



Process evaluation of the implementation of Universal Free School Meals: Research with parents

June 2015



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School Meals contact:

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the parents who gave up their
time to take part in the focus group discussions, NHS Health
Scotland and the wider project advisory group for providing
helpful support and guidance throughout the study, and
Sue Napier and Aileen Paton at the Institute for Social
Marketing for helping with the administration of the fieldwork.

Published by NHS Health Scotland

1 South Gyle Crescent
Edinburgh EH12 9EB

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ISBN: 978-1-84485-594-0

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Executive summary

About the study

This study was conducted as part of a process evaluation to assess implementation, uptake and any unintended consequences of the Universal Free School Meal (UFSM) Policy for Primary 1 to 3 children in Scotland. The process evaluation utilised a mixed methods approach divided into three linked research streams over two phases: research at local authority level, research at school level and research with parents. Together the three streams of research will provide a comprehensive overview of implementation and uptake of UFSM. This report focuses exclusively on the findings from the research with parents. The findings from the research with local authorities and schools will be published at the end of the study.



The parents component of the study aimed to provide insights to help explain variations in uptake. Understanding parents' perceptions also increased the study's ability to test assumptions in the theory of change that underpins the UFSM policy, as set out in NHS Health Scotland's evaluability assessment. Seven focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 37 parents who had at least one child registered for a P1, P2 or P3 class for the school year 2014–2015. Four of the groups comprised parents whose children were eligible for FSM in accordance with previous criteria before implementation of the UFSM policy (n=20). Three groups comprised parents who were ineligible (n=17). Parents were recruited from three local authorities, including: one urban area, one rural area and one semi-urban area. Fieldwork was conducted in February and March 2015, two to three months after implementation of the policy.



Theory of change assumptions

Exploration of the assumptions in the theory of change underpinning the policy suggested that many of the preconditions to gaining positive outcomes were becoming established. Parents were generally very supportive of the introduction of the UFSM policy despite uncertainty on the rationale behind the policy. The financial benefit UFSM offered families not previously eligible – and who, although working, struggled financially – was especially welcomed.

Parents were positive about the nutritional content of school meals, especially compared with packed lunches. Having a hot meal for lunch was important to many parents. The school meal sandwich option was also seen as having an advantage over a packed lunch as it limited the potential for less healthy foods. Perceptions of palatability and appeal to children were more mixed. Parent tasting sessions were encouraged by parents who had been given the opportunity to attend one as they often improved parents' perceptions of school meal food. Most parental criticisms of school meals surrounded the dining environment, including, for example: perceived long waits and queues, rushed meal times, and dining halls that were cramped and noisy. It is likely that parents held many of these views before the introduction of the UFSM policy, however, the perceived increase in uptake of school meals, placing stress on the dining environment, had added to their concerns.

Parents generally believed that children in P1–P3 did not experience stigma associated with FSM. Although it was an issue for some parents previously eligible for FSM, in most cases perceived stigma did not seem to affect uptake by this group before or after the introduction of the UFSM policy. There was no evidence to suggest that stigma was perceived by P1–P3 parents previously ineligible and who were now taking up FSM or not. Both sets of parents, previously eligible and ineligible, were in agreement that universal provision helped reduce any stigma associated with FSM perceived by parents.

Drivers of UFSM uptake

While parents were identified in the theory of change as key to the uptake of UFSM, in some families uptake was driven by the child. Child preferences were centred on menu choices, what their friends were doing, and having enough time to play; packed lunches were associated with less queuing time and could also be eaten more quickly. In other families, the parent made the decision about uptake. This was primarily driven by cost, although perceived nutrition of school meals and increased convenience for parents, many of whom described busy family lives, were further drivers for uptake.

Fussy eating could be a driver for uptake of school meals or not, depending on the parent's perspective. For some parents attendance for school meals was seen as a strategy for dealing with fussy eating. Exposure to a wide variety of foods and seeing peers eating different foods was thought to encourage fussy eaters to try new things. For other parents, concern over fussy eating instilled a reluctance to take up school meals; these parents preferred the greater control that a packed lunch offered in ensuring children were provided with food that parents knew they would eat.

Unintended consequences of implementation

For the potential unintended consequences identified by NHS Health Scotland in the theory of change, the increased convenience that the UFSM policy offered previously ineligible parents was a recurring theme throughout the discussions. Parents previously eligible for FSM thought that the UFSM policy would have little impact on their access to other linked benefits such as the school clothing allowance. There was also no perceived change to school meal food quality since the introduction.

Several other unintended consequences were identified. New administration systems introduced to help manage anticipated demand, such as pre-ordering, had some consequences for parents previously eligible for school meals. Some parents, for example, had to buy and prepare packed lunches if they had not managed to fill in the forms on time. Lunch menus and pre-ordering forms facilitated discussion and negotiation between parents and children. This could either be a barrier or facilitator of UFSM uptake.

