

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 parents¹ 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 insecurity². It alleviated the financial hardship they now see many more families experiencing. They also noted that it improved access to nutritious school food.

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

² 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"³. 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.



³ 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.



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About organisations

Impact on Urban Health

Impact on Urban Health

Impact on Urban Health works to make urban areas healthier places for everyone that lives in them. We do this by focusing on a few complex health issues that disproportionately impact people living in cities.

Part of Guy's & St Thomas' Foundation, we work in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark and share insights from our work to improve health in London and other global cities.

urbanhealth.org.uk



Bremner & Co

Bremner & Co is a food policy consultancy working to make the food system fairer. Founded in 2015, they focus on improving food policy and practice so that everyone has the right to good, nutritious, healthy food. They started their journey running the office of the School Food Plan for the Department for Education, delivering policies and plans to improve England's school food culture. Since then, they have worked on food systems research, advocacy and partnership building, strategy and policy. They have worked with international, national and local governments, not-for-profit and charitable organisations, academics and schools, with the aim of transforming our food system. They have a focus on child nutrition across the life course, from breastfeeding through to leaving further education.

bremnerco.com



CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. Child Poverty Action Group is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339).

cpag.org.uk

About organisations



Reconnect London

Reconnect London is committed to empowering school leaders to drive positive change for young Londoners. We help schools to address collective issues through a range of initiatives. Our Knowledge Hub produces research that deepens understanding of the specific challenges facing London schools. Our Innovation Lab fosters collaboration between schools and partner organisations on a range of innovative projects. Our Headteacher Network promotes the sharing of effective practice, and connects schools facing significant challenges with the support they need to create lasting positive change in their communities.

reconnectlondon.org



ICF

ICF is a global consulting and technology services provider with more than 7,000 professionals focused on making big things possible for our clients. We are policy specialists, social scientists, business analysts, technologists, researchers, digital strategists and creatives. Since 1969 government and commercial clients have worked with ICF to overcome their toughest challenges on issues that matter profoundly to their success.

icf.com



Public Health Nutrition Research

Public Health Nutrition Research is dedicated to improving the evidence base that helps us understand how food and nutrition policy and interventions impact on public health. Our focus has been on improvements in school food and understanding economic inequalities relating to food consumption and nutritional health. We collaborate with key partners to develop robust research designs; support strong project implementation and management; and undertake the evaluation and interpretation of nutritional interventions. We engage with policy makers to ensure projects address relevant questions, employ robust research methods (quantitative and qualitative), and provide policy-relevant results.

phnresearch.org.uk

Introduction

In February 2023, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, announced £130m of emergency funding, as a one-year cost of living intervention, to help families across the capital. The funding extended access to free school meals to all primary school children in state-funded schools in London for one year from September 2023.

The Mayor introduced the universal primary free school meals (UPFSM) policy following a period of rapid inflation in which many families reported struggling to meet household bills and experiencing food insecurity⁴. As well as easing cost of living pressures, the policy was intended to give all primary school children access to a nutritious meal at school, reduce hunger and support children's concentration and learning⁵. In 2024, the Mayor extended the policy for a further four years. Significant policies like this one take time to bed in. The evaluations focused on the first year of the policy only and highlight some of the challenges with implementing a new policy within a demanding timeframe, as well as the positive effects and successes. It acknowledges the context in which this policy was delivered, a school food system under stress. As the policy continues into its second year and beyond, there will be further insights to be gathered.

School food policy and funding across the UK

Within the UK, school food policy is fragmented. Education and free school meals are devolved policy areas. This means the UK Government only makes decisions in these areas for England and devolved administrations have the powers to develop their own policies. However, when funding is spent on these policy areas in England, devolved governments receive a share of the additional funding through the Barnett formula and they can decide how this is spent. This report makes recommendations for policymakers working on policy in England, while recognising this has implications for the devolved nations too.

Entitlement criteria and funding rates provided by the UK and devolved national governments vary⁶. Different school food provision models are in place across the UK and within England. The DfE has overall responsibility for school food policy in England, but legislation places a duty on local authorities, academy trusts (both single (SATs) and multi-academy trusts (MATs)⁷ and schools to provide free school meals to those entitled and ensure that those meals meet quality standards.

Access to free school meals

In England, all children in state schools in reception and Key Stage 1 are entitled to universal infant free school meals (UIFSM). In Wales, UPFSM provision has been fully rolled out and in Scotland all children in P1 to P5 (aged from five to nine years old) are entitled to free school meals.

Across the UK, children identified as being 'disadvantaged', whose families meet specific criteria set by the national Government, are also entitled to means-tested free school meals (FSM). In England, for families in receipt of Universal Credit, household income must be below £7,400 before benefits for children to have entitlement. This very low income threshold has been criticised for leaving hundreds of thousands of children in poverty without access to a free school meal⁸. In England, some local authorities (known as boroughs in London) have pursued

⁴ Food Foundation (2023) Food Insecurity Tracking, available at <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking#tabs/Round-12/All-households>, retrieved 09/10/2024

⁵ GLA (2023) Mayor announces every London primary schoolchild to receive free school meals, available at:

<https://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-announces-every-london-primary-schoolchild-receive-free-school-meals>, retrieved 31/10/2024

⁶ Defeyter, M., Bundy, D., Bremner, M., and Page, A. (2024) Hunger in the Classrooms in Downes, P., Li, G., Van Praag, L. and Lamb, S.P. (eds) The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education. London: Routledge

⁷ Academy trusts are schools that receive funding directly from the DfE and are outside of the control of local authorities. Academy trust refers to a single school, whereas a multi-Academy trust is a group of academies that has a single trust board and a shared funding agreement with the DfE.

⁸ Dimpleby, H. (2021). National Food Strategy: The Plan available at: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org>, retrieved 31/10/2024

their own policies to widen access to school food. This includes five ‘early adopter’ London boroughs (Islington, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets and Westminster) who had opted to provide UPFSM prior to this policy. Other local authorities use auto-enrolment schemes to make sure children entitled to means-tested FSM are registered to receive them.

Before the introduction of this policy, in the academic year 2022/23, a total of 403,998 primary school-aged children in state schools⁹ across London (59.7%) were eligible (entitled and registered) to receive free school meals under DfE policies¹⁰. Of these, 224,519 were eligible to UIFSM¹¹, and 179,479 for means-tested FSM¹². Where children were not eligible, parents could choose to either pay for school meals or send their child to school with a packed lunch. The new policy meant that an additional 270,000 children across London were newly entitled to a free nutritious school meal. Of these, an estimated 80,000 were living in poverty and many more living on low incomes.

Funding for school meals

School meals in England are primarily funded from three revenue streams: the direct grant from the DfE for UIFSM (£2.53 per meal in 2023/24), a notional rate for means-tested FSM set within the DfE National Funding Formula (£2.58 per meal in 2023/24) and meals paid for by families, with per meal rates set by caterers and schools. The government-funded meal rates for all free school meals are higher within the devolved nations (£3.33 in Scotland, £3.20 in Wales and £2.60 in Northern Ireland). A recent report identified that per meal rates in England haven’t kept pace with inflation. It recommended a per meal rate of £3.16 to reflect the current costs of school meal provision¹³. Mindful of cost of living pressures, caterers and schools have tried to avoid significantly increasing the price families pay to plug the funding gap, but many schools have ultimately had to do so. The recent report showed the consequences of a funding shortfall include schools running deficit budgets, impacts on staff recruitment and retention, a lack of investment in kitchen and dining equipment, and risks to the quality of meals served. London schools have been equally exposed to these challenges¹⁴.

Quality of school meals

The DfE introduced mandatory school food standards in 2014 to “ensure that food provided to pupils in school is nutritious and of high quality; to promote good nutritional health in all pupils; protect those who are nutritionally vulnerable and to promote good eating behaviour”¹⁵. These standards stipulate how often certain foods should be offered across a school week and require the exclusion of specific foods, such as confectionary. Although these standards are mandatory, some research suggests they are not always followed, for a variety of reasons^{16,17}. This can have a negative impact on the quality of some children’s food during the school day^{18,19}. There have also been calls for the school food standards to be updated to better reflect current scientific advice for healthy and sustainable diets²⁰.

⁹ This includes children in primary schools, special educational needs and disability (SEND) and Alternative Provision settings.

¹⁰ DfE, [Step 6: Explore data - Create your own tables \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk), 2024

¹¹ DfE, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/cdb89410-ed87-42f2-a053-08dcedcd278c>

¹² DfE, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/32f639e0-74f1-48f6-174c-08dcedc9c179>

¹³ School Food Matters (2024) Cost of a School Meal, available at: <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/CoaSM-report.pdf> retrieved 31/10/2024

¹⁴ School Food Matters (2024) Cost of a School Meal, available at: <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/CoaSM-report.pdf> retrieved 31/10/2024

¹⁵ DfE (2023) School food in England, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-school-food-in-england/school-food-in-england>, retrieved 31/10/2024

¹⁶ Impact on urban Health (2020) Serving up children’s health, available at: <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/insights/reports/serving-up-childrens-health>, retrieved 31/10/2024

¹⁷ Murphy, M, Dobell, A., and Pallan, M. (2024) Promoting healthier food in secondary schools. Available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-mds/applied-health/epic-study/uob-the-epic-study-a4-final.pdf>, retrieved 31/10/2024

¹⁸ Haney E, Parnham JC, Chang K, et al. Dietary quality of school meals and packed lunches: a national study of primary and secondary schoolchildren in the UK. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2023;26(2):425-436. doi:10.1017/S1368980022001355

¹⁹ Murphy, M, Dobell, A., and Pallan, M. (2024) Promoting healthier food in secondary schools. Available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-mds/applied-health/epic-study/uob-the-epic-study-a4-final.pdf>, retrieved 31/10/2024

²⁰ Dumbleby, H. (2021). National Food Strategy: The Plan available at: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org>, retrieved 31/10/2024

The context for policy change in London

London's education system

The GLA doesn't have responsibility for under 19s educational policy²¹. Its role in primary education policy in London is more limited than that of other regional government bodies such as Combined Authorities or County Councils. School policy is set by the DfE²² and is shaped and implemented by local authorities and academy trusts/MATs.

There are around 1,850 schools in London with pupils entitled to the Mayor of London's policy. This includes primary, junior and all-through schools, alternative provision settings, special schools and state faith schools. Of these, 32% are academy trust schools and 68% are local-authority-maintained schools²³. Both the number of schools and the proportion of schools belonging to MATs versus local-authority-maintained schools varies greatly from borough to borough. For example, there is just one primary school in the City of London compared to 100 in Barnet. In Camden, Lewisham, Ealing, Merton, Hackney and Lambeth, more than 85% of primary schools are local-authority-maintained. This compares to Bromley where 94% of primary schools belong to MATs.

There is no central data source on the state of school food catering across the capital. This means that information about which catering providers operate in which areas and schools is fragmented and held locally. Similarly, there is little information on how many people are employed in the sector, how schools are organising school meals and the quality of primary school food.

The five early adopter boroughs and the City of London, which also funds UPFSM for its one primary school, have taken different approaches to using the savings made by the Mayor's policy. The Mayor encouraged them via grant conditions to use the offset funds to support families in financial hardship. Some have extended the free school meals offer to children at nursery. Others have expanded access in secondary schools, either to young people from families receiving Universal Credit, in Key Stage 3 or to all pupils. In some boroughs, these extensions of the policy were planned prior to the Mayor's announcement, others were as a direct response. These differences from borough to borough 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.

London's demographics and school food

Demographic changes in the city are affecting schools and school finances. The cost of housing, falling birthrate and increased movement of families outside of the capital mean that pupil numbers in London are forecast to fall at double the national rate²⁴. London primary schools are expected to have 52,000 fewer pupils by 2028²⁵, and this has already led to several school mergers and closures. Reduced pupil numbers mean smaller school budgets and less capacity and resource within schools to implement new policies like UPFSM.

London is one of the most diverse cities in the world and is more ethnically diverse than the rest of England. 40% of Londoners were born outside of the UK²⁶, and more than 300 languages are spoken in the capital²⁷. 60% of London's pupils (across all school years) identify as Black, Asian, Mixed and/or Other and there is also more diversity of faiths than elsewhere in England²⁸. 21% of children attending state-funded primary schools in London go to a faith school²⁹. This context poses additional challenges for universal school food policies. Schools and caterers must navigate a wide range of tastes and the cultural and religious requirements of the city's communities.

²¹ GLA, Powers and functions (2024) Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/london-assembly-research-unit-publications/greater-london-authority-powers-and-functions>, retrieved 11/11/2024

²² DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/departments-for-education>, 2024

²³ DfE, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>, 2024

²⁴ London Councils, [Managing falling school rolls in London | London Councils - Localgov Drupal](#), 2024

²⁵ Education Policy Institute, [London primary school numbers to drop by 52,000 by 2028 - BBC News](#), 2024

²⁶ Trust for London, [Demography, London's Population & Geography, 2024](#)

²⁷ GLA, [Languages, 2006](#)

²⁸ DfE, School Pupils and their Characteristics, [Step 6: Explore data - Create your own tables \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#), 2024

²⁹ House of Commons Library, Faith Schools: FAQs, [SNO6972.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#), 2024

School food and supporting pupils' needs

Schools must cater for food allergies and intolerances. Up to 8% of children living in the UK have a food allergy³⁰. 20% of severe allergic reactions to food happen while a child is at school³¹. Under the Children and Families Act 2014, schools have a legal duty to support children with medical conditions. The DfE's statutory guidance on allergies stipulates that schools must make sure a child with an allergy is able to eat a school lunch.³²

The significant increase in the number of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England also has an impact on school food. Since 2014, the number of children in England with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has doubled. The number of children identified as having special educational needs who are below the level of a statutory EHCP has also grown. London boroughs have followed these national trends^{33, 34}. Families with children with SEND are also more likely to be living in poverty³⁵.

Evaluating the policy and its effects

The provision of UPFSM across London is a significant milestone in school meal policy in England. The roll-out was rapid, with only seven months between the policy announcement and the start date. This created an important opportunity to document and evaluate the implementation of a regional school food policy and add to the growing evidence base on universal approaches to school food provision.

Impact on Urban Health is a charity that works to unlock the potential for cities, like London, to be healthier. This report summarises the combined findings of two evaluations of the Mayor's policy, commissioned by Impact on Urban Health:

- a **lived experience evaluation**, carried out by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in partnership with Reconnect London. This study gathered the opinions 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 their experience of implementation, what helped them to implement the policy effectively and the barriers they faced.

This report next sets the methodological approach taken to the overall programme of evaluation, and the specific evaluation projects. It then looks at reactions to the policy from pupils, parents and school staff.

Chapter 1:

Examines how the policy is supporting families at home, helping them to manage household budgets during a cost of living crisis.

Chapter 2:

Reports on associations between the policy and improved child and family health and wellbeing.

Chapter 3:

Discusses the ways in which the policy is helping to strengthen school communities.

³⁰ Allergy UK, [Allergy in Childhood | Allergy UK | National Charity](#), 2024

³¹ Allergy UK, [Policy for Allergy at School](#), 2024

³² DfE, School food standards: resources for schools, [Allergy guidance for schools](#), 2024

³³ Isos Partnership, [Towards an effective and financially sustainable approach to SEND in England](#), 2024

³⁴ Education, health and care plans, 2024, DfE; Population estimates for England and Wales, mid-2014, ONS; and Admin-based population estimates: local authorities in England and Wales, mid 2023, ONS.

³⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [Special educational needs and their links to poverty](#), 2016

Chapter 4:

Considers the features of the policy design and implementation, at a regional and borough level and how this has shaped implementation.

Chapter 5:

Reviews the experiences of schools and catering teams in delivering the policy, looking at what helped and hindered its implementation.

Chapter 6:

Explores how accessible the policy is to groups of children with diverse dietary requirements.

Chapter 7:

Sets out recommendations for national policymakers in response to the evaluations' findings.



Methodology

This section describes how we defined the evaluation priorities and set out the study designs and methodological approaches adopted by the two evaluation teams.

Theory of change

Impact on Urban Health commissioned Bremner & Co. to develop a theory of change to:

- guide evaluation priorities
- help to make sure the evaluation builds on the existing evidence-base for universal free school meals
- support coordination of evaluation projects
- generate useful insights for key audiences.

An independent academic team updated a recent literature review including evidence from the UK and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. This examined the relationship between universal free school meals and overall take-up of meals, diet quality, child food insecurity, school attendance, academic performance, Body Mass Index (BMI) and school meal finances³⁶. The team also looked at wider literature on school food in the UK and US to establish key themes.

Bremner carried out interviews and workshops with stakeholders including: the GLA, Impact on Urban Health, Education Endowment Foundation, London boroughs already implementing UPFSM policies, and academic teams and non-governmental organisations with an interest in school food.

Combining insights from the literature review and stakeholder consultations, Bremner's theory of change focused on four priority impact areas that would narrow inequalities for children and their families:

1. household finances
2. child and family mental health and wellbeing
3. child and family physical health
4. learning.

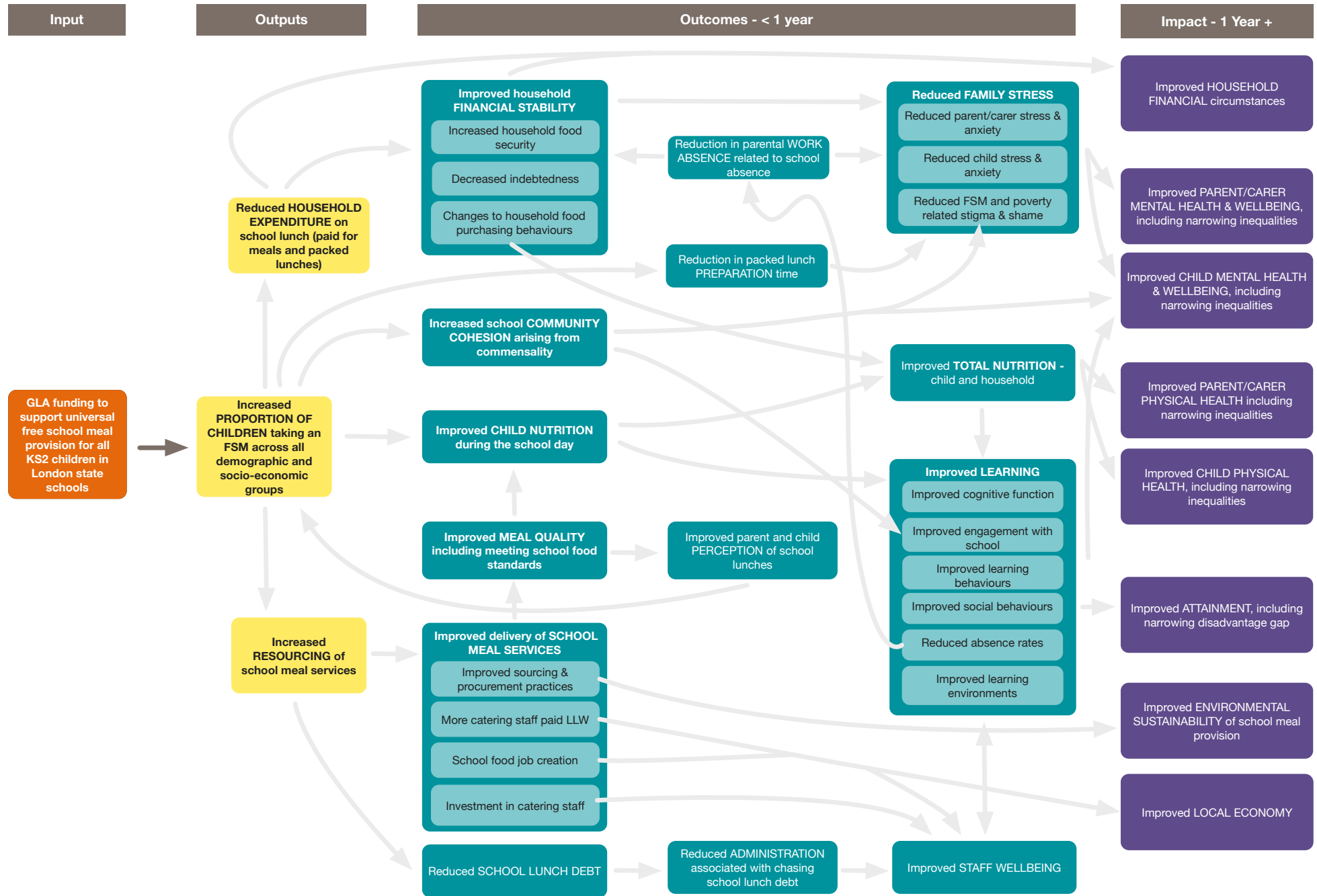
It also defined potential impacts for the local economy and environmental sustainability.

