

# Evaluating universal free school meal provision in two London secondary schools



**Tricia Jessiman, PHIRST Insight,  
University of Bristol**

Judi Kidger, Victoria Carlisle, Katie Breheny, Rona Campbell, Russell Jago, Naomi Leonard

University of Bristol

Marcus Robinson, Programme Lead, Children's services, Hammersmith & Fulham Council



# Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams (PHIRST)

- Funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), Public Health Research (PHR) Programme. Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams provide timely and accessible evaluations of public health interventions.
- Eight teams (more to be added); over 50 current evaluations across the UK
- PHIRST Insight partnered with London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham in Autumn 2020

# What we know

- Food insecurity and child hunger is a worsening problem in the UK
- In September 2022, one in four households with children in the UK had experienced food insecurity in the last month
- FSM are the only means tested part of the school day – in England all children in Reception to Year 2 receive a free school meals , after which a threshold for FSM entitlement comes into force. An annual household earnings of less than £7,400 (not including benefits and after taxes).
- In other UK nations the FSM offer is different. It is being rolled out across primary in Scotland and Wales and In Northern Ireland the eligibility cap is £14,000.

# Food insecurity and child mental health

- High risk for food insecurity in childhood significantly associated with cannabis use, peer bullying, and school dropout potential at 15 years of age (Paquin et al, 2021)
- Significant association between food insecurity and child depression, externalizing/internalizing behaviors, and hyperactivity. (Cain et al, 2022)
- Associations found between food insecurity and children's emotional or behavioural problems, mental health disorders, and mental health markers such as social skills, internalizing and externalizing behaviours, and hyperactivity (Aceves-Martins 2018)
- Evidence from a survey of English school-children during lockdown showed that those who experienced food poverty were more likely to report deteriorating wellbeing during lockdown and had three times the risks of having depression or anxiety. (Mansfield et al 2021)

# LBHF: an innovative school food poverty programme

Universal Free  
School Meals

- Free School Meals in two of the borough's secondary schools – test the efficacy of the offer with an evaluation from Jan 2020.

Free  
Breakfast  
Offer

- A free high-quality breakfast offer in the borough's primary schools.

Innovation  
Process

- Innovation partner and grant pot to support community partners to develop new solutions to food poverty

# Why Secondary UFSM

- CPAG estimates that 120,000 pupils in secondary schools in London are living in poverty but are not eligible for a free school meal.
- Food insecurity in teenagers linked to poorer diet quality, early or delayed puberty and subsequent growth, obesity, poor physical health, poor mental health, disordered eating, risky behaviours, peer bullying and poorer academic outcomes
- Poor habits - Reaching an age where teenagers are making their own informed decisions about eating habits - when and what they eat. Large proportion of students would just eat snacks or would not eat a lunch at all (even if they were eligible for FSM).
- It wasn't being looked at. Very little support in secondary and massive gap in studies looking at secondary aged students.

# The UFSM schools

	Population	N students	Index MD	FSM eligibility	% Boys	% non-white
School 1	Mainstream mixed	414	10% most deprived	33.9%	77.8%	77.1%
School 2	Special school, mixed	105	10-20% most deprived	46.6%	69.4%	56.4%

# Our research questions

1. Is UFSM feasible and acceptable in a UK secondary school context?
2. What are the enablers and barriers to effective implementation of UFSM in secondary schools?
3. What are the cost implications of implementing UFSM in secondary schools?
4. What is the perceived impact of UFSM on secondary school students, including hunger, behaviour and food consumption?
5. What is the perceived impact of UFSM on family finance and food security?



# Methods

- Student surveys measuring food insecurity and diet quality in 2 intervention and 2 comparison schools (n=404)
- Routine data measuring uptake
- Interviews with 20 parents / carers, 28 students, 12 school and catering staff
- Student observations over lunch times (24 students took part – tick box template and photos)



# Evidence of feasibility and acceptability

- Once set up, easier to administer than means tested FSM (all families applied)
- Staggered lunch times
- Increased meals meant increased choices
- Valued by parents and students – financial savings, **equity**, avoiding stigma
- Aware that benefitting families who don't need it, but general feeling that it is worth it: basic right
- Satisfaction among catering staff that all students are looked after

