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Free School Meals Briefing

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Income-Based Free School Meals

The purpose of income-based free school meals (FSM) is to ensure disadvantaged school children have access to at least one healthy meal each day. Healthy, free meals at school help enable all children to have the same opportunities to learn and thrive, no matter where they grow up. The impact of FSMs has been shown to last into adulthood, with evidence of improved educational attainment as well as other social, financial¹, and health benefits².

Section 512 of the Education Act 1996 places a duty on maintained schools, academies and free schools to provide free school meals to pupils of all ages that meet the criteria outlined below³. Eligible families are required to make an application for free school meals.

Free school meal eligibility:

Children in state-funded schools in England are entitled to receive free school meals if a parent or carer were in receipt of any of the following benefits⁴:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guaranteed element of State Pension Credit

- Child Tax Credit (provided they were not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and had an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on - paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Universal Credit - if you apply on or after 1 April 2018 your household income must be less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits)

Pupils in families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) can also be eligible for free school meals⁵.

Funding free school meals

Local authorities are responsible for providing free school meals and applications are made locally. An online eligibility checking system⁶ (ECS) is available to support local authorities to check eligibility. Some local authorities automatically register pupils for free school meals when their parents apply for eligible benefits, but this is not currently universal. Income-based free school meals are funded through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

The Free School Meals (Automatic Registration of Eligible Children) Bill⁷ is currently before Parliament. This bill would mean all eligible children would be automatically registered for free school meals, with opt-out available

¹ ONS, [Education, social mobility and outcomes for students receiving free school meals in England](#) (January 2022)

² The Food Foundation, [The Superpowers of Free School Meals Report 2025, Evidence Pack](#)

³ DfE, [Free school meals](#). Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools (March 2024)

⁴ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds \(NRPF\) - GOV.UK](#)

⁶ [Eligibility Checking System](#)

⁷ [Free School Meals \(Automatic Registration of Eligible Children\) Bill - Parliamentary Bills - UK Parliament](#)

where families wish. The Education Committee Report on Scrutiny of Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill⁸ included a recommendation for automatic enrolment, highlighting children may be missing out due to language barriers and issues with the administrative process. Similarly, the Education Policy Institute⁹ published a report in March 2025 which recommended centrally automatically enrolling children for free school meals to ensure better coverage, particularly for young children where under-registration is believed to be more common. The report highlighted the gap between the number of children registered for free school meals and the number estimated to be living in poverty.

Published data

Data on free school meal eligibility is released annually as part of the Department for Education's [Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics](#) release. This information is derived from school censuses. The most recent data is for the 2023/24 academic year.

This report focuses on income-based free school meals only (excluding Further Education). Further information on related themes such as [Universal Infant Free School Meals \(UIFSM\)](#) for pupils in reception, year 1 and 2, [free meals in further education](#), and [Pupil Premium](#) are available on the gov.uk website.

Transitional protections

Since 1 April 2018, transitional protections have been in place during the roll out of Universal Credit. This has meant that pupils eligible for free school meals on or after 1 April 2018 retained their free school meals eligibility even if their circumstances change. This protection continued until March 2025. After March 2025, any existing claimants that no longer met the eligibility criteria (because they are earning above the threshold or are no longer a recipient of Universal Credit) will continue to receive free school meals until the end of their current phase of education (i.e. primary or secondary).

⁸ ['Schools Bill' should auto-enrol children for free school meals – Education Committee report - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

Prior to the pandemic, this had been the main driver in the increase in the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals as pupils continue to become eligible but fewer pupils stop being eligible.

Free school meal eligibility in West Sussex

In 2023/24 academic year, 15.7% of pupils in West Sussex were known to be eligible for free school meals. Proportions are higher among pupils attending alternative provision (59.4%) and special schools (36.6% to 38.3%), although numbers are smaller. Broadly similar proportions of pupils at state-funded primary (15.5%) and secondary schools are eligible (14.9% - Table 1).

Nationally, around a quarter of pupils are eligible for free school meals (24.6%), a higher proportion than the county. In 2023/24, Manchester has the highest proportion of pupils eligible at 44.3%, and Isle of Scilly has the lowest at 2.8%.