The theory of change became the underpinning framework for Impact on Urban Health's commissioning of two separate but interlinked evaluations. It also guided the GLA's Initial Impact Assessment, policy implementation and monitoring and evaluation activities and a separate impact, implementation and process evaluation, commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation and conducted by University College London. Impact on Urban Health supported a coordination group across all evaluation teams. This group informed evaluation design, shared knowledge and practice, maximised insight generation and worked to minimise the burden on participants.

The evaluations focused on measuring specific outcomes and exploring any unintended consequences of the policy. The studies were designed to capture diverse lived experiences and review the strength of the policy's effects by different socioeconomic and demographic groups, household characteristics and geographic locations.

³⁶ Cohen, J. and McLoughlin, G. (2023) An Updated Systematic Review of the Literature Examining Universal Free School Meals in the United Kingdom and Internationally available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-mayor-does/priorities-london/free-school-meals/integrated-impact-assessment-universal-free-school-meals?check_logged_in=1#annexes-ufsm-ia-194232-title. Retrieved 29/09/2024

More than a meal: An independent evaluation of universal primary free school meals for children in London



Lived experience evaluation methodology

Led by Child Poverty Action Group in partnership with Reconnect London

The lived experience evaluation was established to capture the views, voices and perspectives of those most directly impacted by the policy and to understand the day-to-day effects on the lives of children and families. CPAG and Reconnect London devised research questions, using the theory of change, which explored how the policy has affected household budgets, food insecurity, family health and wellbeing, children's experiences at lunchtime, the wider school day and children and families' perceptions of school.

Research approach

CPAG and Reconnect London took a school case study approach to explore the policy's effects in different school contexts. Working intensely with individual schools, CPAG conducted focus groups, surveys and interviews. CPAG participated in and observed the lunchtime experience, gathering insights and perspectives from a variety of school stakeholders. CPAG focused primarily on pupils and parents and carers. But this evidence was triangulated with insight from school staff, including school leaders, administrative teams, caterers and teaching staff.

Each of the individual school case studies provide a snapshot into the effects of the policy in their own context. Collectively, they also highlight the effects of the policy on children and families across London, and the barriers and enablers to implementation experienced by schools. In total, CPAG and Reconnect London worked with 10 primary schools and settings.

CPAG also gathered the views of parents and carers who may face barriers to engaging in research opportunities in school settings. CPAG did this by partnering with community organisations such as holiday activities and food providers and foodbanks to hear from more parents. Sessions were also conducted with CPAG's pan-London Family Panel.

Across CPAG and Reconnect London's different research strands, the team directly captured the views and experiences of:

- 345 pupils in primary schools in London (through focus groups).
- 286 parents and carers (through surveys, interviews and coffee morning discussions).
- 50 school staff members (through interviews).

All participants including children, parents and school staff were given information on the purpose of the research, how their insights would be utilised and shared, and given an opportunity to ask questions before giving their consent to take part. Parents were notified in advance that their school would be taking part and were provided with the opportunity to opt their children out of the evaluation.

School sampling

The lived experience evaluation used demographic data to map and identify those boroughs and schools invited to take part in the evaluation. The boroughs and schools selected represented a cross-section of London's diverse school system. This helped the evaluation explore how the UPFSM policy is being implemented and experienced in different contexts and what works where. Particular attention was paid to boroughs and schools with a higher proportion of people and children with protected characteristics, those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and those who face intersecting inequalities.

Implementation evaluation methodology

Led by ICF in partnership with Public Health Nutrition Research

The evaluation consisted of five research activities:

1. Desk research and data and stakeholder mapping
2. A school survey
3. A survey of all London Boroughs
4. Qualitative research with stakeholders across the school food system including catering providers and advocacy organisations
5. Case study research with 11 schools across London purposefully sampled using a range of criteria.

Desk research, data and stakeholder mapping

During this phase, the implementation evaluation team reviewed more than 50 documents, mapped stakeholders and data sets, and attended and observed meetings. We sought to draw out knowledge and insight from previous evaluations of school food interventions, universal primary school food policy implementation and enablers and barriers to success.

We also set out to understand how early adopter boroughs are using savings from the Mayor of London's policy, as well as the grant terms and conditions, the policy context, the aims and objectives for the GLA, and the mechanisms of implementation and support.

London Borough survey

We deployed an online survey for the focal points for the policy for the GLA in the boroughs that were new to delivering this policy from mid-December 2023 to 9 January 2024. From a total of 28 boroughs, we received 15 responses. Two early adopter boroughs also replied. Though the survey was not designed for them, this allowed comparison across these contexts.

Focus group discussion with early adopters

In March 2024, we conducted a structured two-hour online focus group discussion with the five early adopter boroughs. We explored motivations and support for the introduction of UPFSM, drawing out the driving and influencing factors. We set out to understand how boroughs have sustained momentum and maintained funding despite financial pressure on local authority budgets. We also focused on logistical actions and changes introduced, success metrics and monitoring activities. At least one lead, sometimes two, from each of the five boroughs attended the focus group discussion. Roles of participants were diverse, including school finance teams, public health, procurement and contracting representatives.

Key informant interviews with catering providers

Four key informant interviews with five different catering representatives were conducted in February and March 2024. One was dual purpose, as the participant was both a local authority catering provider and a representative from LACA. Another was a local authority caterer. One was a large-scale catering contractor with a significant market share in London. Another was from the charity Chefs in Schools.

Survey sent to all London schools

We merged, cleaned and filtered the data sources to invite all schools eligible for the policy (n=1792) to take part in an online survey. Further amplification and reminder activities were conducted to encourage participation using the stakeholder mapping and other networks across the evaluation teams. As an incentive, schools were entered into a draw to win one of five £100 Decathlon vouchers.

The research questions were split into the five pillars of the school food system and included a specific section on barriers and enablers. The survey launched on 10 January 2024 and responses were extracted for clearing and analysis in Microsoft Excel and STATA on 14 March 2024.

School survey responses

There were 140 responses to the survey, of which seven were duplicates. Excluding the five early adopter boroughs, we had at least one response from all but three of the remaining 28 boroughs. No school in Brent, Camden or Kensington and Chelsea responded. The final sample of eligible responses included 132 schools (7%) and was tested using t-tests (in STATA 18) for representativeness of the London school landscape, specifically school size, proportion of schools belonging to MATs vs local-authority-maintained schools and percentage of children eligible for FSM. A descriptive analysis (proportions, cross tables and subgroup analyses) was performed with accompanying graphs and charts in Microsoft Excel. Text data were synthesised and coded.

School-based case studies

A total of 11 case studies were conducted by four researchers over May – July 2024. Case study research consisted of a survey, face to face and phone interviews, observational research and flexible ‘conversations with a purpose’. We first interviewed the school’s headteacher and business manager. We conducted in-depth interviews with key members of the administration team to explore their roles in implementation and their reaction to the policy, workload and wellbeing issues. In-depth interviews were also conducted with catering managers and chefs, with follow up interviews with area managers. Flexible ‘conversations with a purpose’ took place with midday meal supervisors, catering assistants, teaching assistants and Key Stage 2 teachers depending on the school’s availability and the workload of the staff. In these flexible activities, targeted questions most relevant to the interviewee’s role in the policy were explored and notes taken on paper. Photos of meals and catering provision – with no children’s faces or identifiable features captured – were also taken. Copies of menus were collected and compared with any menus displayed in the canteen.

Two follow-up interviews were also conducted over Microsoft Teams to supplement and verify data collected in person.

Two-stage sampling

A two-stage stratified, purposeful sampling method was used to first select boroughs, then schools using demographic, educational/school system and geographic variables derived from published sources. We selected four boroughs in the first stage: Kensington and Chelsea, Lewisham, Waltham Forest and Hillingdon. These represent a variety of contexts including deprivation and inequality, ethnic and religious diversity, proportion of local-authority-maintained schools versus those belonging to MATs, and catering models.

The second stage selected schools with interesting contexts in their borough, using variables including school size, proportion of Key Stage 2 means-tested FSM eligibility, neighbourhood (inequality or deprivation) and type of school.

Data privacy and informed consent

All researchers involved in school-based research had verified DBS certificates – provided in advance or on the first day of research to the school along with a verified ID document. Consent for the research was secured via signature with the headteacher in advance.

Analysis

Transcripts and notes were analysed thematically against the five pillars of the school food system, and the enablers and the barriers. Data were collated into a 'Postcards from the Field' mural board and interrogated by the team. Individual write ups per school were produced to inform the school about the key findings and notes and tips for how to make the most of the policy.

Collection of take-up data

In England, the DfE does not routinely collect school meal take-up data for all children in Key Stage 2, and take-up data for Key Stage 1 is only available for DfE termly census days. Data is not routinely collected by the GLA on the take-up of meals offered through the London scheme. The GLA took the decision not to ask schools to submit additional data on the take-up of meals offered through the London scheme, as it was felt to be too great an additional burden for schools in the context of a rapid roll out. Instead, the GLA have sought to understand levels of take-up through a number of different sources. This has included work with the management information systems (MIS) provider Arbor³⁷, insights gathered through discussions with boroughs and headteacher³⁸, and where schools have claimed funding over the initial 90% allocations.

Arbor data

Arbor provide management information systems (MIS) to over 7,000 schools across the country³⁹. Their system allows the recording of meals taken by pupils and enables analysis by pupil characteristics. Arbor were able to provide a snapshot of take-up data from 259 London state primary schools to support monitoring by the GLA. This is around 13% of the number of schools delivering UPFSM in London, and there are three boroughs where there is no data from Arbor. Consequently, the data provides partial picture of take-up across the capital. It is not known whether pupils in schools using Arbor's MIS are systematically different from pupils in schools using other MIS, so it is difficult to say whether Arbor's data is representative of all schools delivering UPFSM in London. Take-up data was provided to the evaluation teams by the GLA, through their partnership with Arbor to support monitoring of the policy.



³⁷ Arbor, [Using Live Data in Policy Making: How Arbor and the GLA worked together to monitor Universal Free School Meals in London - Arbor \(arbor-education.com\)](https://arbor-education.com/), 2024

³⁸ Schools that wished to claim for over 90 per cent take-up were asked to provide snapshot data on school meal take-up at two points in 2024. [Claiming additional funding for meals uptake above 90 per cent | London City Hall](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/npr-2024-03-14), 2024

³⁹ Arbor Education <https://arbor-education.com/>, 2024

Reactions to the policy – from pupils, families and school staff

Take-up of school meals

All sources of data we examined indicate take-up of school meals under the policy has been high.

GLA sources have shown a range of take-up levels. The GLA collected data about meal take-up from a sample of 259 schools (13% of all London primary schools delivering UPFSM), using the management information system (MIS) Arbor. Take-up in these schools ranged between 88% and 90% across the three school terms in the 2023/2024 academic year. The average Mayor-funded FSM meal take-up in these schools was 89.1%, London-wide. The data show that, in the summer term of the 2023/24 academic year, average take-up was 90%. This was a marginal increase on previous terms - 88% in autumn and 89% in spring. In these schools take-up among pupils eligible for a means-tested FSM increased from 88% in 2022/23 to 94% in 2023/24 and increases were seen across all year groups.

Alongside this, borough reported take-up rates provided to the GLA suggest take-up levels ranged from 58% to 93% across the 16 boroughs who provided figures. Take-up rates reported by the 12% of schools which claimed additional top-up funding from the GLA ranged from 91% to 100%.

Our evaluation research found that most parents surveyed said their child was eating school lunches every day (81% of parents) or most days (three to four days a week) (13% of parents). Just 7% of parents said their children ate school lunches either some days, occasionally or never.

These high levels of take-up across the capital demonstrate the popularity of the policy with parents. These data are backed up by findings from both evaluations which demonstrate that the policy is popular with pupils, families and those working in schools.

Families

Almost all families involved in our research told us they were feeling the effects of the rising cost of living and welcomed the policy for this reason. The policy was also popular with parents, whatever their income, because they felt it made early mornings before school easier (explored in Chapter 2). We found the policy had greater benefits for families who were living in poverty or living on low incomes (explored in Chapter 1). But more affluent families were also strongly in favour of the policy, as they felt it acted as a leveller at school.

Families were almost unanimous in wanting the policy to stay in place. Some called for it to be extended further.

*“This [policy] has to be kept and invested in. I don’t know exactly where the money would come from, but they need to find it.” **Parent***

*“I think it should be expanded to secondary schools as well; they need even more food. Hungry children can’t learn whatever age they are.” **Parent***

Pupils

During focus group discussions, we found children are acutely aware of how many families are struggling financially. Many liked the UPFSM policy and felt it was an important way to help families who might not have much money.

“If people don’t have enough money to pay it must be really hard so it’s important. We have to have free meals. If the family can’t afford to pay for the meals the children will be missing out.” **Year 4 pupil**

“A lot of people and families are struggling, children who don’t eat at home can now have a meal at school.” **Year 5 pupil**

Pupils also liked the policy as they felt it contributed to fairness at school (explored further in Chapter 2).

“I think it’s unfair that [before the UPFSM policy] some children had to pay and some didn’t.” **Pupil, special school**

Schools, school staff and catering providers

Both evaluations found the UPFSM policy has been well received by schools and catering providers across London. During interviews, senior school leaders said the policy had helped to address hidden hunger and food insecurity, and to alleviate the financial burden the cost of living crisis has placed on many families, especially for those just above the threshold for means-tested FSM. Schools believe this has a positive knock-on effect on children’s learning.

“This is a very positive initiative and has helped our children and families, many of whom don’t meet the threshold for FSM but are struggling financially.” **Local authority catering provider**

“It’s made a huge impact on our school community, especially those parents and carers who are on low incomes and struggling to pay bills. [We can see] the impact on staff and the school because children are receiving a hot meal at least once a day, and on children’s focus and learning. We would be so grateful for universal FSM to continue in the future for all children as it is making a huge difference to our children and community.” **Head Teacher, school with in-house catering**

School staff were increasingly aware of the cost challenges experienced by families across the socioeconomic spectrum and the levels of hardship faced by those in poverty. They felt this had heightened the need for additional support from schools including free school meals.

“We have children coming into school not having breakfast, potentially not having dinner. The policy gives these children a hot and nutritious meal once a day. It’s really beneficial.” **Teacher**

“The community here is very mixed. There is the very privileged and then there’s the complete opposite end of the spectrum. This year, more families are using our food bank or coming for our second-hand uniforms. What’s not always obvious is the families you would expect - [the cost of living] is impacting everyone, right across the socioeconomic groups. The policy is fantastic.” **Teacher**

Our research showed the vast majority of schools, like families, wanted the policy to continue. They felt an extension would maximise the long-term impact on children’s health and education.

“We are overwhelmingly for this initiative and the response from families has been very positive. [We’re] seeing more children eating better and particularly families we were worried about; they are all eating well.” **Local authority catering provider**

Chapter 1

What the policy means for family finances



What the policy means for family finances

In this chapter, we look at what the UPFSM policy means for family finances. The evaluations found that the policy is easing pressure on family finances across the income spectrum, with families living on low incomes benefiting the most.

Key findings:

- Families across the income spectrum have been experiencing rising costs that have put a strain on their finances. The policy is easing this pressure, with 84% of all parents surveyed claiming the policy has helped or significantly helped their household finances.
- Families living on low incomes are benefiting the most from the additional financial support, with parents in receipt of Universal Credit more likely to say the policy was 'significantly helping' household finances (52% compared to 31% not receiving Universal Credit).
- However, as UPFSM only addresses one demand on family finances, the policy alone is not a sufficient response to supporting families to deal with rising costs or those consistently living on low incomes or in poverty.

In London, around one in three children are living below the poverty line after housing costs are taken into account⁴⁰. Children and families living on low incomes have been hit hardest by dramatic cost of living increases, as they spend a higher proportion of their budgets on food, housing and energy⁴¹. Many families also struggle with the costs associated with going to school, whether that is food, uniform or transport. This can negatively affect the way children experience the school day⁴². The cost of school food creates an additional burden on family finances. It is estimated that a daily school meal costs families £440 or more per year per child⁴³. If families opt for a packed lunch, it is estimated they will spend over £300 per school year at a minimum per child⁴⁴.

Prior to the introduction of the policy, some of the families living on the lowest incomes were already eligible for means-tested FSM. But the evidence is clear that the national threshold for free school meals is inadequate in reaching everyone who might struggle to afford a meal or packed lunch each day. For example, without the policy in place, CPAG estimates that 180,000 primary and secondary school-aged children living in poverty in London wouldn't qualify for a free school meal under the two national schemes (UIFSM and means-tested FSM)⁴⁵. However, with the policy in place, it is estimated that 80,000 primary-age pupils living in poverty in London who miss out on free school meals under the national criteria are now able to access a free school meal⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ DWP, [Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2023, 2024](#)

⁴¹ CPAG, [Low-income families terrified winter inflation stays high](#), 2023

⁴² CPAG, [The Cost of the School Day in England: Pupils' Perspectives](#), 2022

⁴³ GLA, [The Mayor of London's Love Your Lunch Challenge](#), 2024

⁴⁴ CPAG, [Cost of Education](#), 2023

⁴⁵ CPAG, [By region: number of children in poverty not eligible for FSM](#), 2022

⁴⁶ CPAG, [New official data shows 900,000 children in poverty don't qualify for free school meals under national policy](#), 2024

The policy is easing the ressure on family budgets

Costs have gone up for all families and this is putting a strain on households across the income spectrum. Parents and carers told us that rising costs are affecting their ability to meet their families' needs. Even though inflationary rises have steadied in 2024, many families are not financially better off. And levels of hardship across the city were high before the cost of living crisis⁴⁷. Many families across the income spectrum have been left with little or no room for manoeuvre in their household budgets.

School staff had noticed the extra pressure felt by families across their communities and recognised the challenges this presented for costs related to school life.

"People's food bills have tripled and so to ask a family to pull together a 'healthy packed lunch' is very challenging." **Finance Manager**

Within this challenging context, the policy is helping many families whose household income doesn't cover their costs. Of all parents surveyed, 81% said their child was eating school lunches every day and a further 13% said they were eating school lunches most days (three or four days a week). This strongly suggests that most families across London are taking up the free school meal offer. And those that would previously have been paying for school lunches or providing packed lunches have either saved money or are now spending less. The vast majority of all families (84%) said the availability of UPFSM helped or significantly helped household finances.

"Our mortgage, utilities, phone and grocery outgoings have all increased dramatically. So any area we can save money makes a huge difference." **Parent**

"It's a whole chunk of costs gone. It's like I can rip my shopping list in half because I don't need all the lunch bits." **Parent**

Across all parents surveyed, a third (33%) shared that the UPFSM policy means they have less debt. For families facing hardship, the money saved was often being used for household essentials. This was highly valued by parents.

"I work part-time and as a lone parent and sole provider I'm very grateful for the additional help available to me financially. Without this, it would cost a lot and impact my affordability to provide essentials." **Parent**

"[School lunches] would be a couple of hundred a year and now that can go towards household bills instead." **Parent**

Through conversations at home, pupils were also aware of the financial benefits of the policy for their families.