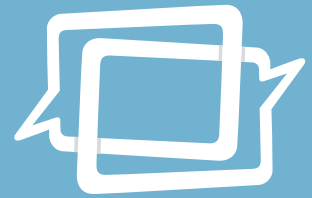
The perception of increased uptake among P1–P3 pupils normalised school meals for parents. The transition into P4 may create issues due to the financial readjustment for those no longer eligible, as well as having a social impact on children if some return to packed lunches because of the increased cost of school meals. Families who return to packed lunches may feel stigma because they cannot afford to meet the cost of school meals. Alternatively, parents may feel under pressure, or an expectation, to continue with school meals, even if their financial situation may mean difficulty in sustaining attendance.

Conclusion and recommendations

The UFSM policy appeared to be working well for the P1–P3 parents sampled. Several assumptions in the theory of change were supported by the focus group discussions: parents were supportive of the policy; universal provision appeared to reduce the perceived stigma of FSM for parents; and parents held positive views over the nutritional content of school meals. UFSM were a welcome financial benefit for parents previously ineligible for FSM under the criteria before implementation of the UFSM policy. However, there was some parental concern over the dining environment and the impact of progression into P4, especially for those who would no longer be eligible for FSM.

Four areas for future development and research were identified which could help improve implementation and uptake:

- Increased communication with parents to improve understanding of the P1–P3 UFSM policy.
- Increased engagement with parents, for example invitations to parent taster sessions and providing opportunities for parents to raise concerns and suggest improvements to school meals.
- Closer examination of the dining environment, along with parents and children's perceptions of the dining environment, to explore whether parental concerns need to be addressed.
- Further examination of the potential financial, social and health impacts of progression into P4.



1.1 Background

The research team from Stirling, Glasgow and Dundee Universities was commissioned by NHS Health Scotland to conduct a process evaluation of the Universal Free School Meal (UFSM) policy for P1–P3 children in Scotland. The evaluation was intended to assess implementation and uptake, and to identify any unintended consequences of the policy. The process evaluation utilises a mixed methods approach divided into three linked research streams over two phases: research at school level, research at local authority level (Phase 1 and 2) and research with parents (Phase 1). This report focuses exclusively on the findings from the research with parents, conducted in Phase 1, to provide insight into their experiences of school meals and how this relates to FSM uptake. Findings from the research at school and local authority level will be published at the end of the study. The findings from all three strands (parents, local authority and schools) will inform the final conclusions and recommendations of the UFSM process evaluation.

1.2 Policy context

With the launch of *Hungry for Success*,¹ Scotland led the way in school food reform within the UK. The guidance within *Hungry for Success* introduced nutrient standards for school meals. The standards were subsequently revised and then formalised as part of the Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools (Scotland) Regulations (2008).² Along with the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) Scotland Act (2007)³ the responsibilities in relation to school food were set out for ministers, local authorities and schools. Across Scotland, major changes have been implemented with nutritionally balanced menus provided to children within the school setting, yet there remain concerns around the foods that children actually eat within the school setting.⁴

In 2014, the Scottish Government launched *Better Eating, Better Learning*,⁴ which sets out a new context for school food. This is in addition to an increased policy focus on reducing health inequalities with the publication of *Equally Well*⁵ in 2008. Further work undertaken by NHS Health Scotland, the *Health Inequalities Policy Review*,⁶ considered evidence of policy interventions likely to reduce health inequalities. Provision of free school meals was highlighted within this review as having the potential to reduce health inequalities by removing price barriers to healthy food.

Until January 2015, school meals were only provided free of charge to children whose parents were in receipt of certain benefits or child tax credits, or older children themselves in receipt of benefits. Other children who chose to eat a school meal either paid a set price for an all-inclusive menu, or could choose from a variety of differently priced options, depending on the school's cafeteria system. Following positive results from an earlier trial⁷ and with the provision of additional funding, Scotland introduced universal free school meals for children in P1–P3 in January 2015. The targeted system of free school meals remains for children in P4 and above.

1.3 Aims and objectives

An evaluability assessment of UFSM was undertaken which developed a theory of change for how the policy might impact on identified outcomes. It assessed the availability of data, and the feasibility of monitoring and evaluating the impact of UFSM on these outcomes. The evaluability assessment recommended focus on the implementation of the policy and the impact on short-term outcomes, namely uptake of FSM.⁸ This study was commissioned to assess implementation of the UFSM policy and provide timely feedback to guide possible improvements. The original aim and objectives for the study focused on implementation of the UFSM policy at local authority and school level. Following enquiry about the scope of the study it was confirmed that the results should provide insights into variation in both implementation and uptake of UFSM. In agreement with NHS Health Scotland, parents were included in the study given their key role in the decision to take up free school meals, and to provide insights to help explain variations in uptake. Including parents also enhanced the study's capacity to test the assumptions in the theory of change that underpins the UFSM policy as set out in NHS Health Scotland's evaluability assessment.⁸

The aim and objectives of the study are as follows.

