

Summary of the responses to the public consultation on the eligibility criteria for free school meals and uniform grants

July 2025

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Executive Summary

The 12-week public consultation on the options for changing the eligibility criteria for free school meals (FSM) and uniform grants ran from 22 November 2024 – 14 February 2025. It resulted in 661 responses being submitted, 632 using the online questionnaire and 29 written responses. 603 of the responses were provided by individuals and 58 were from organisations.

The consultation sought to gather the views of the public as how best to increase the number of children and young people that are able to access FSM and UG, taking into account the severe budget pressures that the Department continues to face.

The responses were strongly in favour of changing the current eligibility criteria to allow for a significant expansion of access to FSM. A large majority of respondents believed that increasing the number of pupils accessing FSM and UG should be a priority for the Department.

The central focus across responses was a strong support for expanding access to FSM, either through raising income thresholds or implementing universal provision.

A large number of respondents favoured the introduction of universal FSM, particularly at the primary school level. This view was driven by the desire to reduce stigma, improve children's health and educational outcomes, and alleviate financial strain on families.

There was an even stronger preference for enabling more low-income families to access FSM and UG through the increasing of the income threshold. This centred on the need to address child poverty and food insecurity through widening access to FSM and UG. Some respondents highlighted that the current threshold did not reflect the reality of providing for children in a low-income family, particularly those just above the current income threshold, described by some as the “working poor”. There were concerns expressed that the current approach is not targeting the right pupils, with many considered to be in poverty not able to access FSM.

A number of responses outlined concerns that FSM and UG entitlement was largely based on families being in receipt of specific benefits. It was explained that many families had issues with being able to access Universal Credit and that this could impact their access to FSM and UG. Some referenced that those in poverty should be able to access FSM and UG on the basis of families' net income. This was particularly highlighted as a concern for the self-employed, women and those living in rural areas.

Introduction

On 22 November 2024 the Department launched a 12-week public consultation as part of the Department's review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals (FSM) and uniform grants (UG). The review is examining a range of options which would increase the number of pupils able to access. The consultation documents and associated impact assessments remain available to view on the [Department's website](#). Modelling was used to estimate how each option would change the number of pupils who could benefit from these supports and the associated annual costs.

The consultation documents were hosted online and made available in both English and Irish. In addition, a child friendly version and an easy read version were also made available. Associated impact assessments were also available.

Respondents had the opportunity to use an online questionnaire to provide their views or to provide a written response. The Department received 632 responses to the online questionnaire. A summary of the responses to the online consultation is outlined in **Part one** of this document.

The Department also received 29 written responses, and a summary of the comments and responses is outlined in **Part two** of this document.

Context

The Department's FSM and UG policy currently provides targeted support to families on low incomes based upon their entitlement to relevant benefits. This is used to identify those children deemed to be most in need and provides children and young people who meet the eligibility criteria with a nutritious meal each day that is suitable as the main meal of the day.

UG provided under the Education Authority's (EA) Clothing Allowance Scheme provides assistance as a contribution towards the cost of school uniform and clothing for physical education.

The vast majority of pupils entitled to FSM and UG do so on the basis of their families receiving relevant welfare benefits, such as Universal Credit (UC), Tax Credits, Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or Income-related Employment and Support Allowance.

As part of the UK-wide move to UC, Tax Credits ended on 5 April 2025 and those previously in receipt of Tax Credits will have been offered the opportunity by the Department for Communities to move to UC.

If a parent is in receipt of UC and has an annual household net income (income threshold) of less than £15,000, their children will be entitled to FSM and UG. The Minister raised this income threshold from £14,000 in June 2024 on an interim basis pending the conclusion of this review. References in this document to the “income threshold” being raised refers to this £15,000 level being further raised to allow those with a higher household net income to access FSM and UG.

Consultation process

The consultation contained six questions that sought views on options which would increase the number of pupils able to access FSM's and UG. The consultation documents and questions explained that the current education budget is already much less than is needed and so difficult decisions continue to have to be made in trying to maintain existing service provision. Respondents were encouraged to take this into account when providing their answers.

