



Improving implementation and uptake of universal free school meals



Universal free school meals (UFSM) were introduced in Scotland in January 2015, offering free school meals to all pupils in primaries 1 to 3 (P1–3).

NHS Health Scotland is leading an evaluation of the UFSM policy, including an evaluation of the implementation of UFSM. This briefing summarises findings from the evaluation on how to improve implementation and uptake of UFSM. It is aimed at those involved in implementing UFSM and school food policy in schools and local authorities.

You can find further details of the evaluation findings here:

<http://healthscotland.com/freeschoolmeals>

The evaluation

The evaluation aimed to:

- understand how UFSM had been implemented
- identify ways to improve UFSM implementation
- identify ways to increase uptake of UFSM.

The evaluation involved research with three groups during 2015:

- Parents
- Schools
- Local authorities

Findings

Overall, local authorities and schools have reported that implementation has been successful and relatively straightforward. The initial focus of implementation was on meeting the expected increase in demand for school meals. The focus for most areas has now changed to increasing and maintaining the uptake of UFSM.

Improving implementation of UFSM

- **Partnership working:** Implementation has been most successful in schools where the head teacher and catering team have worked together to plan, agree and implement the required changes to the management of school meals. These schools viewed school meals as an important part of the school day and of children's education.



'Some schools have been very helpful and said, "Right, what we'll do is, we'll actually change the lunchtime service." And then on the flip side of that, we have schools that do none of that – won't even meet with us to discuss it.'

(Local authority catering staff)

- **Individual school approach:** Local authorities reported that every school presented its own unique set of challenges. These authorities found that working with individual schools to identify the most appropriate actions for each has been important for successful implementation.



'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)

- **Investing in staff:** Schools and local authorities agreed that having the appropriate levels of experienced and trained staff both in school kitchens and in the dining rooms was key for successful management of school meals, as the number of children attending increased with UFSM. Continuing to invest in and train staff will be important for improving implementation.



‘The [additional dining support staff] assist the younger pupils in their choice of food, make sure that they have their healthier choices there, help them cut food, help them clear their tray ... just to give them a much more settled environment. I went to a school yesterday at lunchtime and it’s working really, really well. It was such a nice, calm – calmer – dining room.’

(Local authority catering staff)

- **Sharing learning:** Although each school had its own unique combination of challenges, there were obvious common challenges to implementing UFSM between schools and local authorities. Many areas have been successful in overcoming these challenges during 2015. However, there is a lot of knowledge that could be shared between schools and local authorities to further improve implementation across Scotland.

Improving uptake of UFSM

- **Monitor uptake data:** Schools and catering teams told us they collected detailed data on the uptake of school meals, yet no one seemed to be routinely analysing this data. Routine analysis of UFSM and school meal uptake data at a school and local authority level could identify barriers to increasing uptake, and could highlight schools with low uptake of UFSM that may require support.



‘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)

- **Engage parents:** Parents have an important role in deciding whether a child takes a free school meal. Some parents had low awareness of UFSM, particularly those with English as a second language. Other parents still held negative views about the taste, quality and nutritional value of school meals. Taster sessions for parents and tailored information on entitlement to UFSM have both proved successful in increasing uptake.



‘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)

- **Support children:** Schools and parents would like lunchtime to be a positive, social and learning experience for children, providing opportunities to try new and healthy foods. Concerns were raised during our research that the increase in children taking school meals was having a negative impact on lunchtimes in some schools and discouraged some children from taking UFSM. A number of positive actions were taken in schools, including:
 - ensuring there are adequate levels of supervision and support within the dining halls, in particular providing support for younger children
 - staggering lunchtimes
 - investing in improving and expanding dining facilities.



‘A good sort of 40% of them, you know, they just, they don’t seem to understand the concept of school dinners. Just certain things like, “What colour token are you?” ... And they’ve got 50 kids standing behind them, waiting for baked potatoes ...’

(Head cook)

- **Collaborative menu development:** School staff and parents both reported that menus which are familiar and appeal to children are 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.



‘Half the food the kids have never heard of. I think they should ask the kids what they would like to see.’

(Parent)

For further information on the evaluation, contact:

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You can find detailed evaluation findings and further information here:

<http://healthscotland.com/freeschoolmeals>