Aim:

To undertake a process evaluation of the implementation and uptake of UFSM by local authorities, schools and parents.

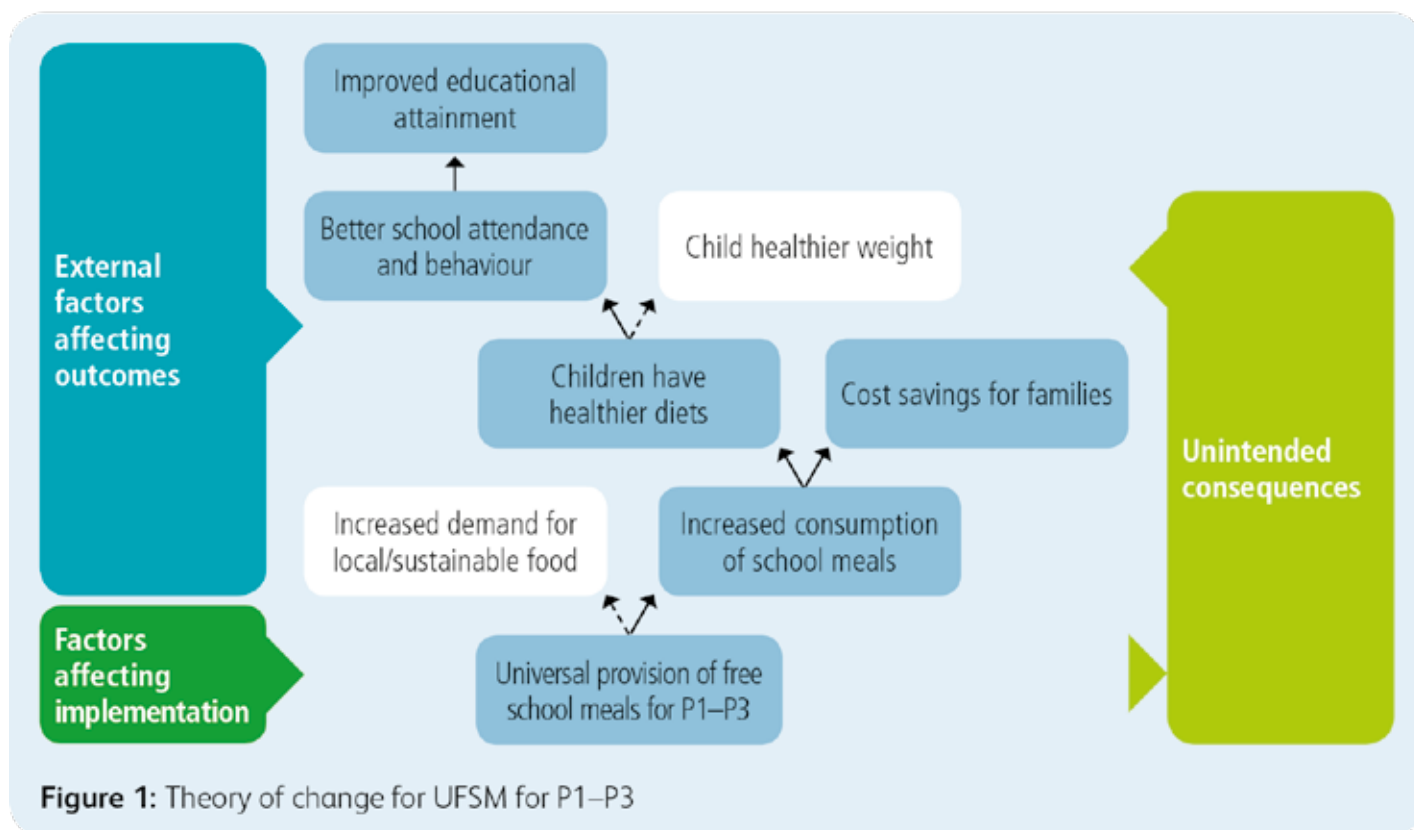
Objectives:

1. To identify key variations in implementation, i.e. those that may impact on the intended outcomes described in the theory of change.
2. Identify factors that may be contributing to differences in UFSM uptake across schools and local authorities as monitored by the annual Healthy Living Survey on school meal uptake data.
3. Identify the common barriers and facilitators to implementation and describe how these were overcome or utilised by local authorities and schools.
4. Identify and measure any unintended consequences of implementation and uptake both positive and negative, and whether and how schools/local authorities attempted to mitigate any unintended negative consequences.
5. Identify learning to improve further the implementation and uptake of UFSM for all P1–P3 pupils.

The research with parents contributes specifically to objectives 2, 4 and 5. The research with schools and local authorities will address all five research objectives and will be published at the end of the study.