"My mum tells me she can spend money on trips and more things at school as she noticed the [dinner] money stopped coming from her account." **Year 5 pupil**

Parents reported they were now able to spend more money on items for their children. For example, buying school uniforms and paying for children to attend activities such as sports clubs.

"I'm able to save £5-£10 a month for my daughter's school uniform next year when she starts secondary school. The uniform is really expensive. It's only a little bit but this will help me." **Parent**

⁴⁷ Trust for London, <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/poverty-over-time/>, 2024

"I now save over £80 a month - this money now goes towards after school clubs etc." **Parent**

School staff had also noticed that parents were able to spend money saved on school-related activities.

"Now we are seeing nice water bottles, paying for school trips - our parents having extra income to attend those trips is beneficial to the children and the families." **Teacher**

Some parents said the money saved on school lunch costs has also helped older children in the household. Parents have been able to spend the money saved on school lunches on other family members.

"I'm able to put more money into my older children's lunches. They can increase their £2.50 allowance, whereas before I would be very strict." **Parent**

Struggling families are gaining the most

The research suggests those living on low incomes, who are struggling to get by, benefit most from the policy. 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).

"It was always a struggle to find the money towards payday - we don't have this anymore." **Parent**

"With all of the other costs, not having to pay for food at school has been a life saver." **Parent**

We heard from families who didn't previously qualify for support but were simply unable to afford daily school meals or packed lunches. This meant children sometimes had inadequate lunches.

"I never knew what I was going to get in my lunchbox. I would purposely avoid finding out until lunchtime. Sometimes it was a nice surprise, but most days it wasn't. I'd always feel embarrassed to show anyone - now I can have school dinners." **Year 6 pupil**

"Prior to the Mayor's scheme, we were finding children who didn't have enough lunch in their packed lunches. You could see that there were issues of poverty in that household." **Catering Manager**

Our research took place in schools that represented a cross-section of London. Some were in areas considered to be more affluent, with comparatively low rates of child poverty and numbers of children who are registered to receive free school meals. But we found there were families struggling and dealing with complex home lives in all schools. In schools in more affluent areas, some staff felt that hardship was more hidden. They acknowledged that universal policies are a powerful mechanism, ensuring no one falls through the cracks.

"The area has the perception of affluence but it's not really the reality and doesn't cover all the people who attend." **Finance Manager**

"Some hidden things may not surface, the policy covers holes for those who don't meet the threshold." **Teacher**

Across the research, there was wide consensus among school staff that the policy was positive for all families. However, school staff felt that the biggest effects financially were on those families just above the income threshold.

“The policy is most beneficial for those families on the cusp of the [free school meals] threshold. It is set at a phenomenally low bar - just £7,400 [income per year]. So if you are just outside that you are having to pay for school food.” **Senior Leadership Team (SLT) member**

The effects of continuing cost of living pressures

While the financial benefits of the policy are being felt by families, some shared that the money saved is quickly absorbed by rising costs elsewhere. Families noted that, in addition to increasing bills, they also felt school-related costs, such as school clubs and uniforms, had gone up.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but we don’t even notice it anymore. It was a big relief to start with but all the money we thought we would be saving, that’s gone on other things. And not like treats or savings or pensions but on covering rising bills elsewhere.” **Parent**

“I would really miss it if it was taken away, but I can’t point to anything and say, ‘I can do this now because the school meals are free’. More like I’m a bit more able to pay some of the bills occasionally.” **Parent**

Families also reflected more generally on how much worse things had become in recent years, even with the support offered through UPFSM.

“If you had said to me two, three years ago I would be asking the school for free uniform for my kids or using their free food or asking to use food banks, I would literally be horrified. Horrified. I would have been ashamed and devastated. But now I have no choice so I’m getting on with it.” **Parent**

“I’m finding I’m actually in a worse situation than I was at the start [of the cost of living crisis]. But I’m less stressed as it’s just normal now. I can’t do anything about it, I can’t fight it, it’s not getting better any time soon, so I’d just better suck it up and accept it.” **Parent**

The research also found that some groups and families were unable to experience the full financial benefits of the policy. For example, because children couldn’t always eat the food that was on offer or meals had to be supplemented with food from home. We pick this issue up in more detail in Chapter 6.



Conclusion

The research confirms that families across London, regardless of their income, have been affected by cost of living pressures. For those already surviving on low incomes, the impact of rising costs has been significant, meaning parents cannot always easily meet the needs of their families.

Before the Mayor's policy was introduced, free school meals were not available to all children and families who needed them. This presented major challenges across school communities in London. The UPFSM policy has evidently supported families across the socioeconomic spectrum, with greater benefits for those who have been struggling the most. The policy has successfully reduced a significant cost facing families living on low incomes, including by increasing take-up among those previously entitled to, but not registered for, means-tested FSM. Existing analysis has also highlighted how different expansions of FSM provision can reduce the numbers of children in poverty⁴⁸.

The policy has clearly been appreciated by families. But school food costs are just one of many costs families face, including increased utilities and housing costs. Families have also noticed other school-related costs continuing to rise. This has diluted the financial effects of the policy for some families. UPFSM in London is helping to ensure poverty isn't compounded in the dining hall and has relieved pressures on families. But more work is needed by the UK Government to address the causes of poverty and lift more families out of this situation.



⁴⁸ IFS, [Child poverty trends and policy options](#), IFS, 2024

Chapter 2

The policy's effects on physical and mental health and wellbeing



The policy's effects on physical and mental health and wellbeing

The evaluations found the policy had a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of children and their families.

Key findings:

- The policy has had a positive effect on the mental wellbeing of children and parents living on low incomes, by reducing the emotional burden and stress of trying to provide an adequate school lunch. More than one in three (35%) parents surveyed stated that their child is now less worried about food at school.
- The policy is supporting children's nutrition by:
 - increasing the proportion of children taking a school meal rather than packed lunch.
 - freeing up money for parents to spend money on 'better' and 'healthier' food at home. 60% of parents surveyed were able to spend more money on food for their family as a result of the policy.
 - encouraging children to try new foods at school. 55% of all parents surveyed thought their child was trying new foods because of the policy, increasing to 63% for families in receipt of Universal Credit (63%).
- Once again, the findings suggest that benefits of the policy are felt strongest by families living on low incomes.

In this chapter, we look at the findings that relate to physical health and mental health and wellbeing, particularly for those parents and children who are most worried about money. This includes the effects of the policy on stress and worry at home and how it is supporting family health beyond the benefits of children eating a school meal. We share family and school staff perspectives about how UPFSM is helping families to provide better food at home, as well as enabling children to try new foods in schools. And we explore the benefits of families being able to spend more on sport and activities for their children.

This chapter demonstrates the benefits of the policy, experienced by children and families, beyond the financial support it provides. Through our research with the five early adopter boroughs in London, we also heard about the importance of positioning the policy as having wider positive benefits for children's health, wellbeing and learning. In the boroughs where this has happened, it has helped to create and sustain momentum, maintain trust and belief in the policy and increased the will to continue effective implementation. Early adopters strongly voiced the need to build long-term political support for UPFSM as a means to improve child health, wellbeing, attainment and education, as well as supporting household finances.

Family mental health and wellbeing

Poverty can create anxiety and stress and this affects family wellbeing⁴⁹. Forgoing essentials and rising debt can place a huge strain on parents' mental health. And children who experience poverty are more likely to experience mental health issues⁵⁰. Living without enough food and heating, and not being able to socialise or take part in

⁴⁹Mind, [Facts and figures about poverty and mental health, 2021](#) and [Young Minds Money, the cost of living crisis and mental health, 2022](#)

⁵⁰Mind, [Facts and figures about poverty and mental health, 2021](#) and RCPCH, [Child health inequalities driven by child poverty in the UK - position statement, 2024](#)

activities, can all contribute to low wellbeing and self-esteem. Children are often aware of money issues at home, and this adds to their worries⁵¹. On top of this, poverty-related stigma also creates mental health challenges⁵². Poverty-related stigma is a process whereby individuals or communities are devalued, because they live in poverty, and/or access specific services designed to support those living on low income, such as food banks. This is perpetuated in different ways, for example the language used to talk about those living in poverty and the policies and systems that affect them⁵³.

Peace of mind for struggling families

Our research with parents and carers shows that the policy has reduced an emotional burden on many struggling families. Prior to the policy, many parents were worried about whether their child had enough food to keep them going throughout the school day. The introduction of the policy has reassured families that, even when money or time is short at home, their child is getting a 'good meal' at school.

*"Sometimes I am just waiting for payday and can't afford to go and buy vegetables and brown pasta and that. Those days are less stressful now because I know they're eating well at school and if they have a cheese sandwich for tea, it's not the end of the world." **Parent***

*"Some days I'm so rushed because I'm working and don't have time to make a proper meal in the evening. But it's ok because I know they've had a good meal at school." **Parent***

Parents talked about the worry that comes with not being able to provide children with a hot meal each day.

*"I think it's a great benefit for parents financially struggling at the moment. Not having to worry about your child [because they're] having a healthy warm lunch at school reduces the burden not only financially, but also mentally and emotionally." **Parent***

*"School lunches were a massive issue, financially and physically. Knowing my child will get some form of meal is a relief to me and takes away the stress." **Parent***

Some parents talked explicitly about the impact of the policy on their mental wellbeing. They shared how challenging it can be to juggle household pressures and how the introduction of UFSM had freed up much-needed headspace.

*"Helps significantly in terms of time, I no longer have to prepare a [packed lunch] in the morning in addition to my full-time role. Less juggling has a huge impact on my mental health." **Parent***

*"Without this policy, I'm thinking the day before about what she can eat. Now I'm mentally free and happy knowing she will be eating something healthy and warm." **Parent***

Parents also felt that their reduced worry at home was good for their children. Nearly half of parents who responded to the survey (45%) said the policy has meant they worry less about passing on their financial concerns to their children. More than one in three (35%) stated that their child is now less worried about food at school.

Pupils in focus groups also shared how concerns about food, prior to the policy being implemented, affected them and their families emotionally.

⁵¹ CPAG, [Poverty's threat to childhood revealed by new research](#), 2023

⁵² WCPP, [Let's talk about poverty stigma](#), 2023

⁵³ The Poverty Alliance, [Report of inquiry into poverty related stigma in Scotland](#), 2023

"I have seen my mum really stressed when she has to pay for our meals and other bills." **Year 4 pupil**

The role of schools in supporting struggling families

School staff told us through interviews that they are aware of many families who were previously struggling but felt unable to come forward and ask for help. Poverty and hardship is often a source of shame for families. This can act as a barrier to parents accessing the help they are entitled to or need.

"People are struggling and people don't want to let that be known." **Teacher**

"A child was hungry in the morning. I asked her if she missed breakfast at home and she said her family just didn't have any to give her, so she has to wait until lunchtime to eat anything. This for me is heartbreaking."
Support worker

"We have many families living on the breadline who are on the threshold and struggling. But we also have some families who are very proud and won't accept anything." **Support worker**

School staff noted that providing a meal each day was one way the school could help families without parents needing to disclose information about their circumstances.

"For our families, free school meals kicked in at the right time. Otherwise, it would have gotten much worse, 100%." **SLT member**

"Schools can't support families with the gas and electric, but at least we can now support them with food."
SLT member

Family physical health

Ensuring children have enough healthy food has become increasingly difficult for parents. The cost of food rose by 25% between January 2022 and January 2024⁵⁴, much faster than wages and benefits have risen. Research shows that healthy nutritious food is nearly three times more expensive than less healthy food⁵⁵ and for families managing tight budgets, it is increasingly difficult to buy adequate food⁵⁶. Households with children are more likely to experience food insecurity and to use food banks⁵⁷.

A good diet is essential to achieving good health outcomes throughout our lives⁵⁸. Access to enough nutritious food is also critical to children's physiological, cognitive, social and emotional development⁵⁹. Conversely, food insecurity has been found to negatively affect children's health and wellbeing⁶⁰. Existing evidence has identified the positive association between nutritious universal free school meal provision and improvements to children's diets and eating habits⁶¹.

⁵⁴ ONS, [Cost of living insights - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/cost-of-living), 2024

⁵⁵ Food Foundation, [Major report highlights impact of Britain's disastrous food policy | Food Foundation](https://www.foodfoundation.org/major-report-highlights-impact-of-britains-disastrous-food-policy/), 2022

⁵⁶ [New data: Government-recommended diet costs poorest 5th of UK half their disposable income | Food Foundation](https://www.foodfoundation.org/new-data-government-recommended-diet-costs-poorest-5th-of-uk-half-their-disposable-income/)

⁵⁷ DWP, [Households Below Average Income: an analysis of the UK income distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100000/Households_Below_Average_Income_an_analysis_of_the_UK_income_distribution_FYE_1995_to_FYE_2023_GOV.UK.pdf), 2024 and House of Commons Library [CBP-9209.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/publications/2024/09/cbp-9209), 2024

⁵⁸ UK Parliament Post, [POST-PN-0686.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/post/pn/0686), 2022

⁵⁹ UNICEF, [SOWC-2019.pdf \(unicef.org\)](https://www.unicef.org/sowc2019), 2019

⁶⁰ [Child food insecurity in the UK: a rapid review \(abdn.ac.uk\)](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/child-food-insecurity-in-the-uk-a-rapid-review/), 2018

⁶¹ Cohen, J. and McLoughlin, G. (2023) An Updated Systematic Review of the Literature Examining Universal Free School Meals in the United Kingdom and Internationally available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-mayor-does/priorities-london/free-school-meals/integrated-impact-assessment-universal-free-school-meals?check_logged_in=1#annexes-ufsm-ia-194232-title. Retrieved 29/09/2024

Improved food at home

Our research found that many families said that savings made because of the policy had enabled them to spend money on 'better' and 'healthier' food at home. This included being able to plan better for meals, being more efficient when shopping and buying more fruit and vegetables. Three in five (60%) parents who completed the survey said they were able to spend more money on food for their family as a result of the policy.

*"The policy has helped me to purchase more healthy and expensive food for the house, like fruit and vegetables." **Parent***

*"Having free school meals has been a life saver, meaning I can make healthier, better dinners as I have more money to spend." **Parent***

*"I can budget better for food because we're not randomly running out of things. I can concentrate on evening meals and breakfast foods and it's a real help." **Parent***

Children had also noticed positive changes to food on offer at home.

*"We have bigger shops at Sainsburys rather than little weekly shops." **Year 4 pupil***

*"My parents now go to Costco for a really big shop." **Year 3 pupil***

Children are trying new foods in school

More than half (55%) of all parents who completed the survey thought their child was trying new foods because of the policy. This percentage increased for families in receipt of Universal Credit (63%). Many parents across the income spectrum talked about the changes in eating habits they had seen. Families felt that seeing other children eat food at school encouraged their own child to try different meals.

*"If it wasn't free I would make a packed lunch because she only likes certain foods. But now she is watching her friends eat things like curries and rice and this is helping her to expand what she eats. This has been a massive change over the last year." **Parent***

*"I just don't have the mental capacity to fight with her about eating chicken tikka at home. But in school she eats chicken tikka because her friends do." **Parent***

These findings from parents were backed up by feedback from those working in schools. We heard from teachers, teaching assistants, senior leaders, midday meal supervisors, catering providers and administrative staff who all felt that UPFSM helped pupils to access different foods.

*"Parents are mindful where they are allocating their money. Access to a free meal gives the opportunity for a child to try different foods without the financial impact." **Support worker***

Pupils also acknowledged that UPFSM had widened the range of foods that they had been able to try and enjoy.

*"When I joined this school, I wanted to bring my own packed lunches as I didn't like any of the foods. I'm glad I stuck with it because now I like the meals." **Year 4 pupil***

*"Lunchtime allows me to try new foods." **Year 4 pupil***

Families described that when money or time is tight it's often difficult to provide choice and variety at home. Some shared that they couldn't risk spending money on food for evening meals that children wouldn't eat. They welcomed the policy as it is enabling their children to try new foods and cuisines in a way that doesn't affect stretched household budgets. Some parents also said that schools were able to offer options that they don't know how to cook at home. They were pleased that the policy opened up these opportunities.

*"They really like the choice they get at school; it feels more like being a restaurant. We just can't provide that kind of choice at home." **Parent***

*"If the policy was to stop, my daughter would be limited in trying new foods. She would only eat sandwiches at lunch." **Parent***

*"I love it because he comes home and he's telling me he's had this and he's had that and I think I wouldn't know how to cook any of that even if you gave it to me for free!" **Parent***

Making the move from packed lunches to school meals

Families, particularly those living on low incomes, reflected that, prior to the policy, it was sometimes a real challenge to provide an adequate and filling packed lunch. We also found a small number of schools that actively enforced policies on what items were allowed in packed lunches. In one case, this acted as an additional barrier to a child attending school.

*"I haven't sent my children to school several times because I couldn't fulfil the packed lunch options." **Parent***

*"My son wouldn't be able to have them [school meals] if we had to pay - his lunches wouldn't be healthy or hot and it would be a massive cost to us." **Parent***

This was echoed by what school staff observed in the dining hall, not only for pupils whose families are surviving on low incomes but more widely.

*"We were seeing children coming in with a [packed lunch] which wasn't sufficient and they were coming up to the counter to get more food." **Catering Manager***

*"There were families we saw, where we thought they were doing ok until you look at the child's packed lunch and you'd realise, actually they are really struggling at the moment." **Teacher***

*"Healthy packed lunches are a battle and challenge for some families, regardless of the income".
Support worker*

Some children told us how limited their packed lunches were prior to the policy.

*"We struggled with money so I had to have a packed lunch but I know it wasn't always healthy, it was what my mum had left in the cupboard. Now I can eat a school dinner." **Year 5 pupil***

Some parents shared that the move to school lunches had helped to increase the variety of food available to children, which wasn't always possible in packed lunches.

*“Providing packed lunches just became repetitive and time consuming, now I know the school is providing her with a variety of nutritious and hot meals.” **Parent***

More money for activities that support health

Many families and pupils also shared how money saved because of UPFSM is now being spent on activities, such as sports clubs and swimming, which help to support health beyond food.

*“With two children, [the policy] saves me around £100 a month. I can use this money for other activities, like sports club, and the children will benefit from it.” **Parent***

*“I’m able to do more activities at school because sometimes they cost between £3-£7 depending on what I want to do.” **Year 4 pupil***

Conclusion

This research demonstrates the positive implications of the UPFSM policy for health, wellbeing and wider family life⁶². For parents and carers, there is heightened worry and anxiety related to children not having enough food during the 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, as well as ensuring they are receiving a nutritious meal.

The stigmatisation of poverty in society can result in feelings of shame and is associated with social isolation and reduced take-up of benefits⁶³. Existing research shows that being eligible for means-tested FSM can cause feelings of embarrassment for children at school, and for their families⁶⁴. This is supported by the GLA Arbor data which shows take-up has increased among those who were previously eligible for means-tested FSM, rising from 88% in 2022/23 to 94% in 2023/24. Our research also demonstrates other ways in which feelings of shame related to poverty can affect lunchtime experiences. Children told us how, prior to the policy, they felt embarrassed about what was in their lunchbox and about being singled out if their parents have outstanding lunchtime payments (covered in Chapter 3). Parents also talked about feeling embarrassed and not feeling able to come forward and ask for support.

Universal approaches to school food can help to address these negative consequences for pupils⁶⁵ and our research shows the policy is helping to break down and address some of the poverty-related stress and feelings associated with stigma families are facing.

From a school perspective, our research found that staff are highly aware of the levels of hardship families face. They reported feeling distressed when children don't have a warm coat and adequate shoes, or when families are struggling to buy the right uniform and school materials. Schools go to great lengths to support families, but they are often working with limited resources and capacity. Therefore, a policy which is universally available and built into the school day supports schools to better support families.