Among statistical neighbours, West Sussex has one of the lowest proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals, with 13 of our 15 nearest neighbours exceeding the county average. Only Hertfordshire has a lower proportion (15.1% - Figure 1). Nearly all local authorities have seen an increase in the proportion of free school meal eligible pupils over time, likely reflecting transitional protections during the roll-out of universal credit.

⁹ [Who has been registered for free school meals and pupil premium in the National Pupil Database? - Education Policy Institute](#)

Table 1. Number and percentage of pupils known to be eligible for Free School Meals in West Sussex schools: 2023/24

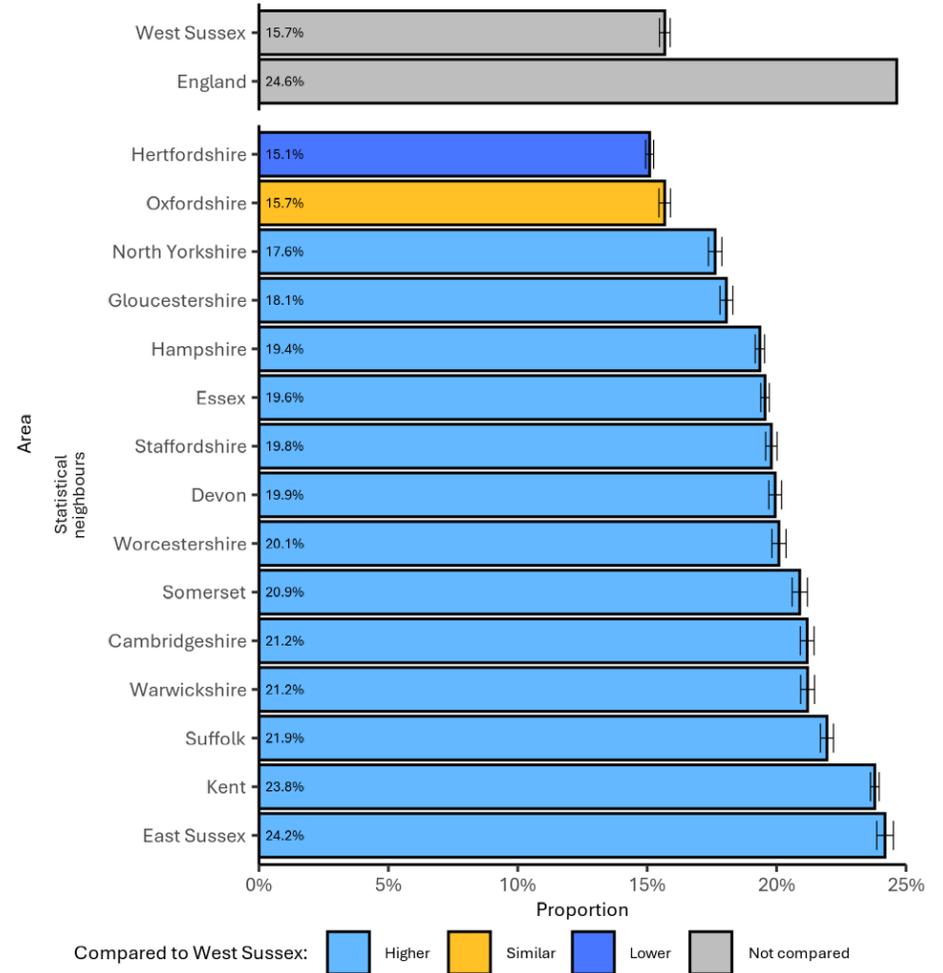
School type	Pupils on roll	Known to be eligible for free school meals
State-funded nursery	501	2 (0.4%)
State-funded primary	64,491	9,983 (15.5%)
State-funded secondary	51,313	7,653 (14.9%)
State-funded special school	2,088	799 (38.3%)
Non-maintained special school	183	67 (36.6%)
State-funded AP school	202	120 (59.4%)
Total	118,778	18,624 (15.7%)

Source: DfE, Explore Education Statistics, Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2023/24

Note: Totals include state-funded primary, secondary, alternative provision (AP) schools, and special schools, and non-maintained special schools. Does not include independent schools.

