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Evaluation of the implementation of universal free school meals
P1–3 in Scotland

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For further information on the evaluation, contact:
Rachel McAdams
Public Health Adviser (Evaluation)
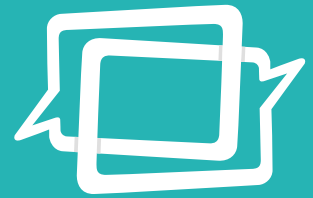**rachel.mcadams@nhs.net**

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Background

In January 2015, the Scottish Government introduced universal free school meals (UFSM) for all children in primaries 1 to 3 (P1–3). This replaced the targeted system of providing free meals for children from families receiving certain state benefits (although this targeted system has continued for children in primary 4 and above). There is some evidence that universal policies such as UFSM could help reduce health inequalities by removing financial barriers to healthy food.[1]

NHS Health Scotland is leading an evaluation of the UFSM policy. To plan the evaluation we first worked with stakeholders to map out how we think UFSM would contribute to a series of linked key outcomes in a theory of change (see figure 1 on page 4). The theory of change also identified that the successful implementation of the policy relied on a number of assumptions being met, and that the key outcomes may be influenced by a number of other factors. Our evaluation was designed to test whether this theory of change was being realised.

A process evaluation of UFSM implementation was commissioned as part of the evaluation. This report summarises the key findings of this process evaluation. It is aimed at those involved in developing and implementing school meals and school food policy at a local and national level.

You can find detailed evaluation findings and further information here:

http://healthscotland.com/ freeschoolmeals

1   Beeston C, McCartney G, Ford J, et al. *Health Inequalities Policy Review for the Scottish Ministerial Task Force on Health Inequalities.* Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland; 2014.
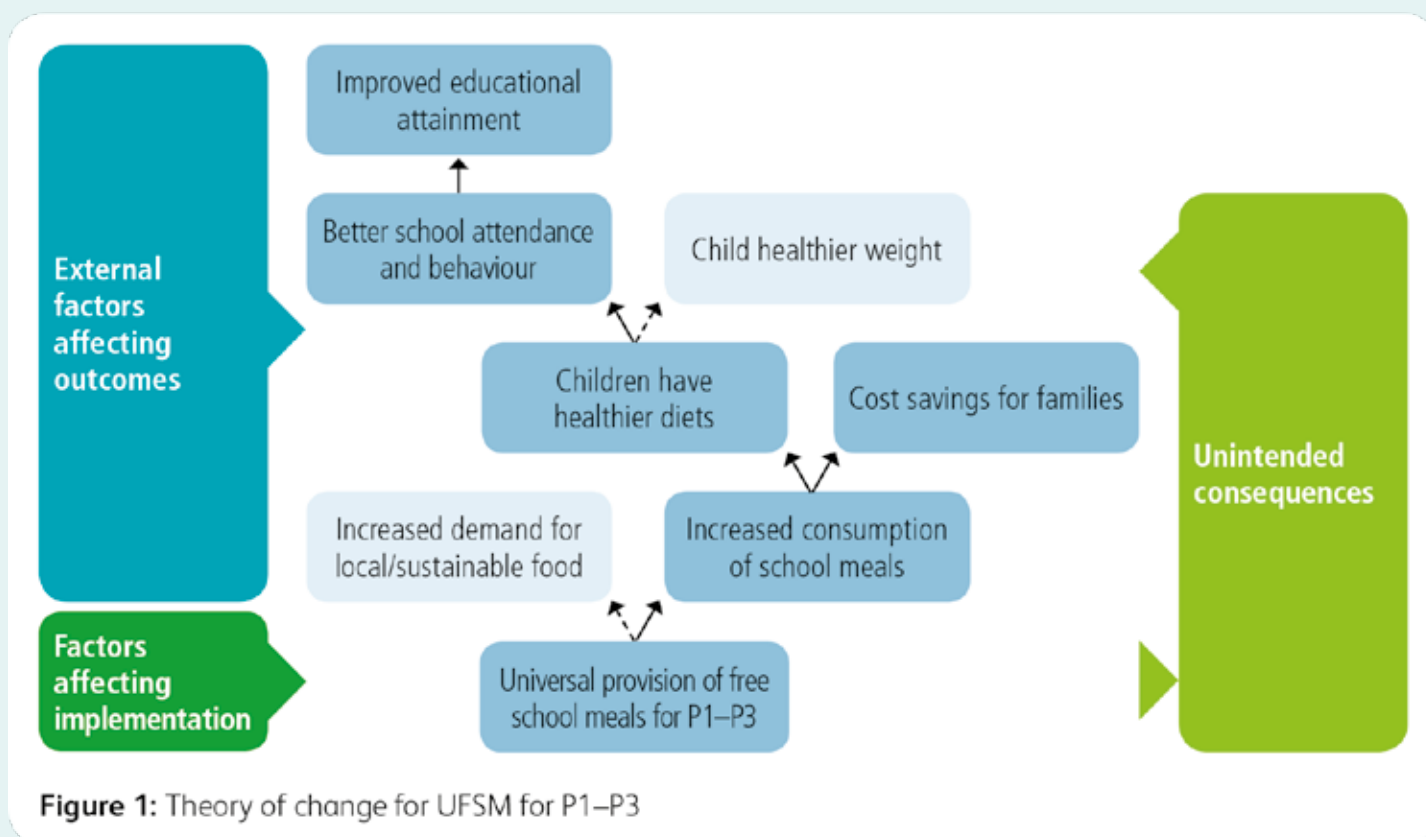
Figure 1: Theory of change for UFSM for P1–P3