⁶² Mind, [Facts and figures about poverty and mental health, 2021](#) and [Young Minds Money, the cost of living crisis and mental health, 2022](#)

⁶³ Wales Centre for Public Policy, [Tackling poverty-related stigma: policy briefing, 2024](#)

⁶⁴ A. Holford, [Take-up of Free School Meals: Price Effects and Peer Effects on JSTOR, 2015](#)

⁶⁵ CPAG and the NEU, [The universalism multiplier, 2023](#)

Our research also shows that when money is freed up elsewhere, parents are more able to invest in their family's health through food at home. They can also spend money on activities such as sports clubs which support children to be physically active. When money is tight, it is difficult for parents to make filling packed lunches that meet the needs of children. The policy has removed this issue for some families. It's challenging to monitor exactly what food is consumed by children at school. However, more children eating school meals and trying new foods supports the development of children's eating habits and preferences and increases the likelihood that they are having a more nutritious meal in the middle of the day.

Josephine's story

Working mum of five, Josephine, lives with her partner. Their joint income puts them slightly above the national threshold for free school meals so none of her children qualify. Finances are often stretched, and Josephine has found it difficult to buy enough food for her family. At times she has made the decision to keep her children at home rather than sending them to school and face the shame of not being able to provide adequate, filling packed lunches.

The introduction of UPFSM means her three primary-aged children now have school lunches. This has significantly helped Josephine's household budget. The policy has given her a sense of relief knowing she can send her children to school and they will be fed properly. She no longer faces difficult conversations with school staff about attendance or what's in their lunchboxes.

"I haven't sent my children to school several times because I couldn't fulfil the packed lunch requirements or pay for the school lunches...I'm working, I'm struggling, I'm proud. I don't want people to judge me or my child's lunchbox. It's been a weight off my shoulders knowing my child will now eat something every day. I still receive unexpected bills sometimes but not having to pay for [school lunches], takes the pressure off..."

"It was more shameful having the school chasing me to ask why I haven't provided a packed lunch that day than when they challenge me about keeping my child at home because I couldn't provide a meal. I'm thankful not to have those calls anymore. As a working parent, I wasn't previously entitled for free school meals. It takes the financial stress away from me having to prepare all the children's lunches."

Josephine has spent the money she has saved on school lunches on essentials for her children, including clothing and food. UPFSM means that she is no longer torn, having to make difficult decisions about whether to buy uniform or food. The policy has given Josephine breathing space. She can spend more money on things for her children and it has also eased the burden of childcare costs for her youngest child.

"I have been able to purchase new shoes for my child when previously, I would wait and leave them until the end of term before replacing them."

"I have more money for my elder child's lunches who has to pay for them. I no longer have to debate in my head about whether to buy a new school shirt or shoes or provide packed lunches/ pay for school meals."

Josephine's story

"We want to spend money on our children so they can eat, play and participate in activities with their friends. We are grateful for the policy. Most of the money saved now goes towards my youngest child's nursery food who has just started. If the policy was to stop, I'm not sure how I would manage this - I don't want to think about that."

As well as helping Josephine's family with the cost of essentials, free school meals have had a wider impact on her own and her family's wellbeing, as it has encouraged her children to try new food and reduced their household stress.

"For us, free school meals have made us happier. We are less stressed, the kids are fuller and better fed. Here's an example of a policy that does what it's meant to do. My children are trying new foods which I don't get to make at home. One of my children has autism and can be really fussy, so this has helped. The mental stress has gone down; I have more time in the mornings as I don't have to prepare all these lunches. I can get the younger ones out the door much quicker. There are certainly less arguments."

Josephine feels that the policy has allowed them to feel more included which has made all the difference.

"All children now get to sit together - there's no separation between packed lunches and school meals."



Chapter 3

The policy's effects on school communities



The policy's effects on school communities

In Chapters 1 and 2, we focused on how the introduction of UPFSM has affected family finances, as well as family health and wellbeing. In this chapter, we look at the evaluations' findings about the role the policy has played in school life and how it has strengthened school communities. A child's experience of school is influenced by much more than just their timetable and the curriculum. It is shaped by a range of daily interactions from the moment they wake up and get ready for school, to relationships between teachers and parents, and their experiences during breaks and social time. The introduction of UPFSM has affected these dynamics as we will explore in this chapter.

Key findings:

- The policy is contributing to a calmer start to the school day for families across the income spectrum, ensuring children arrive at school more ready to learn and in some cases, supporting parents to get to work on time.
- The policy has near-resolved the issue of dinner money debt for primary schools and parents who were previously struggling to cover the cost of primary school meals in London, leading to improved parent-school relationships and reduced administrative burden on school staff. This is another example of a specific benefit of the policy for families living on low incomes. However historic dinner money debt remains a challenge in some schools, limiting the potential positive effect of the policy for some families.
- Children, school staff and parents all spoke about children's improved energy levels and ability to concentrate due to having a school lunch, with this again supporting children's readiness to learn. More than a third of parents surveyed (34%) felt that UPFSM means their child can concentrate better on school and lessons.
- Parents, school staff, and children viewed the policy as a leveller, supporting a sense of fairness and happiness at school. More than one in three (35%) parents surveyed felt that their child enjoyed school more since the policy had been in place.

Schools across England are working to address a number of significant challenges, which have heightened since the pandemic. Increasing numbers of young people are facing mental health challenges, while happiness levels for UK children are low compared to their counterparts across Europe⁶⁶. One in five children are now persistently absent from school (missing 10% or more sessions)⁶⁷ and suspensions and exclusions have increased⁶⁸. Disparities in attainment between those from low-income households and their peers stubbornly remain⁶⁹. These challenges, alongside the wider social and economic issues covered in earlier chapters, are permeating classrooms across England. As a result, schools are taking on an expanded role in meeting the needs of their communities⁷⁰.

⁶⁶ OECD, [Education GPS - United Kingdom - Student performance \(PISA 2022\) \(oecd.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/pisa-2022-results-international/), 2022

⁶⁷ Department for Education, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>, 2024

⁶⁸ Department for Education, [Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england), 2024

⁶⁹ Education Policy Institute, [Annual Report 2024 - Education Policy Institute \(epi.org.uk\)](https://www.epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024), 2024

⁷⁰ CPAG, <https://cpag.org.uk/news/there-only-so-much-we-can-do-school-staff-england> 2023

Strong relationships between schools and families are also an important part of school life, contributing to a supportive and collaborative environment which can help to enhance children's learning and wellbeing. However, these relationships can sometimes face strain for lots of different reasons, for example, parents' work demands, and this can affect children's learning and experiences at school. In this chapter, we explore whether UPFSM supports schools and families to meet these challenges and strengthens relationships between schools and families. This includes looking at the policy's effect on different aspects of the school day, the relationship between home and school, staff time, children's concentration and energy levels, and how children and families perceive their school.

A smoother start to the school day

This research found that, prior to the introduction of the policy, many families, regardless of income, found the mornings before school highly stressful. Parents described the difficulties of trying to get children ready for school and ready to learn, while juggling other tasks and trying to make or manage school lunches. This often led to arguments before school. Parents, from across the income spectrum, reflected on the positive changes the policy has made to their mornings, particularly in creating a calmer environment that supported school readiness. Just over half (51%) of parents surveyed said it saved time in the morning that they used to spend making packed lunches.

*"I have a new baby now, so I have very little time to make packed lunches. It takes away the repetitiveness. I can relax now mentally and financially." **Parent***

Women, in particular, had noticed this change. Reduced tension at home meant less guilt for women and not having to make lunches freed up more time to spend with their children.

*"I find I end up spending more time talking to the kids while they're having breakfast because I'm not caught up in making lunches. And that's fun, we talk about our days and what we're excited about." **Parent***

*"I don't get that guilt of yelling for the whole morning and then wondering if they're taking that into the classroom and how that's going to affect them." **Parent***

*"It's really reassuring for me if I know at breakfast time that she will be eating a good meal at lunchtime. Mornings are always a rush and sometimes she hasn't had enough time to wake up properly and eat." **Parent***

Some women also talked about the knock-on effect it had on their day and their ability to get to work on time.

*"I was always worried about getting to work on time – am I going to be late? But now there's less to do so it is easier, yes." **Parent***

*"I feel like I'm more reliable in the mornings because there's more time, more space. If things go wrong, you know you have time to deal with it." **Parent***

Parents felt that having a calmer start to the day was helping to support their child's education. Some said it helped them to get to school on time and helped children feel more ready to learn at the start of the day.

*"It's definitely reduced our stress levels, so the kids go to school after a happy, shout-free breakfast rather than carrying our stress in with them to lessons." **Parent***

This research highlights that UPFSM can play a pivotal role in supporting all families at the start of the day. Not having to make or manage school lunches saves parents valuable time and energy at a typically stressful time of day. Parents can focus on getting their children ready for the day ahead, in a calmer environment, without arguments or running late. This is positive for families and schools.

A welcome reset on dinner money payments

Primary schools in England are responsible for collecting school meal payments or 'dinner money' from parents who pay for their school meals. School staff, often office staff or finance managers, monitor these payments and manage the situation if families fall behind and accumulate dinner money debt. This can negatively affect the relationship between parents and schools, and the child's lunchtime experience.

Dinner money payment challenges before UPFSM

For parents

Our research found that, prior to the UPFSM policy, outstanding dinner money payments were a concern in many London schools. It was an issue which caused considerable challenges for pupils, parents and school staff.

Parents, especially those struggling with money, told us about the difficulties they had in paying for school meals, particularly when they were waiting for benefits or wages to be paid. Some parents described the stress they experienced when they fell behind and had been trying to find the money. This sometimes resulted in parents avoiding contact with the school, often creating a tension between home and school.

*"Every minute they are calling me chasing me for money." **Parent***

*"Parents with outstanding debt would avoid me." **SLT member***

*"Chasing money was a daily exercise between the parents and office staff. It became more of a debt collector relationship." **SLT member***

For schools and school staff

Schools also described the levels of debt that existed in the system. For some schools, this amounted to thousands of pounds. This issue was more pronounced in schools in areas with higher levels of child poverty.

*"Collectively the debts run into £1,000s. Where we can, we support with funding which we put aside. Otherwise, people are paying off debts for one year, two years." **SLT member***

*"For some families [to have enough money] to get through the summer holidays, they just wouldn't pay [dinner money] for the last few weeks of term so they could have money for the holidays. Debt would still accumulate, and it would be waiting for them in September." **SLT member***

This process of resolving dinner money debt also placed significant pressure on staff time and capacity. It meant office and administrative staff had to regularly call parents, send letters, monitor and follow up on debt. One school shared that staff would spend at least one hour every morning making calls to families who were behind on payments.

*"Calls and texts to get hold of a parent is a lot of hard work for the school office. We had up to 20 pupils at one point [with no dinner payment or packed lunch]." **Catering Manager***

For children

Schools and academy trusts/MATs took different approaches to managing dinner money debt levels. Sometimes these affected children's lunchtime experience. For example, one school gave children wristbands if their families owed a certain amount of money. This meant children were provided with a 'subsidy meal' which mainly consisted of salad. Other schools asked that children bring packed lunches while payments were outstanding.

"When my child has had a subsidy meal, I'd take extra food when I pick him up because I know he would be starving as the meal provided wouldn't be adequate. But the school did a good job being discreet at lunchtime. He thought I would pick that meal for him on that day, so he didn't understand, why I had only picked him the salad." **Parent**

"We had a policy where we would provide a subsidy salad meal. We would never ask or tell the children 'your mum hasn't paid', that's embarrassing for the child." **Teacher**

"One time my mum didn't pay for lunches for a week, they called and said I had to have packed lunch or go home for lunch." **Year 4 pupil**

Some schools monitored debt levels and used this to identify families that might be struggling. They would then signpost them to wider financial support.

"We had a handful of families in debt with their lunchtime payments. We reach out to parents, ensure their benefits are up to date and they are accessing the right allowances." **Support worker**

"There is never any 'you owe us money'. People are all people and we all struggle, so I say 'let's come to some arrangement'." **Support worker**

Improvements since the introduction of UPFSM

Alleviating dinner money debt

The policy's introduction has significantly helped to address the problems caused by dinner money debt. In some cases, it has transformed the relationship between parents and schools. We heard about parents who had avoided contact because of debt now feeling able to come into school and speak to teachers about their child.

"It's now a task which the office doesn't have to do. [And] it's totally removed the stigmatisation and those awkward conversations from that cohort of struggling parents." **Teacher**

"The relationship is so much better now, not having to chase parents every week for money for the outstanding debt." **SLT member**

For schools, a major benefit of the policy has been the time saved on monitoring and following up on payments. This has had a considerable impact, with staff now able to turn their attention to other things.

"The biggest impact it's made is to the school office. It's given them the time back to do what they are supposed to do, not chasing parents for dinner money debt." **Catering Manager**

It has also helped staff who felt conflicted about how the school should respond to debt issues, knowing how much families were struggling.

*“As much as it was heartbreaking to provide a child with just a salad and a bit of bread, we couldn’t keep providing meals which were unfunded. This issue is now eradicated.” **Catering Manager***

While the policy has removed some of the challenges around dinner money debt, we found that there is no consistent approach to managing historic school meal debt. This means some families are still making payments or have debt hanging over them, even with the UPFSM policy in place. Some schools have wiped debt completely, others have set up payment plans or paused the debt.

*“There is a large balance unpaid - we haven’t added anything to the balances this year, but the conversation remains open. It’s difficult for our families”. **SLT member***

*“More than one family are using this year to get straight and to get ahead of the debt. They are still paying this year as if they are having to pay for meals to clear it.” **SLT member***

Through the reduction or elimination of debt, the UPFSM policy has, in some cases, significantly improved the relationship between parents and schools. It has enabled more productive communication and reduced tension and money-related shame for many families. And children no longer have to face the consequences of dinner money debt, including being identifiable and sometimes going without adequate food during the school day. But the benefits of this change are not felt as strongly by those families who are still being asked to pay back historic debt and are at risk of reoccurring if the policy is stopped in the future.

The policy has also evidently freed up time and resources for schools previously spent managing dinner money debt. This has been widely welcomed by schools who are under strain.

School life and learning

Poverty at home is the strongest statistical predictor of how well a child will achieve in school⁷¹. Evidence suggests these outcomes are both a result of direct deprivation (e.g., inadequate housing, less ability to buy books and provide enough food) and the effect of coping with poverty on parents’ mental health (e.g., stress and anxiety). Existing evidence also shows that children growing up in food insecure households, most commonly caused by poverty or low income, have poorer educational outcomes than their peers⁷².

Research has also shown an association between child food insecurity and other factors which impact on children’s ability to learn, such as their behaviour⁷³. When children are hungry, they are more anxious, tired and distracted in class⁷⁴. These barriers can make it harder for children to concentrate in lessons and affect their ability to learn. Previous evaluation has shown that when everyone has access to a school meal, staff report improvements in children’s concentration and readiness to learn⁷⁵.

Lunch and learning: shifts in children’s behaviour, concentration and energy levels

We found that parents, school staff and children in the majority of schools had noticed positive shifts in children’s behaviour, concentration and energy levels. Changes were observed throughout the school day, not just at lunchtime.

⁷¹S Exley, ‘Inside and Outside the School Gates: impacts of poverty on children’s education’, in J Tucker (ed), *Improving Children’s Life Chances*, Child Poverty Action Group, 2016

⁷²[Briefing No. 6 - Financial Inequalities and the Pandemic | COSMO \(cosmostudy.uk\)](#), 2023

⁷³Shankar et al., 2017 [Association of Food Insecurity with Children’s Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes: A Systematic Review - PubMed](#)

⁷⁴*Chefs in Schools*, [PowerPoint Presentation \(chefsinschools.org.uk\)](#), 2022

⁷⁵Education Policy Institute, [UIFSM-evaluation-7.compressed.pdf](#) (epi.org.uk), 2018

School staff reported that a good meal at lunchtime contributed to a 'calmer' school day, particularly in the afternoons. This was echoed by parents who have also witnessed changes to their child's behaviour or mood that they link to eating a hot, healthy lunch.

"The hour before lunch, it's like trying to steady a rocking ship with some pupils. After lunch it does seem much calmer." **Teacher**

"We all know what hungry kids are like, this policy is helpful to teachers too so they can do their jobs." **Parent**

"My child is noticeably different in mood when he has school dinners." **Parent**

The biggest changes pupils themselves noticed were to their energy levels. Some also told us how important a 'good' lunch was for their school day. Parents also noted changes in energy levels with around one in three survey respondents (30%) saying their children had more energy and are less hungry at the end of the school day as a result of the policy.

"I love my lunches. I feel like I have more energy." **Year 5 pupil**

"When we have lunch, it makes us stronger, healthier and we can concentrate more on our learning." **Year 4 pupil**

"My daughter is much happier and has lots of energy and tells me about her meals when she comes home." **Parent**

Parents also reflected on how pupils had improved focus and concentration as a result of having a filling school meal. More than a third of parents who completed the survey (34%) felt that UPFSM means their child can concentrate better on school and lessons.

"I can absolutely tell when she has eaten lunch. I can see in her workbooks which days she has been able to concentrate." **Parent**

"Everyone I know who works in schools has noticed a change in behaviour. There's a difference in how kids are presenting, they are coming into the classroom ready to learn. You can tell who has had their lunch and who hasn't, as the ones who have skipped it are distracted and not really focusing. Overall, the kids are more settled, they behave better and that learning mindset is more available to them." **Parent**

This was echoed by some school staff members who were passionate about how access to school meals removed a barrier to learning.

"They are the greatest thing. The biggest impact you can give to a child is a chance to learn which these meals will help with". **Senior leader**

"You can definitely tell with some pupils how tired they feel just before lunch. As a teacher, it makes it much easier knowing that these children have had a good healthy meal and are ready for the afternoon." **Teacher**

Fairness and a sense of belonging at school

School staff, parents and pupils also described the wider social benefits associated with children eating food together and enjoying the same experience at lunchtime, without money being an issue. Some parents indicated that the policy has brought the school community together.

*“Free lunches are more than just eating for these children, it’s the social aspect too.” **Parent***

*“Every child can now sit and eat next to each other without feeling embarrassed about what’s in their lunchbox.” **Parent***

*“I think this is really important. Children can sit together, learn and try new foods from different cultures.” **Parent***

Some parents spoke passionately about the need to remove means testing from the school day. They felt this had a detrimental effect on children and that school should act as a leveller, not a place to expose differences. Some parents had experienced poverty-related stigma themselves as children and felt that universal provision was the best way to avoid this in their child’s school.

*“There is the community effect of sitting down and eating together. Means testing free school meals is like two-tiering and splitting kids into the haves and the have nots.” **Parent***

*“[There] can be a massive social stigma attached to this sort of thing. Means testing creates frictions we really want to avoid, particularly in schools.” **Parent***

There was also a strong feeling among parents, school staff and pupils that the policy helps to support fairness and happiness in school. Our research suggests it helps pupils to have a more equitable school experience and supports their wellbeing at school. More than one in three (35%) parents who completed the survey 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.

*“Our children are happier about lunchtimes. They talk about it more and are excited when it’s their favourite items on the menu. We feel like [the policy] puts all children on equal footing, [there’s] less separation between them. It has helped them all be happier about the lunchtime experience.” **Parent***

*“We had some families living in crisis mode. Everyone is on an equal footing at lunchtime now – [that’s] how it should be, regardless of the policy. Children should be allowed to just be children. They shouldn’t have to carry any type of financial burden.” **Catering Manager***

*“If the meals were stopped, I would feel many children will be put at a disadvantage, going back to being different and not having anything at lunchtime. It would be a sad thing for a whole generation of children.” **Parent***

While there are many factors that contribute to how children get on and achieve at school, our research suggests that the provision of universal free school meals can help to boost important aspects of school life for children. Better concentration and increased energy levels are key ingredients for children to be able to thrive in education. This shift is being noticed by staff and parents, with some seeing clear links between a hot healthy meal and

better learning. Children themselves also talk about the difference it makes. This insight should be valued by policymakers who want to understand what school is like for children and young people and what impact changes in policy can have on their outcomes and experiences.

