

# **Evaluation of the development phase of Southwark's free, healthy school meal programme January – July 2011**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background and context**

Implementing a programme of free, healthy school meals<sup>1</sup> (FHSM) for all primary aged pupils attending Southwark schools is a key council commitment, as set out in the June 2010 cabinet paper 'A Fairer Future for all in Southwark'. The rationale for the programme was underpinned by the council's commitment to building a fairer future for all Southwark families and encouraging children to be a healthy weight, as set out in the Children and Young People's Plan.

The FHSM programme is a Council priority aimed at tackling the borough's extremely high levels of child obesity and relieving child poverty by putting money in parents' pockets.

The National Child Measurement Programme has identified Southwark as having among the highest levels of childhood obesity in the country. In the 2009/10 academic year, 14.7% of Reception year pupils were obese (the highest rate nationally) and a further 14.9% overweight. In Year 6, 26% of pupils were obese (the second highest rate nationally) and a further 14.4% overweight. Childhood obesity is strongly linked to poor diet and eating a healthy school meal as part of a whole-school approach to healthy eating and healthy weight can be expected to make a contribution to reducing these very high levels of obesity.

We are determined that no child is left behind and are committed to continuing to both narrow the gap and promote the highest possible outcomes for all children. Southwark has high levels of deprivation with an estimated 34% of children living in poverty, rising to over 50% in some wards. Many families on low and middle incomes are not eligible for Government funded free school meals and school meals represent a significant living cost. This is particularly an issue for families with more than one child.

Attainment levels for children in Southwark's primary schools continue to improve, although there is more progress required to narrow the gap for under performing children. There is evidence<sup>2</sup> that eating a healthy meal at lunchtimes, combined with a whole-school emphasis on healthy eating, can positively impact on concentration levels, and in turn attainment levels.

### **Summary**

The practical approach to providing a FHSM in schools was tested in 10 primary schools over January – July 2011, during a "development phase". We are using what we have learnt to roll out the programme to all primary schools. This executive summary highlights some of these key points.

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#### <sup>1</sup> **Glossary:**

"Free healthy School Meals" – Southwark Council's universal scheme for primary age pupils

"Government free school meals" – Government scheme to provide free meals to pupils meeting certain criteria

"School meals" – meals cooked on school premises and provided either free or for a charge. If a child doesn't have a school meal they would bring a packed lunch

<sup>2</sup> Colquhoun D, Wright N, Pike J, Gatenby L (January 2008) 'Evaluation of Eat Well Do Well Kingston upon Hull's School Meal Initiative.' Centre for Educational Studies, Institute for Learning, University of Hull

**Parents really valued the FHSM programme.** Here's what some parents told us:

- My child wasn't a good eater at home and school lunches have changed this because he is trying more foods at home.
- My child is not choosy now, like she was with their packed lunches when they wanted certain foods/packageged stuff.
- My children's concentration and attention had improved when at home
- When my wife and I were both working it was not such a problem to find the money for school meals but I lost my job six months ago and was not entitled to benefit so this has been a godsend for us.
- I have been able to put the money back to my child by buying books.
- My child has been asking for fruit and vegetables at home.

**Staff in schools were positive about the potential benefits of the programme.**

Comments and views received included:

- an increase in the uptake of school meals across the school
- the offer to all children removed the stigma of free school meals based on income.
- by starting children early with free healthy school meals they are more likely to continue to eat them throughout their school years.

Three schools reported that they were actively encouraging parents/carers to get involved in curriculum activities related to healthy eating.

**Support for schools.** A number of schools told us they would like more guidance in areas such as linking food to the curriculum, workshops for parents, how food affects our health, and classroom-based food workshops. Information has been provided for schools to enable them to make their own arrangements. We have published an on-line toolkit of resources and guidance which can be found at [www.southwark.gov.uk/fhsmtoolkit](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/fhsmtoolkit). This provides specific support for headteachers and governors, bringing together all of the information needed for them to carry out their responsibilities for the provision of high quality school meals and supporting a whole-school approach to healthy eating and living. The website will be kept up to date with relevant information as it becomes available along with examples and case studies from schools to share and disseminate emerging good practice.