Figure 1. Proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals in West Sussex nearest neighbours, 2023/24

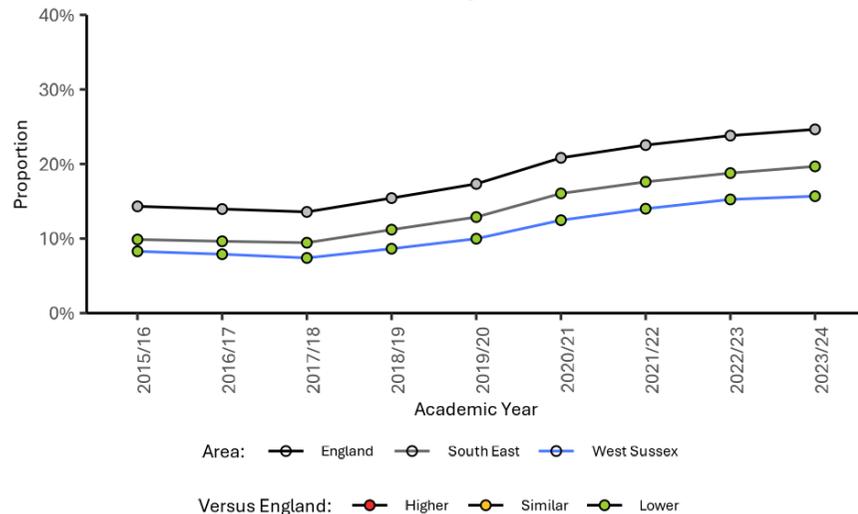
Source: Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, 2023/24



Trends

Nationally, the number of pupils eligible for free school meals has increased since 2017/18 (Figure 2). However, the scale of increase has been smaller in more recent years. This picture is also true in West Sussex and the South East. The increase in the number and proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is likely to reflect continuation of transitional protections to March 2025. Whilst the number of pupils who are FSM eligible can continue to increase, protections mean those becoming ineligible do not flow off in similar quantities.

Figure 2: Proportion of all pupils known to be eligible for free school meals in West Sussex, the South East and England, 2015/16 to 2023/24



Note. The continuing year on year increase in the number and rate of pupils eligible for FSM is likely to reflect the continuation of the transitional protections to March 2025. There is an increasing number of pupils who are FSM eligible as pupils flow on to free school meals when becoming eligible, but protections mean pupils do not flow off in similar quantities.

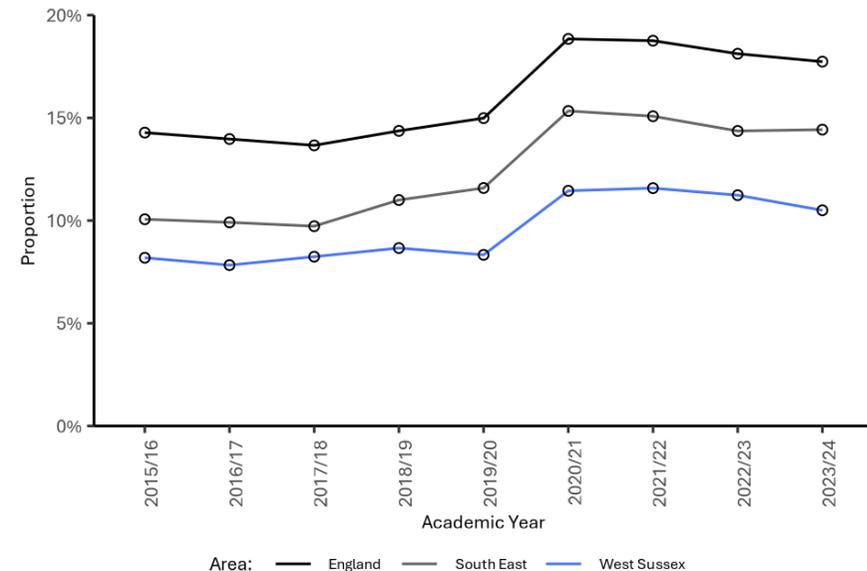
The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in the county and region are consistently below the national rate. The difference between West Sussex and England has widened year on year. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals was 6.0 percentage points higher in

England than West Sussex in 2015/16, rising to 8.9 percentage points by 2023/24.