1.4 Theory of change

The theory of change (see Figure 1) developed by NHS Health Scotland for UFSM provision was based on a rapid review of published evidence and developed in consultation with stakeholders.⁸ In coordinating the evaluation of UFSM for P1–P3 children in Scotland, NHS Health Scotland identified assumptions in the theory of change relevant to the provision of UFSM, external factors that might impact on policy implementation and potential positive and negative unintended consequences.



External factors

- Other school food policy (local and national).
- School approach to school meals and nutrition education.

- Parental engagement in school /school meals.
- Other demands on dual facilities, e.g. PE.
- Child Healthy Weight initiatives in schools.

- Welfare reforms and wider economic context.
- Food availability and cost.
- Levels of early years provision.

Underlying assumptions

- School meals are healthier than packed lunches.
- Children will eat the food provided.

- Children make healthy choices.
- Stigma/peer pressure will not affect P1–P3.
- Parents are supportive of UFSM policy.
- Schools provide a good lunchtime experience for children.

- Children eat each day (food is 'balanced' over a week).
- No compensatory unhealthy eating later in the day.

Potential unintended consequences

- Effect on claims for other benefits (e.g. clothing allowance) due to administrative link with FSM.

- Other aspects of school life suffer (e.g. PE, breakfast clubs).
- School meal food quality suffers.
- Increase inequalities – greater benefits for the better-off families.

- Current P4–P7 and other siblings are put off having school meals.
- Food waste increases.
- Parents' time freed up.



2.1 Study design

The parent strand of the process evaluation was designed to:

- identify factors that may be contributing to differences in UFSM uptake across schools and local authorities
- identify and measure any unintended consequences of UFSM
- identify learning to improve further the implementation and uptake of UFSM for all P1–P3 pupils.

Focus groups were employed to explore parents' perspectives on the factors influencing UFSM uptake. Qualitative methods are most appropriate when the objective is to gain insight and understanding of the dynamics of a particular topic. Focus groups offer an informal setting where participants can engage with one another and share different opinions on the subject.^{9,10}

Parents were recruited at community level through independent market research recruiters. Potential participants were identified by a combination of door knocking and street intercepts. If participants expressed an interest in participating, their eligibility was assessed using a structured recruitment questionnaire (see Appendix 1). If they met the sample criteria, they were left with the study information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 2 and 3) and re-contacted by the recruiter within two to three days to see if they wished to take part. Written informed consent was sought from all participants. The information sheet provided a brief overview of the research, what participation would involve and the potential risks attached to participation. It also explained that participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the research at any time. Should they wish to participate, participants were required to complete the written consent form which was collected at the discussion venue before the focus group discussion began.

Participants received £30 as a 'thank you' for taking part and as a contribution towards costs such as travel and child care. The length of each discussion ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. The discussions were conducted in February and March 2015, at informal community venues outwith the school setting.

2.2 Sample

Qualitative data were collected via seven independent discussion groups, n=37 (see Table 1). Parents were sampled according to their children's eligibility for free school meals under the previous criteria before implementation of the UFSM policy. Four of the recruited groups comprised parents whose children were eligible for FSM in accordance with the previous criteria (n=20) and three groups comprised parents whose children were ineligible (n=17). All parents had at least one child registered with a P1, P2 or P3 class for the school year 2014–2015 and the groups represented a mix of children who attended and did not attend regularly for FSM. Parents who were primary school teachers, working in the field of diet and nutrition, or who had a senior role in the local authority with regards to food policy were excluded from participating in the study.

Parents were recruited from three local authorities. The local authorities were selected to represent urban and rural geographies and differing levels of deprivation and affluence. One local authority comprised an urban area, one a rural area, and one a semi-urban area. Selection of local authorities was based on strong links with recruiters to enable the required sample to be achieved.

Group	Local authority	Previous FSM eligibility	Number of participants
1	urban	eligible	6
2	urban	ineligible	6
3	rural	eligible	3
4	rural	ineligible	5
5	semi-urban	eligible	6
6	semi-urban	eligible	5
7	semi-urban	ineligible	6

Table 1: Parent discussion groups

One extra group of parents whose children were previously ineligible for FSM was recruited. Conducting this extra group meant that it was possible to speak with both ineligible and eligible parents from each of the three local authority areas. An examination of participants' postcodes using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation* (SIMD) confirmed that, on average, parents previously eligible for FSM lived in less affluent areas (mean SIMD score = 2), while those previously ineligible, lived in more affluent areas (mean SIMD score = 4). The sample was predominantly female.

* The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation uses 38 indicators to rank small geographic areas (datazones) in Scotland in terms of their experience of multiple deprivation. It is therefore used as a measure of relative deprivation. Once ranked datazones can then be grouped, commonly into quintiles from SIMD 1 (most deprived 20% of datazones) to SIMD 5 (least deprived 20% of datazones).

