



Students eligible for Free School Meals

Pupil Wellbeing
Survey 2026

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Introduction

In England, free school meals (FSM) are a statutory entitlement available to students that meet the eligibility criteria and whose parents or carers make an application. Local authorities are responsible for providing FSM.

The eligibility criteria for free school meals have varied since they were introduced. Since 2014, all infant school students (reception, year 1, and year 2) in state funded schools in England receive FSM.

For students in year 3 and above, parents or carers currently meet the eligibility criteria if they receive one of a number of selected benefits¹ dependent on household income.

If a student receives FSM in a given school year, they remain eligible until they finish their current phase of education (primary or secondary). This excludes infant pupils that receive meals under the universal policy (reception, year 1, and year 2).

Eligibility for FSM is often used as a proxy indicator of socioeconomic status as so many of the eligibility criteria are related to family income.

Growing up in a lower-income household can affect many aspects of a child's life, including educational attainment, physical and mental health, social participation and future opportunities

The Pupil Wellbeing Survey

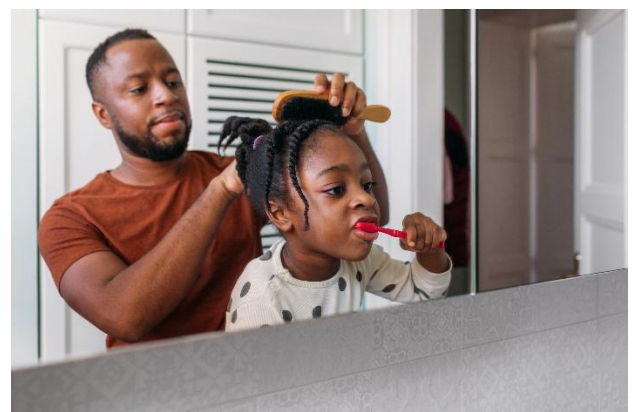
The Pupil Wellbeing Survey (PWS) and Online Pupil Survey™ (OPS) is a biennial survey that has been undertaken with Gloucestershire school children since 2006. Students participate in Years 4, 5 and 6 in primary schools; Years 8 and 10 in secondary schools; and Years 12 and 13 in post-16 settings such as sixth forms and colleges. A large proportion of mainstream, special and independent schools, colleges and educational establishments take part, representing approximately 70.0% of students in participating year groups in 2026. The PWS asks a wide variety of questions about student's characteristics, behaviours and lived experience that could have an impact on their overall wellbeing. The 2026 PWS was undertaken between January and April 2026.

Limitations and caveats of the survey

Not all children and young people who are resident in Gloucestershire attend educational establishments in the county and similarly not all students attending educational establishments in Gloucestershire are residents in the county. It is therefore important to remember this analysis is based on the student population not the resident population.

Gloucestershire has grammar schools, independent schools and several mainstream schools close to the county boundary that attract students from neighbouring areas. As a result, the school and college population, particularly at secondary school age, differs slightly from the resident young people's population, particularly in terms of ethnicity. According to the 2021 Census, 12.3% of Gloucestershire residents were from diverse ethnic communities. However, students from diverse ethnic communities made up 23.1% of the county's school population in January 2026 and 23.4% of respondents to the 2026 PWS..

Although a large proportion of the county's educational establishments took part in the survey, some only had low numbers of students completing the survey; in contrast, others had high numbers. Although this doesn't impact the overall county analysis, as demographics are represented as expected at this geography, analysis by district and education phase might only have certain demographic groups represented due to low student take-up (for example, low numbers completing the survey in Tewkesbury at post-16 phase). Where post-16 provision is situated also impacts the survey, as older students travel further to access post-16 provision.



¹ <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>

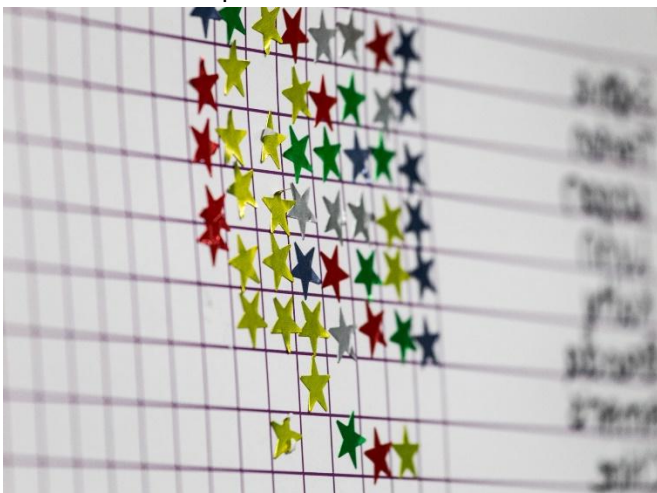
Analysis of deprivation

Educational settings have been categorised into statistical neighbour groups which cluster settings with students of a similar socio-economic profile within the same type of setting (a similar level of deprivation, affluence or personal/family characteristics).

