



# Children eligible for Free School Meals

Pupil Wellbeing  
Survey 2024

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# Introduction

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

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

Parents or carers currently meet the eligibility criteria if they receive one of a number of selected benefits<sup>1</sup> dependent on household income.

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

## 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. Children and young people participate in years 4, 5 and 6 in Primary schools; years 8 and 10 in Secondary schools; and year 12 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 57.2% of pupils in participating year groups in 2024. The PWS asks a wide variety of questions about children's characteristics, behaviours and lived experience that could have an impact on their overall wellbeing. The 2024 PWS was undertaken between January and April 2024.

## 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 children and young people attending educational establishments in Gloucestershire are residents in

the county. It is therefore important to remember this analysis is based on the pupil population not the resident population.

Gloucestershire is a grammar authority, has a number of notable independent schools and several mainstream schools very close to the county's boundary these all attract young people from out of county. This results in the school population (particularly at secondary phase) having slightly different characteristics, especially ethnicity, to the resident young people's population. 12.3% of Gloucestershire's resident population (2021 Census) were estimated to be from minority ethnic groups however 21.0% of Gloucestershire's school population were pupils from minority ethnic groups in January 2024 and 21.7% of the PWS cohort were pupils from minority ethnic groups in the 2024 survey.

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 numbers of pupil take up (for example low numbers completing the survey in Tewkesbury at FE level), where FE provision is situated also impacts the survey as older students travel further to access FE provision.

## Analysis of deprivation

Schools can be categorised into statistical neighbour groups which cluster schools with pupils of a similar social profile within the same type of school (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 pupils. The IMD is based on the home postcode of pupils (collected in the school census). This is aggregated to give an overall IMD score for the school, reflecting the deprivation levels experienced by pupils. The schools are then split into quintiles based on their scores: quintile 1 is the

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

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 and alternative schools are compared to all other schools of this type in the same phase without reference to the IMD.

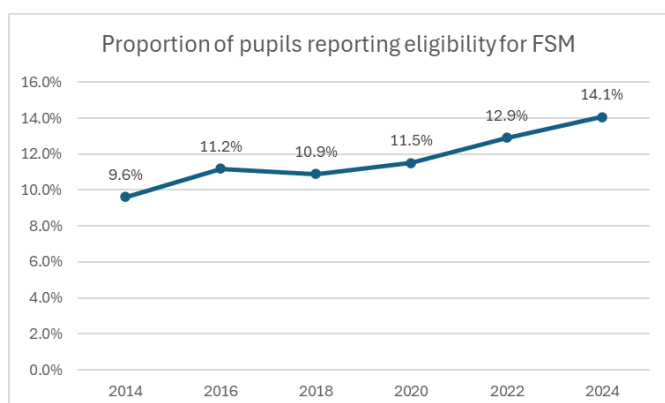


## Eligibility levels

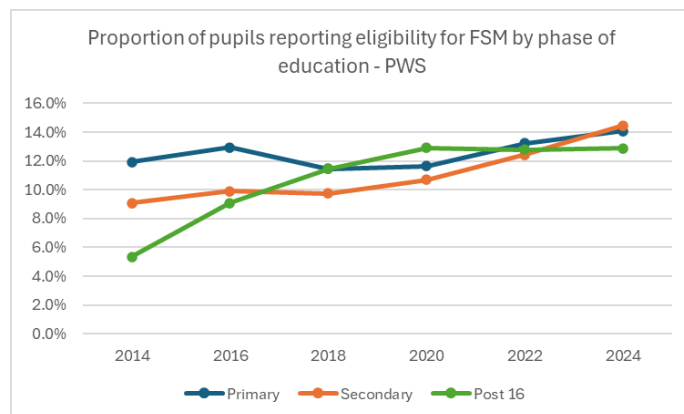
In January 2024, there were around 2.1 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM nationally, representing 24.6% of state funded pupils (20.5% in the South West). This eligibility rate has increased particularly sharply in the last few years (since 2018) and is the highest rate recorded since the current time series began in 2006.