The questions sought views in areas such as the importance of increasing access to FSM and UG relative to other areas in which resources could be spent by the Department. It gathered respondents' views on the relative importance of targeting support to low-income families compared to providing universal FSM to some/all age groups. It also asked about which groups of pupils should be able to access universal FSM if it were to be introduced.

This document divides the consultation responses into two parts. Part one gives details of the responses provided to the questions posed through the online questionnaire. A total of 632 responses were received via the online consultation survey. 576 responses were provided by individuals and 56 were provided by those representing organisations.

Part two relates to the 29 views provided by those who submitted a separate, written response. 27 of these responses were from organisations and two were by individuals.

Some responses referenced areas that are outside the scope of this consultation, for example in relation to the provision of support to children outside of school term time, the rates of uniform grant and the wider costs of school uniforms. These views are not included in this document which focuses on who should be able to receive FSM and UG.

PART ONE – Online questionnaire responses

As part of the consultation process, an online questionnaire was used to allow respondents to give their views. A small number of respondents provided their answers to the same questions in written form without additional narrative and these were included with the results of the online questionnaire. The results to the questions posed are detailed below, split by those indicating they were responding as an individual and those responding on behalf of an organisation.

Question one

Question one asked “Leaving aside potential increases to the income threshold levels for those in receipt of Universal Credit should the other current eligibility criteria remain the same?”

The table below shows the responses to question one.

	Individuals		Organisations		All Respondents	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Eligibility criteria should remain the same	189	33%	18	33%	207	33%
Eligibility criteria should be changed	376	67%	37	67%	413	67%

The results in the table above reflect a very similar pattern between individual respondents and organisational respondents, where approximately two thirds of respondents stated that the current eligibility criteria should be changed.

When a respondent selected the option that the criteria should be changed, they were offered the opportunity to comment as to how the criteria should be changed – over 300 respondents chose to do so. These responses were thematically grouped as follows:

- Strong support for universal FSM provision to be introduced, irrespective of income or benefit status. Many responses referenced this ensuring fairness, reducing stigma associated with FSM entitlement, supporting learning and easing family budget pressures.

- Similarly strong levels of support to raising the income threshold. Many responses referenced that this would help families struggling with the rises in the costs of living, would help the working poor who may earn just over the current threshold and would take account of the effects of inflation.
- A small number of responses stated that the eligibility criteria should be expanded to include working families on low incomes not receiving Universal Credit, single parent families and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- A small number of responses expressed concerns with the current system, referencing: the ‘cliff-edge’ nature of FSM and UG entitlement where those just above the threshold are not entitled to the supports, the impact of stigma preventing some from applying and a preference for net income to be used to determine eligibility rather than being linked to being in receipt of benefits.

Question two

Question two asked “*If a form of universal FSM provision were to be introduced in Northern Ireland, how strongly do you agree or disagree that this should prioritise younger pupils in a similar way to the rest of the UK?*”

The table below shows the responses to question two.

	Individuals		Organisations		All Respondents	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	207	36%	17	30%	224	36%
Agree	125	22%	20	36%	145	23%
Neither agree nor disagree	95	16%	6	11%	101	16%
Disagree	87	15%	7	13%	94	15%
Strongly disagree	59	10%	6	11%	65	10%

The table above shows that 59% of all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that if any form of universal FSM were to be introduced, that they should prioritise younger children in a similar way to the rest of the UK. 66% of organisations took this view, slightly higher than 58% of those responding as individuals. 25% of all respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with a similar proportion of individuals and organisations taking this view.

Question three

Question three asked “*In light of the Department’s challenging budget position, how strongly do you agree or disagree that it should be a priority for the Department to increase the number of children that are able to access free school meals?*”

The table below shows the responses to question three.

	Individuals		Organisations		All Respondents	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	397	69%	38	68%	435	69%
Agree	91	16%	13	23%	104	16%
Neither agree nor disagree	30	5%	3	5%	33	5%
Disagree	31	5%	1	2%	32	5%
Strongly disagree	26	5%	1	2%	27	4%

Of the 631 respondents to question 3, a large majority (85%) either strongly agreed or agreed that taking into account the Department’s challenging budget position, it should be a priority for the Department to increasing the number of children able to access FSM. This included 91% of organisational respondents taking this view. 9% of all respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this should be a priority for the Department.