We use Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) to determine the relative deprivation of students. The IMD is based on the home postcode of students (collected in the School Census). This is aggregated to give an overall IMD score for the setting, reflecting the deprivation levels experienced by students. The settings are then split into quintiles based on their scores: quintile 1 is the most deprived and quintile 5 is the least deprived in Gloucestershire.

In addition:

- Grammar/selective schools are compared to other grammar/selective schools in their phase without reference to the IMD.
- Independent schools are compared to other independent schools in their phase without reference to the IMD.
- Post-16 only/Further Education (FE) colleges are compared to all other post-16 only colleges without reference to the IMD.
- Special schools are compared to all other schools of this type in the same phase without reference to the IMD.
- Vocational and alternative settings/schools are compared to other settings/schools in the same phase without reference to IMD.



Eligibility levels

Key takeaways:

- FSM eligibility is highest for pupils from the most deprived areas.
- Highest rates of FSM eligibility are among students who are known to Children's Social Care and young carers.

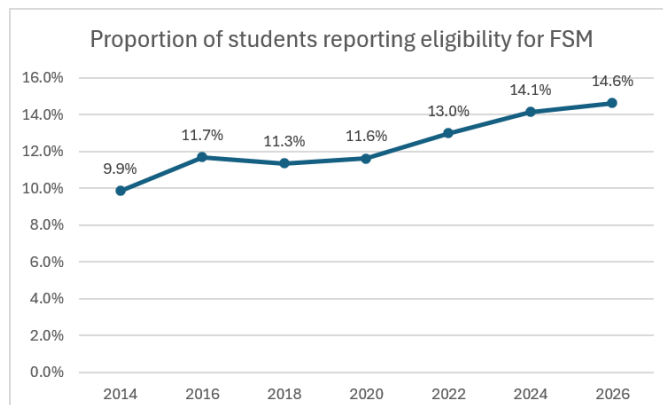
In January 2026, there were around 2.2 million students known to be eligible for FSM nationally, representing 26.5% of students in state funded schools. This eligibility rate has increased particularly sharply in the last few years (since 2018) and is the highest rate recorded since the current time series began in 2006².



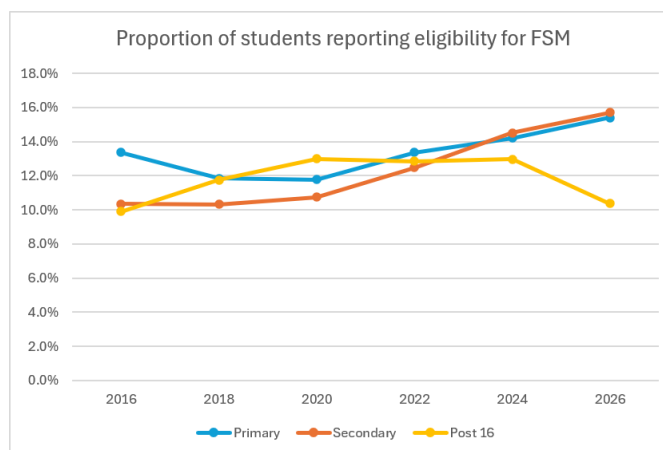
In Gloucestershire, the January 2026 School Census recorded 19.2% of students being eligible for FSM, however 14.6% of students reported being eligible for FSM in PWS 2026. A possible explanation for the difference between these figures is that the overall figure includes younger students in reception and early primary school years. As these students do not complete the survey, they are not represented in the reported survey findings

As reflected nationally, the proportion of pupils reporting FSM eligibility has been increasing steadily since 2018. Local efforts continue to ensure that all eligible children and young people receive their statutory entitlement to FSM. The

January 2026 School Census was the first to reflect the introduction of Gloucestershire County Council's FSM auto-enrolment initiative, which aims to increase the take-up of entitlements among eligible families.



Historically, FSM eligibility has been higher in students in the primary phase³ than secondary phase, however an increase in eligibility since 2024 in secondary students means levels are now the same. In 2026, reported FSM eligibility was lowest in the post 16 phase.



In 2026 there was no significant difference in FSM eligibility by year group, except for those in Year 12 and Year 13 who were significantly less likely to report FSM eligibility.

