



UNIVERSITY
of York

Supporting Free School Meal Auto-enrolment in Yorkshire & beyond

LGA Webinar
11th June 2024

Dr Sundus Mahdi
Research Associate
Sundus.mahdi@york.ac.uk





Transforming the Yorkshire food system

- Regenerative farming
- Hybrid food economies
- Early years and schools

Vision: Tasty, good quality, sustainable food is the 'default' and easiest choice for all children...

The flowchart consists of three blue rectangular boxes with white text, connected by downward-pointing white arrows. The background of the flowchart is a photograph of a rural landscape with a field of yellow wildflowers in the foreground and a blue sky in the background.

ensuring those in greatest need are not left behind or alienated...

*moves **beyond the concept of equity** towards approaches which seek to provide the most benefit to those needing it most*

Why Auto-Enrolment?

- ↑ eligible for FSM nationally (~23%)
- 25% eligible in Yorkshire
- 11% of eligible do not apply
 - Administrative/technical burden
 - Language/literacy barriers
 - Access barriers
 - Stigma
 - Shame
- Benefits - for families, young people, schools, communities

Project Aims

To support the set-up of auto-enrolment processes for FSM across Yorkshire & beyond and evaluate its implementation and impact



First cohort of councils to universally deliver auto-enrolment



Informing national advocacy and policy on FSM registration

Methods

Support LAs to
implement
auto-
enrolment

Monitoring
and
evaluation

Advocacy
and
dissemination



Implementation support

Support LAs to implement auto-enrolment

- ❑ Webinars and workshops
- ❑ Community of practice network
- ❑ Case studies
- ❑ Toolkit
- ❑ 1-2-1 meetings

The Toolkit

- To provide councils with a blueprint process of how to deliver FSM auto-enrolment
 - Beta model
 - Using real examples
 - Plugs into action research
 - One size does not fit all
- What's included?
 - FSM auto-enrolment set-up process map
 - Case studies
 - Templates (example DPIA, business case, opt-out letters to parents)



FixOurFood Resources

<https://fixourfood.org/what-we-do/our-activities/schools-and-nurseries/gated-content/>



Auto-Enrolment process

Governance

- DPIA / Business case

Data

- Data-linkage across databases to identify FSM entitled pupils not currently receiving FSM

Delivery

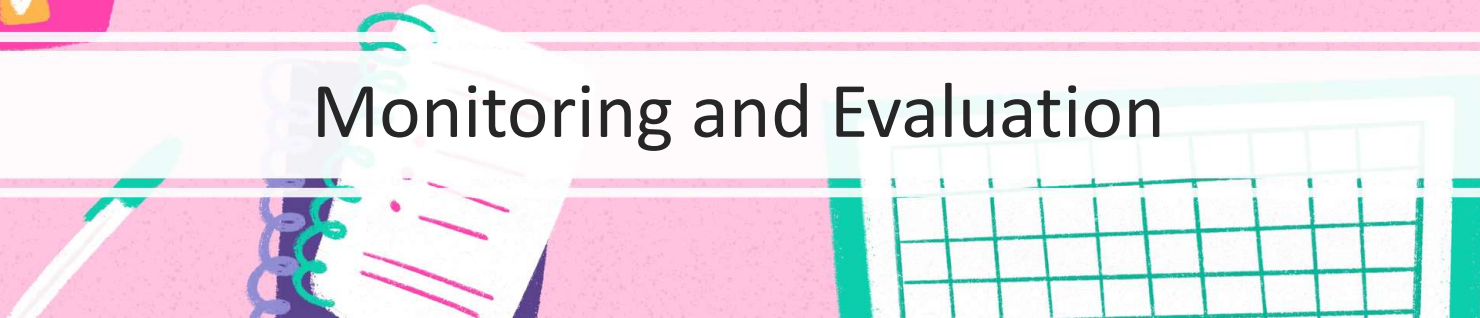
- Issue opt-out letters

Registration

- Add FSM claim to the system and notify schools



Monitoring and Evaluation





Implementation evaluation

- Understand different ways auto-enrolment has been implemented, and any barriers and enablers to its implementation
- Documentary analysis
- Interviews with local authorities & national stakeholders