2.3 Data collection

The discussion groups were moderated by two experienced members of the research team. A topic guide was used to assist the moderators to cover all relevant topics. The guide was informed by relevant themes identified by the theory of change underpinning the programme and explored factors that encourage or discourage FSM uptake. Topics were not explored in a prescriptive manner. Instead, participants were given the freedom to express their views as part of an open and free-ranging discussion, allowing salient topics and insights to emerge, while ensuring all topics of interest were examined. Topics explored with participants included: awareness and understanding of FSM; engagement with FSM; parental and children's food preferences; perceptions of school meals; stigma associated with FSM; perceptions of the UFSM policy; and areas for improving uptake (see Appendix 4).

2.4 Analysis

All discussions were recorded on digital voice-file with participants' permission and were fully transcribed. All data were imported into NVivo 10, a qualitative data analysis software programme, to facilitate data management and analysis (http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx). Analysis proceeded using a Thematic Analysis approach.¹¹ Transcripts of the discussion groups were initially read several times by the lead focus group moderator to identify emerging themes related to the uptake of FSM and themes related to the theory of change identified for the UFSM policy. This enabled the development of a coding framework into which the transcripts could be systematically coded into themes. The coded themes were then used as the categories for analysis enabling comparison between groups such as those previously eligible for free school meals and those not. The lead moderator coded the data and regular discussions took place among the research team regarding coding decisions and labelling of themes. The two group moderators were involved in interpreting the emerging analysis and commenting on the write-up of findings. The findings were also presented to and discussed with the project advisory group** at the end of Phase 1.

2.5 Ethics approval

Ethical approval and governance for the study was provided by the School of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Stirling. Review of NHS assessment criteria for research ethics confirmed that the study did not require NHS REC approval.

** Project advisory group members: Rachel McAdams, NHS Health Scotland, Evaluation Team (Commissioning Lead); Rebecca Sludden, NHS Health Scotland, Research Services; Claire Hislop, NHS Health Scotland, Programme Manager Food & Health; Laura Wilson, Education Scotland, Health and Nutrition Inspector; Greg Walker, Scottish Government Learning Directorate; Joanne Briggs, Scottish Government, Education Analytical Services Division; Fiona Crawford, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Public Health Directorate.



This section pulls together data from the seven parent discussion groups to provide detailed insight to aspects of FSM uptake. Many of the assumptions in the theory of change underpinning the programme, as perceived by parents, are described and analysed to identify factors that may contribute to differences in UFSM uptake (research objective 2). Unintended consequences of implementation, both positive and negative, which relate to parents, are also presented (research objective 4). Additionally, factors that encourage or discourage UFSM uptake are identified.

Key learning from the parents' discussions is presented under three headings:

- Assumptions in the theory of change.
- Drivers of UFSM uptake.
- Unintended consequences of implementation.

Verbatim quotes from parents are used in this section to illustrate key findings. Quotations are attributed to individuals according to description of local authority and eligibility for FSM under previous criteria: urban, semi-urban or rural, and eligible or ineligible (see section 2.2, Table 1).

3.1 Assumptions in the theory of change

A number of assumptions underpin the theory of change for UFSM (see section 1.4). These assumptions were identified as one component in achieving the identified outcomes of UFSM policy (NHS Health Scotland, 2014). The discussion groups with parents explored many of these assumptions the findings for which are presented below.

3.1.1 The nutritional content of school meals is better than packed lunches

Parents' perceptions of the nutritional content of school meals were more positive than their perceptions of packed lunches. Many believed that a school meal provided a more nutritious and balanced option. There was an assumption and element of trust among some parents that school meals, provided as part of a government-backed scheme, were controlled and monitored. In this vein, school meals were also thought to provide the correct portion size for a child.



'They're no' just making things willy-nilly. Ah dare say they've got dieticians and nutritionists in keeping them right... It's no sugar, no salt.'
(Eligible, semi-urban)

'Well you are thinking the government is putting all this money into it, it has to tick the boxes.'
(Ineligible, urban)

'At least at school I know he's getting the right portion amounts.'
(Eligible, rural)

School meals were often associated with a hot meal, perceived to provide greater nutrition than a packed lunch. A hot meal was raised as important by many parents, especially in the winter months.



‘They’re actually getting a proper decent big cosy home-made meal at school... I just like to know they’re getting a nice hot meal and they’re getting nutrition and getting a nice feed basically.’

(Eligible, rural)

Parents said that packed lunches offered less variety of foods than school meals. Pre-packaged foods, often included for convenience, were considered less nutritious than school meals. When more nutritious elements were included they were often returned home at the end of the day uneaten. Several parents said they were concerned about the amount of food they included in a packed lunch; the inclination was to include more than they thought their child needed.



‘So in Primary 1 I always gave him 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, 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.’

(Ineligible, semi-urban)

‘You can’t put stuff that’s nutritional in a pack lunchbox... as wide a variety in a pack lunch as what they’re getting from school dinners.’