Ethnicity

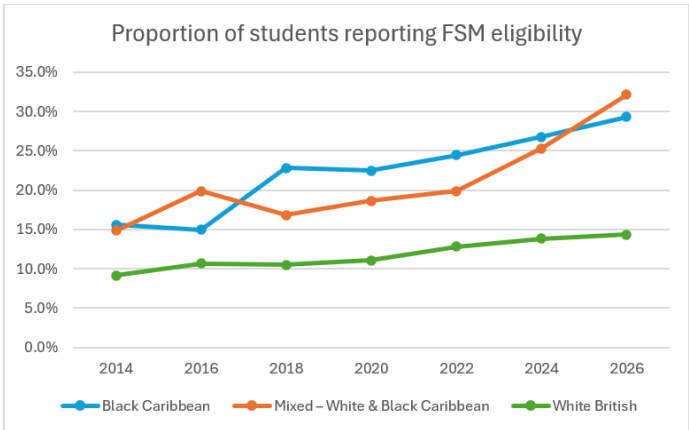
In 2026, students from diverse ethnic communities (all ethnic groups other than White British), were not significantly more likely to be eligible for FSM. Among the groups identified, students from Mixed White and Black Caribbean backgrounds had the highest rate of FSM eligibility (32.1%), followed by Black Caribbean (29.3%), Other Black backgrounds

² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2025-26#section-free-school-meals-eligibility>

³ Primary phase – pupils aged 4-10, Secondary phase – pupils aged 11-15, Post16 phase – pupils aged 16-18

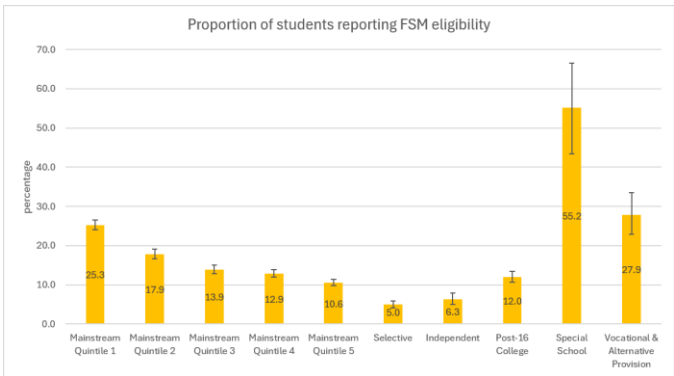
(24.5%), Bangladeshi (20.6%) and Mixed White and Black African students (19.8%), all of whom were significantly more likely to be eligible for FSM than their White British peers. Students from *Gypsy/Roma* (35.5%), *Traveller of Irish heritage* (33.3%) and white *Irish students* (23.1%) were also significantly more likely to be eligible for FSM than white British students.

The majority of the ethnic groups mentioned above have consistently higher FSM eligibility than their white British peers since 2016. For some groups, the difference in FSM eligibility compared to white British students has been widening. For example, the gap in FSM eligibility between Black Caribbean, Mixed white and Black Caribbean and white British students has been widening over the last 10 years as illustrated in the chart below.



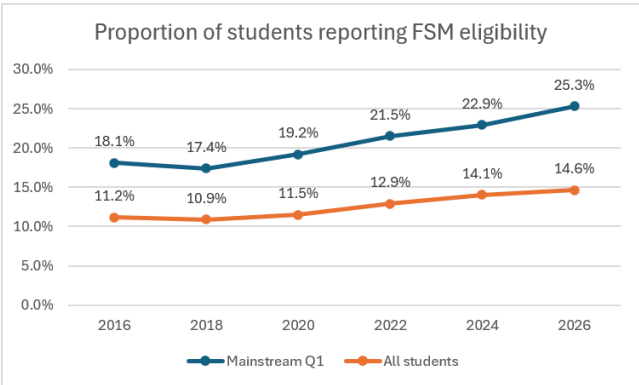
Statistical neighbour groups

As expected, students at settings where the majority live in more deprived areas were significantly more likely to report FSM eligibility than other mainstream groups.



Students in special schools and vocational and alternative provision settings were significantly more likely to report FSM eligibility than all other groups except those in mainstream quintile 1 schools.

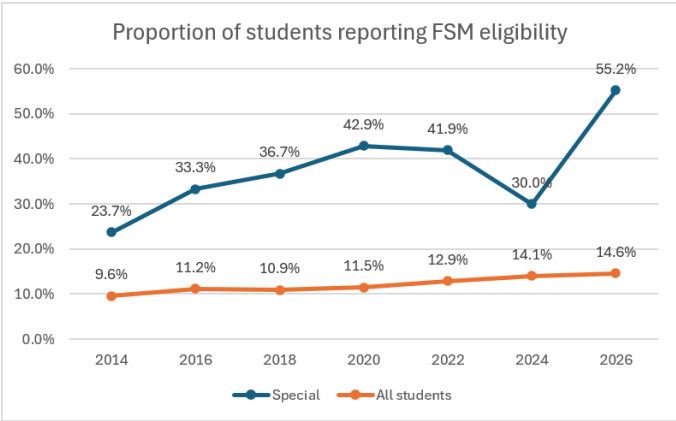
There has been a steady increase in students reporting FSM eligibility in schools with the most deprived students (quintile 1) since 2018.