Free school meal eligibility for reception pupils

Reception pupils are largely unaffected by transitional arrangements put in place during the roll out of universal credit. This is because they have only been in the education for a short period of time, with family circumstances less likely to have changed significantly. Looking at means-tested free school meal eligibility at reception can provide an indication of trends that are largely unaffected by transitional protections.

Figure 3: Proportion of pupils in reception known to be eligible for free school meals in West Sussex, the South East and England, 2015/16 to 2023/24



A plateau/decrease in eligibility among reception pupils does not necessarily indicate less need. Families on universal credit are only eligible for means-tested free school meals if their post-tax income is less than £7,400 per year. This income cap has not changed since it was introduced

in April 2018¹⁰. A national report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies¹¹ suggests that 69% of families with children entitled to universal credit are not eligible for free school meals due to the income threshold. Other factors relating to poverty, such as family composition and housing costs are not considered when assessing free school meal eligibility.

It is also possible that some eligible families do not register for free school meals ('under-registration'), and this may be more common among younger pupils and in some populations more than others. For example, a report by the Education Policy Institute¹² demonstrated a dip in the proportion of early primary school pupils registered as free school meal eligible after the introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals, and low levels of registration in the Early Years.

Pupil characteristics

Ethnicity

Free school meals eligibility varies by ethnicity (Table 2). In 2023/24, rates were highest among pupils in the Traveller of Irish heritage ethnic group (59.5%) and Gypsy/Roma ethnic group (54.7%), locally and nationally. Rates were lowest among pupils of Indian (2.2%) and Chinese (4.0%) ethnic groups. Counts are small at county level, so rates should be viewed with caution.

Year group

Free school meals eligibility also varies by year group, with the highest rates during years of compulsory schooling (reception to year 11 - Table 3). Nationally and locally, the proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals peaked at Year 6 and declines throughout secondary phase.

Children attending state-funded nurseries are also eligible for free school meals if they meet the criteria (and attend for 'full' days – sessions before and after lunchtime). Very few nursery-aged children are registered for free school meals in West Sussex.

Nationally and locally, there are high rates of free school meal eligibility among pupils in year 14. This is a small cohort which includes children retaking the final year of key stage 5.

School

The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is also available at school level.

Figure 4 shows state-funded primary and secondary schools in West Sussex geographically, with darker colours indicating a higher proportion of free school meal eligible pupils in 2023/24. Points have been sized to give an indication of scale, with larger points reflecting larger school populations.

In general, schools in areas that are more deprived on other measures of deprivation (e.g. the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 (see Figure 5), and Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index sub-measure) generally have higher proportions of free school meal eligible pupils.

Counts can be small so significant variation is possible over time, particularly among schools with smaller pupil populations (more commonly, rural, primary schools). These plots **do not** show where pupils live. The distance between where a pupil lives and where they go to school can vary hugely within the county. This may be particularly true for some settings more so than others, for example larger secondary schools (that tend to provide education for wider geographical areas) and special

¹⁰ Department for Education (March 2018), [UCFSM consultation response](#)

¹¹ Institute of Fiscal Studies (March 2023), [The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England](#)

¹² Education Policy Institute (March 2025), [Who has been registered for free school meals and pupil premium in the National Pupil Database? Implications for research and policy](#)

schools. Further analyses could explore free school meal eligibility by pupil residence using the school census.

Research by the Education Policy Institute¹² has demonstrated a strong correlation between the proportion of pupils registered for free school meals and the mean Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index¹³ (IDACI) score. However, in some local authorities, the rate of registration for free school meals is lower than expected given the average deprivation of children living in the area. The report also found some evidence that entitled children in more deprived local authorities are less likely to be registered for free school meals despite being eligible.

Rurality

National analysis¹² has explored free school meal eligibility according to whether a pupil lives in an urban and rural area. This has shown a shift in the past decade where children recorded as free school meal eligible are more likely to live in a rural area.

