

# **Background Quality Report**

## **School Meals in Northern Ireland** **(April 2021)**

## Introduction

### ***Context for the quality report***

The Department of Education (DE) adheres to the UK Statistics Authority code of practice for statistics and the National Statistician's guidance on quality. This document provides a summary of how the School Meals official statistics publication adheres to the code in terms of quality. The School Meals publications can be found at the link below:

[DE website \(Opens in a new window: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-meals-statistical-bulletins\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-meals-statistical-bulletins)

Information on school meals is collected annually from schools in Northern Ireland as part of what is commonly known as the School meals census. This data collection exercise is an annual snapshot of school level data for each nursery, special, primary and post-primary school. The data collected is based on school meals taken on a reference date (usually the Friday of the first full week in October) each year. The main purpose of collecting this data is to provide DE policy colleagues with trend data on uptake of school meals for monitoring and planning purposes. School meals census data is also used by the Education Authority (EA) for benchmarking purposes.

Each school is asked to submit an online return to the Department on the uptake of school meals at an aggregated school level.

When the data are returned to the Department, a team of statisticians are responsible for processing and validating this information. This team consists of one Deputy Principal Statistician and one Assistant Statistician with support, when available, from 1 administrative staff. Following the first stage of data validation, provisional data is issued to the Education Authority in December each year. A second stage of data validation is carried out once data on free school meal entitlement becomes available at the end of February. A statistical bulletin based on final data is released in April.

## Relevance

### ***The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and content.***

All branches in DE are consulted annually about what data are collated, including any additional information to be collected or any data that is no longer required. This ensures that data meets the key users' needs. In addition to this, feedback is welcomed from customers outside DE via the feedback section on our website (there is a link to this in our statistical bulletin). Contact details are also provided for the relevant statistician, should a member of the public wish to offer any feedback directly or request further analysis of data.

EA catering managers are also consulted annually on the upcoming data collection and have an opportunity to discuss requirements.

### **Accuracy and Reliability**

***The proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value.***

Coverage of the data is 100% of all grant-aided schools.

Schools input their data into the online application. Validation checks are built into this in an attempt to mitigate against common mistakes. There is still potential for incorrect data to be submitted and statisticians carry out a series of further validation checks including ensuring all pupils are accounted for and that the figures total.

For schools with a cash cafeteria, the numbers taking cash cafeteria meals is an equated meals figure which is calculated by taking the total income from lunch and break time sales and dividing by the fixed price of a traditional meal (set by the Education Authority). Schools that provide an equated figure for cash cafeteria meals generally also estimate the number of pupils making other lunch arrangements, rather than provide an actual count of pupils

The School Meals Census is intended to capture meal information on a specific day i.e. the Friday of the first full week in October. Where this is not a typical day for school meals the schools are permitted to choose an alternative day, preferably in the same week. Due to the nature of taking a snapshot on a specific day, there may be some natural under or over-coverage in particular categories ie school meal numbers may be lower when a class is on a school trip.

### **Timeliness and Punctuality**

***Timeliness refers to the time gap between publication and the reference period. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.***

Data are collected as of October each year. Provisional data are released in December of the same year to the Education Authority, and final data are released in a statistical bulletin the following April. Given the need to wait for data on free school meal entitlement (from the main School Census) which is released at the end of February, there is no scope to release the final data any sooner.

There have been no instances of data not being released as per the planned publication date.

### **Accessibility and Clarity**

***Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice.***

A summary of the key statistics are available via the statistical bulletin released in April each year.

Data tables at a Northern Ireland, Education Authority Region (prior to the formation of the EA in March 2015) are available on the DE website. Many of these data tables include breakdowns by school type and management type. Data on free school meal entitlement is used to estimate uptake rate of free school meals by pupils entitled. Previous years' data is included on the website also, so time series analysis is accessible.

If data is not available online, users are invited to request specific data via email. These data requests are routinely answered within 15 working days. All data available is provided.

Web content is produced in such a way to be accessible to those who require assistive technology.

### **Coherence and Comparability**

***Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain.***

All data on school meals uptake is obtained directly from schools, thus guaranteeing coherence of the data.

Data on free school meal entitlement (FSME) at school level is obtained from the main school census data collection. The reference date for this data is specifically the Friday of the first full week in October. As the reference date for meals uptake can vary a little around this date on a school by school basis, the figures are not directly comparable but are close enough to provide a reliable estimate of free school meal uptake by entitled pupils.

The variables collected have been largely stable, and the methods used to collect the data have been the same since the 2012/13 data collection, so data is comparable over time.

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 break

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

As education is a devolved issue the other UK administrations often have different approaches or different policies underlying data that is collected. This means that making direct comparisons between regions can be difficult.

### **Trade-offs between Output Quality Components**

***Trade-offs are the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.***

The main trade-off is timeliness against accuracy.

A detailed range of validation checks are conducted prior to data being made available, and this list of validation checks is reviewed on an annual basis. While most of these checks are carried out prior to the end of December each year, a further 3 validation checks are carried out in March, using final data available on school enrolments and fsme.

As there have been no requests to make final school meal census data available much earlier it is currently considered reasonable to wait for the final enrolments/ fsme data to do these final checks.

### **Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions**

***The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.***

The content of the school meals census is defined by the Department's information needs. The relevance of this is checked each year when users across DE branches are consulted for additions and amendments for the following year.

Users of the data are surveyed annually via the NISRA Customer Satisfaction Survey. It is not possible to break down the results of the survey to those that specifically used school meals data; however, the satisfaction levels across NISRA as a whole are very high. There is scope for any comments raised in the survey to be fed back to the team that manages the School Meals Census to take on board for improvements going forward.

Users are invited in the statistical bulletins to provide feedback on the publication and to request further information if required.

### **Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden**

***The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.***

Since 2018/19 the respondent burden is measured every year from every school as part of their data return through the school meals census process. Previous to this, the respondent burden was measured every other year, after completion of all schools data returns and validation checks via a sample survey of schools. The data for 2020/21 found that the average time taken per school to make a return was 30 minutes. In monetary terms this translated to an average of £8.42 per school.

## **Confidentiality, Transparency and Security**

### ***The procedures and policy used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices***

Aggregate data is returned for each school so there are no confidentiality/security issues associated with returning pupil level data.

Any potentially sensitive data relating to small numbers of pupils, are not published or released externally. For this data, any figures that are less than five are suppressed, and an adjacent figure in a column or row in any table with a total is counter-suppressed to avoid the potential identification of individual pupils. .