The process evaluation

The process evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

Q. How have schools and local authorities implemented UFSM? What have the challenges been and how have these been overcome?

Q. What factors impact on uptake of UFSM and how might UFSM uptake be increased?

Q. What impact has UFSM had on the outcomes identified in the theory of change, and what other unintended impacts have been experienced?

To answer these questions the process evaluation undertook research with three groups of stakeholders over two phases during 2015.

	Phase 1 (Jan–Jun 2015)	Phase 2 (Jul–Dec 2015)
Schools: 10 schools from three local authorities acted as case studies.	Lunchtime observations and interviews with catering and education staff in each school.	Repeat observations and interviews with senior managers and head cooks in each school.
Local authorities: All 32 local authorities, plus in-depth research in six areas.	Survey of all authority school catering leads.	Interviews with representatives from catering and education teams within case study local authorities.
Parents: A sample of 37 parents from across three local authorities.	Seven independent discussion groups with a sample of parents who were eligible for free school meals under the targeted system and parents who were not.	

Findings

Implementation of UFSM

Overall, local authorities and schools have reported that implementation has been successful and relatively straightforward. The initial focus of implementation has been on meeting the expected increase in demand for school meals. Factors which helped implementation included:

- **Planning time:** Having a 12-month lead time from policy announcement to implementation provided time to plan, identify barriers and take action to overcome these before, or shortly after, UFSM was implemented.

- **An individual school approach:** Local authorities told us that each school presented its own unique combination of implementation challenges. These areas reported that the most effective approach was to assess the needs and then identify appropriate steps to take to support implementation within each school.

- **Collaboration:** Building positive relationships between education and catering staff at both a local authority and school level was identified as a key factor in successful implementation of UFSM. Implementation was felt to have been most successful when head teachers were willing to work collaboratively with catering teams to identify and implement necessary changes within their school.

> **'I would say the important part was the [catering] supervisors communicating with the head teachers, individually, in their schools – we've got a good bunch of supervisors.'**
> (Local authority catering staff)

One year after implementation of UFSM, some challenges remain:

- **Staffing levels:** Having enough experienced kitchen and dining hall staff to meet the increased demand for school meals continues to challenge many local authorities. Unattractive contracts, competition from other sectors and a lack of experience have all caused problems. Some areas have reported that early and targeted recruitment of staff and extending the hours offered to other staff have helped to overcome these challenges.