A crude analysis of free school meal eligibility (2023/24) among West Sussex primary schools revealed:

- A higher rate of free school meal eligibility among pupils attending primary schools in urban than rural areas (16.1% compared to 12.5%)
- A difference between primary schools within rural areas, with a higher rate of eligibility among pupils at schools in larger than smaller rural areas (13.6% compared to 11.4%)
- A higher rate of free school meal eligibility among schools in areas (irrespective of rurality) that have lower relative access¹⁴
- Differences in relative access were most pronounced among primary schools in larger rural areas. The proportion of primary pupils in schools that are in larger, rural areas with lower relative access is twice that

¹³ The IDACI is a subset of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 that focuses on low-income households with children.

¹⁴ Relative access uses estimates of travel time by road (by private vehicle) to split urban and rural categories by accessibility to a major town or city (defined as having

(24.1%) of those in larger, rural areas with higher relative access (12.3%).

- Free school meal eligibility did not differ by relative access among schools in small rural areas (11.5% nearer to major town or city and 10.9% further from major town or city).
- A difference in relative access exists for schools within urban areas of the county, although this is less pronounced (20.9% further from a major town or city, versus 16.1% nearer than a major town or city).

Caveats:

This is a crude analysis. This analysis focused on primary schools only on the assumption that pupils may be more likely to live in closer proximity to the school they attend than may be the case for other phases of education (i.e. secondary and FE) and specialist settings (i.e. alternative provision, and special schools).

Classifications of rurality and relative access were based on the lower super output area (LSOA) of the school, rather than pupil residence. The rural-urban classification of the LSOA a school falls within may not best describe the characteristics of their pupil population. Further analysis could explore using pupil residence to describe the pupil population in terms of rurality and accessibility, as well as differences by free school meal eligibility.

There are pockets of rural and urban areas within West Sussex (see Figure 6). The differences described here may only reflect discrete areas of the county, and the small number of schools within them. For example, there are very few LSOAs within West Sussex that are classified as 'urban: further from a major town or city', and these all fall in a discrete patch around Selsey. Results are not necessarily generalisable to all areas of the county with similar characteristics.

75,000 or more usual residents). Output areas (OAs) that can reach a major town or city are classified as 'nearer' and those that can't are 'further'. At lower super output area, a majority rule based on the OA classification is applied.

Table 2: Number and percentage of pupils known to be eligible for Free School Meals in West Sussex schools by ethnicity: 2023/24

Ethnic group	West Sussex			South East	England
	Number	Total pupils	Proportion		
Asian - Bangladeshi	127	730	17.4%	23.7%	31.8%
Asian - Chinese	15	375	4.0%	3.8%	7.5%
Asian - Indian	59	2,698	2.2%	3.8%	7.3%
Asian - Pakistani	309	1,622	19.1%	20.7%	26.6%
Asian - Any other Asian background	340	2,380	14.3%	13.7%	21.5%
Black - Black African	264	1,845	14.3%	17.9%	30.6%
Black - Black Caribbean	60	215	27.9%	29.2%	44.7%
Black - Any other Black background	154	546	28.2%	25.8%	38.1%
Mixed - White and Asian	276	2,188	12.6%	14.4%	22.1%
Mixed - White and Black African	334	1,267	26.4%	31.5%	34.8%
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	356	1,113	32.0%	38.7%	44.8%
Mixed - Any other Mixed background	534	2,844	18.8%	19.5%	28.1%
White - Gypsy/Roma	275	503	54.7%	62.9%	58.3%
White - Irish	39	267	14.6%	16.7%	20.9%
White - Traveller of Irish heritage	50	84	59.5%	63.9%	64.9%
White - White British	13,881	89,350	15.5%	20.4%	23.8%
White - Any other White background	970	8,033	12.1%	16.2%	19.3%
Any other ethnic group	273	1,022	26.7%	27.1%	38.4%
Unclassified	308	1,696	18.2%	20.5%	27.7%

Source: DfE, Explore Education Statistics, Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2023/24

Note: Totals include state-funded primary, secondary, alternative provision (AP) schools, and special schools, and non-maintained special schools. Does not include independent schools.