In Gloucestershire, the January 2024 School Census recorded 18.1% of pupils being eligible for FSM, 14.1% of pupils reported being eligible for FSM in PWS 2024. As reflected nationally the proportion of pupils reporting FSM eligibility has been increasing steadily since 2018.



Historically, FSM eligibility has been higher in pupils in the primary phase<sup>2</sup> than secondary phase, however an increase in eligibility in secondary pupils means levels are now almost the same. In 2024 reported FSM eligibility was lowest in the post 16 phase, although not significantly.

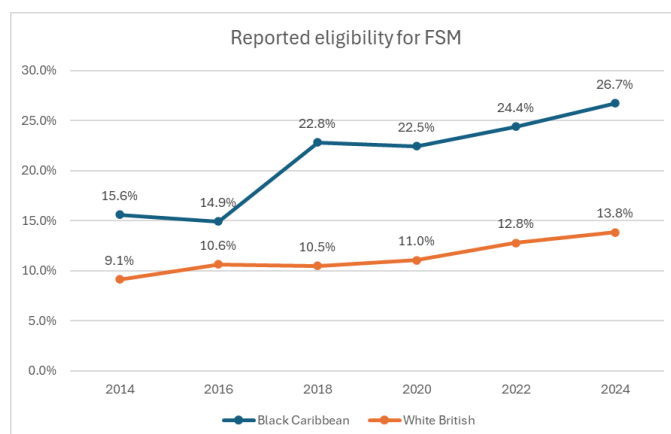


In 2024 there was no significant difference in FSM eligibility by year group.

## Ethnicity

In 2024 pupils from minority ethnicity groups as a whole were not significantly more likely to be eligible for FSM. However, pupils from Black (18.3%) and Mixed ethnicity (16.9%) were significantly more likely to be eligible than their white British peers (13.8%). More specifically *Black Caribbean* (26.7%) pupils, pupils from *Other black* backgrounds, *Mixed White and Black African* (21.7%) and *Mixed White and Black Caribbean* (25.3%) pupils were significantly more likely to be eligible for FSM. Pupils from *Gypsy/Roma* (34.7%) and *Traveller of Irish heritage* (29.1%) were also significantly more likely to be eligible for FSM than White British pupils.

The majority of the ethnic groups mentioned above have had consistently higher FSM eligibility than their White British peers. For some groups the difference in FSM eligibility compared to White British pupils has been widening. For example the gap in FSM eligibility between Black Caribbean and White British pupils has been widening since 2016 as illustrated in the chart below.

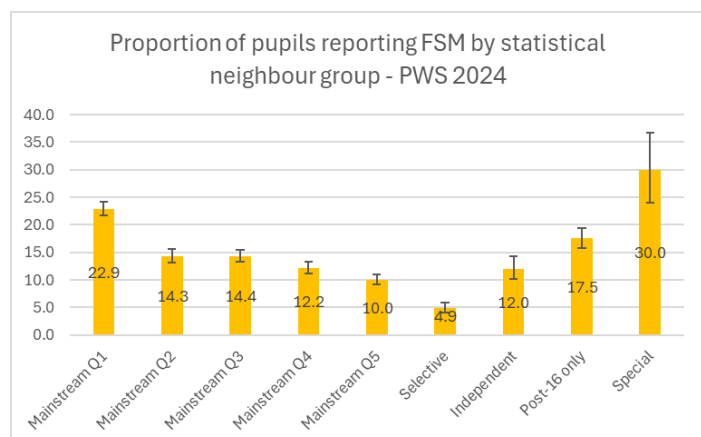


<sup>2</sup> Primary phase – pupils aged 4-10, Secondary phase – pupils aged 11-15, Post16 phase – pupils aged 16-18