> **'An hour in some schools would be enough but it's very difficult to get a member of staff to work an hour a day. Who's going to break up their day for one hour's work?'**
> (Local authority catering staff)

- **Children's experience:** Parents and staff from schools and local authorities raised concerns about the experience of lunchtime for children, which they hoped would be a positive, supportive and social experience. They felt that dining halls could be crowded, noisy and particularly intimidating for younger children and that UFSM may have made some of these problems worse due to increasing numbers taking school meals. This was an area that schools and local authorities felt needed further action.

'Some [dining halls] are at bursting point – is it an enjoyable experience for children? No, it isn't. In certain sites, it's not an enjoyable experience.'
(Local authority catering staff)

- **Increasing uptake:** Now that local authorities had mostly dealt with the implementation challenges of UFSM, their attention was turning to increasing the uptake of UFSM. There was no evidence of routine monitoring of UFSM uptake or exploration of the barriers to increasing uptake. However, many local authorities recognised the UFSM uptake levels varied between schools and were keen to see uptake increase. Some interviewees reported that attitudes of head teachers, who were less supportive of UFSM, and faced with wider budget cuts, presented challenges for activity to increase uptake.

'I think [low uptake figures] should be brought to the attention of the head teacher. I don't think they'll know what their percentage uptake is … We could maybe go out and say "Do you know that you are sitting at 44%? Can we have a look as to why, and what can we do?"'
(Local authority catering staff)

Identifying factors that influence uptake of UFSM

Three factors influencing uptake of UFSM were identified:

- **Knowledge of UFSM:** Knowledge of UFSM policy among parents was felt to be an important factor in increasing uptake. Schools and local authorities reported undertaking work initially to increase parental knowledge and this had led to a gradual increase in UFSM uptake. Schools reported that there were some parents, particularly those with English as a second language, who still lack knowledge of the benefit. These schools have taken steps to target these parents by providing information in other languages.

- **Attitudes towards school meals:** Parents spoke of their own childhood experiences of having free meals and their own beliefs about the quality, taste and nutritional value of school meals as influencing decisions on taking UFSM both positively and negatively. Schools and parents both reported that taster sessions had had a positive impact on parents' views of schools meals and had also helped encourage children to try school meals.

'All of the primary 1 cohort [parents] are offered the opportunity to come in and see a lunch service, and join their children in a lunch service, either just before they start full-time or the first week of them coming in full-time … It actually opens the adults' eyes.'
(Local authority catering staff)

- **Menus:** Parents and schools both commented that the appeal of the school menu offered to children varied and that this led to variation in uptake of UFSM over the course of the week. Sometimes this was due to the popularity of menu choices, and at other times it was felt that certain foods or combinations of foods may be unfamiliar to children and parents.

'Half the food the kids have never heard of. I think they should ask the kids what they would like to see.'
(Parent)

'Sometimes they don't make sense … The side portions don't seem to go with what the main meals are.'
(Parent)

Impact of UFSM

Research participants were asked about the impact of UFSM on both the outcomes identified in the theory of change (above) and the other unintended impacts.

- **Uptake of free school meals:** Both schools and local authorities reported that UFSM had led to increased uptake of free school meals among P1–3 children. However, levels of UFSM uptake varied between schools and also varied during the school week and between school terms.

'Some of our small rural [schools], we're at 100%. They're not a worry and they've never had any issues relating to the size of the dining room … What we have problems with is some of our burgh schools that have huge rolls and the dining facilities are not capable of taking much more. In these large schools, the uptake is lower.'
(Local authority catering staff)

- **Financial benefits for parents:** All of the parents interviewed welcomed the financial benefits that UFSM provided for them and other families with financial pressures. However, families who had been entitled to free meals under the previous system did not report new financial benefits. Many of those interviewed questioned why the policy was limited to P1–3s and worried about the impact on low-income families who are no longer entitled to free meals when their children move to P4.

