

School Meals Census
Official Statistics
Information and Procedures

Data Collection

Information on numbers of pupils taking school meals is collected annually as part of the School Meals Census. This data collection exercise is an annual snapshot for all grant aided schools in Northern Ireland, and the reference point for data is usually the Friday of the first full working-week in October. This is the same date for the main School Census (school enrolments) data collection¹.

The School Meals Census gathers information in relation to the number of children taking school meals either paid or free; those taking traditional meals or cash cafeteria; and those making other lunch arrangements.

The information provided in the School Meals Census combined with that in the main School Census also allows the comparison of uptake of free school meals by those with entitlement.

The Education Authority (formerly Education and Library Boards (ELBs)) is responsible for the day to day operation of the school meals service in all grant-aided schools, with the exception of voluntary grammar schools and grant-maintained integrated schools, where the responsibility lies with the Trustees/Boards of Governors. Prior to the 2012/13 School Meals Census catering managers in the former Education and Library Boards collected data in relation to schools in the controlled and maintained sectors and provided a collated return for their area to the Department; the Department collected information directly from each Voluntary Grammar School and Grant-Maintained Integrated School.

For the 2012/13 School Meals Census the data collection methodology was changed. The Department collected the information directly from each grant-aided school.

The first statistical bulletin on School Meals in Northern Ireland was produced in relation to 2010/11 data. Prior to this data was collected, collated and made available to policy branches within the Department of Education and to other users across the education service, most notably the former Education and Library Boards (ELBs).

The following data is collected:

- Type of meal provision
- Number of pupils enrolled
- Number of pupils present on Census day
- Number of pupils present on Census day but not availing of a school midday break²
- Number of pupils taking traditional meal – paying
- Number of pupils taking traditional meal – free
- Number of pupils taking cash cafeteria meal – paying
- Number of pupils taking cash cafeteria meal – free
- Number of pupils making other lunch arrangements
- Number of adults taking school meal – paying
- Number of adults taking school meal – free – kitchen staff
- Number of adults taking school meal – free – midday supervisors

Main Legislation

The following statutory provisions provide for the processing of data by the Department.

Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 Article 37 provides that ELBs and schools shall make such reports and returns and give such information to the Department as the Department may reasonably require for the purposes of its functions under any statutory provision.

¹ For the 2012/13 School Meals Census the reference date was 19 October 2012 while the reference date for the main School Census was 5 October 2012

² Collection of this data item began in 2012/13 School Meals Census

The Department is responsible for formulating and developing policy and the associated financial arrangements in relation to school meals. The school meals service itself is provided in line with the Approved Arrangements for the Provision of Milk, Meals and Related Facilities made under Articles 58 and 59 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 drawn up by the Department of Education (DE). (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/milk-and-meals-arrangements-education-authority-voluntary-grammar-and-grant-maintained>)

The Department is registered with the Information Commissioner as a data controller under the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 - General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and processing carried out by the Department is compliant with the GDPR.

Resources

The process is currently encompassed within the workload of 1 Deputy Principal Statistician with 1 Assistant Statistician. This is the minimum required to produce the dataset to its current standard and in the current timeframe.

Users and uses of the Statistics Release and data

Data collected through the School Meals Census are used by policy teams within the Department of Education and by other users across the education service, most notably by the Education Authority (formerly the Education and Library Boards (ELBs)). The data are also used to inform a number of Assembly questions.

Response Burden

As part of the 2019/20 data collection all schools were asked to indicate how long it took them to make their return. The average time taken by schools to make a return in 2019/20 was 30 minutes. In monetary terms, this translated to an average of £9.22. The results from each school varied considerably and reasons for this could be such factors as the size or type of each school or the rank of the member of staff completing the return.

The average time taken and associated average cost is similar to the figure reported for 2018/19, which was 29 minutes and £8.69. Note that in both 2018/19 and 2019/20 the response burden information was collected as part of the main data collection so does not include the small amount of time involved if a school was re-contacted during validation work.

Data validation

From 2012/13, data collection has been carried out by the Department directly from all grant aided schools. In previous years the Department collected information from Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools only, while the former Education and Library Boards collected data from all other grant aided schools. The following description of data validation relates to 2012/13 and subsequent data collections only.

Data from each school is subjected to a set of validation checks, including basic arithmetic checks, comparison with previous years return and with latest school enrolment and free school meal entitlement figures.

Any changes made to the data as a result of the data validation process are communicated and agreed with the school.

Quality Assurance

Provisional data, relating to grant aided schools only, is released to the Education Authority's Catering Managers in December each year for quality assurance purposes.

Confidentiality

The School Meals data collection exercise adheres to the Confidentiality principle set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics. No information on private individuals or organisations is released to the public. Sensitive data items or individual level data are not collected as part of this process and are therefore not held by DE Analytical Services Unit.

Publication Details

The Statistical Bulletin on School Meals is an Official Statistics publication usually published in April on the Department's website and on the UK National Statistics Publication Hub. The Statistical Bulletin is pre-announced on the Statistical Publication Schedule on the DE website in accordance with the UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Statistics.

The following individuals are granted 24-hour pre-release access to the Statistical Bulletin:

Minister for Education for Northern Ireland
Permanent Secretary, Department of Education
Deputy Secretaries, Department of Education
Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate
Head of Transport and Food in Schools Directorate, Department of Education
Head of Finance Directorate, Department of Education
Head of Analytical Service Unit, Department of Education
Head of Food in Schools Team, Department of Education
Principal Information Officer, Department of Education
Special Adviser to the Minister for Education

The pre-release access list is published on the DE Statistics & Research website at the same time as the Statistical Bulletin.

Concurrent with the Statistical Bulletin, data on School Meals uptake are made available online in Microsoft Excel and Open Document format.

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