Question four

Question four asked “If additional funding is made available to give more children free school meals, please indicate how you would prefer that it should be used?”

The table below shows the responses to question four.

	Individuals		Organisations		All Respondents	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
All used to support more low-income families	167	29%	18	32%	185	29%
All used to provide universal FSM to certain age groups	229	40%	12	21%	241	38%
Be split to support more low-income families AND to give universal FSM to some year groups	178	31%	25	45%	203	32%

There was no clear favoured response to this question with a broadly even split across the three options from all respondents. The highest proportion of all respondents (38%) answered that if additional funding were available to give more children FSM, the funding should all be used to provide universal FSM to certain age groups. 32% of all respondents stated that they believed that if any additional funding were available, it should be split between allowing some more low-income families to access FSM while giving some year groups access to universal FSM. 29% of all respondents stated that if any additional funding were to be available, it should all be used to enable more low-income families to access FSM. Therefore 70% supported options involving provision of universal FSM and 61% supported options giving more support for low-income families.

Question five

Question five asked “If it were decided that the only change would be to rollout a form of universal FSM, which groups of pupils would be the preference to receive a universal FSM?”

The table below shows the responses to question five.

	Individuals		Organisations		All Respondents	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Universal to P3	54	9%	6	11%	60	9%
Universal to P7	110	19%	16	29%	126	20%
Universal to Yr14	383	66%	28	50%	411	65%
Other	27	5%	5	9%	32	5%

There was a clear preference expressed (65%) that if the only change were to be the rollout of universal FSM, it should be provided to all children and young people up to Year 14. The next most popular option (20%) was universal FSM being provided to all pupils up to P7. 9% believed that universal FSM up to P3 was their preferred option. 5% of respondents selected the “other” option and these comments had a wide spectrum of views as to who should receive universal FSM.

There was a significant proportion of the comments supporting universal FSM to all pupils. Some comments referenced that specific year groups should be prioritised for universal FSM, for example only those in compulsory school years P1-Y12, only those in post-primary school, only those in P1 or those with special educational needs. There were also a small number of comments that universal FSM should not be provided to any pupils and also that any introduction of universal FSM provision would result in a significant increase in food wastage.

Question six

Question six asked “***If it were decided that the Department should rollout a form of universal FSM provision AND it should also enable more low-income pupils from all school years to be entitled to FSM, which of the following is your preferred option for who should be offered a universal FSM?***

The table below shows the responses to question six.

	Individuals		Organisations		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Universal to P3	56	10%	8	15%	64	10%
Universal to P7	390	69%	36	67%	426	69%
Other	119	21%	10	19%	129	21%

In terms of which year-groups should be able to access universal FSM if this were rolled out alongside an increase in the income threshold, there was a clear preference (69%) for universal FSM to be provided up to P7. 21% of respondents chose the “other” option – the vast majority of the comments provided believed that universal FSM should be provided to all pupils alongside a rise in the income thresholds.

The most frequently cited reasons for universal FSM being provided to all pupils along with a rise in the income thresholds were: that post-primary pupils are as much in need of this support as younger pupils as nutrition and learning are linked across all ages; that the stigma associated with FSM can be more significant in teenage years and that the nutritional needs of teenagers are greater due to levels of growth, exams and active lifestyles. There were also a small number of comments made in relation to concerns over the cost-effectiveness of universal FSM provision and the potential for increase food wastage.

PART TWO – Written responses

In addition to the online survey, the Department received 29 written responses, 27 of which were from organisations. This included a petition supporting the implementation universal FSM. In a small number of written responses where a clear answer was provided to the questionnaire questions without other narrative being provided, these responses were included alongside the online questionnaire responses.

A summary of the key points from each of the 29 written responses is shown in the Annex.

Key Themes from Written Consultation Responses

The written consultation responses generated significant discussion around several core themes. These include the overarching issue of child poverty, the benefits of introducing universal FSM provision, the need to raise income thresholds to ensure those in need receive FSM and UG support.

