

Impact  
on **Urban**  
**Health**

# More than a meal

An independent evaluation of  
universal primary free school meals  
for children in London





# Executive Summary

## About the evaluation

The announcement in 2023 of a new policy to provide free school meals to every primary aged child in state-funded schools in London was a significant milestone in school food policy in England. It meant that an additional 270,000 children across London were newly entitled.

The policy's timing, during a cost of living crisis, meant it was initially positioned in economic terms. The £130m emergency funding announced by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was to help relieve the growing financial pressure on families. However, those behind the policy were also interested in wider benefits and the potential for positive ripple effects in homes, schools and communities across the city.

This evaluation details the outcomes experienced by children, families and schools within the first year of the policy, considering the effects on family finances, children and families' health and wellbeing, and their experiences of and engagement with school. Whilst families across the income spectrum have reported benefits from the policy, it's clear that families living on low incomes have benefited the most. Learning from the first year of implementation in London has also been captured. The evaluation highlights barriers (such as funding rates) and enablers (such as proactive support from London boroughs) to effective delivery of the policy, alongside how existing factors within the school food system affected implementation. Most importantly, the evaluation assesses the equity implications of the policy. It demonstrates that more needs to be done alongside extending access to school meals to ensure they meet the needs of all children.

Our recommendations, based on these findings and aimed at national policymakers, can be found on pages 8-9 of the executive summary.



## Explaining the context and policy evaluation

This report's introduction sets out the wider context of school food policy and funding in the UK. It then looks in more detail at the differences in governance and delivery of school food across London boroughs and some of the demographic characteristics specific to the capital. The variation and fragmentation in education policy and school food implementation across boroughs made the design, communication and implementation of this policy particularly complex. There was no 'one size fits all' approach to get this policy up and running in every school.

Acknowledging there would be much to learn from the roll-out of a regional school food policy, Impact on Urban Health commissioned two evaluations:

- a **lived experience evaluation**, carried out by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in partnership with Reconnect London. This study gathered the reflections and experiences of children, families and schools. It focused on how the policy affects household finances, food security, family health and wellbeing outcomes and school life, from family and school perspectives.
- an **implementation evaluation**, conducted by ICF in partnership with Public Health Nutrition Research. This study collected data from schools, local authorities and caterers to identify and understand what helped them to implement the policy effectively and the barriers they faced.

The evaluations were guided by a theory of change, carried out by Bremner & Co, to steer evaluation priorities and help to make sure the evaluation built on the existing evidence-base for universal free school meals. The theory of change supported coordination of the evaluation projects and was used to help generate useful insights for key audiences.

The following chapters share the key findings from these evaluations, which have informed the recommendations for national policymakers that conclude the report. Significant policies like this one take time to bed in. The evaluations focused on the first year of the policy only and highlight initial outcomes for children, families and schools, alongside some of the challenges that come with implementing a major new policy within a demanding timeframe in a school system that was already under stress. As the policy continues into its second year, there will be further insights to be gathered.

## Evaluation findings

### Reactions to the policy

Our findings show that the policy was popular with families and children. It can be seen in high levels of take-up – the Greater London Authority (GLA) collected data in a sample of 259 schools (13% of London primary schools) that show that take-up was between 88% and 90% across the three school terms, with an average take-up of 89.1% across the 2023/2024 academic year. The data also show that take-up among pupils eligible for a means-tested FSM increased from 88% in 2022/23 to 94% in 2023/24. When surveyed, most parents<sup>1</sup> said their child was eating school lunches every day or most days.

Parents, whatever their household income, welcomed the policy and wanted it to continue. They felt it countered the effects of the rising cost of living and, in many cases, had a positive impact on family life.

Our evaluations found that it was also valued highly by those working in schools. Senior leaders said the policy had helped to address the problems of hidden hunger and food insecurity<sup>2</sup>. It alleviated the financial hardship they now see many more families experiencing. They also noted that it improved access to nutritious school food.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, references to parents' views also include feedback gathered from carers and legal guardians.

<sup>2</sup> Not having reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious, healthy food affecting many pupils.

## Family finances

Statistics on child poverty and the extent of financial hardship facing families in London paint a stark picture. The evaluations found that the policy is easing pressures on family finances, for households across the income spectrum. It is having the biggest impact on those families who have been the most constrained by rising food, energy and housing costs.

