

The power of universalism - and why free school meals i...

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I'm going to ignore all [the politics of yesterday's announcement](#) that all children in their first three years of state education will have free school meals from now on. The timing may have been cynical and the pictures that accompanied it even worse, but all politicians are guilty of that. The real issue is that this new policy is an endorsement for universalism.

Universal benefits work. There has been a strong move against them - most especially in the case of child benefits, but also with rumblings of moves against winter fuel allowance, bus passes and much more. And now to ensure that nutrition is delivered it has been realised that only universalism can make sure that all in need get the benefit of a free school dinner.

Perversely the attack on benefits only reinforces the need for universalism. When claiming is stigmatised many in need will not claim, precisely so that they do not suffer the suggestion of being a social outcast by doing so. And they - and in this case, their children - will suffer as a result. The stigmatisation of benefits in that case is quite clearly the cause of social harm.

Of course, the example of school meals is just the tip of it. The failure of so many to claim the benefits they are due - especially pension credit - is a national scandal that is ignored by the press when the result is in very many cases outright hardship.

Universalism avoids that hardship, and literally delivers benefits to society as a whole.

NB. I have [written much more on this issue, with Howard Reed, here.](#)