A similar trend is observed in students in quintile 3 settings. However, the significant increase in eligible students in mainstream quintiles 2, 4 and 5 schools that occurred during the pandemic still persists.

This suggests the impact of the pandemic on household finances was felt across society, and for some groups this pressure hasn't improved in the years since the pandemic.

Students in special schools have consistently had the highest FSM eligibility and saw an increase in 2026 although numbers were small.



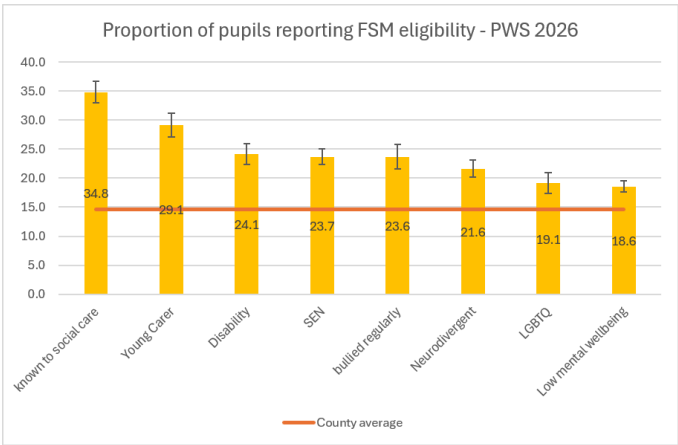
Students at selective grammar schools have consistently had the lowest reported FSM eligibility at around 5% for the last 10 years.



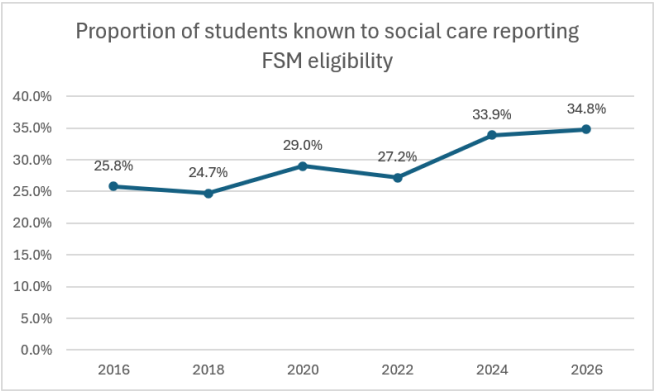
Students with vulnerable characteristics

Students from all vulnerable groups⁴ were significantly more likely to report FSM eligibility than their less vulnerable peers.

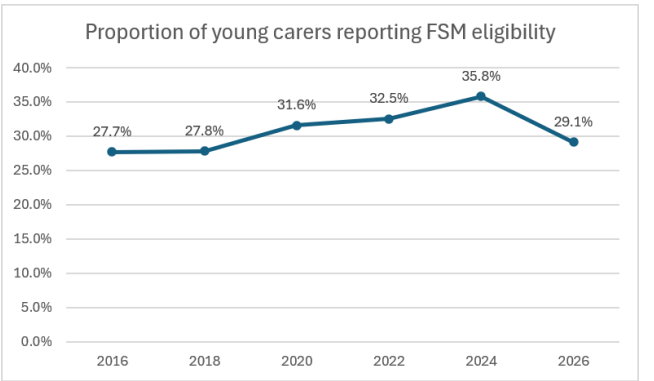
Students known to Children’s Social Care were the most likely to report being eligible for FSM (34.8%) followed by young carers (29.1%). Given that household income is the main predictor of FSM eligibility, this suggests they may be caring for parents who were unable to work, either due to their own disabilities or their own caring responsibilities for other children in the household.



Students who are known to social care have seen a steady increase in FSM eligibility in the past 10 years.



While the proportion of young carers eligible for FSM had been increasing since 2018, a reduction was observed in 2026.



Lived experience



⁴ EHCP/SEN, disability, neurodivergent, known to social care, LGBTQ+, young carer, regularly bullied, those with low mental wellbeing (LMW)

Key takeaways:

- Students eligible for FSM are less likely to enjoy school, feel part of the school community, try their best and achieve top grades.
- Students eligible for FSM are more likely to report being persistently absent, and twice as likely to experience internal isolation, suspension or exclusion.
- Students eligible for FSM are less likely to have strong friendship networks and trusted adult support.

School life

Feeling part of school life

Half of FSM eligible students reported they enjoyed school (51.7%), which is significantly lower than those not eligible (63.6%). Students eligible for FSM were also significantly less likely to say they tried their best at school (80.0% vs. 83.6%) and achieve top grades at school (39.1% vs. 47.3%).

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say they felt safe at school (74.3% vs. 81.4%). 62.5% of FSM eligible students felt they received enough help with schoolwork, significantly less than those not eligible (69.7%).