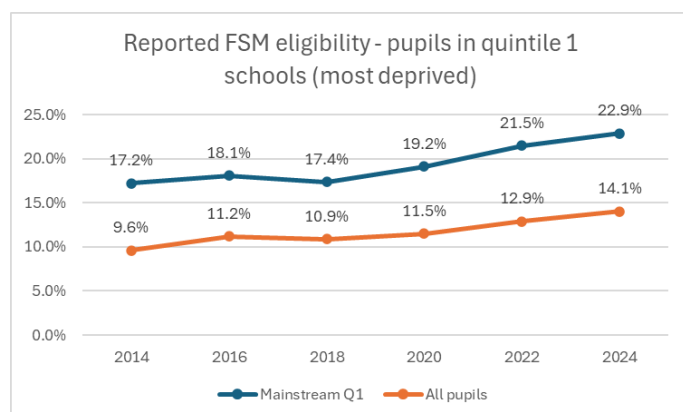
## Statistical neighbour groups

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



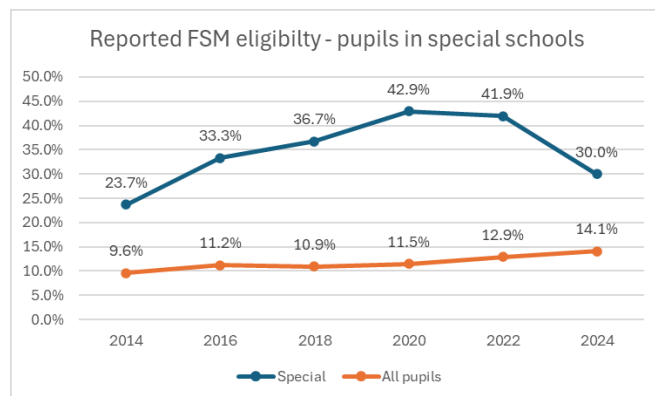
Pupils in special schools were significantly more likely to report FSM eligibility than all other groups except those in mainstream quintile 1 schools.

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



Pupils in quintile 3 and 4 schools saw a similar trend, however pupils in quintiles 2 and 5 schools only saw a significant increase during the pandemic period that persists.

Pupils in special schools and selective schools were the only pupils to have a reduction in the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM since the pandemic and are the most and least likely to report FSM eligibility respectively. Both had previously seen a continuous increase in FSM eligibility since 2014.



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.

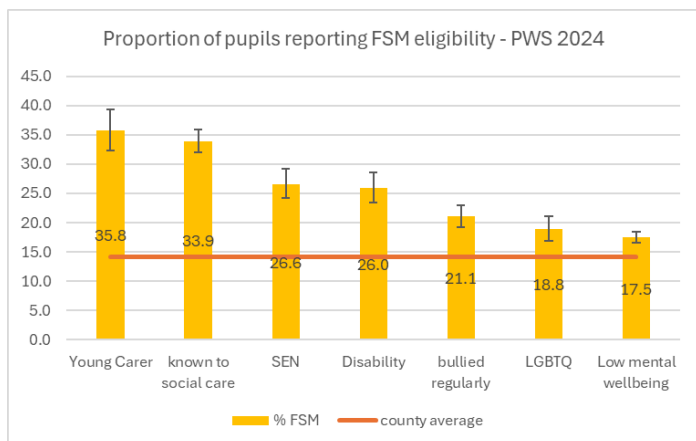


## Pupils with vulnerable characteristics

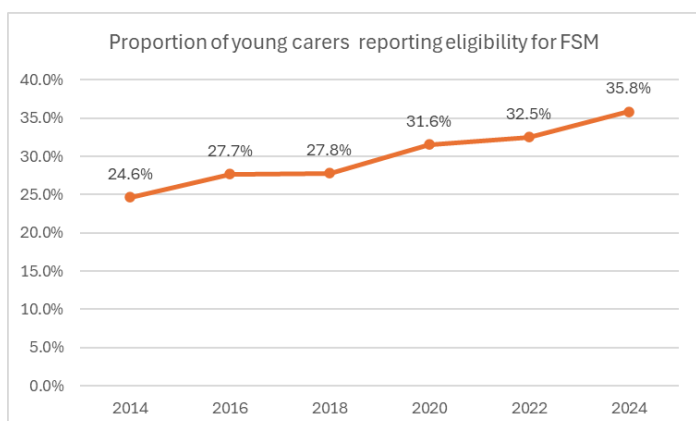
Pupils from all vulnerable groups<sup>3</sup> were significantly more likely to report FSM eligibility than their less vulnerable peers.