Table 3: Number and percentage of pupils known to be eligible for Free School Meals in West Sussex schools by National Curriculum year group: 2023/24

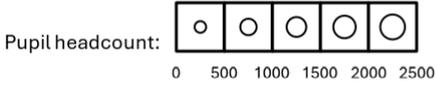
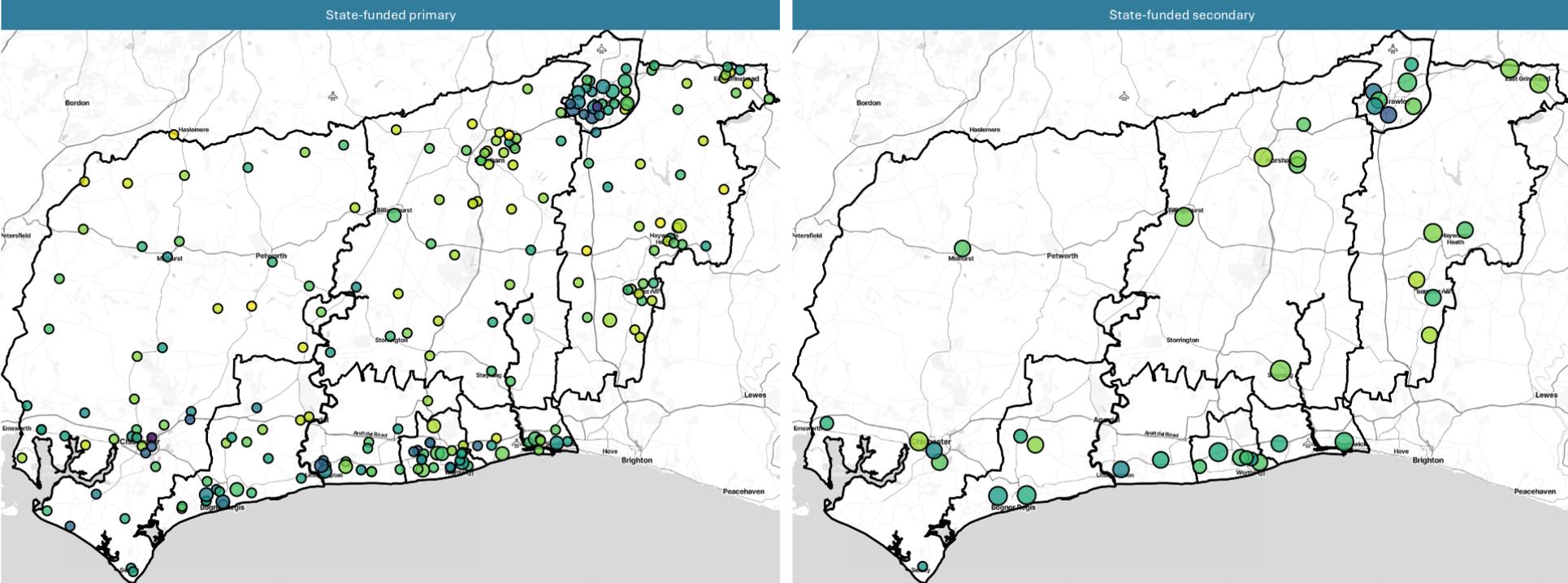
Year group	West Sussex			South East	England
	Number	Total pupils	Proportion		
Nursery 1	3	335	0.9%	4.1%	5.8%
Nursery 2	29	929	3.1%	5.2%	8.3%
Reception	939	8,942	10.5%	14.4%	17.7%
Year 1	1,229	9,203	13.4%	17.8%	21.9%
Year 2	1,470	9,431	15.6%	20.1%	24.6%
Year 3	1,642	9,407	17.5%	22.3%	27.1%
Year 4	1,681	9,552	17.6%	23.3%	28.5%
Year 5	1,720	9,424	18.3%	23.6%	29.1%
Year 6	1,773	9,569	18.5%	23.5%	29.3%
Year 7	1,765	9,777	18.1%	22.1%	27.9%
Year 8	1,642	9,636	17.0%	21.3%	27.2%
Year 9	1,468	9,333	15.7%	20.5%	26.6%
Year 10	1,501	9,244	16.2%	19.7%	25.6%
Year 11	1,344	9,124	14.7%	18.4%	24.5%
Year 12	237	2,524	9.4%	9.4%	14.3%
Year 13	153	2,226	6.9%	8.7%	13.4%
Year 14	28	75	37.3%	32.6%	40.2%

Source: DfE, Explore Education Statistics, Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2023/24

Note: Totals include state-funded primary, secondary, alternative provision (AP) schools, and special schools, and non-maintained special schools. Does not include independent schools.

