

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

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We commissioned two evaluations to capture the outcomes of and learning from the first year of the London UPFSM policy

- **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.
- **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.

More than a Meal, launched in November 2024, presents the **combined key findings** from both evaluations and concludes with **seven recommendations for national government**.



1. The policy is easing pressures on families across the income spectrum with those on a lower income benefitting the most

- 84% of all parents surveyed said 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)
- Money saved by families is being put towards household essentials and items for children e.g. school uniforms and clubs
- The policy is highly popular with parents, but many continue to struggle with costs elsewhere.

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

Parent

“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**

2. The policy is supporting the mental and physical health of families in different ways

- The policy has had a positive effect on the **mental wellbeing of children and parents** living on low incomes, reducing the emotional burden and stress of trying to provide an adequate school lunch:
 - 45% of all parents said the policy has meant they worry less about passing on financial concerns to their children
 - 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**:
 - 60% of all parents were able to spend more money on food for their family
 - 55% of all parents thought their child was trying new foods because of the policy, rising to 63% for parents in receipt of universal credit

“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

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

3. The policy is strengthening school communities and improving children and families experience of school

- 51% of parents said the policy saved time in the mornings they previously spent making or managing school meals, this supported a smoother start to the day
- In the majority of schools, the policy has removed issues around dinner money debt, helping to improve home-school relations
- 34% of parents said their child can concentrate better on school and 35% said their child enjoyed school more.

‘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

“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.” **Parent**

4. Key learnings from regional policy design and implementation

- The **clarity and transparency of the GLA funding arrangements**, especially providing 50% of the funding allocation up front, built school trust and confidence to scale up and deliver the policy
- Schools and caterers reported school meals could be provided within the £2.65 meal rate set for year 1 of policy, but **associated trade-offs** - staffing, pay, T&C's, and quality and choice.
- Boroughs who played a **proactive role and provided tailored support** to local schools were a clear enabler of policy success.
- 94% of schools surveyed had capacity to cook food for all children, but many had **outdated kitchen equipment** that needed to be replaced or upgraded to enable delivery.
- **Local approaches to auto-enrolment**, stimulated by the policy and led by four boroughs in year 1, successfully registered 2,814 for means-tested FSM and unlocked £4.7m of funding for schools (from pupil premium and other school income).

“We were pleased the funding was sorted and promptly, [otherwise] we wouldn't be able to afford it as a small school” **Administrative officer**

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

5. Key learnings from successful implementation in schools

- **Majority of schools surveyed (68%) reported that they didn't have to make specific adaptations to deliver the policy.**
- **Key enabling factors** contributing to schools effectively scaling up and ensuring school meals met the needs of their communities:
 - 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
 - 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.

“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**

“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**

6. There is still more to do to ensure equitable take-up, and therefore access

- 26% of parents asked for more options that meet their child's dietary, religious or cultural requirements
- Some families (who are also more likely to be living on lower incomes) were unable to make the most of the offer e.g. families with children with SEND and from racially minoritised groups
- There were many examples of school practices that helped in this area for example:
 - Head teacher involvement in school food
 - Expert chefs
 - Children and families providing input and feedback

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

“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**

Key recommendations for national government

1. Urgently extend access to free school meals and work towards a universal approach to school food
2. Introduce nationally coordinated auto-enrolment for free school meals
3. Increase per meal funding rate and make funding allocations simpler
4. Wipe out dinner money debt
5. Ensure there is sufficient capital investment in school kitchen and dining infrastructure
6. Introduce a national School Food Quality Assurance Scheme (and update the School Food Standards)
7. Train and support school leaders, caterers and business managers to deliver great school food