Young carers were the most likely to report being eligible for FSM. 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.

<sup>3</sup> EHCP/SEN, disability, known to social care, LGBTQ+, young carer, regularly bullied, those with low mental wellbeing (LMW)



The proportion of young carers eligible for FSM have been increasing over the last 10 years, although the only significant increases (in the previous survey years) were seen between 2018-2020 and 2022-2024.



A similar trend to the chart above, was seen where pupils were known to social care.

## Lived experience



Household income is the main predictor of FSM eligibility, therefore many pupils eligible for FSM will be growing up in low income households. We know that living in low income household is not easy and we aspire to live in a county where no child or young

person has to sleep in a cold bedroom, study on an empty stomach, or miss out on trips with friends.

## School life

### Feeling part of school life

Half of FSM eligible pupils reported they enjoyed school (50.8%), this was significantly lower than those not eligible (58.4%). Pupils eligible for FSM were also significantly less likely to say they tried their best at school (75.3% vs. 81.2%) and achieve top grades at school (35.0% vs. 44.9%).

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say they felt safe at school (67.2% vs. 74.9%). 57.9% of FSM eligible pupils felt they received enough help with school work, significantly less than those not eligible (63.6%).

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

- I am often aggressive or violent (11.6% vs. 5.7%)
- I am often in trouble (15.9% vs. 8.5%)

46.0% of FSM pupils said they felt stressed by school work and 29.0% said that they worried about going to school, both of these were significantly higher than pupils not eligible for FSM.

### Missing school

Missing any school time has been associated with lower attainment. Pupils with higher absence<sup>4</sup> typically have significantly lower attainment at KS4 than their peers with higher attendance rates.

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report missing 10% or more of school sessions in the previous term (40.0%) compared to those not eligible (29.6%). 1 in 8 pupils eligible for FSM reported missing more than 16 days of school in the previous term compared to 1 in 17 of those not eligible for FSM.

Secondary and post-16 pupils are asked about suspension and exclusions. A quarter of FSM pupils report experiencing an internal isolation, suspension or exclusion (25.4%) compared to 1 in 8 of those not eligible for FSM (13.0%).

<sup>4</sup> missing 10% or more of available sessions.

## Friendships and relationships

### Supportive peers

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

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report finding it easy to make and keep friends (47.3%) than those not eligible (56.6%).

### 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.

Pupils 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.

### Romantic relationships

There was no significant difference between pupils eligible for FSM and those not in terms of sexual activity at around 1 in 10 pupils reporting being sexually active for both. There was also no significant difference in the proportion reporting early sexual debut (ESD).

However, pupils eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report they didn't use contraception the last time they had sex than those not eligible, suggesting they may be more at risk of teenage conception and sexually transmitted diseases.

## Home life



### Living situation

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report they lived with both their parents (41.8% vs. 79.7%).

FSM eligible pupils were over 3 times more likely to report living with only one of their parents.

Reported living situation	Not FSM	FSM eligible
(not answered)	0.33%	0.46%
I live with both of my parents	79.73%	41.83%
I live with both parents in separate houses e.g. shared over the week	9.12%	16.64%
I live with one of my parents	8.76%	34.37%
I am a residential student at an FE college	0.21%	0.32%
I board at a boarding school full time	0.64%	0.98%
I board at a boarding school part of the week	0.23%	0.06%
I live in a residential special	0.02%	0.26%
I live with foster carers/in a foster	0.16%	1.47%
I live in a children's home	0.04%	0.14%
I live with a relative who is not my parent	0.35%	2.43%
I live somewhere else	0.37%	0.84%
I live on my own/independently	0.02%	0.03%
I live with friends	0.03%	0.17%

Almost half of pupils living in the following accommodation types were eligible for FSM:

- Children's home
- Residential special school
- With a relative who is not my parent
- With foster carers/in a foster home

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say they had a paid job in their spare time (19.4% vs. 26.1%).

### 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.

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report feeling safe at home or the place where they live (86.5% vs. 91.7%), and significantly more likely to say they had been a witness of domestic abuse (39.5% vs. 25.4%). 15.2% of all pupils reported being a victim of domestic abuse, almost a quarter of pupils eligible for FSM had been a victim of domestic abuse (23.4%).

