

Department for Education
‘Evidence check’ memorandum
Universal infant free school meals (UIFSM)

Policy?

1. From September 2014, all children in reception, year 1 and year 2 attending state-funded schools in England are eligible for free school meals. This includes pupils attending academies, free schools, maintained special schools, pupil referral units, and day pupils in non-maintained special schools. The headline effect of this policy will be to extend free school meal entitlement to an additional 1.55 million children.
2. The policy is designed to:
 - improve educational attainment and children’s social skills and behaviour;
 - ensure that children have access to at least one healthy meal each day, and support the development of long term healthy eating habits;
 - help families with the cost of living, and remove disincentives to work.

Evidence

Attainment, social skills and behaviour

3. The Department for Education and Department for Health ran pilots of universal free school meals in two local authorities – Newham and Durham – between 2009 and 2011. The pilot evaluation¹ showed that there were benefits for all children – those who would have been entitled previously to a free school meal under the existing entitlement criteria as well as those that became newly-entitled during the pilots. The pilots found:

- *Improved performance in the classroom.* The universal FSM pilot had a significant positive impact on attainment for primary school pupils, with pupils in the pilot areas making between four and eight weeks’ more progress in English and mathematics than similar pupils in comparison areas. Improvements in attainment were strongest amongst pupils from less affluent families and amongst those with lower prior attainment.
- *Increased take-up of meals amongst children from low-income families, who were already entitled to, but not taking free meals, under the existing rules – at least partly because universal entitlement removes the perceived stigma attached to receiving free school meals.*
- *Higher take-up of school lunches amongst other children – which is important.* A study by academics from the University of Leeds showed that only 1% of packed lunches brought to school by children met the School Food Standards (Evans et al, 2010), whereas estimates from a 2012 School Food Trust survey (Nelson et al, 2012) suggest that 99% of primary meals catered by local authorities are compliant with food-based standards.
- *Social and behavioural benefits.* Schools in the pilot areas were seen to engender a culture where children sat down to eat with friends and teachers in a civilised environment: broadening social skills, teaching table manners and supporting equality and fairness by levelling differences in social background.

Nutrition

4. Food preferences and behaviours formed during early childhood can track through childhood and into later life. Longitudinal research (Nicklaus et al, 2004; 2005; Nicklaus 2009) shows that the food varieties chosen by young children were strongly correlated with variety of food choices up to age 22 and that instilling healthy eating habits at a young age can be carried forward into adulthood. The introduction of universal infant free school meals

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-free-school-meals-pilot-impact-report

alongside the Department for Health's fruit and vegetable scheme is part of a wider programme which aims to get children eating healthily, not only now, but into the future.

5. We therefore expect the new entitlement to bring longer term benefits for children's health by instilling early in life healthy eating habits which will be carried forward into later years. For example, the FSM pilot study generated a rise in the number of children who ate vegetables at lunchtime by 23%, an 18% decline in the consumption of crisps, and was seen to encourage pupils to consume a wider range of food.

Cost of living and economic viability of school meals services

6. The introduction of UIFSM will also help families with the cost of living and save parents across the country up to £400 per eligible child. In addition, the School Food Plan² published in July 2013 highlights that significant economies of scale can be achieved if the take-up of school meals increases.

Implementation

7. The government has provided significant support to schools to help them to implement the policy of universal infant free school meals. This includes allocating over £1 billion of revenue funding over the two years 2014-16, £150 million of capital funding, and an additional £22.5 million in transitional funding for small schools. We have also set up a free implementation support service, run by school food experts, that has been providing hands-on support to help schools find solutions to local challenges. Schools have had longer to prepare for the introduction of universal infant free school meals in September 2014 than schools in pilot areas had.

8. A survey of all local authorities and 14 multi-academy trusts (MATs) carried out between 11 and 22 August 2014 identified that 98.5% of schools would be offering a hot meal option on the first day of term³, and the majority that were not would be offering hot meals by the beginning of January 2015 at the latest. The evidence is that almost all schools delivered free meals to all their eligible pupils on the first day of term, and the small handful that did not had plans to do so within a short period.

References

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Nelson, M., Nicholas, J., Riley, K., and Wood, L. (2012) Seventh annual survey of take up of school lunches in England. School Food Trust. www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/assets/research-reports/seventh-annual-survey2011-2012-full-report.pdf

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² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251020/The_School_Food_Plan.pdf

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-infant-free-school-meals-schools-offering-a-hot-meal>