**84% of parents surveyed across the income spectrum said the availability of universal primary free school meals (UPFSM) helped or significantly helped household finances. Parents surveyed who were receiving Universal Credit were more likely to say the policy was ‘significantly helping’ household finances (52% compared to 31% not receiving Universal Credit).** Money saved, that would previously have been spent on school dinners or packed lunches, was helping to cover other costs. Some families told us they were using it to pay for household essentials. Others were now able to spend more on other school-related items for their children, such as uniform, trips and sports clubs. The evaluation found this was noticed and appreciated by children and school staff. **A third of parents surveyed (33%) said the policy means they have less debt.**

However, many families did point out that the financial benefits they initially felt because of not having to pay for school meals had been offset by continuing rising household costs like housing, energy and food. And, as explored in Chapter 6, there were some groups and families who couldn't experience the full financial benefits of the policy because their children cannot always eat the food on offer.

## Children and families' health and wellbeing

The evaluations found that the policy has positive implications for the health and wellbeing of children and their parents. By easing the pressure on family finances, it has also reduced the emotional burden on parents benefiting their mental health.

Not being able to afford the things your family needs can place a huge strain on parents' mental health. And children are often all too aware of money issues at home, adding to their worries. School can be a place where children experience the stigma of poverty more acutely. For example, some children told us how, prior to the policy, they felt embarrassed about what was in their lunchboxes. This particular source of shameful feelings has been removed by the policy.

Parents who had been struggling financially said the policy provided peace of mind because they knew their children were getting a 'good meal' and wouldn't be going hungry at school. Many felt freed of the worries associated with finding the money for school meals or trying to make a healthy, filling packed lunch every day. Parents value the policy because it not only reduces household costs, but also alleviates very real fears about their children experiencing food insecurity and hunger.

Our research also shows that when money is freed up elsewhere parents can invest in their family's health through 'better' food at home. **Three in five (60%) parents surveyed said they were able to spend more money on food for their family as a result of the policy.** Rising food costs, especially for healthy food, make it increasingly difficult for parents to give their children a filling, balanced diet. Parents talked about being able to spend the money they saved on school meals on fruit, vegetables and evening meals.

Pupils, parents and school staff all reported that more children are now trying and enjoying new foods at school. **More than half (55%) of all parents surveyed thought their child was trying new foods because of the policy, increasing to 63% of parents in receipt of Universal Credit.** Better food at home and a more varied diet at school can contribute to improved health. Parents also reported having more money available to spend on activities that support children's health beyond food, for example sports clubs which help children to be physically active.

## Stronger school communities

Our evaluations found the policy is helping to strengthen school communities and has positive implications for school life more widely. Children's experience of school is shaped by a whole raft of factors beyond the timetable or curriculum. Providing a free meal at lunchtime has influenced how enjoyable and productive the school day is for pupils and has had a positive effect on how home-school relationships function.

Our research shows that, before the policy was introduced, many families found the mornings before school highly stressful. Parents described the difficulties and arguments involved in getting children up and ready for school on time, while trying to make or manage school lunches. Parents from across the income spectrum said their mornings have run more smoothly since the introduction of UPFSM. **Just over half (51%) of parents surveyed said it saved time in the morning that they used to spend making packed lunches.** The calmer start to the day has meant less guilt and stress for many parents and some also feel their children are now arriving at school more ready to learn.

The policy has also prompted a welcome reset on dinner money payments. The evaluation found this had previously been a challenging issue for school communities, causing real tension between schools and families. Parents who had accumulated dinner money debt and were struggling to pay found this to be a source of stress and sometimes avoided contact with school. Meanwhile, schools struggled with the administrative and emotional burden of chasing families for money, especially knowing many were experiencing hardship. Children were also aware and affected by this issue, for example through receiving 'subsidy meals' or being moved onto packed lunches that parents sometimes struggled to fulfil.

The UPFSM policy has successfully alleviated many of these problems caused by dinner money debt. We heard about much improved home-school relationships, which made the school day easier for children. School staff also felt the time they saved on chasing payments allowed them to focus on other parts of their roles. Outstanding historic debt is still an issue in some schools, and so these positive benefits are not yet being felt by all families who previously struggled to consistently pay for school meals.

Better concentration and increased energy levels are key ingredients for children to be able to thrive in education. We found widespread examples of parents, school staff and children noticing positive shifts in behaviour, concentration and energy levels during the school day. **More than a third (33%) of parents surveyed felt that access to a filling, healthy lunch means their children can concentrate better in lessons.** And children talked about feeling 'stronger and healthier' and having 'more energy'.

The introduction of UPFSM has also helped to change the way some children feel about school, contributing to feelings of greater fairness, belonging and community. Being able to sit and eat together, with all pupils sharing an equal lunchtime experience, is highly valued by children and families. **More than one in three (35%) parents surveyed felt that their child enjoyed school more since the policy had been in place. And 31% of families said their child's mental wellbeing had improved.** This strongly suggests this policy is helping to support pupil happiness and wellbeing at school.