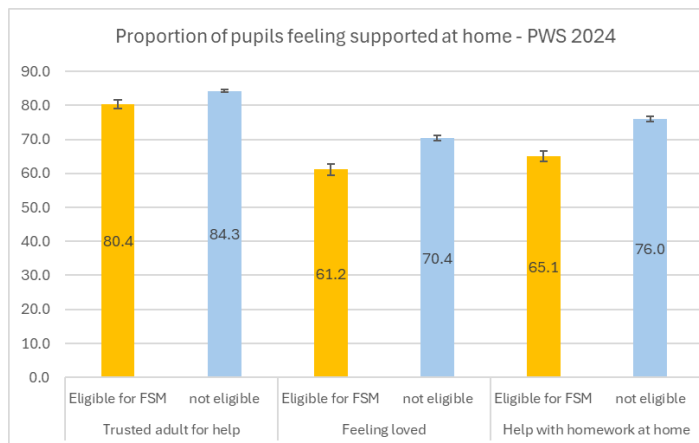
Pupils eligible for FSM were also significantly less likely to say they felt safe in the neighbourhood where they lived (63.5% vs. 72.7%).



1 in 14 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 33).

### Support at home

Having a supportive home environment can help a child thrive.



Pupils eligible for FSM consistently report feeling less supported at home than those pupils not eligible.

Where pupils had missed some days from school, those eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to say it was because *My home situation prevents me from going to school* (4% of all those eligible for FSM). They were also significantly more likely to report they had missed school because of period poverty (1.5% compared to 0.5% of pupils not eligible for FSM).

### Anti-social behaviour

Pupils eligible for FSM were more likely to report being in trouble with the Police (5.5% vs. 2.1%); more likely to report carrying a weapon (7.8% vs. 5.5%) and joining a gang (2.1% vs. 1.0%).

### Digital behaviours

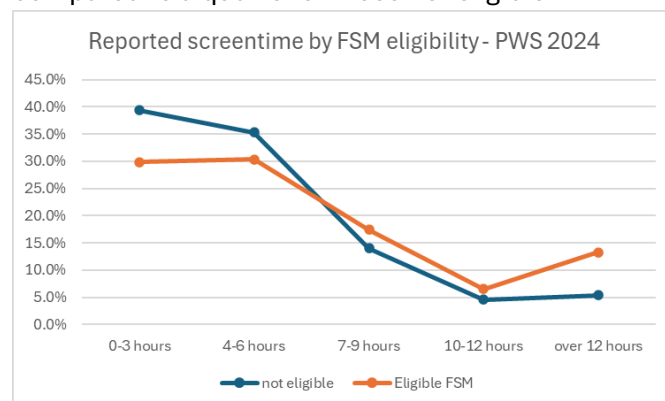
The effects of the internet on pupils can be both positive and negative. The internet provides pupils with access to information, entertainment, and opportunities for social interaction. However, excessive internet use can have detrimental effects on pupils' academic performance, personal growth, and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

Primary age pupils eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to say an adult checked what they were doing on the internet at home (60.9% vs.

67.3%). FSM eligible pupils 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 (71.3% vs. 77.9%).



The average amount of screentime in UK teenagers is around 6-7 hours per day, in this analysis reported screentime of 7+ hours is classified as excessive. Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report excessive screentime, with over a third reporting 7+ hours online per day compared to a quarter of those not eligible.



This is most influenced by pupils in the primary phase eligible for FSM, who were significantly more likely to report excessive screentime.