Disruptive behaviour at school was more likely to be reported by students eligible for FSM:

- I am often aggressive or violent (9.3% vs. 4.8%)
- I am often in trouble (15.6% vs. 8.0%)

51.1% of FSM students said they felt stressed by schoolwork and 30.7% said that they worried about going to school. Both of these were significantly higher than students not eligible for FSM.

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say they felt they belonged to their school community (54.7%) compared to those not eligible (65.1%), this may reflect the wider impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on student's sense of belonging and school experience.

Missing school

Missing any education time has been associated with lower attainment. Students with higher absence⁵ typically have significantly lower attainment at KS4 than their peers with higher attendance rates.

Students eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report missing 10% or more of education sessions in the previous term (37.7%) compared to those not eligible (25.8%). 1 in 9 pupils eligible for FSM reported missing more than 16 days of school in the previous term compared to 1 in 22 of those not eligible for FSM.

1 in 5 FSM students report experiencing an internal isolation, suspension or exclusion (20.4%) compared to 1 in 10 of those not eligible for FSM (11.0%).

Friendships and relationships

Supportive peers

When students establish strong friendships, they have higher self-esteem and are better able to focus on doing well in education without feeling sad and lonely.

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report finding it easy to make and keep friends (46.0%) than those not eligible (55.8%).

Trusted adult

Loving, reliable and responsive relationships are fundamental to child development. Through relationships, children learn how to think, understand, communicate, behave, express emotions and develop social skills.

Having someone to turn to who enables a young person to explore issues in a safe environment without judgement can help them be more resilient moving into adulthood.

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say they had a trusted adult they could turn to for help if they were worried about something (90.5% vs. 93.0%).

Sexual activity

Questions about relationships and sexual activity are only asked to students in secondary and post-16 settings.

⁵ missing 10% or more of available sessions.

There was no significant difference in reported sexual activity between students eligible for FSM and those who were not, with around 1 in 10 pupils reporting being sexually active for both. Students eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report early sexual debut (sexual intercourse under the age of 16).

Students eligible for FSM were also significantly more likely to report they didn't use contraception the last time they had sex (30.9%) than those not eligible, (19.6%) suggesting they may be more at risk of teenage conception and sexually transmitted infections.

Home life



Key takeaways:

- Students who are eligible for FSM are four times more likely to live with only one parent.
- FSM-eligible students are less likely to feel safe at home and experience high exposure to domestic abuse.
- Risk taking and antisocial behaviours are more common among students eligible for FSM.
- FSM-eligible students report higher screentime use and have fewer protective factors such as parental oversight.

Living situation

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report they lived with both their parents (41.6% vs. 76.9%).

FSM eligible pupils were almost 4 times more likely to report living with only one of their parents.

Reported living situation	Not FSM	FSM eligible
(not answered)	0.33%	0.35%
I live with both of my parents	76.95%	41.57%
My parents don't live together. I spend time living with them both	10.77%	20.08%
I live with one of my parents	8.84%	32.07%
I am a residential student at an FE college	0.48%	0.26%
I board at a boarding school full time	0.62%	0.39%
I board at a boarding school part of the week	0.29%	0.02%
I live in a residential special school	0.06%	0.07%
I live with foster carers/in a foster home	0.23%	1.25%
I live in a children's home	0.20%	0.42%
I live with a relative who is not my parent	0.38%	2.20%
I live somewhere else	0.79%	1.18%
I live with friends	0.06%	0.14%

Around half of students living in the following accommodation types were eligible for FSM:

- With a relative who is not my parent
- With foster carers/in a foster home

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say they had a paid job in their spare time (18.9% vs. 25.7%).

Safety at home

Feeling safe and secure at home is important for children and young people to feel protected, cared for and able to develop in a supported environment.

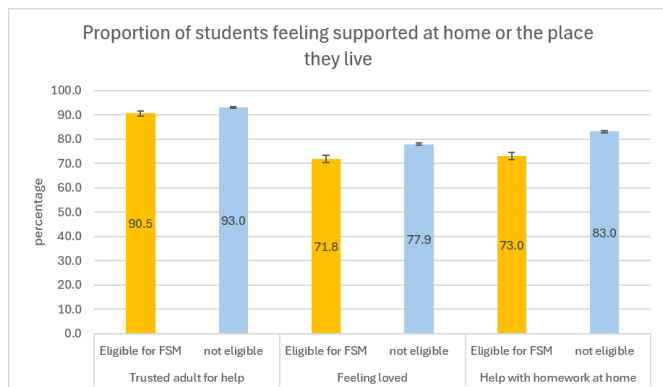
Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report feeling safe at home or the place where they live (90.9% vs. 95.0%), and significantly more likely to say they had been a witness of domestic abuse (37.3% vs. 21.2%). 14.7% of all secondary and post-16 students reported being a victim of domestic abuse, and over a quarter of students eligible for FSM had been a victim of domestic abuse (27.1%).