- **Child Poverty**

A dominant theme across the written consultation responses is the widespread concern about child poverty and rising levels of food insecurity across Northern Ireland. Many submissions highlight the high rates of children living in poverty and the serious negative consequences this has on their lives including the correlation between poverty and poorer educational outcomes. Statistics from sources such as the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and reports of growing reliance from food banks are frequently cited to illustrate this issue.

Several respondents noted that these issues have been exacerbated by welfare reforms and the rising cost of living, placing additional pressure on already struggling families.

The responses emphasise that poverty affects children's educational attainment, health, and overall well-being, creating significant disadvantages. The reliance of many families on food banks is presented as a symptom of broader issues such as low levels of income, inadequate welfare support, and the rising cost of living.

- **Universal FSM Provision**

A predominant theme across the written consultation responses was strong support for the introduction of universal FSM provision. The majority of written respondents advocated for universal FSM as the preferred long-term goal.

While universal FSM for all pupils from nursery through to Year 14 emerged as the preferred outcome for many respondents, there was widespread recognition of potential budgetary constraints with numerous responses suggested a phased approach to implementation. Many recommended starting with universal provision for younger children (predominantly recommending up to P7) and gradually extending this to older year groups over time. This approach was seen by many as a pragmatic compromise that would deliver benefits to younger children while establishing a foundation for eventual universal coverage.

The most frequent arguments presented in the written responses in favour of universal FSM provision can be summarised as follows:

- **Alleviating Financial Strain:** Universal FSM can ease the financial burden on families, particularly those struggling with the rising cost of living and food insecurity. This is seen by many as a way of not having a “cliff edge” where some families are just over the income threshold and therefore, despite struggling financially, are not entitled to FSM.
- **Improving Nutrition and Health:** Providing a healthy universal FSM to children is seen as an important method to improve children and young people’s diet, which in turn benefits their short and long-term physical and mental health and has a positive impact on tackling childhood obesity.
- **Reducing Stigma:** Universal FSM provision helps to alleviate any perceived stigma associated with FSM only being accessed by low-income families. This creates a more equitable and inclusive school environment.
- **Enhancing Educational Outcomes:** Access to a regular, healthy meal can improve a child’s educational outcomes through improved attendance, engagement in school, concentration and academic performance.

- Need to Increase Income Thresholds and Expand Eligibility

In parallel to advocating for universal FSM provision, a high proportion of respondents emphasised the need to increase the income threshold for FSM and UG entitlement, prioritising support for low-income families, particularly in the context of the Department’s very challenging budget position. Many referenced it being particularly important to support families who fall just above the income thresholds but still struggle with financial hardship - referred to by some as the "working poor." Respondents frequently noted that existing eligibility criteria leave many low-income families without sufficient support.

Many respondents viewed increasing income thresholds as complementary to the goal of universal provision rather than an alternative approach. They suggested that both approaches should be taken forward, with income threshold increases helping more quickly while progress toward universality continues over the longer term.

Many responses felt FSM and UG entitlement being based upon entitlement to other benefits did not take account of the practical challenges associated with accessing UC. This includes a view expressed by a number of respondents in relation to how UC disadvantages the self-employed and those in rural areas. The use of benefits entitlement to determine FSM and UG entitlement is seen as problematic because it excludes many low-income families who are not eligible for those benefits, such as working families including what some described as “the working poor”. A number of responses believed that FSM and UG entitlement should take account of family size.

An academic report commissioned and published by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People was referenced and endorsed within several responses in relation to it showing that the existing FSM and UG eligibility criteria do not accurately target children in poverty, with a significant proportion of children in poverty being excluded. The report advocated for the use of net household income to better capture those in genuine need rather than FSM and UG entitlement being based on entitlement to other benefits. It also recommends that family size be taken into account in determining FSM and UG entitlement.

The disproportionate impact of poverty on women was also raised by several respondents, with calls for eligibility criteria that consider the specific challenges faced by women.

PART THREE – Conclusion

The consultation on eligibility criteria for FSM and UG generated 661 responses, highlighting the importance of these supports to families across Northern Ireland.