(Eligible, rural)

Additionally, children appeared to have greater control over the contents of a packed lunch and would usually favour less healthy components. Peer pressure was also evident; some parents said their child would ask for certain types or branded foods. Often parents would compare a packed lunch with the school meal sandwich option which, although similar, provided less opportunity for their child to eat ‘junk’ foods.



‘If she gets a school dinner, there’s no crisps and there’s no biscuits in it so, and she’ll drink her milk. So I would rather her eat in cos it’s the same sandwich that she’s getting except... with me, making her pack lunch she’s like that, “I’ll have a tea-cake, a Blue Riband” do you know what I mean?’

(Eligible, semi-urban)

A small number of parents also identified that school meals could compensate for unhealthy eating at home.



'If she's having a hot dinner then I don't feel guilty if, at night, it's banana toast or you know, whatever they have.'

(Ineligible, rural)

'They probably are more healthy than that packed lunch that I gave them, that's probably why, "No you are going school dinners because your tea [dinner] is not going to be healthy, you are going school dinners".'

(Eligible, urban)

However, with packed lunches parents felt that they knew what and how much their children were eating as uneaten contents were usually returned home at the end of the day. This offered reassurance and dispelled worry for parents of fussy eaters.

3.1.2 Children will eat the food provided

There was some uncertainty among parents about how much children were eating. Some spoke of children being very hungry at the end of the school day, although it was unclear if parents thought that this was because their child had not eaten enough or if this hunger was simply characteristic of young growing children. Some parents were more certain that their children did not eat very much at lunchtime if they did not like the meal options. However, among some parents, regardless of this, they preferred their child to attend for school meals due to cost and convenience. In addition to an uncertainty over how much children were eating, some parents said they were unsure whether their children were taking all the menu components they were entitled to. This was sometimes attributed to a lack of confidence or awareness in younger children. Other parents felt that children skipped parts of the meal to have more time to play.



'I think if you were to say to [daughter's name], "You can have this" she would take it but because she doesn't – I don't think she realises – cos I'm trying to say to her, if she takes a sandwich, "Please take other stuff. Ask what you're allowed to take", cos I can never remember what they're allowed. I said, "You are allowed other stuff as well as a sandwich – don't just take the sandwich" you know? I think she doesn't realise. You know, I think when they're so young that maybe...'

(Ineligible, rural)

'I do get a feeling that [son's name] wolfs his food down just to get out and play... there was a while when I knew he wasn't eating pudding and stuff like that.'

(Ineligible, urban)

Related to these issues, many parents were concerned that there was a lack of monitoring in the dining room, and little feedback on how much and what children were eating. Discussions in the rural local authority were an exception to this. Some parents in these groups said they did get feedback as, living in smaller communities, they knew dining hall staff personally.



‘There’s not enough supervision...My daughter usually just eats the main and then the vegetable, leaves the potato, cos she’s not so keen on potato and half of the time she doesnae drink her juice or milk. She’s not good at drinking at this moment so I keep asking the teacher if she had, to keep an eye on but apparently their teacher’s not the one who supervises lunches.’

(Ineligible, semi-urban)

‘I mean I’ve asked the teacher a couple of times and she is like “oh yeah she did eat quite a lot” but I don’t think she is standing there watching like the whole class and what they are eating ken, because they will be on their break by then.’

(Eligible, urban)

‘With the school dinners, you don’t really know what they’re eating cos you’re not gonnae get any feedback from the teachers...There’s too many kids.’

(Ineligible, semi-urban)

‘Well obviously with this being, like, a small town, you know a lot of the workers that are in there so you know that they’re getting well monitored.’

(Eligible, rural)

3.1.3 School meals are palatable/appeal to children

Compared to the positive perceptions of school meal nutrition, parents’ perceptions about their palatability and appeal to children were mixed. Appeal was closely related to menu choices. Some parents complained that the choices were not appropriate for young children, offering unfamiliar foods such as couscous and risotto. Others were impressed by the menu and thought that it offered a good and interesting variety.



‘There is not a very good selection of food and I mean half the food the kids have never heard of. I think they should ask the kids what they would like to see, ken and they would probably be happy with their pizza and their sausages and, but I mean stuff like couscous and risottos and stuff like that, the kids are not going to eat that.’

(Eligible, urban)

‘It’s pretty good you know, you get your pizza, and chicken bits as well as sweet and sour chicken and, there is quite a range.’

(Ineligible, urban)

Some parents had noticed a positive influence on their child's eating habits from attending for school meals. Parents of some fussy eaters said that their child would happily try or eat foods at school that they refused at home. Other parents welcomed school meals because they offered an opportunity to taste foods that would not be provided at home.



