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Predicted School Meal Uptake following Universal Free School Meals

In September 2013, the Government announced that it would fund universal free school meals from September 2014, for infant pupils, pledging in excess of £600 million pounds per year. The move has been widely welcomed and for those local authorities delivering a school meal service, it will mean a significant increase in the number of meals supplied and an overhaul of their current cost models.

Key points:

- Funding for universal free school meals at infant level will be available from September 2014
- APSE anticipates primary school uptake will on average increase to 61% from the current 49%
- Pre-order systems should be introduced to reduce unnecessary queuing, ensure availability of choice and further boost uptake

This paper attempts to determine the likely effect on school meal take-up, to predict the likely take-up in primary schools once the scheme is implemented, allowing local authorities to plan ahead to ensure staffing and financial structures are in place.

Background

The School Food Plan released in July 2013, contained a series of action points, which were all accepted by the Department for Education and were set to be implemented. A final point on universal free funding of meals was accepted in principle but unfunded. In September 2013, Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, pledged to fund free school meals for all infant pupils across the UK.

Trials on the effect of free school meals had been explored in the past:

A Scottish trial ran from October 2007 to June 2008 in five local authorities in Scotland – East Ayrshire, Fife, Glasgow, Scottish Borders and West Dunbartonshire. These local authorities were selected to take part in the trial because they include recognised areas of deprivation and cover urban areas as well as small towns and rural areas across different parts of the country.

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/236867/0064986.pdf>

An English Free School Meals (FSM) pilot was a two-year programme operating in three local authorities between the autumn of 2009 and summer of 2011, to extend entitlement to free school meals. Two different approaches to extending FSM provision were tested as part of the pilot. In Newham and Durham, all primary school children were offered free school meals. In the third area (Wolverhampton), entitlement was extended to cover pupils in primary and secondary schools whose families were on Working Tax Credit.

APSE collects School meal uptake data from 70 authorities across the UK on a yearly basis through our APSE performance networks benchmarking club. APSE collects data based on total meals served against total possible. At the end of the financial year 2011/12 the uptake calculated by APSE was as follows:

Primary School	Average Uptake
Free meal uptake	80.79%
Paid meal uptake	41.91%
Overall uptake	48.91%

Scotland collected their data on a single day with the following data:

P1-P3 (infants)	Uptake before	Uptake during	Increase
Free meal uptake	89.2%	93.6%	4.4%
Paid meal uptake	41%	69%(free)	28%
Overall	53%	75%	22%
P4-P7 (juniors)	47.3%	49.9%	2.6%
Overall uptake	50%	60%	10%

Uptake increased most in schools where it was lowest previously. The increase in uptake was also higher in smaller schools and in schools with on-site (as opposed to off-site) cooking facilities.

The comparable English pilots in Newham and Durham, collected data on uptake based on the number of children taking at least 1 meal per week compared to before the study. This saw up to 90% taking at least 1 meal compared to 60% before, representing a 30% increase.

Calculation and prediction

From a provider perspective, the % number of children taking a meal once a week is interesting but does not provide a sound basis for predicting the overall level of uptake and hence the meals served.

APSE data confirms the Scottish pilot suggesting a baseline average of approximately 50% uptake at infant level. Scotland also suggests that there is a positive increase amongst those not eligible at Junior school level, potentially partly due to parents being able to pay for one child if a sibling is free. This increase is 2.6%

Assuming that each school year contains the same number of pupils, each contributes 1/7 of the total number of pupils able to take school meals

Primary uptake a proportion of meals = 3/7 years x 75% uptake = 32.1%

Junior uptake as proportion of meals = 4/7 years x 48.91% x 1.026% increase = 28.7%

Combined = 32.1% + 28.7% = 60.8%

Prediction for Primary School Uptake from September 2014 = 61%

Reasons for not taking a meal

The English Pilots usefully captures a sample of those not taking up the free school meal option.

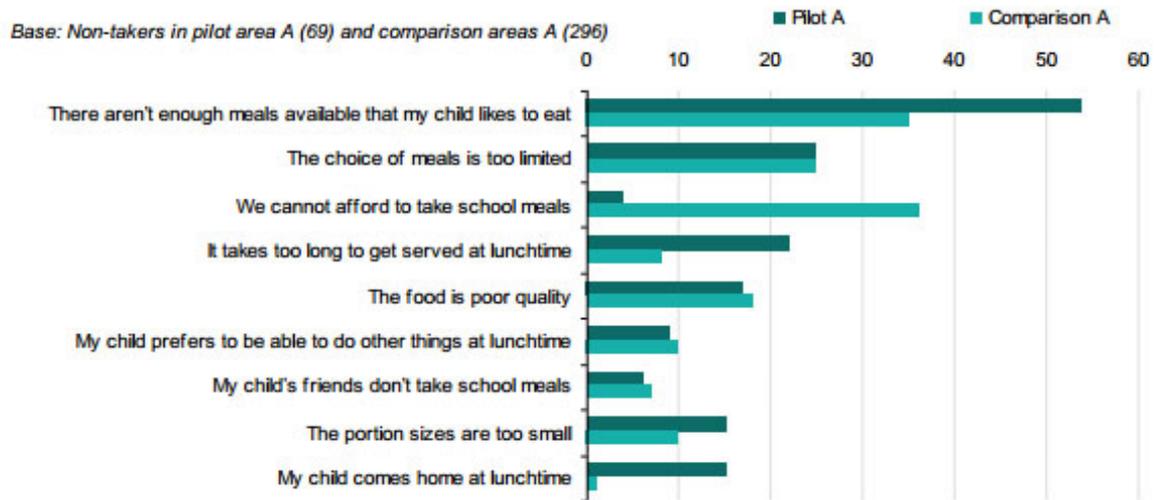
Top reasons were:

- There aren't enough meals available that my child likes to eat
- The choice of meals is too limited

- It takes too long to get served

This suggests that a simple pre-order system and a move to a cashless arrangement would remove disincentives and improve uptake even further.

Figure 2.12 Reasons for not taking school meals in area A (universal entitlement)



Source: Data collected from a sample of parents and pupils as part of the longitudinal survey in year 2 of the pilot. These figures are skewed towards families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. They relate to pupils in Years 0 (Reception) to 4.

APSE Comment

APSE has supported in-house caterers for over 25 years in school meal provision and acts as the Secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group on School Food. The boost in meal numbers is not only good news for those kids who were missing out under the current arrangements, but should also have a profound positive effect on the financial viability of many school meal services.

The rise in numbers should be particularly welcome in schools with low current meal numbers as these are often subsidised by either the school or local authority with cost of production exceeding the price charged.

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