We carried out a capital audit in all schools to find out if they had enough equipment and facilities to provide a FHSM to all children whose parents wanted one. We have used the results of the audit to support schools to ensure they have sufficient resources – plates, cutlery, ovens, fridges, tables and other equipment – to cope with the projected increase in demand for school dinners. We have committed £206K to provide additional equipment to directly support the roll out of the FHSM programme. Two further phases will be met within the total of £500K agreed by Council in July 2011. Where, during the course of the audit we identified the need for capital improvement to the fabric of buildings which is not related to or caused by the introduction of the FHSM programme, this will be considered under the LA's existing school kitchen refurbishment programme.

There are number of variables that could impact on the future costs of the programme such as the level of take up of Free Healthy School Meals, as well as Southwark's pupil number growth and any changes in the eligibility criteria for

government free school meals. These variables will be built into the funding model, for example, following the annual school roll projection update.

The take up of all school meals (paid or free) in the development phase schools varied from as low as 26% up to 90% before the introduction of Free Health School meals (note that these figures are based on whole-school numbers). Initial information for the roll out from September 2011 has suggested a take up in Reception and Year One of 84.5%.

It has been reported by schools that some children who previously did not have a school meal are now receiving one due to the FHSM programme, and it has been established in the process that they were actually entitled to a Government funded free school meal but had not applied previously. Our data confirms that in the development phase schools, the Government funded free school meal levels increased by 0.8% between 2010 and 2011, an increase of 149 children year on year. Families who are entitled to but aren't claiming Government funded free school meals are a particular target group in addressing child poverty. Also, we anticipate that as the scheme rolls out more such pupils will be identified, which will, among other things, mean that schools will receive more Government Pupil Premium funding than previously – as that funding is based on the number of children claiming the Government's free school meals.

The full roll out commenced in September 2011 to all Reception and Year One classes. Parents received application forms and the programme started on the first day of term in September 2011.

The application form has been simplified based on feedback from the development stage and requires parents to only complete once, when their child starts the school, not every year.

## **Full Report**

### **Programme planning**

As this is a large and complex project with significant logistical and financial implications it was agreed by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services that there would be two phases to the programme:

1. A development phase to run from January to July 2011 to develop an effective, cost-efficient model for roll out across the borough and to gather learning for the full roll-out.
- 2 Roll out to all Southwark schools from September 2011 with specific year groups included in the programme year on year with full roll-out to all year groups by September 2013.

### **What we have learnt from the development phase?**

The development phase gave us opportunities to identify and address potential challenges, including administrative arrangements at school level and identification of capital investment required to provide the additional meals as take up increases. In this way we aimed to ensure effective roll-out to meet the commitment that by September 2013 a FHSM could be taken up by all primary pupils whose parents who wanted one. The purpose of the development phase evaluation was to:

- Gather qualitative data from stakeholders on views and attitudes to the programme – including views of parents and staff;
- Develop a registration system which allows the identification of those families eligible for Government funded free school meals which will ensure schools receive maximum income from central Government;
- Analyse the change in take-up of school meals following the introduction of the policy;
- Identify the capital investment required to enable all schools to deliver an anticipated increase in take-up;
- Identify additional support for facilitating a whole-school approach that will give extra help to tackle high local childhood obesity levels;
- Accurately assess the cost of implementing the new policy;
- Develop the required organisational and governance structures to support effective and efficient implementation, in partnership with key stakeholders;

A total of 10 schools were selected to participate using the following criteria: level of deprivation (as measured by free school meal eligibility rates), levels of obesity according to the national child measurement programme, a range of uptake of school meals, representation from all community council areas where schools expressed an interest in being part of the development phase, and had the capacity to deliver.

### **Qualitative data collected through focus group interviews with parents**

In June 2011 the ten development phase schools involved were invited to arrange focus group meetings for parents and carers of children in Reception and year 1 to allow staff from children's services an opportunity to canvass their experiences and opinions on the development phase of the programme. The aim of this exercise was to capture the views of parents/carers whose children were benefiting from a free healthy school meal for the first time. We also wanted them to comment on the impact of the programme at home, school and in their community in relation to key issues for a borough with high levels of deprivation and obesity, and an ongoing commitment to improvement in school performance for all children.

#### **Headline commentary**

- Children sharing the school meal experience for the first time were identified by their parents/carers as being less picky about food and requesting meals from the school lunch menu at home.

“My son was a poor eater at home but since he has been enjoying the social aspects of eating a meal with his friends and trying new foods his eating has improved.”