Figure 4: State-funded primary and secondary schools in West Sussex by proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals; 2023/24
 Points sized by school headcount, fill colour reflects the proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (yellow = lower, purple = higher)

Source: DfE, Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2023/24

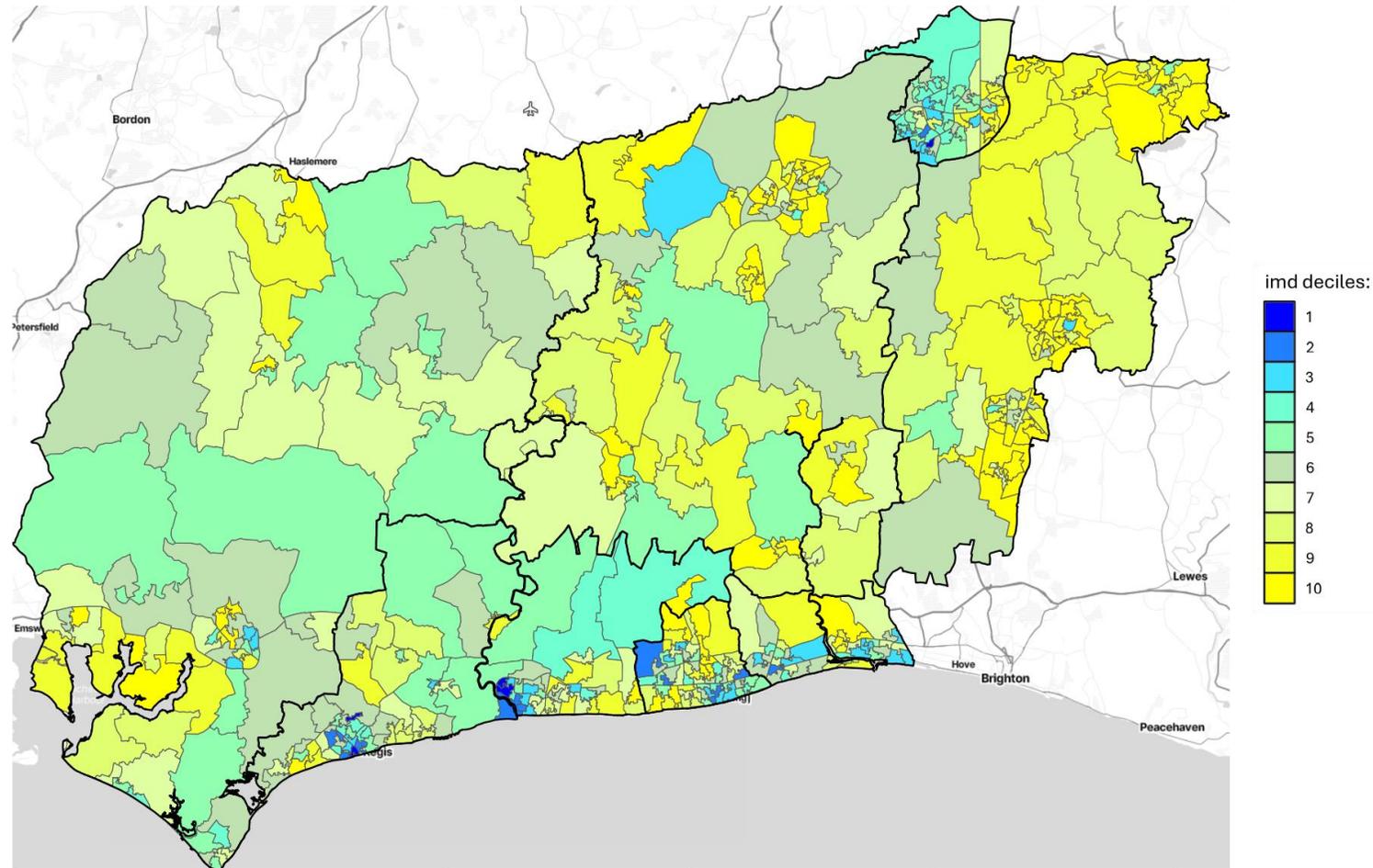


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Appendices

Figure 5: National Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 deciles in West Sussex