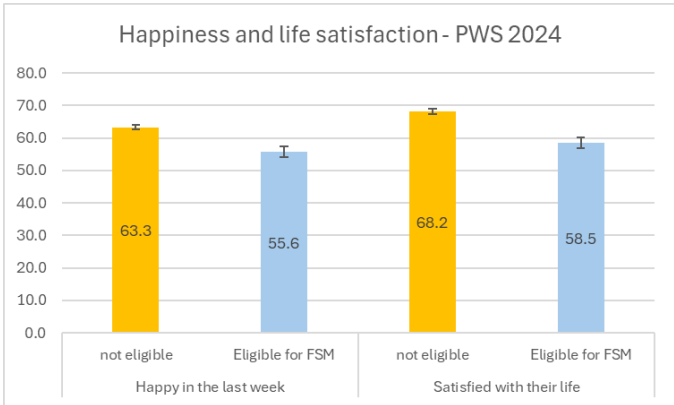
Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report one of their top 3 online activities were *Posting my own social media* (9.3% vs. 7.8%) and *Gambling online* (3.4% vs. 2.3%) than those not eligible. This was particularly evident in primary age pupils who are legally underage for both these activities.

Pupils 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

Happiness and life satisfaction

Pupils eligible for FSM were also less likely to report feeling happy and satisfied with their life.

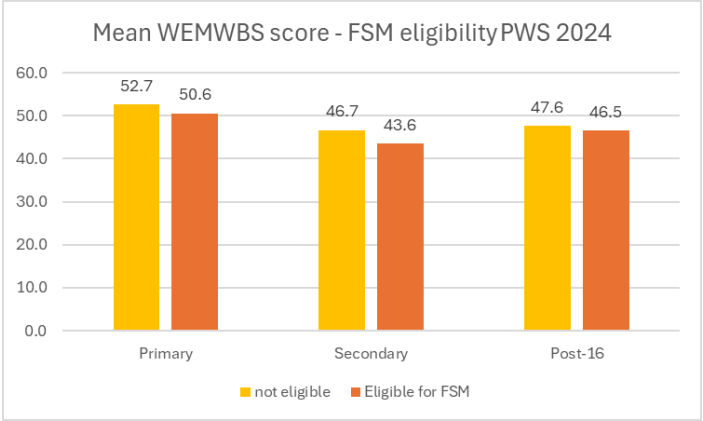


Mental wellbeing

In the pupil survey wellbeing is measured using the Warwick and Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Pupils eligible for FSM had a lower mean WEMWBS score 47.8 than those not eligible for FSM (49.8), this indicates lower overall wellbeing.

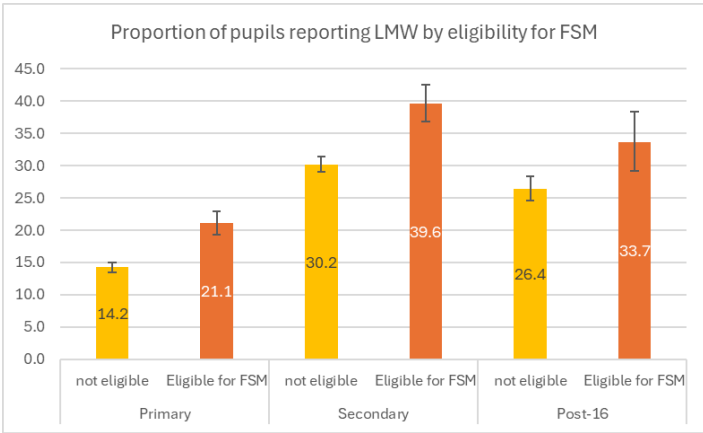


This gap was seen across all phases of education but was widest in the secondary phase.



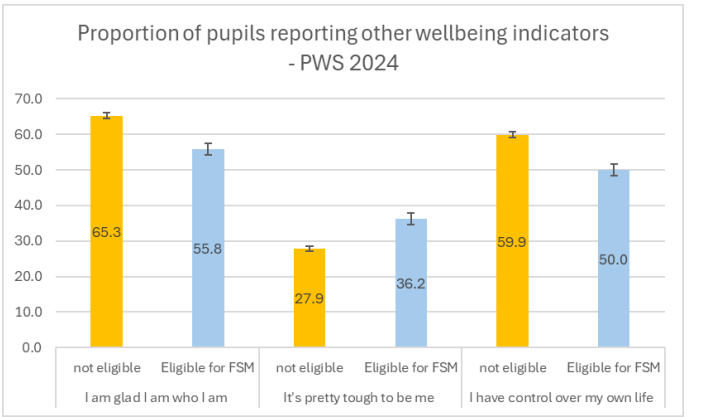
WEMWBS scores can also be categorised into low, average and high mental wellbeing. The bound for low mental wellbeing (set by Warwick University) is 44.0 and has been aligned with NHS probable depression or anxiety.