Students eligible for FSM were also significantly less likely to say they felt safe in the neighbourhood where they lived (70.1% vs. 77.9%).

1 in 18 pupils eligible for FSM said they had run away from home in the previous 12 months; two times the proportion of those not eligible for FSM (1 in 43).

Support at home

Having a supportive home environment can help a child thrive.



The chart above shows students eligible for FSM consistently report feeling less supported at home than those students not eligible.

Where students had missed some days from education, those eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to say it was because *My home situation prevents me from going to school* (2.7% of those eligible for FSM vs. 1.4% of all students). They were also significantly more likely to report they had missed school because of *Difficulties relating to my period (e.g. Period symptoms, such as bleeding abdominal cramps and headaches, lack of period/sanitary product)* (8.1% compared to 5.7% of pupils not eligible for FSM).

Anti-social behaviour

Students eligible for FSM were more likely to report being in trouble with the Police (4.2% vs. 1.6%); more likely to report carrying a weapon (4.7% vs. 3.0%) and joining a gang (1.9% vs. 1.1%).

Digital behaviours

The effects of the internet on students can be both positive and negative. The internet provides students with access to information, entertainment, and opportunities for social interaction. However, excessive internet use can have detrimental effects on students' academic performance, personal growth, and behaviour. Additionally, uncontrolled use of the internet can expose students to inappropriate content, including sexual information, or content which may conflict with cultural values.

Primary age students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say an adult checked what they were doing on the internet at home (66.2% vs. 71.9%). FSM eligible students of all ages were also significantly less likely to report they had a trusted adult to turn to if they were worried about something they saw or heard online (78.0% vs. 81.5%).



The average amount of screentime in UK teenagers is around 6-7 hours per day, this analysis therefore classifies reported screentime of 7+ hours as excessive. Students eligible for FSM were more likely to report excessive screentime (OR 1.8).

This is most influenced by students in the secondary phase eligible for FSM, who were twice as likely to report excessive screentime (OR 2.1) than those not eligible.

Students eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report one of their top 3 online activities as *Posting my own social media* (7.6% vs. 5.7%) *Watching videos on social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube etc.)* (65.2% vs. 61.8%) and *Gaming online with others* (47.5% vs. 41.7%) than those not eligible.

Students not eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report less harmful online activities such as *Keeping up to date with world affairs*, *Learning a language*, or *Watching TV on catch-up services*.

Mental health

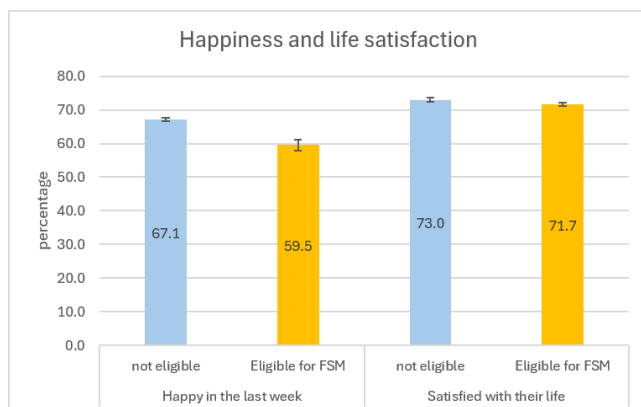
Key takeaways:

- FSM eligibility is associated with lower happiness, life satisfaction and overall mental wellbeing.
- FSM-eligible students are more likely to experience mental health challenges such as LMW, self-harm and eating disorders.
- Students eligible for FSM are more likely to receive mental health support.



Happiness and life satisfaction

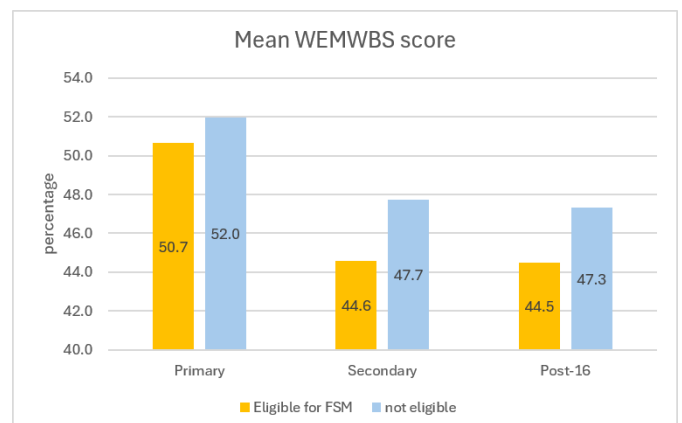
Students eligible for FSM were less likely to report feeling happy and satisfied with their life as shown in the chart below.



