

Briefing: Free School Meals and children affected by No Recourse to Public Funds

September 2022

Praxis is deeply concerned that children living in poverty who are affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition remain unable to access free school meals, despite recent policy change. As the cost of living rises steeply, those who have no access to a safety net are [amongst the most vulnerable in our society](#), and hungry children are again paying the price.

In April 2022, after years of campaigning, the Department for Education (DfE) [announced](#) it was permanently extending access to free school meals to all children whose parents met the income criteria, regardless of their immigration status. This included children and parents who have insecure immigration status (also known as undocumented), and as such represented an important step forward.

However, following consultation with families, schools, local authorities and charities, Praxis and our allies are concerned that the way in which the DfE is implementing these changes means that thousands of children will remain unable to access the free school meals to which they are now entitled. In particular, we are concerned that:

1. **The [guidance](#) requires that families with irregular status declare it to schools, without clarity about how data, including relating to parents' immigration status, will be shared within government departments.** Although the DfE has confirmed in writing that it "it is not in DfE's process to share information on NRPF free school meals with other government departments," families – particularly those who are lack status – are understandably concerned about potential immigration enforcement action in the context of the hostile environment. Even if schools are only required to share data with their local authority, the presence of embedded Home Office officials in some local authorities is also a source of concern. This represents a very significant obstacle to families' ability to access free school meals, even if they are living in deep poverty;
2. **There is extremely low awareness amongst schools and families about the policy change, and we have seen no evidence of a communications campaign to address this.** The main DfE [webpage](#) about free school meals still makes no mention that children with NRPF are now eligible to apply, more than five months after the change was announced. Given that the system is already fairly complex, this is another big obstacle to children who are living in poverty benefitting from this change.

Following consultation with families, schools and local authorities, Praxis, together with eight charities and schools, raised these concerns with the DfE in July. In response, the Department reiterated their commitment to extending access to all children affected by NRPF and said they would take these points into consideration for any future refresh of the guidance. A full term after the policy change was introduced, there is also no information available yet as to whether the policy change has resulted in an uptake in free school meals amongst children affected by NRPF.

Given the severity of the cost of living crisis, we believe that further action is urgent. Praxis is calling on the DfE to:

- 1 - Implement a data-sharing firewall to prevent data on free school meals eligibility from being shared with the Home Office. At a minimum, the Department should confirm publicly, and in its guidance to schools and parents, that data on immigration status will not be shared with the Home Office;
- 2 - Provide an update on the number of children affected by NRPF that have benefitted from free school meals since the change was introduced;
- 3 - Invest in a dedicated communications campaign to inform schools and local authorities about the change; Praxis is working with schools and local authorities to raise awareness about this change, and to ensure that all children who are entitled to do so are able to access free school meals, regardless of their immigration status.

For more information, please contact Praxis' Policy and Public Affairs Manager Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz (josephine.whitaker-yilmaz@praxis.org.uk)