'I quite like the school meals because it is introducing them to new foods and, I mean, even if her Aunt comes over to my house, her Aunt will make her, like, stewed sausage and she ate every bit of that. So see if I made it, "I'm not going near that",' so I quite like the idea of her going to school meals cos it's new things, she's trying new things, without being pressured, from me, and that's what I like about it so I'm quite happy that she's happy.'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

'I don't think my son would ever ask for chicken casserole for lunch if he was at the house. But he eats it at school.'

(Ineligible, urban)

'And she's had bean-burgers. Now I would never have bean-burgers in the house but she's really enjoyed bean-burgers and it's given her an opportunity to have stuff that I wouldn't.'

(Ineligible, rural)

Some parents said they thought the combinations of side and main components were unusual. One child, for example, had asked her mother why she had been given pizza with a side of mashed potato. Some parents suggested that making small changes in how food was prepared could increase appeal to children, such as omitting vegetables from mince, offering a pudding without custard instead of automatically pouring it on top, or putting butter on baked potatoes. However, for children who did not want to take up the main offerings, the daily option of sandwiches and baked potatoes were often seen as a fallback.



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

(Ineligible, rural)

'If my one doesn't like anything that is on the menu then they just go for the baked potato that's at the bottom... I just wish they'd put some like maybe butter or salt or sauce or something just to make it taste a bit better for them.'

(Eligible, urban)

Offering parents tasting sessions appeared to be dependent on the school. In each group, some parents had been invited to attend a tasting session and some had not. Often, but not always, these sessions improved parental perceptions about the palatability of school meals. Many appeared to have enjoyed attending tasting sessions and appreciated the engagement with the school.



‘When my wee girl started Primary 1, the parents got invited to go to school meals with them... So we actually got to try it and obviously see what it was all about and it was good....Yeah, it was lovely.’

(Eligible, semi-urban)

‘I went in for a taster session in P1 and I was quite surprised because I remember school dinners being really disgusting but I was like actually these are quite nice you know so....’

(Ineligible, urban)

‘Did you guys ever go to a taster thing in P1 when they started? I remember it was horrible, there was no like sauce, salt, and I thought it was really bland. I thought she’d hate it but she loves the school dinners.’

(Eligible, urban)

3.1.4 Stigma/peer pressure will not affect P1–P3

Overall, participants were in agreement that stigma surrounding FSM was not an issue for younger school-age children, but felt that it became more of an issue as children got older and became more socially aware. Some parents identified that card payment systems had helped to reduce stigma among children, however stigma among parents still appeared to be an issue.



‘I think parents in the playground universally have a preconceived idea of which pupils have free meals... P1, P2, P3, I think they are totally unaware of class difference.’

(Ineligible, urban)

‘They’re that young anyway, they’re not paying attention to who’s paying and who’s not.’

(Eligible, rural)

One group of eligible parents highlighted that before the introduction of the new policy, they felt it was obvious to others that their children were in receipt of FSM on a Friday. This was a half-day of schooling but only some children were provided with a school packed lunch to take away.



‘My [son] comes out on a Friday, “I’ve got my packed lunch”, and everybody in the whole playground knows he gets free dinners, it’s handy now that they all get it... because his pal’s mum was like, “Don’t tell everybody that son”.’

(Eligible urban)

Often, parents previously eligible for FSM, had themselves attended for FSM in their childhood. Many in this group spoke about the stigma they had felt as children and recalled negative experiences. These thoughts were sometimes transferred onto their children, making stigma of FSM a concern for this group of parents.



'It's funny cos I worry, I do worry about him going to school dinners... I suppose it's just like a stereotypical thing, I think, "Oh, that's a shame, they're getting a free school meal".'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

'I remember when I was back at school, like, everybody used to make a huge deal out it. "Oh, they get free school dinners." ... You did get bullied.'

(Eligible, rural)

In the majority of cases however, stigma, although perceived by the parents, did not appear to affect uptake of FSM before the introduction of the new policy. Indeed many said they appreciated the financial and time-saving benefits of FSM. One parent described the norm of eligibility for FSM passing through the generations:



'See, I was always a free meal in school... I've never seen it any different. It's like, "Well, my kids get what I got so".'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

However, another parent, although eligible under the previous criteria, had chosen not to claim for FSM. Although previously reluctant to claim for FSM, this parent was able to take advantage of the new policy.



'Cos I used to get a ticket, and I'm talking about a raffle style ticket... I didnae want that. I don't know if it's still the same... But I had that stigma of being a wean and getting handed that ticket... and they looked down on you.'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

For both of the parents quoted above, the UFSM policy was welcomed with regards to reducing their fears of stigma. They went on to say:



'The stigma might actually change now.'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

'So now... you're not gonnae get judged because you get free meals and they don't.'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

It was highlighted by both previously eligible and ineligible parents that this was one of the benefits of the new policy; the risk of parents feeling stigmatised was reduced if everybody was the same. There certainly appeared to be no fear of stigma for parents who were previously ineligible now benefiting from UFSM.