“My son now complains about meals at home saying school meals are better.”

“I have twin boys in Year One and since they started having school meals in January they have been requesting that I cook similar meals and I am having to familiarise myself with cooking vegetables I have never used before.”

- The promotion of the programme within the development phase schools has raised awareness of “healthy school meals” which has resulted in children talking about food more and the schools were receiving more demands from parents/carers for school meal menus and taster sessions.

“I would like to know what ingredients are in the meals.”

- Whilst six months, was not viewed as long enough for parents/carers to notice any significant difference in behaviour and concentration levels, but there was a view that having a healthy nutritional meal at midday should improve energy levels and concentration. But some parents did feel that their children's concentration and attention had already improved when at home.
- In terms of cost benefits to families, many families said that the money saved was benefiting the whole family as the saving was used to top up their family food budget or used for other family activities. Some families commented that not having to pay for school meals had reduced their stress levels.

“When my wife and I were both working it was not such a problem to find the money for school meals but I lost my job six months ago and was not entitled to benefit so this has been a god send for us”

“I was paying £16 per week for school dinners for my children so this is a big saving for me.”

- The majority of parents/carers agreed that their child having a school meal as opposed to a packed lunch was extremely convenient as they were less rushed in the mornings. It was also noted that it could be stressful trying to be inventive when providing packed lunches as most schools have a packed lunch policy which requires the lunch to be healthy and nutritional and parents/carers were now relieved of this responsibility. This prompted requests for more information from schools on nutritional standards so they could advise those parents requesting information on providing healthy meals at home.
- Parents'/carers' experience of the registration process of the development phase was on the whole very positive. This can be attributed in part to the work done by school administration staff to promote the programme and support the registration process.
- The benefits to the school community were seen in terms of children being equal as meals were free to all and not just to those on low income. Socialisation skills were being improved by the shared lunch experience and therefore potentially have an overall effect on improving behaviour in general.

**Development of a registration system which allows the identification of those families eligible for free school meals and identifying the impact of extending the system for registration for free school meals**

To be statutorily entitled to claim a Government free school meal a family must complete an application form, and be in receipt of income support, income based jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance, support from NASS (National Asylum Support Service), guaranteed element of state pension credit, child tax credit and joint family income of no more than £16,190. The numbers of children statutorily entitled to a Government free school meal is information which is used to inform certain sources of funding at both school and local authority level and so it was important that whatever system was used Children's Services was able to continue collecting this data. This is particularly important for schools' allocation of the Pupil Premium, which is driven by Government free school meal entitlement.

After analysing practice elsewhere and taking advice from legal services, it was agreed all families wanting their child to have a free healthy school meal would have to submit an application. This would ensure that Children's Services and schools would have the required information to receive the correct levels of government funding, and to develop an administratively simple system.

The development phase application form was developed and sent to school staff with information to support parents and carers to complete and then returned to children's services for processing.

As a borough-wide online application process becomes the standard process, the application process will become easier and will only require new starters to a school to complete the process. The status of the family is then able to be checked electronically.

**Key learning points**

- Following feedback from parents, the application form has been simplified. The feedback so far has been positive.

- To ensure a high return, parents and carers needed reminders and support from the school to complete the forms. Additional information was sent to the schools with the applications forms; also a dedicated phone line was set up to provide answers to parents requiring support.
- Initially schools were asked to keep a copy of the completed application form. However, to reduce bureaucracy we have made the decision to collect the forms directly from the schools to process and are moving to an electronic system for the future.
- We are developing simple systems which compare, verify and reconcile information gathered into the finance, data and admissions teams.

**Analyse the change in take-up of school meals following the introduction of the policy**

There was a significant variation in the uptake of school meals in the development phase schools generally, but also by pupils who were entitled to Government-funded free school meals. At St Jude's and Haymerle, 32.6% and 43.4% respectively were entitled to a government-funded free school meal and 100% took up Free Healthy School Meals. However at other schools the take up varied. Initial information for the roll out from September 2011 has suggested a take up in Reception and Year One of 84.5%.