“If I don’t eat properly, I cannot focus on my work, then I have to wait until I get home.” Year 6 pupil

UPFSM is also helping to change the way some children feel about school, contributing to feelings of greater fairness, belonging and community. Our research suggests this policy is helping to support pupil happiness and wellbeing at school.

Conclusion

At a time when primary schools and special schools across London are facing wide-ranging issues, our research shows encouraging signs that the UPFSM policy can play a part in strengthening school communities.

Our data highlights that challenges around school food, prior to the policy being introduced, sometimes made children late to school and, in a small number of cases, stopped them from attending at all. For example, families told us making and managing school lunches in the morning made it harder to get to school on time. For those struggling with money, we found some cases where parents’ shame around not being able to provide a healthy packed lunch or settle outstanding dinner money debt led to children being kept off school. More widely, the issue of outstanding dinner money debt was placing a strain on the relationships between home and schools, particularly for those living on low incomes. We found the removal or reduction of dinner money debt, in most schools, had helped to improve or restore school-family relationships and lower administrative pressures on schools. When this happened there were clear benefits for the whole school community.

The policy also appears to be supporting calmer behaviour in the classroom, with school staff reporting afternoon lessons running more smoothly when children have had a hot, healthy meal. Across our research, pupils, families and school staff noticed differences related to concentration, engagement and energy levels, which are considered crucial building blocks for learning. However, with a range of factors influencing learning, staff acknowledged it was sometimes difficult to isolate the effect of food on children. There are also signs that pupil wellbeing and happiness is improved, with children feeling that the school day is fairer and more enjoyable because everyone gets to eat school meals together. Pupil mental health and wellbeing is also linked to school attendance levels⁷⁶ and we look forward to seeing whether the policy has a statistical impact on areas including attendance and attainment when further evaluations are published⁷⁷.

Challenges around school attendance, punctuality and behaviour are highly complex, with no single solution. However, the positive changes in school life associated with providing a free meal at lunchtime have potential to improve all three. By reducing tension between home and school, creating a fairer lunchtime experience, and improving energy and concentration levels, UPFSM removes some of the barriers to children’s positive engagement with school life.

⁷⁶Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition, [Not in School](#), 2024

⁷⁷See Education Endowment Foundation for more information on upcoming evaluations: [Universal Primary Free School Meals in London evaluation](#)

Aisha's story

Aisha lives in Hillingdon with her partner and two children. Her partner works full-time, and she is in part-time work. They were not previously entitled to free school meals. Aisha feels the UPFSM policy is supporting her family's health by expanding the types of food she is able to provide at home.

"The policy has helped me to purchase more healthy and expensive food for the home, like better quality fruit and vegetables. I can now provide cereal or toast in the mornings to ensure my child is full-up and ready to start the day. It's a long time until lunchtime".

Prior to the policy, Aisha regularly struggled with lunchtime payments, particularly towards the end of the month when she was waiting for wages to come in. She described the anxiety she felt when the school tried to contact her about the payments.

"When it's the last week of the month on a Monday, I would get the call knowing I couldn't pay. I wouldn't know what to do - what could I say? I would just be hoping I can get through the week and try to find the money from somewhere."

Although the school still provided some food for her child on the days when lunchtime payments were outstanding, this was restricted to a smaller meal.

"On those days, I'd take extra food when I pick him up because I know he would be starving."

She now feels more relaxed knowing her child is getting a good meal at school. She says her child is "bouncier and happier" when he comes home. Aisha has also been able to save money for sports clubs, including gymnastics and cricket, for both her children during the school holidays.

"I wouldn't even have been able to consider this last year if I had to pay for meals".

She is clear about the value of the policy to families like hers.

"I think it's a great idea to help those on a low income with a bit extra. Paying for lunches for multiple children really does add up."



Chapter 4

How the GLA supported boroughs and schools to implement the UPFSM policy



How the GLA supported boroughs and schools to implement the UPFSM policy

The implementation evaluation collected data and insights from the GLA, schools, boroughs and caterers across London. This chapter explores the GLA's funding and governance arrangements for the policy, as well as how it was communicated to boroughs and schools. It then considers the important role of the London boroughs, and other stakeholders, in supporting schools to scale up to deliver the UPFSM policy across the city.

Key findings:

- The clarity and transparency of the GLA funding arrangements built school trust and confidence to deliver the policy
- Whilst most schools and caterers reported they could provide school meals within the £2.65 meal rate set for year 1 of the policy, they said there were associated trade-offs in staffing, pay, terms and conditions, quality and choice. In response to these concerns and rising costs, the GLA increased the allocation to £3.00 per meal for academic year 2024/2025.
- Boroughs played an instrumental role in enabling effective delivery of the policy. Boroughs who were proactive and provided tailored support made a big difference in ease of implementation for schools.
- Whilst the vast majority of schools who responded to the survey had the kitchen capacity to deliver UPFSM, many needed equipment to be replaced or upgraded to enable delivery.
- Local approaches to auto-enrolment, stimulated by the policy and led by some boroughs, were successful in registering children entitled to but not registered for means-tested FSM. This 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.

How the GLA designed the policy and its governance structure

Before launching the UPFSM policy, the GLA carried out an Integrated Impact Assessment to understand more about its potential impacts on equalities, health, the economy and the environment. This included an Equalities Impact Assessment (discussed in Chapter 6), an evidence review and stakeholder engagement. Its planning was supported by the theory of change produced by Bremner & Co⁷⁸.

This work guided the final design of the policy and its governance arrangements. It also informed the grant principles, eligibility criteria and monitoring arrangements.

⁷⁸ Theory of change diagram in [Methodology section](#)

The GLA took a collaborative approach to governance. It invited officers from every London borough to be a part of the governance structure. This consisted of a Partnership Advisory Group (which met throughout the first year of delivery of the policy and continued into year two) and several smaller groups, each focused on a specific topic. For example, evaluation and monitoring, schools' policy issues, grant management and sustainability. Each group included borough officers. The Partnership Advisory Group, comprised of senior officers, provided guidance and expert input into policy development and implementation, and reviewed and endorsed proposals from the groups. The governance structure connected the GLA with boroughs and other stakeholders throughout the policy's implementation and provided a mechanism to capture and share learning from those boroughs already providing UPFSM.

Funding the policy

The GLA announced it would distribute funding via the 33 London boroughs, who would in turn pass the money on to schools. Funding would be allocated to all boroughs, including the early adopters already providing UFSM. The GLA then signed a funding agreement with each London borough. This described the funding timeline, the grant conditions and the grant principles:

- The agreed funding timeline was for 50% of the funding to be given in advance, at the start of the academic year; 25% in the autumn term and 25% in the spring term.
- The grant conditions attached to the funding specified that the grant must be used for delivery and implementation of the UPFSM programme. Boroughs were encouraged to use any surplus to support schools to deliver the policy and to help solve any local challenges. They also stated that boroughs and schools must take part in evaluation, monitoring and learning activities, conducted and supported by the Mayor, and promote the policy using the approved branding guidelines.
- The grant principles detailed actions that the GLA would like to see, while recognising that not every school would be able to deliver them immediately. These principles encouraged schools and boroughs to:
 - support approaches which maximised registration for means-tested FSM.
 - support families and communities by paying the London Living Wage (LLW) to catering staff.
 - meet school food standards and ensure school food is culturally appropriate.
 - take a 'whole school approach' to healthy eating, participate in Healthy Schools London and adopt water only policies.
 - meet sustainable catering guidelines and support environmental aims.

The GLA set the UPFSM funding at £2.65 per meal for the 2023/24 academic year. This rate was higher than that set by the DfE for UFSM or mean-tested FSM in order to contribute to any additional school administration and staffing costs, and to encourage schools to comply with the grant principles. The GLA communicated the funding mechanisms to all London boroughs who, in turn, shared the information with the schools in their borough. The GLA's funding was based on an assumed uptake of 90% of school meals based on the number of students in school in the 2022/23 academic year. Schools could claim additional funding if take-up was above 90%.

After signing the funding agreement, each borough decided how to distribute the funds. The London borough survey data showed that all boroughs that responded followed the GLA's advice and allocated the funding based on most recent census data (from 2022).

Cost per meal allocation variations

Our school survey data indicated that 56% of schools use contracted private catering, followed by 24% with in-house catering and 18% with a local authority catering provider. This variation in how school food is provided across London is a key factor in schools reporting big differences in their cost per meal. This ranged from around

£1.40 to £5.00, though the numbers at the lower and upper ends of the scale are outliers. Most reported a cost per meal between £2.50 and £2.80, compared to the GLA funding of £2.65.

Overall, schools and catering providers reported that they were able to provide meals within the allocated amount. But they said there are trade-offs with staffing, pay, terms and conditions, quality and choice. This finding reflects a challenge that pre-dated this policy – many schools and catering teams are having to provide considerable top-up funds to provide meals due to inadequate education budget allocations⁷⁹. Inflationary pressure in food and staffing costs were mentioned as a barrier to delivering the policy.

*“The per-head funding from the GLA is currently insufficient to maintain as it doesn’t cover the full cost of a school meal – especially with the added items such as bread, pudding, salad. It would have been helpful to have additional funding for the increase in uptake.” **Head teacher***

In response to schools’ concerns, and in recognition of the increasing costs of providing school meals, the GLA increased the allocation to £3.00 per meal for 2024/25.

Schools’ understanding of funding mechanisms

The evaluation found the transparent funding mechanisms, particularly the pump-priming nature of the 50% allocation upfront, built considerable trust with many schools giving them the confidence to scale up.

*“We were pleased the funding was sorted and promptly, [otherwise] we wouldn’t be able to afford it as a small school.” **Administrative Officer (via school survey)***

*“I feel that the funding that we’re getting from the Mayor’s Office is straightforward...quite often with other funding we get, like a lot of the COVID funding, we then have to justify how we’ve spent it. And thankfully we don’t have to do that.” **Finance Officer***

Schools received their first funding allocation based on an estimated take-up figure of 90% (as it was provided prior to the start of the academic year) and the number of Key Stage 2 pupils they had according to January 2022 census data. The GLA chose to use the 2022 census pupil figures (higher pupil numbers than the 2023 census as pupil numbers are declining) because this offered a more generous offer for schools. However, as the policy was introduced in the 2023/24 school year, these calculations didn’t always reflect the actual pupil roll numbers, which can change year to year. Where calculations based on census day data underestimated pupil numbers, the GLA offered top up funding to ensure schools weren’t out of pocket.

However, despite the efforts of the GLA and some boroughs to communicate clearly, our evaluation found this funding formula was either not clearly communicated or not clearly understood by all schools, as illustrated in the quote below. This led to some schools still feeling unprepared, not fully understanding the grant conditions, or confusion in some schools during the second and third funding allocations. Some schools felt there hadn’t been enough consultation about how funding amounts were calculated. Others didn’t understand the uptake-related terms of the funding or the data used to estimate number of children, leading to funding deficits and inaccuracies.

*“Funding arrangements are very important if schools are to manage their budgets effectively. This has been and still is an issue as the school is expanding each year by one year group. Figures were calculated on the May 2023 census, by September 2023 we had another class of 30 children in Key Stage 2 which haven’t been calculated into the local authority funding. We are currently in discussions regarding payment for this extra group. No one from the local authority has called the school to check numbers [even though this] was outlined on the Mayor’s free school meals directives to schools and boroughs.” **Head teacher (via school survey)***

⁷⁹School Food Matters (2024) Cost of a School Meal, available at: <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/CoaSM-report.pdf> retrieved 31/10/2024

Funding uncertainty due to the short-term policy timeline

Initially, the announcement of a one-year policy created uncertainty. Schools felt uneasy not knowing if and for how long it would continue. They were concerned about having to inform parents that it may end (especially families just above the means-tested threshold) and how an abrupt end would affect their catering arrangements.

“We need to know the length of time [the policy] will be running. [We] have spent a lot of money on resources, building and staffing.” **Head teacher (via school survey)**

The announcement of an extension of the policy was very well received. However, the worries about what the end of the policy could mean for families and for home-school relationships remain. Schools felt that stopping the policy would risk undermining trust and affect the emotional health and wellbeing of families and children (see Chapters 2 and 3).

“It would be difficult to inform families that support is no longer available” **Head teacher (case study school)**

In April 2024, the Mayor committed to continuing the UPFSM policy throughout his current Mayoral term⁸⁰.



⁸⁰ School Food Matters, <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/news-views/news/news-and-views/london-mayor-sadiq-khan-pledges-free-school-meals-4-more-years>, 2024

Additional funding – Investing in kitchen and dining infrastructure and equipment

According to the school survey, 94% of schools have a kitchen with the capacity to cook food for all children. But findings show that some of the kitchen equipment is outdated and needed to be replaced or upgraded to deliver UPFSM.

Because of this, some boroughs committed significant capital investment to get schools ready. Data from the borough survey show five boroughs directly invested more than £1m in kitchen and dining equipment. One London borough audited schools in the 2023 summer term, offering match funded upgrades to schools on a case-by-case basis. They identified which schools were likely to need upgrades within the year through audits completed during the 2023 summer term, prior to launching the UPFSM policy.

The GLA responded to this issue by providing flexible support for schools, where possible. A small donation of kitchen equipment from an external distributor was received and distributed to schools based on need, and some funding was made available for exceptional circumstances. Some schools we worked with received this support from their borough or the GLA and other schools told us they were disappointed when they were unsuccessful.

“There were a couple of things that came out offering equipment, from various places that have been donated, but we didn’t get anything - we literally applied for anything we could.”

Catering Manager

Equipment audits were also carried out by some commercial catering providers to guide decisions about investment in catering equipment. Others offered needs assessments, dedicated staff and small grant schemes. Interview data show that the audits led to increased demand for white goods. Manufacturers, distributors and installation companies couldn’t fulfil and install orders for heavy kitchen equipment. Delivery of orders had to be staggered.

Schools are usually responsible for buying and maintaining fridges, freezers, dishwashers and ovens. Some found that the rapid roll-out of the policy exacerbated existing challenges around managing kitchen equipment.

“It has impacted us financially because of having more meals to cook and prepare. We’ve had to use funds of our own for ovens and other bits and pieces because it wasn’t provided by the GLA.”

School Business Manager

“It’s great that [the GLA] want to offer this [financial support to cover the cost of meals] ...however there was just no financial support [for equipment]. And obviously the schools had to find the money for us to be able to get it done.” Catering Manager

Data from the school survey found only 12% of schools reported receiving additional funding to support implementation, 69% of whom received funding from the borough.

Communicating the policy

The GLA collaborated with a wide range of stakeholders to make sure the policy was communicated clearly and effectively, and enough guidance and training was provided. These included those involved in the governance mechanisms (borough officers), school and academy trust leaders, and supporting organisations, including teaching unions.

Communicating the policy to boroughs

Before launching the policy, the GLA wrote to boroughs several times and offered opportunities to join webinars or arrange meetings. Boroughs were invited to get involved in the policy's governance and received training and guidance documents. Out of the 15 respondents to the borough survey, 12 mentioned they had attended webinars, visited the GLA website, and regularly met with the GLA team, as well as being part of the Partnership Advisory Group. One early adopter borough helped the GLA to design materials. Only one of the boroughs mentioned communication with the GLA as a barrier to implementing the policy, whereas four boroughs mentioned that communication and support from the GLA had helped them to deliver UPFSM.

Communicating the policy to schools

The schools survey asked schools to rate the information and guidance about this policy from the GLA, their borough or other stakeholders, including their MAT or wider school networks. Just under a third (29%) of schools rated the support, advice and guidance from the GLA and their boroughs as being extremely or very useful. Almost two thirds (60%) of the respondents were not aware of, or hadn't received, any information from other sources, such as their MAT or catering provider. This is potentially a missed opportunity given the effectiveness of school networks in disseminating policy guidance.

Some schools expressed that, while communications about the policy had been largely positive, there had been limited opportunity to discuss the information with families. They explained that, in some cases, families found out about the policy via public communications from the GLA, when they would have liked the opportunity to tell families themselves. Schools also said they would have liked more peer-to-peer learning and better information-sharing among schools.

Detailed communication sent to schools, regarding implementation, grant terms and conditions, was managed by the boroughs. Some boroughs were very proactive. For example, one borough wrote to all residents to inform them of UPFSM and encourage take-up. Another had a single point of contact to answer any queries from schools and organised drop-in sessions. One school told us it has a named contact at the borough who has given support on a range of policy-related activities, from accessing fridges and freezers via the GLA to help with referring at-risk families to the fruit and vegetables voucher scheme.

Where the relationship between boroughs and schools was strong, the communication and understanding of the policy were solid.

"The people that deal with that in the borough are really good, really keen." **School Finance Officer**

"The communication generally has been very, very good. You know, all the emails, with advice on how to implement the free school meals was there. I did find them very easy to understand and navigate and get my head around what it means for our school." **Head teacher**

The evaluation also found examples where schools felt communication from their boroughs was ineffective. They told us that their borough had misunderstood the message from the GLA or delayed conveying the information, affecting their capacity to implement the policy. This typically happened where borough-school relationships were weaker or more fragmented because the borough held a more limited role in education. This was common in areas where a large proportion of schools were academy trusts.

*“[London Borough] were useless, literally. It was wait for information from them, which never came. There was one meeting that literally was right at the end of term, that was basically reading out the stuff that the Mayor had already sent. So, it didn’t help us in any way, shape or form – obviously the rollout had to be really quick.” **Head teacher***

*“I work in [London Borough] and they’re useless. So I waited months and months to get the money through from them. Yeah, so it really does very much depend from one borough to another.” **School Financial Officer***

Communicating the policy to families and children

Communicating the policy to families and children was envisaged as a shared responsibility across the GLA (via direct communications, social media and PR), London boroughs, schools and academy trusts/MATs. All stakeholders played some part in informing parents and carers, and this was broadly successful. This was reflected in our research with families which found 96% were aware of the policy. GLA public communications included direct campaigns in schools, such as the Love your Lunch challenge (a drawing competition) for pupils to celebrate their school lunches⁸¹.

Some schools did raise that having English as an additional language was sometimes a barrier to communicating the UPFSM changes to families in their schools, though the GLA did provide translated options for some of their key communication resources.

Boroughs play a pivotal role in the policy’s success

The evaluation found that proactive support from boroughs made it easier for schools to implement the policy. Some boroughs were very proactive in their support towards schools. In addition to the activities described above, proactive boroughs used three approaches that contributed to the policy’s success:

- assess each school’s needs and support them in a targeted manner.
- establish means-tested FSM auto-enrolment processes.
- increase coordination between public health and school food strategies.

Supporting free school meals registrations and auto-enrolment

What is auto-enrolment?

Families who qualify for means-tested free school meals have to register their children before they can receive their free lunches. Some families who are entitled don’t register so their children are missing out. This can be because of language barriers, overly complicated processes or the stigma around sharing details about household income with their child’s school.

Auto-enrolment schemes use existing data to identify previously unregistered entitled children and automatically enrol them for free school meals. Local authorities can opt to use auto-enrolment.

The local authorities that have trialled auto-enrolment schemes have, between them, successfully registered thousands more children for free school meals and attracted millions of pounds in extra funding for schools to support disadvantaged pupils, via pupil premium grants⁸².

⁸¹ GLA, [The Mayor of London’s Love Your Lunch Challenge](#), 2024

⁸² Fix Our Food, <https://fixourfood.org/what-we-do/our-activities/schools-and-nurseries/gated-content/>, 2024

The UPFSM policy and funding to support disadvantaged pupils

The registration process for means-tested FSM can be a barrier to take-up, with an estimated 11% of entitled children not registered to receive a meal⁸³. During the evaluation, schools highlighted a range of reasons for this. For example, one school felt that asking families for National Insurance numbers poses challenges for newly arrived migrant families and asylum seekers. Language barriers are also an issue, despite support for translation and interpretation in schools.