The responses demonstrate a clear consensus from respondents that expanding access to FSM and UG should be a priority for the Department, even in the context of the challenging budget constraints facing the Department.

Two complementary approaches emerged from the consultation. First, there is substantial support for raising income thresholds to enable more low-income families to access FSM and UG, particularly those who fall just above current thresholds yet struggle financially. Second, there is significant backing for implementing universal FSM provision, with many respondents favouring universal provision up to Year 14.

Many respondents proposed a phased approach, whereby universal FSM provision could be introduced over a longer timeframe in recognition of budget limitations. There were also some who raised concerns as to the cost-effectiveness of providing universal FSM when there are already severe funding pressures across the education sector.

There were a number of respondents who highlighted their concerns that linking FSM and UG entitlement to benefits entitlement did not sufficiently target support towards those in poverty, with some suggesting that net household income would be a more effective alternative approach.

The responses provided through this consultation will be one of the key factors that the Minister will take into account in his decisions on the way forward in this policy area.

The Department would like to thank all those who took the time to respond to this consultation.

Annex – Summary of key points in each written response

Written responses listed in alphabetical order.

	Summary of key points
Act Now NI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided an online petition signed by 961 individuals calling for the introduction of Universal FSM for all pupils. Of the 961 responses, 220 (23%) had a Northern Ireland postcode.
Advice NI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports widening FSM eligibility, especially for families on Universal Credit. Cautions that universal provision may direct resources to families who do not need help. Recommends automating the FSM registration process through data sharing agreements. Highlights the importance of tackling stigma around FSM. Prioritises improving uptake among already entitled families.
Alliance Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports broadening access to FSM and UG as part of wider Anti-Poverty Strategy, potentially on a gradual basis. Emphasises the cost of child poverty versus the long-term savings of FSM provision. Highlights the high levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland and cites evidence of the negative impacts of poverty on children's outcomes. Argues that it is more costly not to take action to tackle poverty.
Barnardo's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States that FSM eligibility should target children in poverty, not just those on benefits. Explains that the current eligibility criteria miss many poor children and includes many not in poverty. Supports universal provision of FSMs to younger children, expanding as budget allows. Highlights the benefits of universal FSM for health, education, and reducing stigma. Acknowledges budget constraints but emphasises the importance of investing in children's futures.
British Dietic Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the rollout of universal FSM up to P7 pupils and the raising of the income threshold. References evidence showing that a lack of nutrition strongly influences education outcomes and poorer health both in childhood and later in life. States that the application process itself is a major barrier with many families facing challenges with literacy, digital access or transport. Strongly agrees that the Department prioritises increasing the number of children able to access FSM.

	Summary of key points
Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strongly advocates for widening access to FSM and UG through a phased rollout of universal FSM to all school pupils. Highlights the benefits of FSM, including a wide range of health, educational and economic benefits. References that current FSM provision does not support all children deemed to be in poverty. Outlined findings of a workshop with children and young people on the consultation issues. Participants were supportive of the introduction of universal FSM as well as ensuring low-income families have access to FSM. Emphasises the importance of UG provision for low-income families and advocates for both an expansion of access and an increase in the rates of UG.
Consumer Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strongly supports the expansion of FSM and UG provisions to alleviate financial hardship and food insecurity, outlining that this should be a priority for the Department. Advocates for a needs-based approach to FSM entitlement, prioritising those facing financial hardship, regardless of age, and not just those in receipt of benefits. Provides evidence of the largest proportion of low-income families' expenditure at points in the year being on food and non-alcoholic drinks and of the growing challenge of food affordability in low-income households. Recommends that there should be a cross-governmental approach to eventually introduce universal FSM through a phased approach.
Equality Commission for NI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports action to address poverty and promote educational attainment and improvement in children's health and recognises the importance of FSM in achieving these goals. Urges the Department to consider how proposals can tackle inequality and advance equality of opportunity through support centred on addressing objective need. Referenced research that the linking of eligibility for FSM to benefit entitlement results in some young people with working parents who are in poverty not being entitled to FSM.
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports universal FSM for all pupils to year 14 and for the income threshold to be increased. Outlines that school uniform costs and proper nutrition should not be barriers to school participation or educational attainment. Emphasises that policy decisions should take account of the regional disparities in Northern Ireland and the impact on rural communities.