*Everyone benefits from it...even if its just a handful of extra children, it's a handful of extra children that aren't hungry. That would impact the complete family because it is stressful when you've got children that are hungry.*

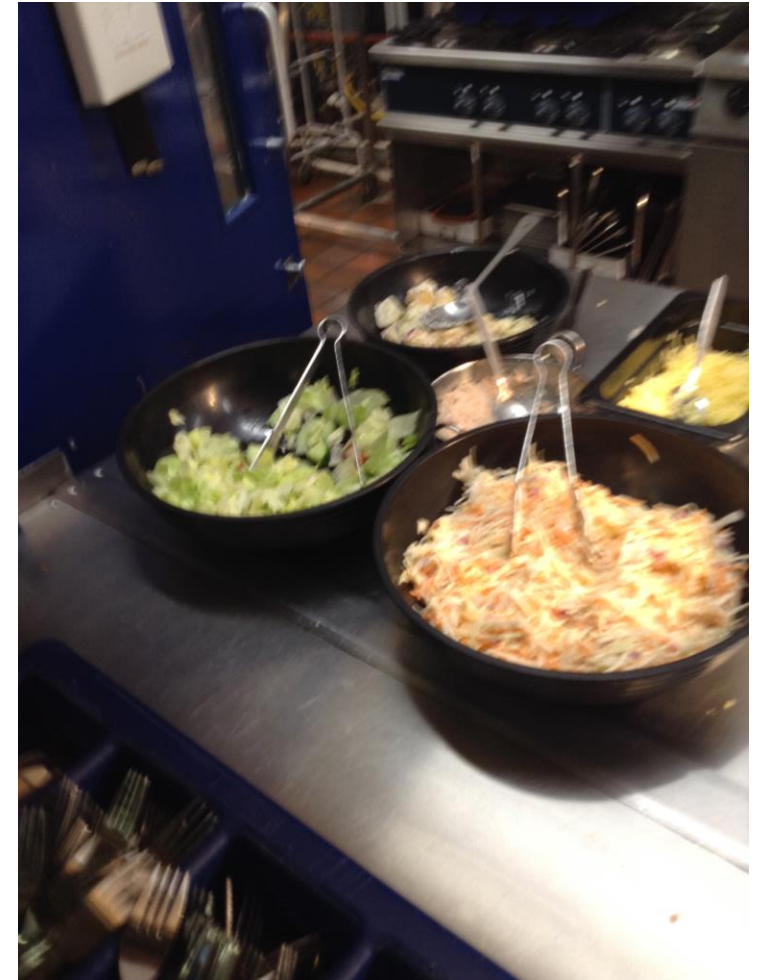
**Parent**

*If we reverted to FSM, there would be more students who fall through the cracks and do not claim FSM. ...there would definitely be kids not getting fed.*

**School staff**

# Observations evidence that for most students universal free school meals...

- Were considered 'OK' or 'good' for enjoyment
- Did not create too much queuing time
- Had menu options that were 'OK' (suggestions for more seasoning and more culturally varied food)
- Had portion sizes that were too small for 1/3-1/2 of students
- Could be healthy, but depended on choice
- Could still create two tier system, if 'treat' puddings or drinks sold at extra cost



# Interview evidence of impact

- Reduce hunger and food insecurity
- Nutritional benefits
- Benefit household finances, reduce parental stress and reduce food insecurity
- Improved behaviour and concentration in lessons
- Reduce stigma associated with claiming free school meals: social leveller
- Create opportunities to socialise and develop good eating habits

*He's learning there. He's safe. He's warm. He eats. And it's like he comes home at 3:30 better off than he was in the morning. That's like a big peace of mind for parents*

**Parent**

*Some people might ask me for money, if I can buy them something...When they changed the lunch to free, everyone had a chance to get food. Everyone could eat, not go home hungry*

**Year 10 Student**

## Routine data showed uptake increased over time

		Uptake of FSM Start of pilot (Nov 2019)	Uptake of FSM Nov-2021
School 1	All students	39%	68%
	FSM eligible	55%	78%
School 2	All students	59%	72%
	FSM eligible	74%	79%

## Levels of food insecurity are high (but no difference by group)

	Food Secure	Food Insecure
Intervention	144 (70.24%)	61 (29.76%)
Comparator	147 (74.24%)	51 (25.76%)

Q's derived from USDA Children's Food Security Scale

Likely to be underestimate – parents protect children as much as they can

# Cost implications

- Infrastructure: dining room size, kitchen equipment
- Additional staff: cook, serve, supervise
- Administration: set up, pupil premium funding
- Nutritious food is costly, but increased numbers offset overhead so similar plate price
- Model has to work for caterers (or snacks and drinks will still be sold)
- Cost the LA £93,773.30; £448.50 per non-FSM eligible student
- Compared to other solutions???