“A lot of our families don’t speak English. Sometimes we get pushback from the local authority because they will support them to do the paperwork, but then it will send an email saying you need to upload this document for the check, which they don’t read. They don’t understand the email, so then it never gets processed. So we’re always trying to chase it up.” **School Finance Manager**

In cases like this, the introduction of UPFSM has made it easier for many families to access school lunches, as there is no need for separate registration.

However, this has wider implications for funding to support disadvantaged pupils. When a child is registered as eligible for means-tested FSM this triggers additional funding for schools, known as the pupil premium. In 2023/24, this funding was £1,455 per pupil. It is an important income stream for many schools⁸⁴.

When UPFSM was announced, some schools and local authorities raised concerns that the policy would remove the incentive for families to register their children for means-tested FSM. A reduction in registration would have a knock-on effect on pupil premium funding. In our survey with schools, half said that UPFSM has reduced the numbers registering for means-tested FSM. 31% indicated there had been no change and 19% said they didn’t know.

However, government data for London schools in 2022/23 and 2023/24 suggest registration rates for means-tested FSM in Key Stage 2 have stayed almost the same (29.7% compared with 30%). Data for Key Stage 1 pupils gives a similar result. This discrepancy between the data and what schools reported could be explained by falling school rolls; schools are experiencing reduced registrations for means-tested FSM because there are less children attending overall.

Auto-enrolment

Recognising these concerns, the GLA and individual boroughs committed to supporting schools with improved means-tested FSM registration processes. The GLA encouraged schools to maximise registrations through one of its grant principles. It worked with the FixOurFood free school meal auto-enrolment research consortium to promote their auto-enrolment toolkit to boroughs, hosting knowledge exchange events and activities.

As a result of auto-enrolment, in 2023/24 four boroughs (Tower Hamlets, Lewisham, Lambeth and Wandsworth) delivered 2,814 additional free school meal registrations and recovered £4.7m of pupil premium and other school income⁸⁵. Importantly, newly identified FSM pupils came from households with higher levels of inequalities and deprivation than those already registered for means-tested FSM, and much higher than the London population average. For example, in Lambeth, 79% were Black or from minoritised ethnicities, 9% from lone parent families and 50% had English as a second language at home⁸⁶.

The GLA commissioned Policy in Practice to work with an additional four London boroughs to deliver auto-enrolment for autumn 2024. In August 2024, the GLA also provided all boroughs with a £20,000 grant to explore ways to implement auto-enrolment. A number of additional boroughs implemented FSM auto-enrolment for the

⁸³ DfE, Pupils not claiming FSM, [Pupils not claiming free school meals - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupils-not-claiming-free-school-meals), 2012

⁸⁴ DfE (2024) Pupil premium 2023-24: technical note available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium-allocations-and-conditions-of-grant-2023-to-2024/pupil-premium-2023-to-2024-technical-note--2>

⁸⁵ Fix Our Food, <https://fixourfood.org/auto-enrolment-for-free-school-meals-bbc-22-10-24/>, 2024

⁸⁶ Love Lambeth, <https://love.lambeth.gov.uk/lambeth-hundreds-more-families-to-get-free-school-meals/>, 2024

October 2024 census, including Southwark, who have identified and registered over 800 additional FSM pupils. A pan-London approach for FSM auto-enrolment is also being discussed, recognising that a combined effort would be the best opportunity to identify and target all pupils.

Coordination between public health, school food and education teams

Data from across the study found borough support for schools on UPFSM was most effective when coordinated by a dedicated team focused on school food. Data from the focus group discussion with early adopter boroughs suggested that schools welcomed a coordinated approach from public health and school food specialists. In these boroughs, these teams provide practical support and training about procurement and contracting, monitor and improve the nutritional standards of school meals, and support and advocate for whole school approaches to food. The teams understand the needs of individual schools and can identify and provide other support, such as targeted capital investment in kitchens and dining.

Support from other stakeholders

Schools provided a mixed picture of the support they received from other stakeholders. Some schools received a lot of support from the catering companies they work with or their MAT, especially about the quality, delivery and cost of meals.

*“We were just always pushed about standards. And the good thing about being part of the [MAT] is [the Trust Operations Manager] collects photographs of food from every school to see what it looks like, which they should be doing anyway with their manager, catering companies. Just in terms of portion control and quality...which is one benefit of doing it that way” **Head teacher***

Others felt they navigated the challenges of implementing the policy on their own. The evaluation found that schools would like more direct communication across MATs, school-peer networks and school catering providers about the policy. Schools want logistical, operational and practical support (evidenced by some schools using equipment and procurement consultants) to scale up and improve school meals.

*“I joined a lot of [GLA] webinars and obviously their website and stuff, but it was all letters for parents and things. We can write letters to parents, we didn’t need those, that wasn’t the help we needed [we wanted best practice support and how to adapt our facilities].” **Head teacher***

Conclusion

This chapter explored the essential building blocks – funding, communication and support - behind the policy’s implementation. The funding mechanism fostered trust and confidence among schools. This financial clarity enabled most schools to scale up their meal provisions. But there were some concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the funding and the amount received by schools.

While many schools appreciated the direct communication and involvement, and detailed guidance, provided by the GLA, there were notable disparities in support across different London boroughs. Some boroughs worked proactively with schools and provided expert support and capital investment, which significantly eased the transition for schools. Others left schools to implement the policy independently. Evidence suggests tailored support from boroughs has been a key driver for successful implementation of UPFSM. Given the GLA’s limited remit in education policy across London, and the central role of London boroughs as conduits of this funding, it is important to recognise that the structural mechanisms of the policy worked well, particularly the clear and transparent funding flows.

This mix of different catering models and providers created communication and coordination challenges, both for implementing and for monitoring and evaluating the policy. For example, there was no single defined route to communicate plans for delivering UPFSM to catering providers. Responsibility was dispersed across various channels and networks, for example boroughs, academy trusts, schools and catering networks. This meant it was difficult to monitor the extent to which the details of the policy had been received and understood.

Another consequence of this fragmented system is that there is no central hub to coordinate the many logistical elements needed for the scale-up of the policy. For example, purchasing equipment, negotiating new suppliers, setting up new systems, recruiting staff and sharing good practice. This created bottlenecks as multiple schools and catering providers across the city were working in isolation as they tried to source the same things.

Differences in the management of schools and the diversity in catering providers also help to explain variations in levels of preparedness and success with implementation. This is explored in Chapter 5.

The complexity of rolling out an ambitious policy in a fragmented school food system within a challenging timeframe shouldn't be underestimated. In spite of this, the GLA was able to guide and support boroughs and schools to successfully deliver the UPFSM policy across London's primary schools.



Chapter 5

Schools' experience of delivering the UPFSM policy



Schools' experience of delivering the UPFSM policy

Implementing a policy on this scale, within a restricted timeframe, brings operational challenges. This chapter looks at the elements of London's complex school food system that contributed to the successful implementation of UPFSM, and those that made delivering the policy more difficult.

Key findings:

- The majority of schools surveyed (68%) reported that they didn't have to make specific adaptations to deliver the policy. For those who did report needing to adapt (28%), changes included extending catering or support workers' contracted hours and recruiting new staff, buying new equipment or modifying kitchens/dining rooms, increasing the time available for lunch, and menu adaptations.
- The widespread support for the policy was reflected in the will schools and caterers demonstrated to deliver it within tight time constraints.
- Schools with particular characteristics were better able to ensure that school meals met the needs of their communities. These included:
 - Strong school leadership on school food
 - A physical dining environment and timetabling that enabled children to eat together calmly
 - A skilled chef, and catering team embedded in the school
 - Menu design that is responsive and enables children to try new foods, and take supplementary items, such as salad and bread, to fulfil their hunger
 - Systems that support children to make food choices, and deliver against those choices.
- Long-term systemic challenges related to underfunding, such as difficulties with catering staff recruitment and retention, linked to low wages and limited professional development opportunities, were found to act as constraints in delivering these features.

The evaluation teams gathered data from schools, boroughs, caterers, children and families, all of whom were keen to discuss school food beyond the UPFSM policy. Disentangling wider pre-existing issues with the school food system from policy-specific issues is difficult. Therefore, this chapter explores the barriers and enablers to implementing a good school food culture more broadly, over and above the specific challenge of rolling out London's UPFSM policy. It describes the flexibility and resilience of schools and the importance of school leadership, the right dining environment and menu design, and an integrated school catering team to successful delivery.

A resilient and flexible system

Evidence from across the evaluations demonstrates there was a strong will from schools, boroughs and catering providers to get the policy up and running. We found that London's schools are resilient and flexible, and these qualities were key to the successful delivery of UPFSM.

There was widespread support for the policy from school staff who saw its potential to help children, families and school communities. The transition to UPFSM was fairly straightforward for most schools who, with hard work and

planning, were able to adapt and scale up to deliver the policy. The majority of schools surveyed (68%) reported that they didn't have to make specific adaptations to implement the policy.

Schools with specific characteristics, such as high numbers of pupils eligible for means-tested FSM or a no packed lunch policy, found it easier to scale up their school meal provision. This was because the existing high take-up of school meals meant they had the catering arrangements, equipment and infrastructure to support it.

"There were no issues with implementation, it was just making better use of a set-up we already had." **School with contracted private catering**

"Quite hassle-free but it took some planning and time to get this right." **School with contracted private catering**

"For us, it was pretty seamless because we had the capacity, we had the facilities, and the team are here. So it happened quite naturally." **Head teacher**

Stakeholders across the London school food system described how they had pulled together to ensure all schools could scale up provision. Many talked about the huge amount of hard work, problem-solving and creativity required to address the logistical and planning challenges involved in schools being ready for the start of the 2023/24 autumn term.

"I think this has been a stressful but very positive experience and I am delighted that it is continuing for another year." **Headteacher**

We found many examples of schools and catering providers working together to assess needs, capacity and equipment, and to adapt serving practices, menus and staffing. Of the 28% of surveyed schools who reported making specific adaptations to deliver UPFSM, changes included extending catering or support workers' contracted hours and recruiting new staff, buying new equipment or modifying kitchens/dining rooms, increasing the time available for lunch and menu adaptations.



A local authority catering provider's perspective

Schools working with this local authority catering provider had a window of around two weeks (before the six-week holiday) to set up and trial new systems and make sure everything was in place for the start of the school year.

The caterer approached each of the 35 schools it supports to find out about their specific needs. Between 10-25% of children in this borough's schools are from South Asian ethnic backgrounds and up to 55% are from African ethnic backgrounds. This meant both faith-based diets and cultural preferences were an essential consideration for the caterer and individual schools.

It took a significant amount of work to gather and upload all children's dietary requirements and allergen information onto the catering system. This was essential to ensure every child received an appropriate meal from day one. A small number of schools had to adjust their timetables or add extra staff to help with meal distribution.

This caterer offered tasting sessions during parents' evenings to gather feedback and build support. It tailored menus to meet different schools' needs and preferences. This involved consulting with student councils and adjusting menus based on feedback. Despite the logistical challenges arising from working across multiple sites, this caterer's close relationships with its schools ensured a smooth roll-out from day one of the policy.

"We had to do a lot of background work [and] due diligence because we still had to get [information about] a lot of the children that might not necessarily be on the parent pay and all that...all their allergens, all their dietary requirements. And we had to get that uploaded onto the system so that when we were up and running on that first day, we did have every single child on there."



Strong leadership on school food

A strong approach from school leaders on school food was found to be central to the success of the policy. This was seen in case study schools where the head teacher or senior leadership team were present during lunchtimes and ate school meals with pupils. They also took an interest in finding out what's popular with pupils, feeding this back and agreeing menu options with caterers. In these cases, the food offer tended to better reflect the school community. It was more appealing to children, of better quality and more culturally appropriate (explored further in Chapter 6). Catering staff in these environments also felt valued and a part of the school team.

"I'm involved in catering not just from a strategic perspective, but also in a very practical way. If I'm in the building, and I can, then I like to do a lunch duty every day because that gives me an opportunity to meet with the children." **Head teacher**

In some case study schools, SLT members served meals to the children and the head teacher knew what each child liked to eat and supported the catering team to help lunchtimes to run smoothly.

"The head teacher always eats our food; he knows what we like to eat and sits with us." **Year 4 pupil**

But in other schools, we found roles, responsibilities and accountability for lunchtimes weren't clearly defined. There were case study schools where teachers and SLT members didn't regularly visit the canteen, eat a school lunch or support with behaviour management.

This created challenges for the midday meal supervisors and catering staff, who were sometimes unable to manage the queues, and behaviour alone. In these examples, lunchtime experiences could, at times, be noisy and stressful, for children and for staff.

The lunchtime environment

The physical environment

A concern raised during the policy design stage was that some schools wouldn't have the kitchen and dining infrastructure to be able to provide lunches for all children. Or, importantly, to guarantee a lunchtime environment and experience that would encourage children to choose school dinners. Our survey of schools found the majority of London's primary schools have adequate dedicated dining halls or multi-purpose spaces for lunchtime. Survey data shows that most (>90%) schools serve lunch to children in a single space, either a multi-function sports or assembly hall (51%) or a dedicated canteen or dining hall (41%). Just 1% of schools serve children in classrooms, while 6% serve lunches in a mixture of spaces.

86% of schools said they had made no changes to the dining environment to deliver UPFSM. But 12% reported that the policy had been the catalyst for improving the dining environment to make it more attractive and appealing.

"As more children are now eating lunches provided by the school, we now try and create a positive dining experience with the atmosphere and positive conversations. We have decorated the hall, purchased tablecloths and centre pieces." **School with contracted private catering**

Children noticed when their school had taken steps to improve the overall lunchtime experience, for example, by improving the physical environment or changing seating arrangements.

"The dining hall makes me feel really safe and I like going in there." **Year 4 pupil**

“The music in the dining room is nice, it’s much quieter because it used to be like Brixton Market!” **Year 5 pupil**

Giving children enough time to eat and enjoy their lunch was important to the policy’s success. Research shows that school timetables are under considerable pressure and there is little flexibility around lunchtime⁸⁷. While most schools hadn’t made changes to lunch timings (81%), 10% indicated they had increased the time available. For example, one school extended the lunchtime available for Year 6 students by 15 minutes as this year group were the last to eat lunch and had frequently been late back to lessons.

“We want to make sure it’s the best provision for the children. We moved the dining times [in response to the policy] so the children can have more time to eat their lunches and play.” **SLT member**

The evaluation found that in schools where time allocated for lunches and/or dining space was limited, the response to the policy was less positive. Some schools reported that queues had increased, and the dining hall had become noisier and more chaotic due to the increased demand for meals since UPFSM. Some children said their lunchtime experience felt more rushed since the policy had been in place. 22% of families who responded to our parent survey and reported that their children were not taking up the UPFSM offer everyday said their child would be encouraged to eat school lunches more often if the dining hall was less busy. A small number of parents also felt that the lunchtime experience was affecting food choices.

“I’m concerned my child is making food choices based on the practicalities of the queue timings.” **Parent**

Lunchtime as a social experience

Children, staff and parents described the importance of the social aspect of lunchtime. The evaluations found that changes made in response to the policy to create a better social environment supported both take-up of meals and its wider benefits. The presence of teaching staff in the dining room to help to manage and support the lunchtime experience was key to the policy’s success. As were clear roles and responsibilities for all lunchtime staff e.g., understanding who is responsible for serving, cleaning up, monitoring queues and encouraging children to try things.

In schools where staff sat with pupils, children appreciated this time and were able to build stronger relationships with staff outside the classroom setting.

“I like the teacher sitting with us as I feel safe.” **Year 3 pupil**

“I never feel alone because I know I can speak with my teacher, and we talk about other things then just school.” **Year 5 pupil**

Other schools use their lunchtimes to provide additional learning opportunities. Staff and pupils have conversations around food and healthy eating, and there is an emphasis on modelling good behaviour and the social aspect of eating.

“Lunchtime is another lesson, and they don’t know it – we don’t get to switch off at lunchtime.” **Teacher**

“It’s more than just eating together; we get to reflect and be thankful. I can also see if a child’s had enough to eat.” **Teacher**

⁸⁷ Day, R.E., Sahota, P. & Christian, M.S. Effective implementation of primary school-based healthy lifestyle programmes: a qualitative study of views of school staff. BMC Public Health 19, 1239 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7550-2>

An improved lunchtime experience also had benefits for children choosing to take a packed lunch. In some schools, the introduction of staggered lunches meant pupils could now sit with their friends regardless of whether they ate packed lunches or school dinners. Parents recognised the social benefits of allowing all children to eat together.

*“My son is only seven, so he’d not say this in so many words, but the kids are no longer separated by what kind of lunch they are having which means they stay together if they want to. Socialising is such an important part of school that this is really important to him, and to us.” **Parent***

*“My daughter doesn’t skip her lunch anymore so she can go outside at the same time as her friends. They sit together, they eat together, they finish together, they wait for each other and they play together.” **Parent***

Where this flexibility wasn’t in place, children described how separation from their friends affected their social experience and stopped them from choosing to eat a school meal.

*“If you don’t have any friends having school dinners, I will have a packed lunch to sit with my friends.” **Year 4 pupil***

These findings highlight how some schools have used the UPFSM policy as a catalyst for improving the lunchtime experience. However, this has not happened in all schools, and, in some cases, the policy has led to a more disorderly lunchtime experience for children. With a longer-term commitment to the policy in place, more schools should consider what changes they need to make to make sure every child has a positive lunchtime experience.

Menus, choice and ordering

The evaluation found that children have strong views about the food on offer to them at school, talking about it throughout the day. Our conversations and observations in schools also suggested that pupils cared about the systems for ordering lunches and the choices available. In this section, we look at what’s working for children, and what needs to change, to ensure they receive a nutritious, filling plate of school food that they enjoy every day.

A primary school’s approach to great lunchtimes

One school in Lambeth has worked to encourage all pupils to take a school lunch. With input from the student council, the school has implemented changes based on pupil feedback to improve the food on offer and the overall lunchtime experience.

*“I feel like the school listens to us and allows us to feed back so we can eat the food which we actually like.” **Year 6 pupil***

*“I asked for a different type of fish in the school council meeting, and it appeared on the menu.” **Year 5 pupil***

Lunchtime is an integral part of the school day. Staff at the school eat lunch with pupils, which the children really enjoy, resulting in a positive school food culture.

Menu design

We found the policy allowed some schools and catering providers to try new ways to stimulate children and families’ interest in, and appetite for, school meals, such as taster sessions with parents. In some cases, the increased demand for school meals meant that caterers could create more varied menus to meet different preferences and appeal to a wider range of children.

*“We’re trialing new things all the time, we’ve just ordered new salad carts.” **Head teacher***

One catering provider found that the cost savings generated via the policy were helpful in stimulating interest and demand for school meals. They redesigned the menu because of the increased demand and to accommodate different preferences.

“We will provide five different dishes and packed lunch for your child. If you want a packed lunch, we can do it on site, but it’s going to be compliant, healthy. The right ingredients in there...sandwiches, wraps. So you don’t need to make packed lunch saving you nearly £500 a year for one child. If you have two that’s £1,000 and then the time. For me as a parent it’s not that much the money, it’s the time.” **Catering provider**

The evaluation found having a better range of choices at the counter, or providing additional breads and salads with every meal, helps more pupils to choose a meal and feel fuller.

“We have children who are always hungry [after their meal], now we have the opportunity to give them more.” **Teacher**

“We offer a salad bar and bread which is self-serve, students can fill up their plates as they wish. Children are now able to get more than the five a day just from one meal with the salad, veg and fruit offering.” **Catering staff**

In some schools, sandwich options were offered alongside the hot lunch, which was popular with pupils. School staff thought this helped with the roll-out of the policy as it eased children’s transition from packed lunches and encouraged meal take-up.