Mental wellbeing

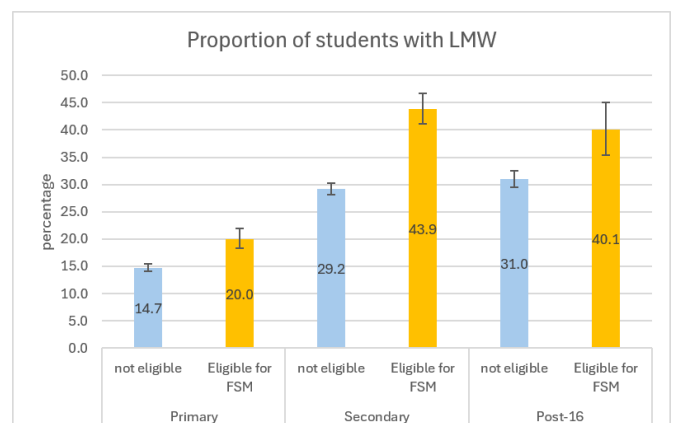
In the PWS, wellbeing is measured using the Warwick and Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Students eligible for FSM had a lower mean WEMWBS score (47.9) than those not eligible for FSM (49.8), which indicates lower overall wellbeing.

This gap was seen across all phases of education but was widest in the secondary and post-16 phases.



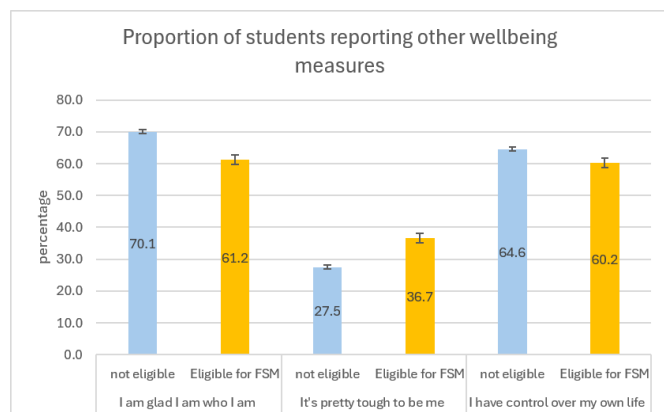
WEMWBS scores can also be categorised into low, average and high mental wellbeing. The bound for low mental wellbeing (set by Warwick University) is 44.0 and has been aligned with NHS probable depression or anxiety.

Pupils eligible for FSM were also significantly more likely to report LMW in every phase.



This suggests the impact of poverty on the mental health of young people continues throughout childhood. Again, the gap between those eligible and not eligible for FSM is widest in the secondary phase.

Students eligible for FSM report significant differences in additional wellbeing measures.



Almost 1 in 3 students in secondary and post-16 settings eligible for FSM report ever self-harming compared to 1 in 5 of students not eligible for FSM. They were also significantly more likely to report experiencing eating difficulties in response to how they feel about their weight, shape or body (30.7% vs. 19.9%).

Receiving mental health support

Students eligible for FSM (12.6%) were twice as likely to report they were receiving professional mental health support at the time of the survey and significantly more likely to report ever having professional mental health support (34.0%) than those not eligible (6.7% and 20.7% respectively).

Healthy living

Key takeaways:

- FSM-eligible students are less likely to achieve getting adequate sleep and amount of physical activity or eating healthily.
- Indicators of food insecurity are more common amongst students eligible for FSM, such as meal skipping and lower fruit and vegetable consumption.
- Students who are eligible for FSM show poorer oral health and hygiene behaviours.
- FSM-eligible students are more likely to engage in health harming behaviours, including smoking and drug experimentation.

Sleep

Getting the recommended sleep has a positive effect on wellbeing especially in children and young people. Less than half of students eligible for FSM report getting the recommended amount of sleep (44.0% vs. 53.3%). This was observed across all phases of education and was lowest in secondary pupils eligible for FSM where only 36.9% reported getting the recommended amount of sleep.

Eating healthily

81.4% of students eligible for FSM reported the food available at home enabled them to eat healthily, this was significantly lower than those not eligible (88.4%). Given this finding it is unsurprising FSM eligible students were also significantly less likely to report eating the recommended 5 portions of fruit and veg a day (22.6% vs. 28.1%). Those eligible for FSM were also twice as likely to report they regularly skipped a meal due to a lack of food at home (5.2% vs. 2.5%).

There was no significant difference between students eligible for FSM and those not eligible in their consumption of unhealthy foods, with around half of students in both groups (51.4% and 51.8% respectively) reporting eating sweets, crisps and other unhealthy snacks daily. However, students eligible for FSM were more likely to report regularly consuming high-sugar drinks (20.9% compared with 14.3%).