	Summary of key points
Food Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Its response is informed by the views of two of its young food ambassadors who attend school in Northern Ireland Outlines that the Department should prioritise the widening of FSM access to children from low-income families over the introduction of universal FSM. However, it does support universal FSM provision for children to P3 with a view to widening access to all pupils at a later point when budget constraints allow. Highlights that Northern Ireland is the only UK region with no universal provision and believes that this imbalance should be tackled. References research that to meet government recommended healthy eating guidance, the most deprived families with children would have to spend 70% of their disposable income on food. FSM provision for these families would help them access a healthy diet that would promote more equitable educational and health outcomes for the children. Cites the views of a young food ambassador on the importance of food on a child's physical health, emotional well-being and academic performance. Also how those who cannot afford lunch can experience isolation and low self-esteem leading, in some cases, to bullying or exclusion from peer groups.
Foyle Network Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> References its experience in relation to food banks in its area and the increasing need for support to be provided to families. Supports the recommendations by Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network to implement universal FSM in Northern Ireland Recommends an increase in the income threshold during the period of rolling out universal FSM. Outlines that FSM and UG should be part of a comprehensive Anti-Poverty Strategy.
Joanne Bunting MLA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasises importance of providing much needed FSM and UG support to low-income working families, single parents and those with more than one school-aged child. Notes that child children from socio-economic backgrounds who could be classed as 'working poor' are often not able to access FSM or UG because one or more of their parents are employed. Outlines that extending the eligibility criteria to include more low-income families can promote equality and support the educational experience of all children.
Mark H Durkan MLA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports expansion of FSM and UG support by increasing the income threshold. Also supports provision of universal FSM provision, particularly at primary level, using a similar approach to that used in Scotland. Outlines concerns over growing levels of food insecurity, much of which has been driven by the consequences of welfare reform. Expresses concerns around the impact of the transition of legacy benefit claimants migrating to Universal Credit and the potential loss of eligibility to FSM and UG. While welcoming the interim rise in the income threshold to £15k per year, believes that this does not go far enough and should be raised further to reflect inflation and increases to national minimum wage.

	Summary of key points
Mental Health Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considers the review as an opportunity to reduce the mental health effects of social and economic inequalities. • Supports action to improve childhood nutrition and advocates for an increase in income thresholds aligned with current cost of living and poverty measures. • Notes the negative impact of poverty on children's cognitive, emotional and physical development. • Highlights research showing that public bodies' actions can mitigate financial stress and improve the population's mental health. • Acknowledges the impact of budget constraints and asks that the Department ensures that those most in need are supported and that the decisions take into account the need to ensure that provision does not contribute to poverty stigma.
Mid Ulster District Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believes lack of access to FSM and UG can disadvantage many children, both in terms of their educational attainment and the mental wellbeing impact of poverty-related stigma felt by some children. • Notes that those who need FSM and UG support should be able to access it in a dignified manner with a focus on pupils being able to access their right to education with the removal of any barriers to this being achieved. • Collated responses from 18 local schools with the preferred option of 7 schools being option (c) of universal FSM to Year 14 and 5 schools preferring option (d) with a rise in the income threshold. • Comments from schools included an acknowledgement that while universal FSM for all children would be preferable, this would not be currently economically viable. A comment was also provided that in recognising the challenges for those of post-primary age, the focus of FSM provision should not be on younger pupils.
National Education Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the provision of universal FSM, citing the range of possible benefits such as increased financial security for families, nutritional benefits, improved eating habits and reduction in stigma. • Highlights the importance of universal FSM with a range of physical and mental benefits and raised regional comparisons with other UK jurisdictions and international perspectives. • Emphasises the importance of there being the necessary catering infrastructure and staff in place to support universal FSM. • Notes that a significant proportion of children in Northern Ireland live in poverty and the increasing challenges experienced by children due to socio-economic inequalities.