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.

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



Almost 1 in 3 pupils in secondary and post-16 settings eligible for FSM report ever self-harming

compared to 1 in 5 of their less vulnerable peers. They were also significantly more likely to report having an eating disorder (14.1% vs. 10.1%).

### *Receiving mental health support*

Pupils eligible for FSM (10.0%) were almost 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 (26.6%) than those not eligible (5.8% and 19.7% respectively). Those eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report they found professional mental health support easy to access.

## Healthy living

### *Sleep*

Getting the recommended sleep has a positive effect on wellbeing especially in children and young people. Less than half of pupils eligible for FSM report getting the recommended sleep (45.0% vs. 53.7%). This was observed across all phases of education and was lowest in secondary pupils eligible for FSM where only 32.3% reported getting the recommended sleep.

### *Eating healthily*

77.5% of pupils eligible for FSM reported the food available at home enabled them to eat healthily, this was significantly lower than those not eligible (86.7%). Given this finding it is unsurprising FSM eligible pupils were also significantly less likely to report eating the recommended 5 portions of fruit and veg a day. 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%).

Pupils eligible for FSM were less likely to report eating less healthy foods; 57.3% report eating sweets, crisps and unhealthy snacks daily. However, 27.3% report drinking high sugar drinks regularly (compared to 60.3% and 17.4% in those not eligible).



Pupils eligible for FSM were more than twice as likely to report drinking energy drinks regularly 1 in 13 vs. 1 in 30. Previous studies of PWS data suggests those who don't eat breakfast regularly were significantly more likely to report drinking energy drinks daily.

### *Exercise*

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to report doing the recommended exercise (41.0%) than those not eligible (52.8%). There was no significant difference in those who didn't exercise the recommended amount reporting they didn't exercise due to the cost of equipment or difficulty in accessing the venue based on FSM eligibility.

### *Healthy behaviours*



There was no significant difference in primary pupils reporting washing hands before eating a meal between those eligible and not eligible for FSM.

Primary pupils were also asked about oral health habits. 91.0% of those eligible for FSM report brushing their teeth at least once a day, this was significantly lower than those not eligible, 96.4%. Pupils eligible for FSM were also significantly less likely to report they had been to the dentist in the previous 12 months (59.6% vs. 70.1%).

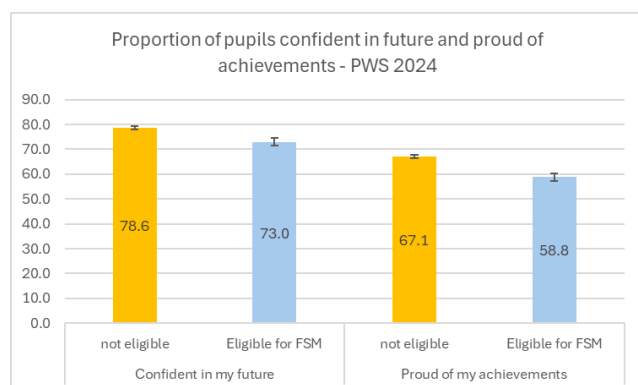
### Health harming behaviours

Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report regular smoking (2.5%) and vaping (15.0%) than those not eligible (1.4% and 11.1% respectively), but no more likely to report drinking regularly or being drunk regularly. They were also significantly more likely to report they had tried illegal drugs (15.9% vs. 11.3%).

## Preparing for the future

### Confident in the future

Pupils 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



Just over half of FSM post-16 pupils expected to be in education or training the following year compared to almost three-quarters of those not eligible. Around 1 in 10 (9.7%) of pupils eligible for FSM expected to be unemployed or out of education in the future, this was significantly higher than those not eligible (5.9%).

Twice as many post-16 pupils not eligible for FSM reported planning to apply to university (45.6%) than those who were eligible for FSM (23.7%).