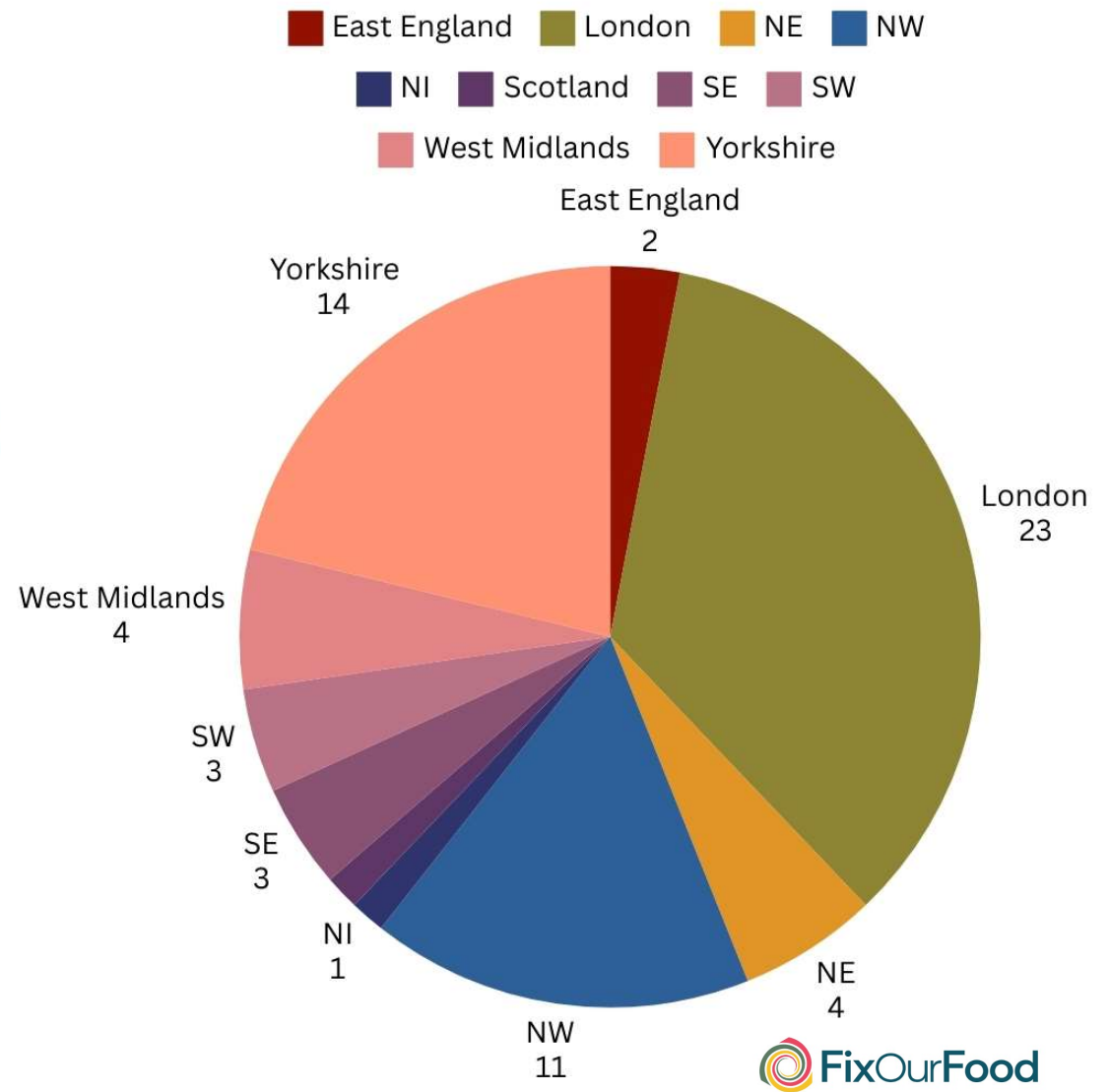
Impact evaluation

- FSM eligibility, school meal uptake, delivery costs, pupil premium returns, impact on inequality, opt-out rates
- School stakeholders and parent interviews – auto-e acceptability