	Summary of key points
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the provision of Universal FSM, rolling over progressively over time as budget allows, starting with youngest children. In parallel, believes that criteria will be needed in some form to enable entitlement to UG and allocation of other resources. Believes that FSM eligibility should be targeted primarily towards children in poverty to ensure they have access to nutritious food. Provides analysis commissioned on discrepancy between FSM entitlement and children in poverty. This details concerns that the current eligibility criteria result in many children in poverty not being able to access FSM and UG. Notes that increasing the current income threshold will only marginally increase the number of children in poverty being entitled to FSM with most gaining entitlement not being in poverty. States that current FSM eligibility disadvantages working families. Recommends that entitlement to FSM should no longer be linked to benefits entitlement and should be solely based on families' net income levels, equivalised by family size.
Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the phased rollout of universal FSM to all pupils with increasing income thresholds during the rollout period. This should be funded through the pooling of resources from DE, Department of Health and the Department for Communities. Provides research on the health and educational benefits of offering universal FSM provision. Explains how increasing household poverty levels and hardship for families has been contributed to by welfare reform measures, austerity measures such as cuts to educational services and rises in the costs of living. Cites concerns that there are many families in poverty that are not currently able to access FSM and that issues with the migration of households to Universal Credit are resulting many not being able to access FSM.
Parenting Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports universal FSM for all pupils up to year 14 but in light of budget pressures, should prioritise P1-P7 first. Advocates for urgent reform of the FSM and UG eligibility criteria to ensure that all children in poverty receive the support they need. Notes that many children in working families are not able to access FSM due to restrictive eligibility criteria. References that there is a mismatch between many of those in poverty and those receiving FSM and UG. Believes that FSM entitlement should be based on net household income rather than receipt of benefits.

	Summary of key points
Public Health Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the provision of universal FSM to P7 and increasing income thresholds. Strongly agrees that increasing access to FSM should be a priority for the Department. Agrees that younger pupils should be prioritised in any introduction of universal FSM. Cites evidence as to how FSM provision has many benefits including boosting attainment and attendance, improving food security and diet quality and helping to prevent childhood obesity. Explains how there is a significant disparity of diet and attitudes to food between low-income and high-income families. FSM provision could help reduce this disparity and the associated health inequalities.
Participation and The Practice of Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the provision of universal FSM to all children in order to improve children's health and address the impact of child poverty. References reports on the significant number of families with children having to rely on food banks. Notes the human rights framework that sets out standards in relation to food poverty, food insecurity and an adequate standard of living. Outlines the disparity between universal FSM provision in other areas of the UK. Highlights the financial challenges experienced by many families due to the costs of school uniforms.
Rural Community Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the provision of universal FSM. Provided a range of evidence on the impact of poverty and food poverty in particular on Northern Ireland households, especially those in rural areas. Details the additional costs of living in a rural area and the challenges of accessing many services for rural dwellers. Outlines how educational cuts to services in recent times has impact rural communities. Explains how moving to and/or accessing Universal Credit has been particularly difficult for rural households and the self-employed in particular, with the logistics of the UC system being a barrier. Therefore, many children who would potentially be entitled to FSM are not able to do so. Does not believe FSM entitlement should be linked to applicants being in receipt of UC. Shows comments from its own informal survey emphasising the importance of school meals to low-income families who are not in receipt of FSM and explained some of the reasons as to why many do not apply or are not able to do so. Outlined concerns with the format of the consultation questionnaire and the Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken by the Department.