**Key learning points**

- While almost 100% of families with children attending Reception and Year 1 applied for free healthy school meals, uptake (actual meals eaten) did not exceed 87% at any point in time. This can be accounted for through absences and some children still voluntarily opting to bring a packed lunch into school; this uptake level will continue to be monitored and reviewed as the main programme is rolled out.
- There was an increase in uptake in schools where the existing government-funded free school meals uptake was lower. It is suggested that this is in the main because the meals are free. However, advice was given to schools about how to encourage greater uptake, drawing on local good practice and national guidance.
- We will share the learning from the development phase schools with other schools as part of the roll-out, to support an increase in take up.

**Identify the capital investment required to enable all schools to deliver the anticipated increase in take-up**

In order to roll out the programme, schools need to have the capacity to manage and meet an increased volume of school meals and be compliant with food safety regulations. In addition to this, the school must have trained staff in place to ensure that requirements around nutritional standards are adhered to.

It was agreed the best way of gathering this information was through an independent audit developed by a specialist kitchen operations manager. Initially an electronic audit for schools to complete online was used to identify potential capital costs. The information from this was used to develop a more thorough auditing process.

Thirty schools were identified as requiring the more thorough audit, due to number of pupils on roll, a current uptake of school meals (paid or free) of less than 75%, those which have not had recent development work in the kitchens and those which have raised concerns/requested advice and guidance. These schools were visited and a joint exercise was conducted focusing on equipment, staff, resources, building alterations and enhanced practice. Technical catering operations advice was also provided to the schools as part of this process. The remaining schools were offered telephone support to complete the audit. As a result of the audit £206K has been committed to provide the additional equipment needed to directly support the roll out of the first phase of programme and we anticipate that the full roll-out costs will be met within the one-off £500K capital budget allocated to the programme.

We identified:

- Overall potential cost implications based on January and May/June audits
- Responsibilities of local authority, school and external caterers in regards to any additional resource needs to deliver the increase of meals.
- An assessment of the physical capacity of schools to deliver the increase of school meals, with estimated costings for additional equipment to enable schools to meet the increased capacity
- Recommendations for phasing of expenditure needed to ensure kitchens can meet the likely increase in demand for meals within the agreed £500K budget

### **Key learning points**

- Many of the schools are well placed to deliver the additional healthy school meals without the need for any large investment. In most cases there is an increased need for cutlery and crockery, tables, cookers and food storage including fridges and freezers. All the improvements will be met from within the agreed £500K budget.

### **Identify the additional support to facilitate a whole-school approach that will help tackle rising childhood obesity**

Helping tackle child obesity is one of the key drivers for this policy. The prevention and management of childhood obesity is very complex, influenced by a wide range of factors. Free Healthy School Meals is one – important - policy amongst many. Locally we are implementing best practice through the Healthy Weight Strategy, with schools playing a key role as a universal setting that most children attend.

There is extensive investment in prevention of childhood obesity before children start school. Breast feeding is known to be a protective factor and local initiatives to increase breast feeding rates including breastfeeding cafes have been successful with a year on year increase recorded. Healthy weaning is promoted in the community and there is also a network of community based organisations working towards 'Baby Friendly' accreditation. Guidance on promoting healthy lifestyles amongst under 5s and their families has been disseminated to all early years settings including child minders through a DVD "Food for Thought". This addresses how to engage children in growing, cooking and eating fresh fruit and vegetables, healthy eating more generally promoting physical activity both indoor and outdoor. To help families understand and implement the messages in the DVD, most children's



centres are now offering opportunities for families to attend training on collectively preparing for mealtimes

The Foundation Stage curriculum is very active and we promote the implementation of active play and learning about health within the curriculum across all early years settings. Children's services have invested heavily in outdoor play facilities across schools and settings to increase opportunities for young children to be active, even during inclement weather.

A range of online materials have been developed by the communications team to support implementation of the whole-school approach. This includes information relating to national programmes eg the School Food Trust and Food for Life Partnership, as well as local arrangements whereby the schools buy in additional support.

Recently, Children's Services commissioned a course for cooks in our own children's centres on preparing and delivering healthy meals for children in our settings. This also deals with how to cope with special diets. A training session for Governors on implementing a whole-school approach is being delivered by the Food for Life Partnership in the autumn term. In addition the council provides a range of other services that can help tackle obesity and keep children healthy – for example sport and leisure provision such as the Community Games. Schools emphasised the importance of effective communication around the range of provision – including Free Healthy School Meals - that helps keep children fit and healthy.

