

Education and Lifelong Learning

Evaluation of the Free School Meal Trial for P1 to P3 Pupils

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This document summarises the findings of the evaluation of the free school meal trial for P1-P3 pupils. The trial is part of the Government's drive to improve the nation's health and encourage good eating habits from a young age. The trial ran from October 2007 to June 2008 in five local authorities in Scotland – East Ayrshire, Fife, Glasgow, Scottish Borders and West Dunbartonshire. Ipsos MORI was commissioned by the Scottish Government to undertake an evaluation of the trial, with the overarching aim of informing roll-out in other areas.

Main Findings

- Overall, the principal conclusion is that the implementation of the trial was relatively straightforward. There were no unexpected impacts and roll-out by other local authorities should not be problematic.
- Problems that emerged were generally minor teething problems that could be quite quickly remedied through planning, preparation, flexibility and small adjustments to daily routines.
- The trial resulted in significantly increased uptake of school meals. Among the target group of P1-P3 pupils not free school meal (FSM) registered, uptake of school meals increased from 41% to 69%. Uptake also increased slightly among P1-P3 pupils who were previously FSM registered (from 89.2% to 93.6%) and among P4-P7 pupils (from 47.3 % to 49.9%).
- The increase in uptake was higher in smaller schools and in schools with on-site (as opposed to off-site) cooking facilities.
- Uptake increased more in schools with lower levels of FSM registration, where pre-trial uptake tended to be lower.
- It was clear from the research that the main reason for non-uptake is that some children are 'fussy eaters'. The research indicates that the greatest impact on uptake might be realised through initiatives to enhance parents' skills in encouraging young children to eat a wider range of foods, as opposed to changes to the school meal experience itself (queuing systems, décor, etc.).
- Although there was evidence that pupils were trying new foods and that some were asking for new foods at home, including healthier options, the evidence is unclear on how many children were doing so and the extent to which children were eating more healthily at home. On other potential benefits such as whether parents felt they knew more about healthy foods and were buying healthier foods for the home, the evidence is also unclear.

Background

The free school meal trial for P1-P3 pupils is part of the Government's drive to improve the nation's health and encourage good eating habits from a young age.

The 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.

Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The overarching aim of the evaluation was to inform roll-out in other areas by exploring:

- the change in uptake of school meals by P1-P3 pupils
- process and practical issues for local authorities and schools
- the range of potential health and other benefits of the trial
- the impact of the trial on the costs of providing school meals
- any unexpected impacts and barriers to roll-out in other local authorities.

Methodology

The change in uptake was based on analysis of uptake data collected from each school in the five local authority areas before the trial started in October 2007, and again in late February 2008. In order to reduce the burden on schools, the February 2008 survey was carried out in conjunction with the annual School Meals Census undertaken by the Scottish Government. Both the pre-trial survey and the late February 2008 survey mirrored the methods employed by the School Census – a school level return being required from each school, giving figures for a “normal” day.

¹ In a similar manner to the School Meal Census, schools were asked to complete their returns for a specific date – unless this date was atypical, for example, if a year group were out of school for any reason or there was a special menu such as an “Italian theme”.

The other findings are based on case studies in ten schools (two in each of the five local authority areas) involving qualitative research among key stakeholders (pupils, parents, teachers, headteachers, school catering staff and local authority catering managers), and a postal survey of 926 parents of P1 to P3 pupils in schools across the five areas.

Change in uptake

The trial resulted in significantly increased uptake of school meals:

- Among the target group of P1-P3 pupils not free school meal (FSM) registered, uptake of school meals increased from 41% to 69%.
- Among P1-P3 pupils who were previously FSM registered, uptake increased from 89.2% to 93.6%.
- Overall, the uptake among all P1-P3 pupils increased from 53% to 75%.
- There was concern that the trial might negatively impact on P4-P7 uptake (for example, because queues might increase or food choices might reduce). However, there has been a small but positive impact on this group – uptake increased from 47.3 % to 49.9%.
- Overall, the uptake among all primary pupils increased from 50% to 60%.
- Uptake increased in all five trial areas. Among the target group of P1-P3 pupils not FSM registered, the biggest increases were in Fife and Scottish Borders (both 32 percentage points) and East Ayrshire (31 percentage points). The increases were relatively lower in West Dunbartonshire (26 percentage points) and Glasgow (22 percentage points).
- Among those previously registered for FSM, the increases in uptake ranged from 8.5 percentage points in Scottish Borders to 3.4 percentage points in Glasgow.
- Among P1-P3 pupils who were not FSM registered and who did not take a school meal before the trial, those in the most deprived areas and those in the least deprived areas were equally likely to take up the offer of a free school meal.
- The increase in uptake was higher in smaller schools and in schools with on-site (as opposed to off-site) cooking facilities.

- In all five local authorities there was a substantial upward trend in P1-P3 uptake at the start of the trial. In three areas (West Dunbartonshire, East Ayrshire, and Glasgow) this decreased slightly and, to varying degrees, stabilised over the following months. In the remaining two areas, uptake was less stable, fluctuating between around 60% and around 70% in Scottish Borders and between around 66% and around 73% in Fife.

Uptake increased more in schools with lower levels of FSM registration, where pre-trial uptake tended to be lower. The five trial areas have a higher proportion of FSM registered pupils than Scotland as a whole, so should FSM for P1-P3 pupils be rolled out in the remaining local authority areas, the overall increase in uptake across the rest of Scotland is likely to be higher than that observed in the trial areas.

Parents indicated that if school meals were no longer free, their child would take a school meal more frequently than they did pre-trial – in particular, on days that they liked the food on offer. This suggests that if charges are reintroduced, overall uptake will decrease but remain higher than pre-trial levels. It also suggests that this cohort will have higher levels of uptake once they reach P4 and beyond.

While uptake among all P1-P3 pupils has increased to 75%, this still means that a quarter are not taking a school meal on a 'normal' day. It was clear from the research that the main reason for non-uptake is that some children are 'fussy eaters'. It should be acknowledged that parents of these children generally wanted them to have school meals and would welcome help to encourage their children to sample a broader range of foods. There does, however, appear to be a ceiling effect – there are some pupils who, for whatever reason, will never take a school meal. Nevertheless, the research indicates that the greatest impact on uptake might be realised through initiatives to enhance parents' skills in encouraging young children to eat a wider range of foods, as opposed to changes to the school meal experience itself (queuing systems, décor, etc.).

While parents generally found it valuable to have menus sent home and many considered the invitation to sample the foods on offer useful, sometimes foods were given attractive 'child-friendly' names such as 'Nemo Pizza' and 'Shark Infested Mince'. As a result, it was unclear what the individual ingredients in some dishes were, leaving parents feeling that they could not always help their child decide what they wanted, nor cook the same food at home if their child asked for it.

Practical issues: limited time and space

The main challenges schools faced were physical space and time pressures; the interrelated problems of the size of dining areas coupled with the time available for lunch.

However, these logistical issues were not unexpected and there was a strong view that small adjustments to daily routines would go a long way towards relieving them.

Interviewees outlined a range of successful strategies that would be useful to share with other schools should free school meals be rolled-out across other local authorities. In particular, strategies found useful in making effective use of limited time and space include:

- staggering the times pupils arrive at dining areas
- setting tables in advance
- operating different queuing systems or service areas
- allowing slightly lengthened lunchtimes (e.g. letting P1 pupils out five or ten minutes early)
- using alternative accommodation (especially for packed lunches)

With regard to pre-ordering systems, there were mixed views; in some cases they were viewed as unnecessarily time consuming for little benefit, while other schools found them successful.

Lead-in and start time of the trial

Although schools and local authorities managed very successfully to implement the trial without major difficulties, there was a commonly held view that a longer lead-in time would enable more preparations to be put in place. In particular, there was insufficient time for potential new staff to undergo Disclosure Scotland checks and, on occasion, additional equipment was not in place at the outset.