Notes. Deciles: 1 = most deprived (blue), 10 = least deprived (yellow)

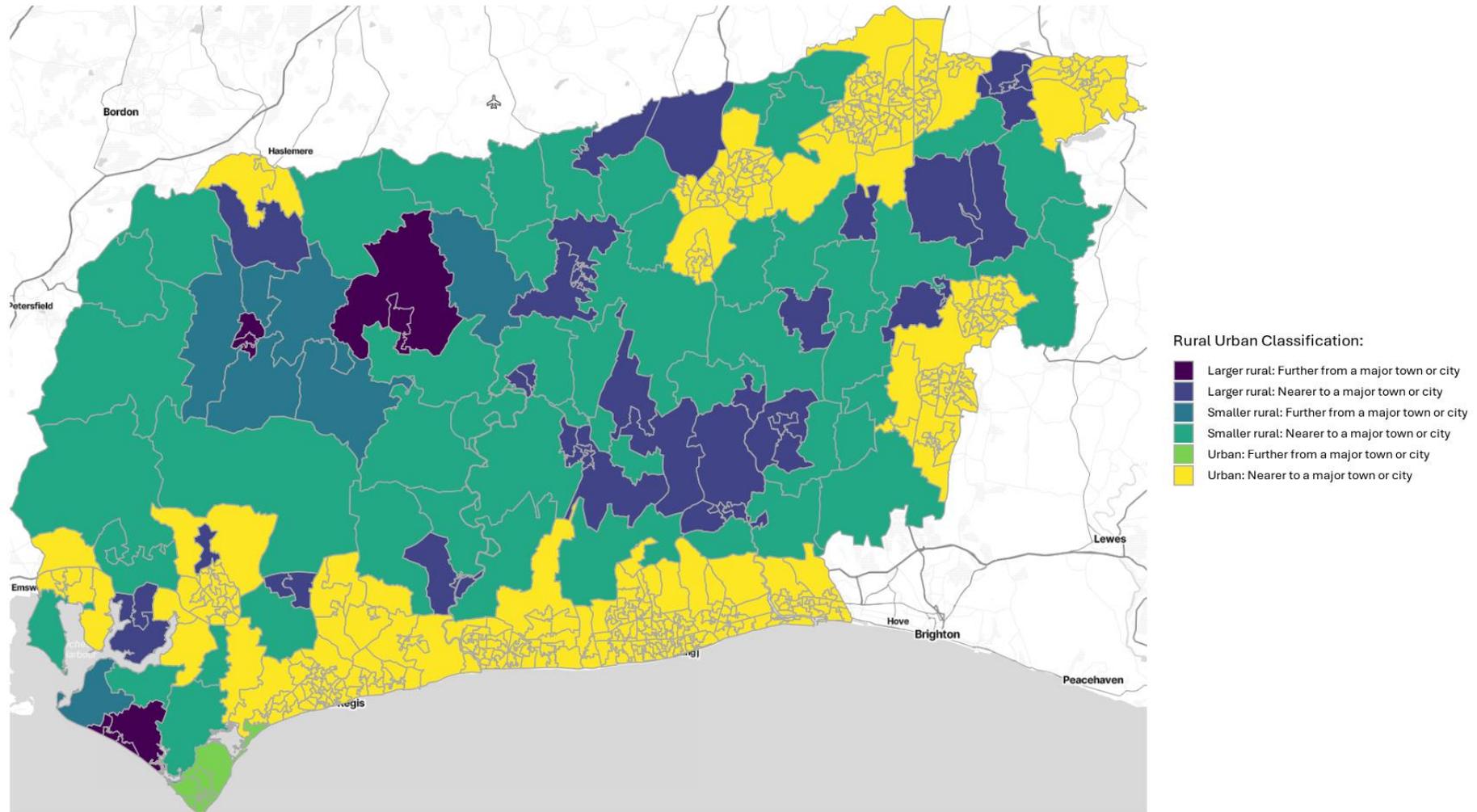


ONS - OpenGeography

MHCLG - Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019

Figure 6: Rural urban classification 2021 of lower super output areas in West Sussex

Source: ONS 2021 Rural Urban Classification



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