Students eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report drinking energy drinks regularly (1 in 20 vs. 1 in 33). Previous studies of PWS data suggests those who don't eat breakfast regularly were significantly more likely to report drinking energy drinks daily. This continued in 2026, Students who reported *Never/Not often* eating breakfast were three times as likely to report ever drinking energy drinks than those who regularly ate breakfast (33.5% vs. 11.1%).

Males who didn't eat breakfast were five times as likely to say they drank energy drinks every day than those who ate breakfast regularly (12.3% vs. 2.2%). In females this was higher again with 11 times more females reporting drinking energy drinks every day who didn't eat breakfast compared to those who eat breakfast regularly (11.0% vs. 1.0%).

Exercise

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report doing the recommended exercise (40.0%) than those not eligible (49.6)

Healthy behaviours



Students were also asked about oral health habits. 91.6% of those eligible for FSM report brushing their teeth at least once a day, which is significantly lower than those not eligible (96.5%). Students eligible for FSM were also significantly less likely to

report they had been to the dentist in the previous 12 months (55.5% vs. 64.6%).

Health harming behaviours

Students eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report regular smoking (1.8%) and vaping (6.4%) than those not eligible (1.2% and 3.6% respectively), but no more likely to report drinking regularly or being drunk regularly. FSM eligible pupils were also significantly more likely to report trying illegal drugs (15.5% vs. 11.5%).

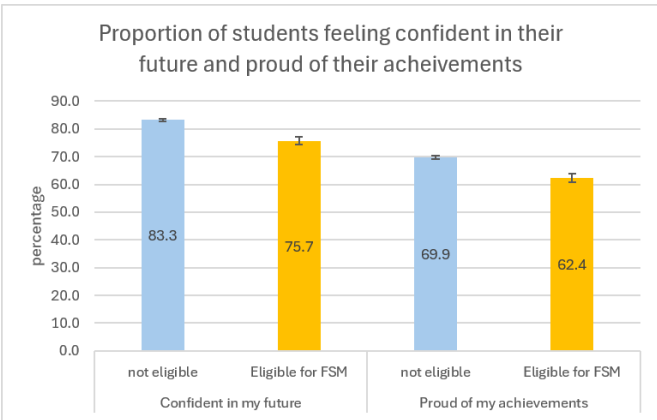
Preparing for the future

Key takeaways:

- FSM eligible students are less confident in themselves and future prospects.
- Fewer students who are eligible for FMS report aspiring to go to university.

Confident in the future

Students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to feel proud of their achievements or confident about their future than those not eligible for FSM.



Future plans



Students eligible for FSM in the secondary phase were significantly more likely to report they planned to do *nothing* after Year 11 (2.8% vs. 1.5%). However, there was no significant difference between students reporting the same after their post-16 studies.

Planned destination following Year 11		
	eligible for FSM	not eligible
Apprenticeship, or other paid employment with training	23.2%	16.2%
College/sixth form	50.8%	61.4%
Don't know	23.1%	21.0%
Nothing	2.8%	1.5%

Post-16 students eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report they planned to go to university than those not eligible and a higher proportion reported they planned to do an apprenticeship, although this difference wasn't statistically significant.

Planned destination following post-16 studies		
	eligible for FSM	not eligible
Apprenticeship	18.4%	15.6%
Paid work	19.1%	14.2%
Voluntary work	0.9%	0.5%
University	42.2%	52.7%
Nothing	1.2%	0.8%

Conclusion

Overall, students eligible for FSM report a consistently less positive lived experience than those not eligible. The differences are evident across school, home, relationships, mental health, healthy living and future aspirations, suggesting the impact of low household income is wide-ranging and cumulative rather than limited to a single area of life.

FSM eligible students were less likely to feel they belonged at school, felt safe, enjoyed school, received enough help with schoolwork, or felt confident about their future. They were also more likely to report missing school, experiencing internal isolation, suspension or exclusion, and feeling worried or stressed about school. This indicates that students eligible for FSM may face additional barriers to engagement and attainment within education.

The differences extend beyond school. Students eligible for FSM were less likely to report feeling safe and supported at home and were more likely to report exposure to domestic abuse, running away from home, excessive screentime, lower wellbeing, self-harm, eating difficulties, poorer sleep, food insecurity and some health harming behaviours. These findings suggest that FSM eligibility is associated with a wider pattern of disadvantage affecting emotional wellbeing, safety, stability and health.

While not all differences were significant, the consistency of the pattern is important. FSM eligible students were more likely to report multiple factors that can reduce wellbeing and limit opportunities, while those not eligible were more likely to report protective factors such as stronger school belonging, safer home environments, healthier behaviours and greater confidence in the future. This reinforces the importance of using FSM eligibility as a marker for identifying groups of students who may benefit from additional support across both education and wider wellbeing.