There was also a view that it would have been better for the start of the trial to coincide with the beginning of the school year in August, to avoid pupils getting into a routine which is then changed. These problems could be easily overcome for roll-out in other areas.

Impact on the quality and quantity of food

The quality and quantity of food provided was not seen to have changed as a result of the trial. Furthermore, waste was proportionate to pre-trial levels.

Popular options did sometimes run out for those at the end of the queue, but this was also an issue pre-trial and the problem was not exacerbated by the trial.

Provision for special dietary needs was not a problem – special dietary needs have a minor impact on uptake (only 4% of survey respondents cited dietary needs as a factor influencing uptake) and there is no evidence of increased demand for special foods as a result of the trial.

Impact on workloads

Workloads of local authority and teaching staff remained relatively unchanged as a result of the trial. The greatest impact was on catering staff who tended to have slightly increased workloads as a result of the trial. However, once extra staff had been recruited, there were generally no major problems.

In general, staff viewed the implementation of the trial as simply an extension of what they were already doing. However, staff undertaking supervision in the dining room sometimes felt they might have less time to encourage healthy eating among individual children.

Potential health and other benefits

Universal healthy free school meals have the potential to impact on children's health, wellbeing, and educational performance in the medium to long term. However, there is unlikely to be a 'quick fix' in terms of changing children's eating preferences overnight, and given the short-term nature of the trial, this evaluation did not seek to examine such impacts in detail. Instead, the evaluation explored early perceptions of health and other benefits, from which the following conclusions can be drawn:

The trial provided pupils with an opportunity to try new foods, resulting in pupils asking at home for foods they had tried at school. In some cases, these were healthier options.

Although pupils appeared to have a good awareness of healthy foods, there is no evidence that the trial had

impacted upon this. When deciding what to eat, children tend to pick what they like the taste of. Choosing healthier options is likely to come as a result of them trying and enjoying new foods. Therefore, evidence that the trial acted as a catalyst for pupils' willingness to try new foods is a positive finding.

There was some evidence that the trial had impacted positively on the home environment of pupils. In particular, it had resulted in parents talking about food with their children more often and some parents noted that children were more confident in discussing their food preferences.

In turn, some parents were keen to make meals for their children that they had enjoyed at school but did not always know how to make them. Providing recipe cards or books of school recipes was suggested as a solution.

Teachers did not report any behavioural changes in pupils at lunchtime or in afternoon classes.

Although there was evidence that pupils were trying new foods and that some were asking for new foods at home, including healthier options, the evidence is unclear on how many children were doing so and the extent to which children were eating more healthily at home. On other potential benefits such as whether parents felt they knew more about healthy foods and were buying healthier foods for the home, the evidence is also unclear.

Costs

One of the reasons for selecting the five particular authorities involved in the trial was that they were each operating in a different context – in terms of size of local authority, levels of deprivation, urban/rural mix, size of schools, previous levels of uptake and structure of school meals provision – and so faced different challenges. The costs reflected this and should not therefore be read as an assessment of the efficiency of different areas in implementing the trial, but as a guide to the range of costs incurred by local authorities in different circumstances.

The costs of the trial varied widely from £1.79 per additional meal in Fife to £4.65 in Scottish Borders. Costs tended to be higher in areas with a higher percentage increase in uptake, i.e. where more fundamental changes needed to be made to staffing and equipment levels. Costs also tended to be lower in areas where the total number of additional meals served was higher – perhaps where there was more scope for economies of scale to reduce some of the costs (e.g. in relation to buying equipment in bulk or negotiating contracts with food supplier).

Future research

An important issue to consider, which is outwith the remit of this research, is what pupils are actually eating. There was evidence that many pupils picked at their school meals, eating only the bits they like. In particular, it was suggested that some of the healthier foods such as vegetables and

soup were frequently left untouched by some pupils. Having got to a stage where more pupils are enjoying the school meal experience and are willing to try new foods, the next steps are to ensure that pupils are eating all or most of the school meals they choose, and that links with parents are improved in order to ensure that the free healthy school meal initiative reaches its full potential.

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Social Science in Government

ISBN 978-0-7559-7216-6