### **Key learning points**

- Governors welcomed extra guidance to help meet their statutory responsibilities around school food standards and health and safety regulations.
- Following the audit a range of on-line materials has been developed by the Communications team to support implementation of the whole-school approach. This includes information relating to national programmes eg the school food trust, as well as local arrangements whereby the schools buy in additional support; this provides more information for headteachers and governors as well as parents.
- Advice about other support agencies eg Food for Life Partnership, School Foods Trust, is being provided to schools.

### **Accurately assess the cost of implementing the new policy**

There are three elements to the programme:

- a. the cost of provision of the meals
- b. capital costs (discussed above)
- c. programme running and evaluation costs

Agreed annual revenue budget:

Roll out timetable	Annual budget requirement £m
2011 -12 Reception & Year 1	1.145
2012 – 13 Reception, Years 1, 2, 3 & 4	2.559
2013 – 14 Reception &	4.145

Capital costs (one-off budget) £0.5m

### **The cost of provision of the meals**

We made the administration of the funding to schools as simple as possible. Schools require timely and regular payment, and to reduce administrative burdens for both schools and the Local Authority it was agreed that the funding should be paid through already established systems. As a consequence, schools will be paid based on the number of applications for free healthy school meals received in September less the number of applications verified as being entitled to government-funded free school meals. The actual take up (i.e. of meals eaten) figures will be reviewed during the course of the school year – taking into account sickness absence, or people choosing to bring in sandwiches instead) and payments adjusted accordingly. That is, we will only pay for meals actually eaten. Payments will be made at three points during the school year.

### **Programme running and evaluation**

The programme required dedicated capacity and this was particularly evident at the beginning of the programme, when there was intensive project officer activity to:

- Establish the cross-organisational programme support team
- Establish the information and finance systems for roll-out to all schools
- Develop draft communication materials and their subsequent amendment in the light of feedback from the audit
- Lead communication of key information to all stakeholders, particularly school leaders, chairs of governors, key officers and parent/carers
- Relationship management/trouble shooting with individual schools
- Evaluate the development phase, focusing on a qualitative evaluation
- Scope the evaluation of the substantive programme.

The evaluation methodology of the full programme is currently in development – including reporting mechanisms. The project team, in consultation with Public Health and other key stakeholders, will agree key indicators which can be easily monitored and allow for evaluation that provides useful information on the impact of the programme.

### **Key learning points**

- The cost the provision of the meals may vary over time as there are a range of factors which are subject to fluctuation or change, including increasing school rolls. However, effective monitoring of take up and ensuring those children entitled to the Government free school meal are recorded and claimed for will mitigate some of the risk. There is the potential for inflation to increase costs to schools, or any increase passed on by external contractors. It is possible however, that costs charged to schools will be better contained when the whole school is benefiting from the programme. It is possible that the cost per meal might reduce as the volume increases.

- There is the risk that the criteria for Government free school meals might change, reducing the numbers of eligible children. We will monitor the development of the Government's Universal Credit.
- There is a need for a Project Manager to monitor and manage the roll out as well as support the schools with information and the quality standards.. This post has now been established.

**Develop the required organisational and governance structures to support effective and efficient implementation, in partnership with key stakeholders**

Overall accountability for the programme rests with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services. Overall responsibility for delivering the roll-out of the programme lies with a senior named officer in Children's Services Department. A project team was established to support the programme development including colleagues from across the council and the NHS led by a Project Manager.

Discussions have taken place with headteachers and school business managers to support the establishment of organisational arrangements at school level. A dedicated phone line is in place for schools and parents to make contact and get answers to questions. This has helped to inform the administrative process of the roll-out.

A Cabinet Member Individual Decision-Making (IDM) report to approve the roll-out programme was agreed in July 2011. To ensure appropriate governance during the development of the programme, regular reports were made to the Strategic Director of Children's Services, the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and the Children's Services management team..

Information will continue to be provided to school governors to support them with their strategic responsibilities at school level to enable them to ensure that nutritional and food hygiene standards and guidelines are met.

**Key learning points**

- It is important that the project support group includes appropriate levels of representation from teams involved in the programme.
- It is important to coordinate the work of this programme to ensure good levels of learning, involving school staff and governors.
- An effective and transparent governance systems is crucial.
- It is also important to keep governing bodies informed as to the progress of the programme and to influence them to promote not only healthy meals within their schools, but also to include healthy living as part of the curriculum.