## GLA and borough support for schools

The complexity of rolling out an ambitious policy in a fragmented school food system within a short timeframe shouldn't be underestimated. The GLA worked closely with boroughs and schools to successfully deliver the UPFSM policy across London's primary schools.

The report looks in detail at how the GLA approached the design of the policy and its governance structure. First, it carried out an Integrated Impact Assessment, with a specific focus on equalities and how the policy would affect groups with protected characteristics.

The evaluations found clear funding mechanisms, effective communication and ongoing support were all essential building blocks underpinning the policy's implementation. The funding mechanism was defined and agreed with each borough, with grant conditions attached. The GLA also designed grant principles, to encourage wider good practice on the quality and accessibility of school food. This included promoting means-tested free school meal registration, paying catering staff a living wage, and taking a whole school approach to healthy and sustainable food.

The GLA set a per meal rate of £2.65 and made additional needs-based available for schools with specific requirements. Feedback from schools and catering providers on funding levels and clarity of the funding mechanism varied. Many were able to provide meals within the first year allocated per meal grant. Others felt they had to continue to find money from elsewhere in their budgets to top up funding for school meals. Rising food and staffing costs were noted as barriers to delivering the policy. The GLA responded by raising the per meal rate to £3.00 in the policy's second year.

Whilst 94% of schools surveyed had a kitchen with capacity to produce meals for all children, the evaluations found that some schools had outdated kitchen equipment that needed replacing or upgrading to enable effective delivery of the policy. Efforts were made by some boroughs, and the GLA, to provide resources to address this need. Only 12% of schools surveyed reported receiving additional funding to support implementation, 69% of whom received funding from their borough.

The evaluation found the quality of relationships between London boroughs and schools, and the effectiveness of communication, was a key determining factor in the ease of transition to UPFSM. Some boroughs worked proactively with schools and provided expert tailored support and capital investment. Others left schools to implement the policy independently. Proactive support from boroughs was important for effective implementation, given their central role as conduits of the policy.

A GLA principle of grant encouraged London borough action on auto enrolment processes for children entitled to means tested FSM, but not registered to receive them. This work, which linked existing data, identified thousands of previously unregistered but entitled children. It also unlocked millions of pounds of extra funding for schools to support disadvantaged pupils via pupil premium grants. Importantly, newly identified children came from households with higher levels of inequalities and deprivation than those already registered and were disproportionately from minoritised ethnicities. This finding further highlights the failings within the existing system in terms of reaching children and families in need.

## Schools' experience of delivering the policy

The evaluations found schools' resilience, flexibility and strong will were key to the successful implementation of UPFSM. There are many factors that contribute to a good school food culture more generally, including the importance of taking a whole school approach, strong leadership and collaborative working. The evaluations identified that many of these existing factors were important in ensuring schools delivered the UPFSM policy effectively.

Strong school leadership on food was central to the success of the policy. We found it worked best where senior leaders took a hands-on approach, from supporting menu design to being present during lunchtimes and knowing what children liked to eat.

The lunchtime environment was another key factor. To take up school meals, children need a dining experience that gives them the time and the space to enjoy their food. They want to sit with their friends and enjoy social time outside of the classroom. Queues, noisy, busy or poorly managed dining halls and problems with ordering systems were all issues raised during the evaluations. Addressing these challenges helped with policy implementation.

Where there were strong relationships between catering teams, school leadership teams and the school community, implementation of the policy was more effective, and menus were more popular with children. Given the importance of a skilled and engaged catering team, concerns were raised during the evaluations about pay, terms and conditions for catering staff. These issues, which predate the policy, have already and could continue to inhibit effective implementation of UPFSM.

## Ensuring equitable access for all children

Every child needs to eat well. Though more primary school-aged children now have access to free school meals in London, too many are still missing out on good, filling and varied school lunches. Schools are not always able to adequately cater for pupils with medical, cultural and religious food requirements. This means some children and families, often the most marginalised, cannot yet experience the full benefits of the policy or have missed out altogether. Many of these groups already face inequalities so it is vital that the policy doesn't further exacerbate these.

The GLA's Equalities Impact Assessment identified these risks, and the GLA sought to address them by providing additional funding. The GLA allocated £5m of additional funding in 2023/24 "to act as contingency for any extraordinary costs associated with implementation including specific access requirements for some groups of children in certain extraordinary and specific circumstances such as children with special educational needs and disabilities, and pupils who may have specific dietary requirements in connection with their religion or belief"<sup>3</sup>. The evaluations found that more needs to be done to ensure all children have equitable access to filling, healthy school food, with lessons learnt from schools delivering this well.

The school food system has often struggled to meet the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). We found the complex and varied needs of SEND pupils, in terms of the quality, timing and presentation of meals and additional staff support required, were a challenge for implementation of the policy in both mainstream schools and special schools.