“We provide a sandwich option alongside our main meals; this has helped the picky eaters come onto school meals [for] the first time.” **SLT member**

“I like that we have the opportunity to have sandwiches if you don’t like any of the choices that day.” **Year 5 pupil**

However, some school staff and catering teams raised concerns that sandwiches are not always substantial or nutritious enough, particularly if too many children opted for this over the main hot meal option. This is an area for schools to keep under review as the policy becomes further embedded.

“Those children choosing a sandwich everyday are potentially missing out nutritionally – brioche for breakfast, sandwich for lunch and potentially another sandwich for dinner, across the day or even the week which isn’t nourishing for that child.” **Teacher**

The offer of supplementary foods discussed above, such as salad bar options, was effective in addressing concerns from some children and parents about school meal portion sizes. But these options were not available in all schools. Consistent with other studies on school food, we found some children reported they were not always getting enough food or able to request seconds⁸⁸. Although there had been ongoing concerns about portion sizes in some schools, a number of families reported this had become more apparent as a result of more children having school lunches since the policy was introduced. Just over a third of parents we surveyed who said that their children were not regularly having school lunches reported that bigger portions would contribute to their child having school lunches more often.

“There has definitely been a decline in food quality and portion sizes since the policy came into effect. We had to speak with the catering team.” **SLT member**

⁸⁸ CPAG, [The Cost of the School Day in England: Pupils’ Perspectives, 2022](#)

Some children and staff spoke about other changes to the menu they had noticed since the introduction of the policy. In some cases, the policy was felt to have restricted, rather than expanded, menus and food choices. And, in a few schools, a lack of opportunities for children and families to input into the menu affected take-up and enjoyment of the offer.

*“We don’t get a chance to say what’s on the menu or feedback when it’s released.” **Year 4 pupil***

Pupils spoke about some of their favourite foods disappearing from menus to make way for items which can be made in larger quantities. A handful of caterers also told us they have had to make some changes to the main menu from a three-week to a two-week menu. For children not currently having school lunches regularly, 39% of parents who responded to the survey think improvements in the quality of school food would encourage take-up.

*“It’s definitely changed since last year; they are making more bulk items and less food.” **Year 5 pupil***

*“We had to make changes to the menu in response to the policy.” **Catering staff***

However, some staff reflected that the short-term nature of the original scheme and funding had played a role in this and that a longer-term commitment would help them to plan.

*“Since the funding we saw a drop in quality - there was an adaptation to the menu and a bit more back-to-basics in terms of variety. However, now knowing the policy is available for a longer term, we were able to adapt the school budget and renewed the contract to cover the terms so there was some early teething [problems].” **SLT member***

The additional per meal funding made available for year two of the policy may also help address issues of cost effectiveness for a range of meals, further improving menu design.

Giving children choice and a clear, effective way to order school food

While pre-dating the introduction of the UPFSM policy, the different ways school food can be ordered by children and families in London primary schools made a difference to take-up⁸⁹. Pre-orders can be made either at the start of the week or the school day, or food is chosen at the lunch counter. Data showed that the policy worked best in schools which were able to build children’s trust and confidence in school food. Key to achieving this was offering children choice about the food they eat and managing expectations about what was going to be available at lunchtime.

We also identified specific examples of where more could be done to ensure children are able to choose and receive the meals they want. Challenges were identified with pre-ordering systems; they didn’t always work as they should with children reporting that food they had ordered had run out. Pupils also found having to order in advance inflexible; not being able to change their mind at the counter made them nervous about mealtimes. Conversely, in schools offering choice at the counter, popular options also ran out. This meant children weren’t always getting options that they liked. Some children also expressed anxiety about not knowing the menu in advance and having to make choices in the moment.

⁸⁹ School Food Matters (2024) Cost of a School Meal, available at: <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/CoaSM-report.pdf> retrieved 31/10/2024

"I never know what's in the food, sometimes I just have to take something, and I don't know what it is."

Year 5 pupil

In some case study schools, families had to decide each term whether they were opting for packed lunches or school dinners. This restricted opportunities for children to try out school dinners. And parents worried about opting for school food for a whole term, in case their children didn't like the meals or they weren't suitable.

Our findings highlight the challenges of giving children choice when delivering meals to high numbers of children with limited time and budget. They also show there is no easy answer. In many cases, issues around choice had existed before the introduction of the policy. However, if we are to maximise take-up of free school meals, it will be important to listen to and understand children's needs, so the system provides nutritious choices that they enjoy.

Strong, integrated, catering teams with good pay, terms and conditions

Across issues of leadership, menu design and choice and ordering, we found the integration of catering teams into the school to be of key importance. Where there were strong relationships between catering teams, SLT members and the school community, implementation of the policy was more effective and menus were more popular with children.

The evaluation identified that the presence of a skilled chef(s) was an enabler of the policy, as they were able to respond to children's needs and changing requirements as the policy bedded in. In schools with skilled chefs we observed, and were told, that the food looks good and tastes great, and pupils are excited about lunchtime.

"The food is really nice here. Chef XXX cooks our meals and asks how we are. The staff changes a lot, but he is always here and is really kind to us." **Year 5 pupil**

"So we have a very experienced chef who can shop around and be responsive to sort of supply and demand need over time, which is hugely positive" **Head teacher**

"The head chef is amazing and has enabled us to have a seamless transition to UPFSM. The care they put into every meal they make doesn't go unnoticed. We can fully trust them." **Head teacher**

Given the importance of a skilled and engaged catering team, concerns were raised during the evaluations about pay, terms and conditions for catering staff. This issue, which predates the policy, has already and could continue to inhibit effective implementation of UPFSM.

The evaluation found evidence of historic challenges in the school food system. This included recruiting and retaining catering and dining support workers and the difficulty in providing attractive terms and conditions, from pay to progression to pensions, within budgetary constraints. These were frequently highlighted in all phases of research as ongoing issues.

One of the GLA's grant principles is that schools should be encouraged to pay the LLW, currently set at £13.15 per hour. A recent report suggests that a skilled school chef should earn a minimum of £16 an hour outside of London⁹⁰. Where the LLW is being paid, and staff terms and conditions are attractive, schools and catering teams expressed concerns about the long-term impact of these staffing costs on school budgets. The local authority catering provider interview data shows that fulfilling this grant principle requires investment from the local

⁹⁰ School Food Matters (2024) Cost of a School Meal, available at: <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/CoaSM-report.pdf> retrieved 31/10/2024

authority. Case study research showed that many staff are not paid the LLW due to budget limitations. In one case study school in central London, the chef was paid £11 per hour. Unsurprisingly, this catering provider was struggling to recruit well trained and skilled catering professionals into these roles.

The evaluations haven't found evidence of the extent to which the additional funding made available via the UPFSM policy is influencing staff pay and conditions. Stronger guidance may be needed to sustain the skilled workforce needed for this policy.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines several enablers and barriers in the implementation of UPFSM. It is important to note that the evaluations were carried out during the first year of the policy. There will inevitably have been some teething issues during the roll-out. And, with time and experience, some of the issues described may be rectified. However, there are some key learnings that will need specific attention, such as the ongoing issue of how to attract and retain a skilled school catering workforce.

The flexibility and resilience of London's school food system are products of the huge good will found in this sector. The scale up efforts, among schools, catering providers and borough teams, have been significant.

Funding for the UPFSM policy may have removed a significant cost barrier, but we found many historic challenges across the school food system that can inhibit implementation. This chapter highlights how the approach that caterers and schools take to the provision of lunch influences perceptions, acceptability and take-up of meals, both positively and negatively. There are many different and important enabling factors to delivering a universal policy effectively. These include the people involved, from school leaders to chefs and catering teams and support workers, and defining clear roles and responsibilities in school food. They also cover essential infrastructure, such as a dedicated and attractive dining hall, and the vision and will to listen to the school community on what makes a positive social dining experience, responsive menus and quality food.

Recruitment into catering roles remains a challenge, especially setting pay and terms and conditions that attract people into these jobs. Factors that have enabled more effective recruitment and retention include offering training and progression, paying a living wage and ensuring high levels of staffing at lunchtime. With the evaluations demonstrating the essential role catering teams play in making UPFSM work, more must be done to make sure school catering is 'good work'. Staff should be valued and rewarded for the crucial part they play in providing children with nutritious food they enjoy.

Chapter 6

Ensuring equitable access
for all children



Ensuring equitable access for all children

Earlier chapters have outlined the many positives of the policy for children, families and school communities. But in this chapter, we look at the children and families still unable to make the most of the UPFSM policy and the work which needs to be done to ensure equitable access for all children. We explore why accessing free school meals (by which we mean food being both available and appropriate) remains a challenge for groups and families with some protected characteristics, looking at what the effects are and what can be done to change this.

Key findings:

- The GLA considered the likely effects of the policy on those with one or more protected characteristics in detail through the Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) and made additional funding available to mitigate the risks of inequitable take-up experience of the policy.
- One in four parents (26%) we surveyed asked for more options that meet their child's dietary, religious and cultural requirements. Our findings indicate that more work needs to be done so that all children have equitable access to filling, healthy school food, by ensuring:
 - the food on offer, how it's presented, and the support provided to eat it are appropriate for pupils with SEND in both mainstream and special schools
 - there is enough choice and variety for children with faith-based requirements, to enable them to take-up a meal every day and to improve their enjoyment of school lunches
 - school meals are culturally appropriate to reflect the diversity of local school communities
 - parents have clear information on how school meals meet their children's specific dietary 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.

The Equalities Impact Assessment

Caterers and schools in London have to manage complex food needs and requirements. School food must meet the needs of children with SEND, those with allergies and intolerances, and take diverse cultural and religious requirements into account. Meeting these needs goes beyond menu planning. It requires an understanding of a wide range of ingredients and preparation methods. Schools also have a legal duty to provide safe and nutritious lunchtime options to children with allergies and intolerances.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the GLA's Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA), published in July 2023, looked at the likely effects of the policy on those with one or more protected characteristic. The EqIA informed the policy design, making sure it considered the Equality Act 2010 and potential socioeconomic inequalities.

Through this process, the GLA identified that the UPFSM policy, as it was originally designed, may not have met the requirements of certain groups. It recognised that the per meal rate may not be enough for all schools to cater for certain faith groups and other groups of children. For example, catering Halal meals for Muslim pupils and Kosher

meals for Jewish children, particularly for those attending non-faith schools, and meals for children with SEND⁹¹. This was of particular concern as families with certain protected characteristics, such as families with children with SEND and Muslim families, are also more likely to be living in poverty⁹² and face intersecting disadvantages.

In response, 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”⁹³. The GLA offered additional funding for state-funded special schools through an application process. The funding could be used for an increase in the price per meal and/ or small equipment. The Mayor also provided a top-up for Jewish state schools, at £3.50 per meal, to allow for the additional costs of Kosher food, as the EqIA highlighted this was substantially higher. This has continued into year 2 of the policy..

Families and children unable to make the most of UPFSM

The school food system in England is complex, with challenges around funding, food quality and standards, options, eligibility and access to meals and lunchtime experiences for pupils. These issues pre-date this policy and can mean certain groups of families or those with protected characteristics are less able to access a school meal. Even with universal provision, there is still more attention needed to make sure the policy is fully accessible, particularly to those who need it the most.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Children with SEND are more likely to have specific requirements around food. This can be for a range of reasons. For example, neurodivergent children often experience the taste, smell, sight and feel of food in a different way⁹⁴. The mealtime environment can also cause strong reactions to food. Other children have specific dietary requirements such as requiring blended diets, or additional support with feeding at lunchtime.

The numbers of SEND pupils in London have increased in recent years. In response to this trend, boroughs are working with mainstream schools to increase their SEND provision. This is all against the backdrop of inadequate central government funding⁹⁵. Our research involved special schools and mainstream schools with SEND provision. We found that experiences of the UPFSM policy have been mixed. The school food system has often struggled to meet the requirements of children with SEND. There are different reasons for this and, with a universal policy in place and increased numbers of children eating school meals, some of these have been further highlighted and in places exacerbated.

Data collected by the GLA from schools using Arbor suggests that take-up was similar between pupils with SEND (88%) and pupils without SEND (90%). Staff and caterers identified some of the specific challenges in implementing this policy in special schools, where there are many children with varied and complex needs.

“Implementing the policy for our school can be very different [compared to other schools]. In our setting, food can be a very different thing for children living with autism. It’s hugely sensory and there is a whole lot to be considered.” **SLT member, special school**

“The children have expectations in a SEND school. If you are telling them they are having peas on that day and you turn up with sweetcorn, that’s going to be a real problem. We can’t just provide substitutions like you can in a mainstream school.” **Catering Manager, special school**

⁹¹ GLA, [MD3146 Primary School Universal FSM Provision 2023/24](#), 2023

⁹² CPAG, [Poverty: facts and figures](#), 2024; Islamic Relief, [Tackling Poverty in the UK](#), 2022

⁹³ Mayor of London, [MD3146 Primary School Universal FSM provision 2023-2024](#), July 2023

⁹⁴ S,A, Cermak et al, Food selectivity and sensory sensitivity in children with autism spectrum disorders, 2010

⁹⁵ GLA, <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/educational-outcomes-send-pupils-have-failed-improve-over-last-decade-despite-costs>, 2024

In some case study schools, school staff working with pupils with SEND told us about specific needs and requirements that, when they're not met, can create anxieties or concerns for their pupils. This included for example, food needing to be served at consistent times, it needing to meet medical needs and to be presented in certain ways, for example meal components separated out on the plate. Many children also needed certainty about what they were going to be eating. This was true for pupils with SEND in both mainstream settings with SEND provision and special schools.

*"It's not just the quality of food but also the presentation. The way the meals are being served [by the external provider], it's not the ideal scenario." **SLT member, special school***

*"The food doesn't meet the needs of the children. Because the children are hands on with their food, they like rice, pasta but the food [like curries and bolognese] is very wet." **Support worker, special school***

*"A lot of the children here have food issues - they like their foods separated. I've got no control how they [the offsite caterers] serve it." **Catering Manager, special school***

*"Our children like their food to be on time and if it isn't this can cause a lot of anxieties. If it's delayed, we have to plan for this and communicate properly to our children." **Teacher, special school***

One special school told us about their challenges around implementing the policy. They found communication unclear, saying they didn't receive enough specific information on how UPFSM would work in their school, or how the complex needs of their children and families would be addressed. They felt that additional costs for specialist settings such as theirs hadn't been considered. For example, they needed more staff to provide food therapy for the additional children taking up school lunches, alongside catering extra meals. The school was unaware of the additional funding provided by the GLA to support 'access requirements for some groups of children'.

*"Initially I thought great, fantastic, all the children are going to be fed. Followed swiftly by, where is the money coming from? Where is the extra staffing? What about the logistics? It wasn't clear and it wasn't well thought out." **SLT member, special school***

*"It's not just about providing food but the right type of food. For a specialist setting such as ours, more bespoke funding would have been more thoughtful. We substitute from our budget, we spend a considerable amount on that." **SLT member, special school***

*"The school is subsidising the policy and having to purchase additional items." **SLT member, special school***

A senior leader raised the importance of ensuring the policy worked in special schools where there are higher costs. They felt children with SEND should be a higher priority.

*"I appreciate we are a special school, but if you want the policy to work fairly, and you want a child to access a school meal, let's think about 'all' children and not just the mainstream children, let's think about the SEND children as well. Yes, we have health care plans in place for our children so that comes with a level of funding. But that only goes so far - when we look at the educational outcomes, we do sensory, fine motor skills, culinary and independent skills - but unfortunately, it's not seen as important to the Government." **SLT member, special school***

Some parents of SEND children also felt that, since the policy was introduced, their children's dietary needs were not being met. In one case, this related to menus changing from a three-week to a two-week menu cycle to accommodate the policy. In this instance, the increased demands placed on the caterer by the policy meant they were no longer able to provide more tailored menus for different schools. Instead they moved to a standardised two-week menu across all their schools. Parents also reported other changes such as reduced portion sizes and options which they associated with the introduction of the policy.

*"More options is what my child would like and bigger portions." **Parent, special school***

*"There should be more variety, it's the same foods every two weeks." **Parent, special school***

*"From a medical food perspective, my child's needs are not being met - I have reached out to the school several times." **Parent, mainstream setting***

Children in one special school shared their views about the food on offer. Responses were mixed with some reporting there wasn't enough food and that meals were sometimes cold. Pupils also wanted more opportunities to tell the caterers what they liked. However, some enjoyed the food and the chance to sit with their friends and teachers.

*"The portion sizes are too small, there is never enough food." **Pupil, special school***

*"There are a lot of options I like but I would like to speak to the people who make the food and tell them what I like." **Pupil, special school***

*"I like sitting and having my lunches. I like that my teacher's there because I feel safe". **Pupil, special school***

Despite these concerns, parents with children with SEND across mainstream and special schools were grateful for the financial help the UPFSM policy provided their family. And staff echoed this, recognising that families with children with SEND were more likely to face poverty, financial hardship and vulnerabilities.

*"I don't have to worry about providing packed lunches knowing my child will always eat".
Parent, special school*

*"Our families are quite vulnerable. We know some of them are struggling. So having the option of a free school meal means one thing they don't have to worry about. Knowing that if they cannot provide a packed lunch that day, their child will be provided with a meal - it gives everyone a peace of mind."
Staff member, special school*

The research also found examples of practices that encouraged free school meal take-up among children with SEND. In one mainstream school, children with SEND were able to bring packed lunches but could come to the counter and try new foods to support their transition onto school meals.

*"I don't mind if they put the food over the table and they want to touch it because this shows that they are intrigued and want to learn about the food more. One example of this is, in the last two months, one child who has always had a packed lunch is now eating school meals because they got her to try a new item every single day." **Catering Manager, mainstream school with a specialist unit for children with SEND***

The fact that the policy gave children with SEND opportunities to try new foods was seen as a clear benefit by some school staff and parents. Particularly as cost or the need for routine made this challenging day-to-day for families.

“Our children like consistency – the same meal every day, but the policy allows them to branch out.”
Support worker, special school

“My child is happier. He can have more lunches and try and new foods.” **Parent, special school**

To meet the needs of children with SEND, extra care and attention is required from staff across the school food system to ensure both the food on offer, how it’s presented, and the support provided to eat it are appropriate for the child. This was clearly demonstrated in one of our case studies: a SEND unit and special school who shared the same catering provider. Their well-respected chef is empowered and equipped to design and deliver creative meals that meet children’s sensory and other dietary needs. Children with SEND eat first and it is recognised that their preferences should be met, whether that is their tastes, the temperature of food or the dining environment. Delivering food and a lunchtime experience that met all children’s needs took hard work and backing from senior leadership, with the head teacher and deputy head both actively involved in the lunchtime experience.

This is clearly a complex area of the school food system that needs attention beyond this policy. However, to ensure all families can get what they need from school food, we encourage the GLA to continue considering how they can mitigate against challenges that are, in some cases, being heightened by the policy.

Faith-based diets

Many schools recognised the possibility of children with faith-based diets missing out on both means-tested and universal free school meals and already had school food provision which met a range of requirements. However, we found evidence that some pupils with faith-based dietary needs were often facing more limited meal options than other children under UPFSM, particularly in schools where they were in the minority. This sometimes prevented these children from taking up and enjoying the offer every day. These issues largely pre-date the policy but require attention to help deepen our understanding of how an equitable school lunchtime experience can be delivered for all children.

Halal diets

Almost all London schools (95%) surveyed offered Halal food in 2022/23, rising slightly (to 97%) in 2023/24. Some offer Halal and non-Halal meat options. Others offer vegetarian or pescatarian meals as default Halal options. Where there are no specific Halal options, pupils choose vegetarian meals. However, our research shows some families found these to be restrictive and repetitive.

In case study schools, where the Halal option was simply the vegetarian option, some families chose not to take up the offer every day or had to provide supplementary food.