	Summary of key points
Safefood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the provision of universal FSM to all pupils. If funding does not allow for this, believes universal FSM to P7 and increasing income thresholds is the most appropriate approach. Recognises that a phased approach may be needed. Outlines the negative impacts of poverty and food poverty in particular on low-income households. It also notes that those in larger families are more likely to be in this position and this should be taken into account. Therefore, recommends that those in food poverty able to access FSM support. Recognises the benefits of FSM provision on children and young people's diet and health, their food security and their educational outcomes.
Sinn Féin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Believes that universal FSM would bring many short and long-term benefits and therefore should be a longer-term ambition. However, in recognising the ongoing budget pressures, believes widening entitlement to FSM through raising the income thresholds should be taken forward to support more low-income families. Recognises the benefits for children of accessing FSM in terms of diet/health, educational outcomes and socio-economic impact. Also how FSM can help tackle the barriers for children and young people from low-income households may have in reaching their educational potential. Notes that universal FSM would boost uptake and help to reduce the poverty-related stigma associated with FSM entitlement only being available to those from low-income backgrounds. Details concerns about falling numbers of children entitled to FSM and the negative continuing impact of the move to Universal Credit resulting in many being excluded from FSM entitlement.
Unison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the implementation of universal FSM for all pupils as an effective way to address the issues of child poverty and inequality. Recognises that this may require a phased or incremental approach. Details its ongoing campaign for universal FSM that has run since 2021 as a measure to improve educational attainment, reduce poverty and improve child health and development. Supports research that details how the current FSM eligibility criteria are not supporting the pupils most in need and that a new approach should not link benefits entitlement to FSM entitlement, with the latter being based on net income, adjusted for family size. Calls for the Executive to prioritise funding to enable the implementation of universal FSM, recognising the availability of universal FSM in other regions in the UK. States that any changes to the numbers of children receiving FSM should continue to be delivered using a public model of the school catering service and would unequivocally oppose any move to privatise or outsource the provision of school meals.

	Summary of key points
Women's Platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls for a single Universal Credit qualifying criteria with a priority on universal FSM for all children and young people to reduce pressure on low-income families and allow children to learn without concerns over their access to food. It would also help alleviate any stigma experienced by those without sufficient access to food. • Recommends replacing current complex eligibility criteria with a simple income threshold that reflects the current relative poverty threshold, referencing a threshold of £21,000. Potentially with a tapering to allow those of incomes less than £30,000 to access a proportion of the grant. • Believes a universal approach for all children and young people would recognise the challenges for families of older children without prioritising any age group over another. • Recognises the important support universal FSM could offer to women in particular, many of whom continue to experience financial and health difficulties, some of which are exacerbated by issues with Universal Credit.
Women's Policy Group NI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the introduction of universal FSM to all children up to year 14 and that this should be a key priority for the Department. It also supports the raising of the income threshold to widen access to UG. • In noting that poverty in Northern Ireland is not only deeply entrenched but also gendered, it highlights the disproportionate impact of poverty on women and their children. • Believes that Universal Credit can exclude the self-employed and those in rural areas and as a result the current eligibility criteria should be reformed to reach more families in need. • Explains that it believes the consultation process should have facilitated more detailed responses to be provided including the opportunity to provide more nuanced answers than the online questionnaire allowed.
Women's Regional Consortium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the provision of universal FSM to all pupils although some felt that if this were not possible, at least younger children should receive universal FSM. Believes increasing access to FSM and UG should be a priority for the Department. • In recognising the impact on children and young people's wellbeing, believes that current levels of FSM and UG support are insufficient when the financial pressures on many households are taken into account, also advocating for increased financial support for families. • Provides detail on the impact of poverty, the cost-of-living pressures and welfare reform/austerity policies on households and women in particular. • Explains concerns over food security for many households and the negative impact of the move to Universal Credit on many groups including the self-employed. Believes that issues with accessing Universal Credit are therefore having a detrimental effect on many families being able to access FSM and UG. • Has concerns with how the public consultation process did not facilitate respondents providing their views effectively.

	Summary of key points
Youth Assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a report of members views following engagement with officials. Most members believe the criteria should expanded to include additional groups such as children looked after and newcomer children. Members appreciated the current budget landscape and that a rise in expenditure in this area will need to be found elsewhere within the Department's budget. Most members believe that any universal FSM should prioritise younger children in order to support their early development and instill positive eating habits. Almost all members believe it should be a priority for DE to increase the number of children accessing FSM. Most members feel that in light of budget pressures, support for children from low-income families should be a priority over universal provision. While most members believe that if universal FSM were to be implemented, it should be up to year 14. Members supported a range of different income thresholds, with the greatest number supporting a £20,000 threshold. This should be reviewed annually. Also recommends consideration of: family size be taken into account; potential for a tapered support for those just over the income threshold and more being done to tackle stigma of applying for and taking FSM.