Faith-based diets were mostly catered for. But some children and parents raised concerns about the lack of choice and repetition of meals for pupils following faith-based diets. We found take-up in these groups wasn't significantly affected but the children's enjoyment of the food was. And families didn't always feel the financial benefits of the policy as they were having to supplement school meals with extra food from home.

This was also the case for some children from Black or minoritised ethnicities who felt that school meals didn't reflect their culture or the food they liked to eat at home. **One in four parents (26%) we surveyed asked for more options that meet their child's dietary, religious and cultural requirements.**

We found many examples of school practices that can help in this area – from head teachers being included in decisions about school food, to the involvement of expert chefs and giving families more of a say in school meals. These all make a difference and can help to make sure children don't face further disadvantage at lunchtime.



<sup>3</sup> Mayor of London, [MD3146 Primary School Universal FSM provision 2023-2024](#), July 2023

## Recommendations

The evaluations of London's UPFSM policy demonstrate its significant benefits for children, families and school communities. The positive effects seen in London, as well as in Wales and Scotland, emphasise the need for universal free school meals across the UK to ensure equitable access and benefits nationwide. The evaluation findings also indicate how universal free school meal policies must be complemented by additional actions to ensure they translate into accessible, nutritious and culturally appropriate school meals for all, with adequate funding and fair pay for catering staff.

Whilst the evaluation has captured much learning to support improved implementation in the capital, this report's recommendations focus on action that national government should consider. The evaluation proposes seven key recommendations for policymakers in England to maximise the benefits of free school meals for all children.

### 1 Urgently extend access to free school meals and work towards a universal approach to school food

The evaluations found that whilst the policy had positive financial and health benefits for households across the income spectrum, families who were struggling financially but not entitled for means-tested FSM benefited the most.

**To unlock these benefits for families with children living on low incomes nationally, the Government should commit to a phased approach for universal free school meals, starting by expanding eligibility to children in families receiving Universal Credit.**

### 2 Introduce nationally coordinated auto-enrolment for free school meals

The evaluations captured the importance of auto-enrolment in registering children eligible for means-tested free school meals, in particular to maximise funding for schools from pupil premium grants.

**A national auto-enrolment system for free school meals should be established within three years to streamline access and funding, benefiting many children and schools through improved free school meal registration.**

### 3 Increase per meal funding rate and make funding allocations simpler

Our findings show that the funding rate per meal provided by the GLA in year 1 didn't cover the cost of providing meals in every school, even though it was higher than the per meal rates provided by national government for universal infant and means-tested free school meals. The evaluation also found that most schools appreciated the clear and transparent funding approach taken by the GLA.

**The national per meal funding rate should be raised to £3.16 and indexed to inflation, with additional support for smaller schools and those with higher special educational needs. The Government should introduce a single funding mechanism for school meals that provides clarity on allocations and eligibility criteria for school food interventions.**

### 4 Wipe out dinner money debt

The evaluations found that the policy has significantly helped to address the problems caused by dinner money debt, but where outstanding debt remains, families and schools are not feeling the full benefits of this.

**Following Scotland's example, the Government should establish a fund to eliminate existing school meal debt, improving relationships between families and schools. This will only be effective if introduced alongside an expansion to free school meals, otherwise it will not address the underlying issues of families not being able to afford school meals and debt starting to build again.**



## 5 Ensure there is sufficient capital investment in school kitchen and dining infrastructure

Our findings show that some schools required additional investment to upgrade their school kitchen and dining facilities in order to effectively deliver the policy.

**The Government should conduct a nationwide audit of school kitchen and dining facilities. Then allocate appropriate capital funding to ensure necessary investments are made for quality meal preparation and positive dining experiences.**

## 6 Introduce a national School Food Quality Assurance Scheme (and update the School Food Standards)

The evaluations highlighted how the school food system is not yet effectively ensuring school meals consistently meet the needs of all children, which can result in inequities in who benefits from universal free school meal policies.

**National government has a role to play in ensuring the examples of good practice from schools and caterers found in this evaluation are consistently applied across schools. Updating school food standards and establishing a quality assurance scheme would help maintain meal quality, cater to diverse needs and ensure pupil feedback is considered.**

## 7 Train and support school leaders, caterers and business managers to deliver great school food

Our findings show that strong school leadership involvement in school food and a skilled catering team were important enabling factors for successful policy delivery, especially ensuring food provision better met the needs of all children. The evaluations also found that schools found it easier to implement the policy when provided with greater support, training and guidance.

**The Department for Education (DfE) should work with relevant professional organisations to update school food training and guidance for schools and catering teams, to support schools in delivering high-quality meals that meet community needs.**



Thank you to everyone  
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Visit our website to read  
the full evaluation.

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