'Since this [UFSM] came in he's went every day. I've just forced him because, to be honest, it'll probably save me about £50 a month or whatever because it's a load of rubbish I was buying to put in his pack lunch so, he's going every day.'
(Parent)

- **Nutritional benefits for children:** All of those interviewed recognised that school meals were often healthier than home packed lunches, and felt that UFSM meant that more children benefitted nutritionally. However, staff in schools and local authorities did feel that the impact of school meals was limited because many children did not take school meals every day, and there was limited support available to encourage children to select and eat a varied meal.

'So in primary 1 I always gave him a pack lunch but it was the same – I'd say rubbish – it was your Dunkers, Froobs, carton of juice. Tried to give a bit of fruit, but that would usually come home. Most of the pack lunch would come home every single day – apart from if I put in sweets or a packet of crisps.'
(Parent)

- **Other impacts:** A mixture of positive and negative unintended impacts were also identified. Schools and parents raised concerns that the increased numbers of children taking school meals following the introduction of UFSM may have added to existing problems. Noisy and crowded dining rooms were a concern, and having sufficient time available for all children to eat and play during lunchtimes was an ongoing challenge. However, the schools which had received investment due to UFSM to improve the dining and catering facilities said that this had improved the efficiency and experience of lunchtime for the whole school.

'He likes to play. That's his first complaint ... it takes a long while to wait cos there's a long queue.'
(Parent)

Actions to improve implementation and uptake of UFSM

The research identified nine action areas to further promote and sustain the uptake of UFSM:

1

Communication

Clearer communication of the rationale for the policy by the Scottish Government to school and local authority staff and parents would support action to increase uptake. This should include the expected benefits of UFSM for children and families, including the reason for targeting P1–3s.

2

Improving the dining environment

Concerns were raised about the impact of increased uptake of UFSM on the dining hall experience for children. Local authorities and schools should review the dining hall experience in individual schools and address any concerns. National agencies should facilitate the identification and sharing of good practice examples between schools and local authorities which have improved the dining hall experience for children.

3

Engaging parents and children

Taster sessions for parents and children helped increase UFSM uptake. Schools should therefore consider increasing opportunities for taster sessions.

4

Staffing

Schools reported that having sufficient catering and dining hall support staff, who are trained in encouraging children to make healthy choices and try new foods, has had a positive impact on uptake of school meals, and on what children choose and eat for school meals. Local authorities and schools should work together to ensure sufficient supervisory staff are available during lunchtime and consider how further training could be provided for staff.

5

Targeted support

Local authorities and the Scottish Government could offer further support for schools to raise awareness of the policy among parents with English as a second language.

6

Menu development

School staff and parents both reported that menus which are familiar and appeal to children were a potential way of increasing uptake of UFSM. Schools and local authorities should consider establishing or enhancing systems for parents and children to feed back on menu choices and to encourage more reflective approaches to menu development.

7 Partnership working

Partnership working between school catering and education staff improved implementation of UFSM. Local authorities should facilitate partnership working at all levels between education and catering to encourage greater integration of catering and food choices into wider school life.

8 Monitoring longer term uptake of UFSM

The existing national data on uptake of school meals, through the Healthy Living Survey, has several limitations, as it is limited to a snapshot of uptake on a single day. The Scottish Government should consider better ways of monitoring and evaluating the impact of UFSM in the longer term, such as making better use of more routine, local data on school meal uptake.

9 Monitoring uptake data

There was a lack of routine monitoring and interrogation of UFSM uptake data at a school or local authority level. Routinely analysing UFSM uptake data would encourage exploration of barriers to increasing uptake and help identify schools that may require support to increase uptake.

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