

Enhanced Free School Meals offer in Stockport

What is it?

The Stockport School Meal Support Scheme (SMSS) was adopted in response to:

- The continuing cost of living crisis, with soaring food prices, means that more families are struggling to afford school lunches.
- A hot and nutritious school meal improves children's concentration and behaviour during lessons and positively impacts on school attendance, children's health and academic performance.
- Many low income families miss out on eligibility for means-tested Free School Meals due to the low eligibility threshold (less than £7,400 a year after tax and not including benefits)

[Stockport Council passed a motion at Full Council](#) in January 2023 to establish the SMSS for the 2023/24 academic year with the aim of providing a paid-for school meal to children living in families in receipt of Local Council Tax Support and/or Housing Benefit and not already eligible for the nationally funded universal and free school meal support.

What was the timeline?

The SMSS was approved for the 2023/24 academic year, commencing in September 2023, with project delivery spanning from February 2023 to July 2024.

Stockport Council's anti-poverty initiatives in schools remain ongoing and continue to evolve. Recent developments include the rollout of a poverty-proofing programme in schools, the implementation of an assisted Free School Meals (FSM) enrolment scheme, and the recent launch of the ReLoved school uniform scheme.

How did it happen?

Following approval, Council officers designed and rolled out the scheme, establishing eligibility criteria, data collection, and payment processes.

Eligibility:

- Child lives in Stockport
- Child's family receives Local Council Tax Support and/or Housing Benefit

- Child is aged 7–18 on 4 September 2023
- Child attends school/college from September (including out-of-area)
- Child is not eligible for universal or means-tested Free School Meals (FSM)

This was a local scheme without Pupil Premium implications, so no changes were made to the school census.

Process:

- Briefings held for schools
- Letters sent to eligible households with a link to an online support request form
- Parents confirmed eligibility details; communications repeated each term to capture new eligibilities
- Requests were triaged and outcomes emailed to parents/carers
- Schools received lists of eligible children and funding allocations based on the number of meals requested
- Funding transferred to schools to cover meal costs

Payments:

Payments were made directly to schools at the actual meal cost (varying by provider), rather than a flat rate, ensuring budgets weren't adversely affected. The standard FSM rate in Stockport is £2.53, but three providers charge different rates.

For a small group of post-16 students attending out-of-borough colleges, funding was provided as a cash payment (£2.53 per day) to parents/carers at the start of each term, due to logistical challenges with college meal provision. This approach supports choice, dignity, and control for young adults.

Who was involved?

A wide range of stakeholders were involved in delivering the scheme including:

- Stockport Council – Revenues & Benefits Team
- Stockport Council – Business Intelligence Team
- Stockport Council – Communities & Inclusion Team
- Stockport Council – Resident Advice & Support Team
- Stockport Council – Information Governance
- Stockport Council – Stockport Family
- Schools and school-meal providers

Delivery of the scheme was overseen by the Cost of Living Task Force (now Anti-Poverty Steering Group) and regular updates provided to the council's Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resource.

How did you involve the community?

Throughout the design and implementation of the SMSS, the project lead regularly consulted Elected Members. Equally vital to the scheme's success was the input from schools themselves. A series of workshops with school business managers were held to gather their feedback and understand the practical implications, ensuring the scheme was designed to avoid any negative impact on school capacity.

What were the challenges and how were they overcome?

The scheme involved several complex challenges, including:

- Developing a payment system for children attending schools outside the borough, where the council had limited direct relationships, complicating administration.
- Addressing meal provision for pupils in settings without suitable food facilities, mainly post-16 students at out-of-borough colleges. For this group, the council provided £2.53 per day in cash via Post Office payouts to parents/carers at the start of each term. This cash-first approach was chosen due to practical difficulties around college meal services and scheduling, while also promoting choice, dignity, and control for young adults.

What has been the impact?

By the end of the academic year, 1300 children were supported by the scheme. A total of 150 settings supported the scheme – 104 Stockport schools/colleges, 46 schools/colleges outside Stockport.

Alongside the development of the SMSS, Public Health worked in partnership with the main provider of school meals in Stockport to further develop their menu offer to reduce the amounts of fat, salt and sugar, increase the plant-based offer and develop marketing materials that would appeal to students and families. The provider is now accredited by both Pro Veg UK and SUGARWISE. The provider has also recently launched Project Green Genius, a recipe design competition, where students will have

the opportunity to create and share plant based and planet-friendly recipes. The project will further help to engage students in the process of designing a healthier diet whilst highlighting the importance of sustainable, vegetable-based food choices. The winning dish will feature in future menus.

Whilst the scheme ended in July 2024, the council continues to support recipient families with cost-of-living support. For example, in July and December 2024, the council awarded Family Support Vouchers (worth £190 per child) to SMSS recipient families that would not ordinarily be eligible for the vouchers. This benefited 182 families (including 246 children).

Further information

Child Poverty Action Group – [Free School Meals in the North West](#)