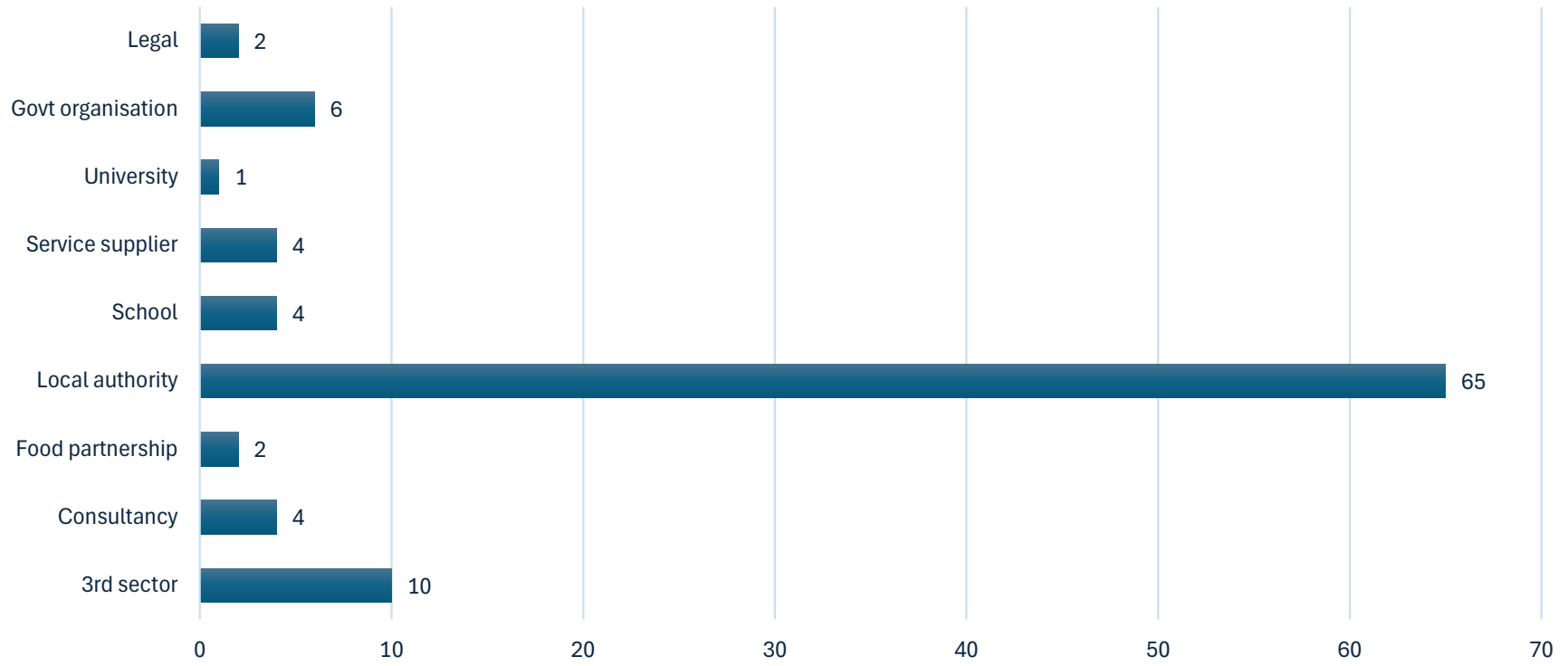


Interim findings: Policy and impact

Local Authorities that have engaged with FixOurFood (n=66)



FixOurFood Resource Access (n = 98)



FSM Auto-Enrolment Implementation – Barriers (Local Authorities)



Sourcing data and gaining approvals for using data was challenging impacting project timelines



The data source used to identify eligible families will need to be considered going forward as more families move over to universal credit



Councils have limited resources, both in terms of staff capacity and financial resources



There was a general lack of understanding around the legal basis of the programme

FSM Auto-Enrolment Implementation – Barriers (Local Authorities)



The gap between children being identified and schools receiving the funding can incur costs to schools. Some local authorities are mediating this by supporting schools in the interim.