*I'm managing because I sell stuff at lunch, I make it on drinks and stuff and I'll make it on break, so that's not really a problem*

**Caterer**



# Conclusions

- Current national means tested system not addressing big rise in food insecurity among secondary school students
- UFSM can be delivered successfully in secondary schools
- UFSM has high acceptability among stakeholders due to wide range of perceived benefits
- Evidence of impact on food insecurity from this study is mixed

## Universal free school meals in secondary schools are a feasible and acceptable way to address food insecurity

Dr Judi Kidger, Dr Vicky Carlisle, Tricia Jessiman, Dr Katie Breheny, Prof Rona Campbell, Prof Russ Jago (University of Bristol) Steve Strong (public partner) Marcus Robinson (London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham)

Approximately 2.6 million children in the UK currently live in food insecure households (where they have limited or uncertain access to adequate food). The current cost of living crisis has led to reports of increasing numbers of school pupils whose parents are not able to pay for school meals.

### About the research

Free school meals (FSM) is a public health approach to reducing food insecurity and increasing healthy eating. However, in England these are only provided to all pupils in the first three years of school, and to pupils of all ages whose households are in receipt of Universal Credit, provided their overall income is less than £7400.

Not everyone who is eligible for FSM claims them, possibly because of embarrassment about being marked out in this way.

The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) began a pilot scheme in January 2020, in which free school meals were provided to all pupils in two secondary schools, with the aim of making sure that no young person is too hungry to learn.

This research, produced in partnership by the University of Bristol and LBHF, looked at the potential benefits of the pilot scheme for pupils and their households, and what the factors were that made it more or less difficult to deliver. It did not look at effectiveness or cost effectiveness of UFSM.



Image credit: Hans from Pixabay

### Policy implications

- The current means-tested system of free school meals (FSM) does not address high levels of food insecurity among secondary school aged pupils.
- School staff and parents/carers who have experienced universal FSM (UFSM) say the benefits outweigh the potential cost of supporting families who do not need financial help.
- Incentives for schools are: UFSM's potential to improve concentration and behaviour during lesson time, stigma reduction for FSM claimants, and an easier administration process compared to the current system.
- UFSM is feasible and acceptable in secondary schools, regardless of size or catering set-up, particularly with staggered lunchbreaks that many schools introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The evidence-base for effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of UFSM in secondary schools to address food insecurity is poor and needs more schools to pilot the scheme.
- Any local authorities, multi-academy trusts or schools that decide to pilot UFSM for secondary pupils should coordinate evaluation measures with others to improve the evidence-base.
- National government should fund a large-scale study of UFSM in secondary schools to enable robust evaluation of its effectiveness and cost effectiveness at improving food insecurity, health, and educational outcomes.

"The long-term impact of parents not having to fund school lunches for three years I think is a really big thing and most of our families are low income so for me that was the thing I could see being really beneficial"

- Leadership Staff



# More research is needed to:

- Examine feasibility of delivering in other schools / councils
- Evaluate in a larger scale, longer term study, with before and after measures and a comparison group
- Examine cost-effectiveness, relative to other ways to address food insecurity



# What has happened in borough since...

- UFSM support at the two schools continues
- Supporting more students. The mainstream school has seen roll numbers increase by over 20%. It has made a marked difference to the students at the schools and their lunch habits (particularly at 6<sup>th</sup> form).
- But we recognise that USFM are only part of wider CoL support
- This work has shown that it is possible to roll out UFSM at secondary successfully. Other London councils are also starting expand provision as well as campaigns for national changes.

## Further details....

About the study, please contact:  
[Tricia.Jessiman@Bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Tricia.Jessiman@Bristol.ac.uk)

About the pilot, please contact:  
[Marcus.robinsonchs@lbhf.gov.uk](mailto:Marcus.robinsonchs@lbhf.gov.uk)