“If you ask me, ‘Yes or no, is your child eating free school meals?’ Then my answer is yes. But are they eating them regularly? And are they eating enough food that we can go a day without sending food in from home? Then, no.” **Parent**

“I always prepare a packed lunch for my child to take with him just in case he doesn’t like the meals on offer that day. I don’t want him to be hungry.” **Parent**

“I’m concerned my child’s protein needs are not being met as she cannot have the meat options.” **Parent**

We also found some schools choose not to advertise their Halal meals on menus due to push back from other parents who disagree with Halal practices. This meant some Muslim families were unaware of the Halal options available.

Kosher diets

The evaluation teams had planned to carry out qualitative research in Jewish faith schools. However, this wasn't possible. The research took place during a period where Jewish faith schools were taking extra precautions to protect staff and pupils. We were advised by local authorities and caterer contacts that it would be highly challenging for Jewish faith schools to host external researchers at this time. Responses to our schools' survey from Jewish faith schools were also low. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the policy's impact on this group.

The Mayor provided a funding top-up for Jewish state schools to acknowledge the higher costs of Kosher meals as identified in the EqIA, at £3.50 per meal. However, the majority of Jewish faith schools in London are independent⁹⁷ and so the UPFSM policy doesn't apply. The issue of independent faith schools was considered in detail through the development of the UPFSM programme and relevant Mayoral decision⁹⁷. The eligibility for the Mayor's free school meal programme replicates, for key stage 2, the government's free school meals programme (which includes funding on a universal basis for children within state-funded primary schools who are in key stage 1). This means that both programmes together cover state-funded primary schools, state-funded special schools and state-funded alternative provision in London, including state faith schools, but not private or independent schools.

While our research didn't extend to independent faith schools, we recognise some Jewish children have been unable to experience the benefits of the policy, despite being in families that are facing some of the greatest levels of hardship. For example, Jewish independent schools which are attended by Charedi children are classed as independent because fees are charged. But Charedi families don't have to pay fees if they are unable to afford them and, in many cases, the schools and pupil places are funded by the community. Children in these communities are more likely to live in larger than average families that receive income-related benefits⁹⁸. These families are likely to experience poverty at a greater level than families in London generally, are more at risk of food insecurity and face higher food costs for Kosher items⁹⁹. The potential benefits of FSM for children attending independent faith schools is an area which requires further exploration.

Diets suitable for Sikhs and Hindus

Sikhs typically don't eat meat that is prepared according to Halal or Kosher methods. Many schools in London predominantly offer Halal meats meaning Sikh children are not always catered for. Some Hindus also refrain from eating certain foods on certain days. This can be challenging when there aren't many options on offer. We found that a small number of Sikh and Hindu families opt out on these days or for these reasons.

"My faith doesn't allow me to have chicken on a Tuesday. The menu is all chicken on Tuesdays, so I bring in a packed lunch." Year 5 pupil

GLA Arbor data and our parent survey suggest these challenges didn't significantly affect overall take-up. But they did affect enjoyment of meals, with around one in four parents we surveyed whose children are not regularly eating school lunches (26%) asking for more options that meet their child's dietary, religious and cultural requirements.

Cultural preferences

Some parents felt strongly that schools should make sure lunches reflected the culture and preferences of the school community to further increase the take-up of UPFSM. For children not regularly eating school lunches, 52% of parents who responded to the survey think that more school food options like food they eat at home would encourage their child to eat lunch more often. We found this wasn't always happening and this affected

⁹⁶ GLA, Free School Meals for Jewish Schools (<https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/free-school-meals-jewish-schools-2>), 2024

⁹⁷ GLA, <https://www.london.gov.uk/md3146-primary-school-universal-free-schools-meal-provision-2023-2024?ac-184676=184663>, 2024

⁹⁸ Pinter Trust, [The Charedi Community, 2024](#)

⁹⁹ Institute for Jewish Policy Research, [Child poverty and deprivation in the British Jewish community](#), 2011, London Community Foundation, [Teen Action](#), 2023

those who are Black or from minoritised ethnicities the most. This is particularly concerning as families from these communities are more likely to be living in poverty and face intersecting disadvantages, with 47% of children who are Black or from minoritised ethnicities living in poverty compared to 24% of white children¹⁰⁰.

"[The policy] is such a great help at a time when we desperately need support but it's important everyone gets the same excellent quality that only some families are receiving now." **Parent**

"I'm not able to cherish the policy like everyone else because our culture needs are not being met." **Parent**

"The menu isn't reflective of our culture needs. My daughter enjoys trying new foods, but they could try harder." **Parent**

Pupils' experiences echoed this. Children who are Black or from minoritised ethnicities told us the food at school didn't reflect what they ate at home.

"If they had more traditional foods on the menu then I would change from packed lunch." **Year 5 pupil**

"The food is very different from home; I only like my mum's food." **Year 4 pupil**

Families in more marginalised communities and those facing hardship also reported feeling worried about being perceived as ungrateful. They felt unable to speak out about the food that was on offer as they didn't want the policy to be taken away. This prevented them from raising concerns about the appropriateness and quality of the food available.

"I don't want to complain about the quality of the food to the school, because we get this food for free and I don't want to seem ungrateful." **Parent**

"My children don't like the food. Yes, they have Halal food, but they don't know how to prepare or cook it. We don't say anything as we are getting something [for free]." **Parent**

We observed that when head teachers were able to advocate for families' specific needs, tastes and cultural preferences to catering teams, this resulted in menus that appealed to the whole school community. Families and pupils' experiences also echoed this.

"Our headteacher knows what we like, Ms X develops the menu." **Year 4 pupil**

Some schools and caterers also run initiatives to increase take-up and have promoted school lunches through activities such as theme days. Others created opportunities for parents and children to have more of a say on school food, working to strike a balance between introducing new foods and offering home favourites. These approaches are working well.

"I like the theme days where you can try different foods from around the world." **Year 4 pupil**

¹⁰⁰ Poverty: [facts and figures](#), CPAG

“We have a student council, and they speak to the catering team and help feedback into the menu.”
Year 5 pupil

Dietary requirements

Most parents surveyed with children with dietary restrictions felt their children’s needs were catered for (64%). But families want to know more about the food on offer at their child’s school. They would like better communication with catering staff to fully understand and be reassured that food is appropriate for their child.

Schools’ efforts to meet dietary requirements are not always communicated well to parents. This means they choose packed lunches as they are not aware which diets can be catered for. Large catering providers often leave the task of catering for special diets to an individual chef (who works for the caterer), sometimes with very little training. This leads to a more limited range of choices that aren’t always appropriate or balanced, for example plain pasta without a tomato sauce or cheese. Pupils with dietary requirements such as allergies reported that they often had to eat the same safe foods every day, with restricted access to desserts.

“My child has dietary needs; I would like to see more food engagement from the caterer to discuss what’s in some of the food choices.” **Parent**

“I have a dairy and egg allergy so I always have to have a jacket potato if I can’t have the mains. I only get fruit as I can’t have any of the desserts.” **Year 5 pupil**

Options for vegan and vegetarian dishes can be limited. Parents have said that protein needs for these choices are not always being met and they would welcome more variety.

“I feel like they don’t do the vegetarian food properly. I don’t like the meat stuff; they should just give us real food.” **Year 5 pupil**

“I am vegan, and I often have to have the jacket potato or pasta every day.” **Year 5 pupil**

We know schools are working hard to cater for a wide range of needs. Our research suggests that in most cases they are finding ways to ensure that all children are able to access meals. But there are disparities in the standards and range of options available for those with dietary requirements.

Cultural barriers to accessing free school meals

We heard from a Muslim mother who previously paid for their child's school meals. She appreciated the policy but felt their family didn't feel the full benefit as it didn't fully accommodate their child's cultural and dietary needs. She often prepared her child extra food at the end of the school day as she felt the meals didn't meet her child's protein needs.

"They [the caterer] could improve the Halal options. My daughter has very limited choices. She must have the vegetarian options and, if she doesn't like them, it will be a jacket potato at least three times a week. I provide my daughter with a large breakfast at the start of the day and boiled eggs at the end of her school day knowing she will still be hungry due to only having a jacket potato. I do worry her protein needs are not being met, so I always prepare some kind of meat meal at home. So, the cost for me is still expensive. I have spoken to the school, but I don't want to complain as we are grateful for what we do receive."



Conclusion

Children and families with additional dietary and nutrition needs, such as those with medical, cultural and religious food requirements, are too often missing out on good, filling and varied school lunches. Some families haven't been able to make the most of the policy, while others have missed out altogether. These challenges are not new for schools, with many pre-dating the policy, but they require further exploration and attention to make sure all children have equitable access to school food.

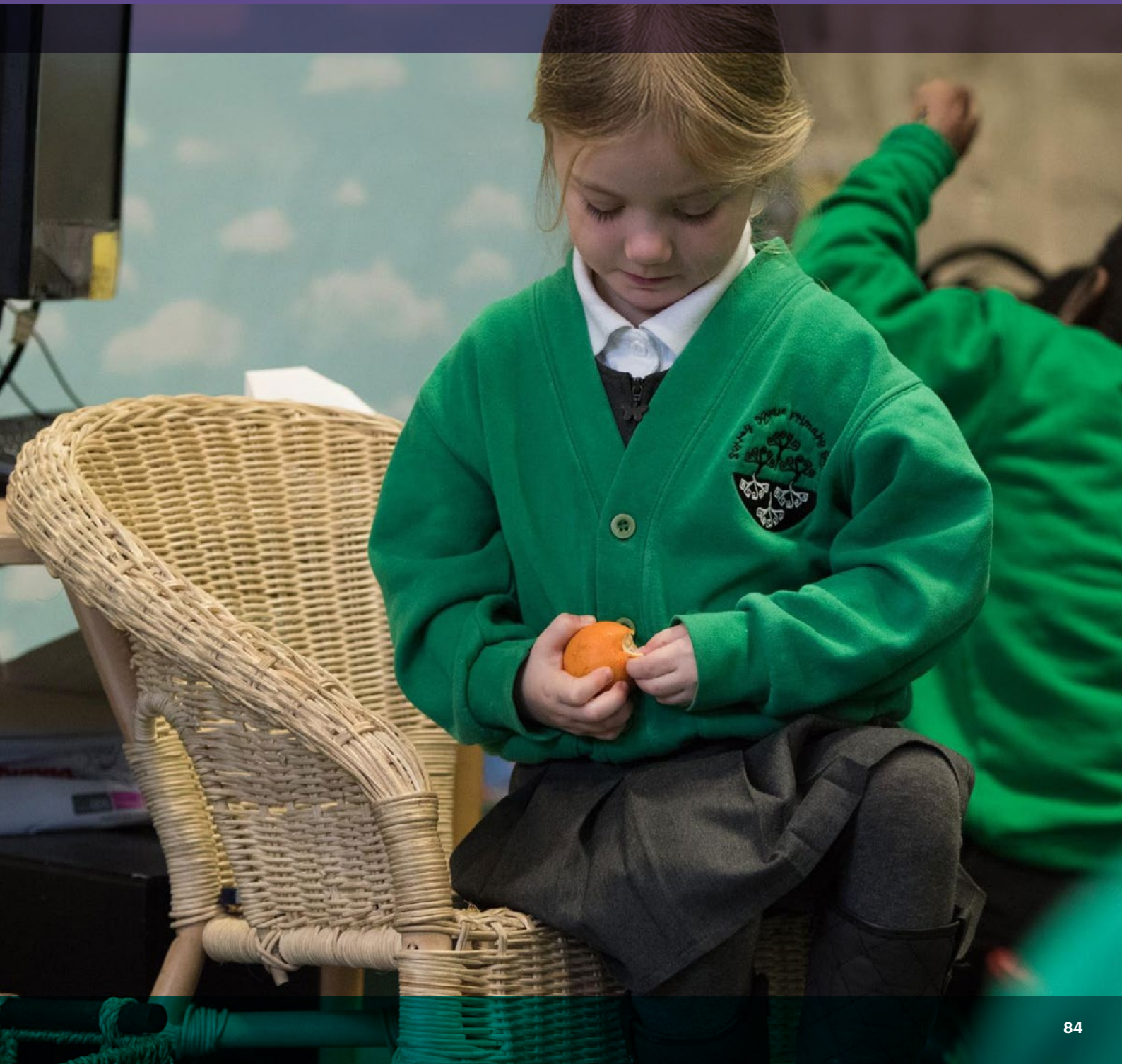
And this isn't just about ensuring everyone can access a filling meal during the day. This evaluation has highlighted the financial benefits for families who can access the offer, along with the ways the policy can support wider health and wellbeing for families and children. It is therefore important that inequalities for certain groups are not further baked into the system. We know schools and academy trusts have worked hard to deliver the policy at pace during the first year (2023/24). With the funding now in place for year two and at a higher rate (£3.00 per meal) there is scope for the delivery of the policy to be improved further and refined so it reaches all families.

Our research shows there are many examples of school practices that can help in this area – from head teachers being more involved in what food is offered, to expert chefs and introducing opportunities for school communities to have their say on what food is on offer. These all make a difference and can help ensure children from minoritised groups don't face further disadvantages at lunchtime. The GLA, local authorities, schools, academy trusts and caterers must work together to further develop the policy and share learning and effective practices. This will make sure everyone can make the most of a policy that is working well for so many families across the capital.



Chapter 7

Discussion and recommendations



Discussion and recommendations

The findings of the evaluation outline the important and wide-ranging benefits of a UPFSM policy for children, families and schools in London. This policy should be maintained and the lessons learned should be used to further improve provision within the capital. All children across the UK should be able to benefit from a successful universal school meals system. It isn't fair that universal free school meals, and their associated benefits, are available for primary school children in London (and in Scotland and Wales), but not elsewhere.

Our evaluation highlights the importance of a whole system approach to ensure a universal free school meals policy is delivered effectively and efficiently across all schools, translating to improved outcomes for all children and families. There needs to be equitable access so that all pupils can benefit from school meals. There also needs to be a focus on quality assurance so that school meals are tasty, nutritious and culturally appropriate. And the school system needs fair and adequate funding to meet the real costs of quality ingredients and fair pay and conditions for all catering staff.

Impact on Urban Health has made seven recommendations to national policymakers in England. If implemented, each will support the school food system to work better for school communities and ensure that many more children and families in England's schools can experience the benefits of a free school meal every day.

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

The Government should commit to moving towards universal FSM over the course of the parliament. The current threshold for means-tested FSM is unfair. In the short term, eligibility for free school meals should be extended to all children in households receiving Universal Credit.

This evaluation found that the UPFSM policy had positive benefits for households across the income spectrum, but families who were struggling financially but not eligible for means-tested FSM benefited the most. The Government should widen access to means-tested FSM in the short term, with a view to introducing a universal approach nationally by 2029, to ensure that the substantial financial, health and learning benefits highlighted in this report are available to all children and families. The evaluation also found that the administration and monitoring of a means-tested school meals system is burdensome for schools, and that issues around debt affect the whole community. Universal approaches can remove these challenges entirely.

This evaluation examines the benefits of a universal policy for children of primary school age. However, we know that poverty and food insecurity also affect secondary school pupils, and that children often need more food to sustain them as they get older. We believe that a universal FSM should be extended to all secondary schools and more work is needed to understand how this can be implemented effectively.

2 Introduce nationally coordinated auto-enrolment for free school meals

The Government should commit to implementing national auto-enrolment for means-tested FSM within three years, while in the interim supporting local authorities to implement local processes to auto-enrol children within their area. This would require collaboration between the DfE, the Department for Work and Pensions and HM Treasury.

The GLA, boroughs and schools should be commended for their efforts to identify and support these families. However, findings from the FixOurFood auto-enrolment research project show that London boroughs that have piloted auto-enrolment have found the process onerous and inefficient. The Government should therefore commit to a national auto-enrolment mechanism.

The auto-enrolment activity that has been stimulated and accelerated in London boroughs in response to the UPFSM policy provides further evidence of the high number of children who are currently entitled for means-tested FSM but not registered. These children are missing out on nutritious meals and their families are missing out on the cost savings and associated health and wellbeing benefits discussed throughout this report. Schools are missing out on funding to support disadvantaged children, such as the pupil premium, which is dependent on means-tested FSM registration.

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

The DfE should increase the rate per meal to £3.16, in line with the recommendations of the recent School Food Matters report, Cost of a School Meal. This should be index-linked to the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Additional funding should be made available for small schools (under 200 pupils) and those with high numbers of children with SEND.

Although schools welcomed the higher funding rate per meal (£2.65) funded by the GLA, it didn't cover the cost of providing meals in every school. The GLA's decision to increase the rate further to £3.00 per meal in the second year of the policy was widely welcomed. The GLA also provided additional funding for SEND schools and for certain faith schools. However, there is clear recognition across the sector that the current per meal rates allocated by the DfE for UIFSM and means-tested FSM haven't kept pace with inflation. This poses a risk to the school meals system and needs to be addressed urgently.

The Government should introduce a single funding mechanism for school meals that provides clarity on allocations and eligibility criteria for school food interventions.

Most schools responding to this evaluation valued the clear and transparent guidance from the GLA on funding allocations and mechanisms for distributing funding. Nationally, schools report that the current mix of school food funding rates, allocation calculations and funding delivery mechanisms is inconsistent and lacks transparency.

4 Wipe out dinner money debt

Following Scotland's example, the Government should set up a fund to clear existing school meal debt.

The evaluation found that the policy has significantly helped to address the problems caused by dinner money debt. In some cases, it has transformed the relationship between parents and schools.

This will act as an immediate relief across all schools nationally. But it will only be effective if implemented alongside an expansion of free school meals, otherwise it will not address the underlying issue 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

The Government should undertake an audit of school kitchen and dining capital investment requirements. This would ensure that future school capital budgets include the funds required to provide the quality and choice of meals and the positive dining experiences needed to encourage children and families to take up school meals.

Some schools required capital investment from their borough, or equipment donations from the GLA, to be able to implement UPFSM. Those schools that required capital investment but didn't receive it reported the additional strain this placed on their budgets.

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

The DfE should introduce a School Food Quality Assurance Scheme that provides clear guidance and a framework for maintaining food quality and increasing meal consumption across all groups of children. This should include accountability measures and support for implementation. It should also ensure that a diverse range of pupils and families are able to provide feedback on the guidance.

The GLA made it a principle of the grant funding that all meals provided under the UPFSM policy must meet the cap down. The evaluation found that most schools and catering teams were striving to meet the current standards.

However, some were struggling to provide balanced meals for all pupils particularly those with SEND, medical, cultural or religious dietary requirements. Updating the standards would help to ensure that school meals offer all children a choice of nutritious, good quality meals that they can enjoy every day.

Although the evaluation didn't specifically analyse the nutritional quality of school meals, the DfE and the Department of Health and Social Care should work together to update the school food standards to reflect the latest scientific evidence on health and sustainability. Supporting guidance should also be revised to help schools and their catering teams ensure that school meals meet the needs of all pupils.

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

The DfE should work with school leaders (through representative organisations such as the National Governance Association and the Institute for School Business Leadership), local authorities and caterers to map training and support needs across the school food system. It should then develop and roll out appropriate guidance, support and training to help schools deliver great school meals that meet the needs of all children. A national approach to school food training and support would level the playing field and equip every school with the tools to deliver school food that meets the needs of their community.

This evaluation highlighted the strong will and commitment of school leaders, caterers and business managers to deliver high quality school meals. It found that where school leadership for school food was strong, food provision better met the needs of children. The presence of skilled catering teams integrated into the wider school was also important.

Schools received varying levels of support, training and guidance before the policy was introduced. As a result, some schools found it easier to implement the policy than others.

Thank you to everyone
who gave up their time to
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Impact
on **Urban**
Health

The Grain House
46 Loman Street
London SE1 0EH

[@ImpUrbanHealth](https://twitter.com/ImpUrbanHealth)
urbanhealth.org.uk