Due to variation in school food procurement, the reimbursement for the free school meal doesn't always cover the full cost of the meal, and local authorities do not have the capacity to provide support to individual schools



Staff capacity can be a facilitator or barrier depending on a) whether a specific role exists to undertake additional projects or b) whether staff have capacity within their current workload

FSM Auto-Enrolment Implementation – Facilitators (Local Authorities)



Using the toolkit and working collaboratively with other local authorities facilitated auto-enrolment setup, alongside sharing of relevant documents



Hearing from and being able to contact local authorities that had already implemented auto-enrolment was useful



Having support from senior staff from the beginning helped to bring people together, identify responsibilities and avoid duplication of work



Maintaining good communication was important to keep key stakeholders engaged in the process



Acceptability of FSM Auto-Enrolment (School Stakeholders)

One less thing for families to worry about who are under a lot of stress

Some parents struggle academically and find filling forms difficult

Some parents lack awareness/experience of the FSM benefits system so unaware of the application process

Takes away embarrassment/stigma from parents having to approach the school and admit they need support (financially and support in completing forms)

It's a very big help, I mean, if I had to pay for them [free school meals] it would be another expense which in this cost-of-living thing, it's just made it even more important that... any kind of saving is a good saving. So I would say it's a godsend really.

- Parent



Perceived Benefits of FSM Auto-Enrolment (School Stakeholders)

Captures children coming from UIFSM

Positive impacts on catering

Reduced administrative time on school staff

Auto-enrolled children have been taking up meals.

Benefits beyond just receiving free school meals and pupil premium

Increased pupil premium will help fund programmes that support children

One of the families that I've been supporting, mum was working full time. She's from Poland. She's not aware of the processes and the things that most of our families are aware of... she didn't know what she was entitled to, she wasn't aware of other things for her son as well, which we've been supporting her with. And because she was working full time, she obviously wasn't entitled straight away...

... most of her income was going on all the rent, it was going on utility bills, which left her struggling an awful lot to buy things for her and her son, food being one of them. So, we signposted to different foodbanks... and she was pregnant as well... she ended up losing her job. Because she lost her job, this is where the auto-enrolment came in, so that was all done for her automatically, which has really, really helped her son have a hot meal every day. She's just so, so grateful.

EARLY FINDINGS

In the 1st year of launch,
FSM AUTO-ENROLMENT in 5
LAs has led to...

2814

Additional

FREE SCHOOL MEAL

registrations

£4.7M

Additional school income
including

PUPIL PREMIUM

FixOurFood
Findings
(Nov 2023)

***“ WE’RE GLAD THAT WE DID IT,
THE FIGURES SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES
AND THE NUMBERS, BUT WE WERE MORE
IMPRESSED BY... THE MAJORITY OF THE
CHILDREN WERE FROM THE MOST
DEPRIVED AREAS SO WE’RE HITTING THE
SPOT. ”***



National workshops

- 5 workshops with representatives from multiple national organisations
- Commitment and shared vision for advocacy

Recommendations for decision makers

- Set a timeline & process for the introduction of a national auto-enrolment system by 2025, that removes the need for additional administration
- Support local authorities in adopting an opt out auto award mechanism
- National government to provide all relevant datasets to local councils

Acknowledgments

University of York

Prof. Maria Bryant
Prof. Bob Doherty
Louise Padgett
Rob Oxley

Bremner & Co

Myles Bremner
Dayna Brackley

The Food Foundation

Dr Annie Connolly
Shona Goudie

Local authorities supporting co-design

Sheffield
Lambeth
Leeds