3.1.5 Parents are supportive of UFSM policy

The change in policy appeared to be clearly communicated to parents in advance of its introduction, most parents were aware of its introduction prior to the new school term. Notice of the new policy had been communicated by schools primarily in newsletters, and, to a lesser extent, text messages. Many participants also recalled hearing about the universal policy on television news. Others said they had heard about it on the radio and through word of mouth. However, while participants were aware of the universal policy, the rationale behind the policy did not appear to have been communicated to them. Parents were especially uncertain about why the policy only applied for P1–P3 with the exclusion of older age groups. Most of the criticism surrounding the policy centred on this theme.



‘Why a P3 but not a P4? Why is a P3 more deserving than a P4?’

(Ineligible, urban)

‘I don’t think three years is enough to instil healthy eating when they’re so young. I think it needs tae be carried on up until at least Primary 7.’

(Eligible, rural)

‘In some ways the older kids could actually be more needing it because they’ve probably got more on after school than what the little ones (have). They’ll have more homework... more activities, more vigorous stuff so, in theory, if you were gonnae split it, you know, and if it was for them kind of reasons, then....’

(Ineligible, rural)

The quotes above relate to parents’ uncertainty about the background to the policy. In the discussion groups parents offered reasons they thought could be behind the policy. These included suggestions that the policy was designed to help with childhood nutrition and obesity. However, some parents were confused that if this was the objective, why universal provision would stop after P3. Other participants thought that the policy was politically-driven in order to help win votes; introduced to help parents financially and time-wise; or a strategy to improve concentration in children. Two participants thought that the policy was on a trial run. Several parents said provision beyond P3 was restricted due to budgets. One other participant interpreted the policy as a criticism of parents – that the government thought parents were not providing their children with an adequate diet in terms of nutrition.

Despite uncertainty over the background to the policy, in general, parents were very supportive of the change to UFSM. There were several drivers for this. Some were supportive because they identified population level benefits from the policy such as reducing hidden child poverty and stigma around FSM.



‘Because you don’t know their background, sorry but, I do, I just think well regardless of what goes on at least they are getting a proper meal.’
(Ineligible, urban)

‘There’s so much, like, child poverty and things like that now that you’re not even aware of, and that families are out working but could have less than someone that’s not working and I think it’s just, you know then that all these children have the opportunity of a decent meal.’
(Ineligible, semi-urban)

‘It’s quite good that it’s for everyone though so, like, the stigmatised thing isn’t so much.’
(Eligible, semi-urban)

Parents were also supportive of the change in policy as it offered individual level benefits. Those parents previously ineligible for FSM often spoke of the financial benefit it offered them. Some parents previously eligible for FSM also saw this as a positive thing. Several parents in this group empathised with working parents who had to pay for school meals, often drawing on specific examples of family and friends with financial struggles. School meals were often seen as an expensive option, particularly for families paying for more than one child.



‘It’s good for kids that didnae get it. If their parents maybe had to pay and struggling. It didnae make a difference to me but if, like, for people that maybe had to pay.’
(Eligible, semi-urban)

‘For our situation it was definitely great because we are always on that threshold, we never get any help with anything but we are always struggling, you know. Many folk are now and I think it was just this has made such a massive difference, it really has.’
(Ineligible, urban)

‘I think they’re really quite costly... it’s away up to £1.90.’
(Ineligible, rural)

Parents also spoke of the convenience UFSM offered them. Many spoke of busy lives or juggling work and family life. Children attending for school meals meant parents did not have to spend time preparing packed lunches or ensuring they had money available to pay for lunches.



'I feel quite relieved when they do say they want to go school dinners, in the morning, cos I'm thinking, "Yeah, something else I don't have to think about". Cos usually I've to go to work, like, early mornings, so it's just a mad rush to get everything organised.'

(Ineligible, rural)

A minority of the sample were unsupportive of the policy. These parents were from the group of parents previously eligible for FSM. They could not see any added benefit of wider provision.



'Like the situation that I'm in at this minute, they would be getting free school meals anyway... Worse off kids, they were getting a healthy meal anyway so I just don't... I just dinnae see the point.'

(Eligible, rural)

3.1.6 Schools provide a pleasant eating environment

The dining environment was the aspect of school meals most strongly criticised by participants. The assumption in the theory of change was that schools provide a pleasant eating environment in terms of queuing, space, enough time for eating and a good balance of social time to spend with friends over lunch. Parents expressed concerns over all these issues. There were some complaints of long wait times and queues. Often this resulted in less time for children to play. For this reason some children were asking to be provided with a packed lunch.



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

(Ineligible, rural)

'Well, she says to me a few times, "Oh, I didn't get to play for long today Mummy," and things like that. She wants to eat something and be straight out to play. Whereas I think, in a school dinner now, there's much more of them taking a school dinner, she's waiting longer for her dinner so she's not getting as much to play.'

(Ineligible, semi-urban)

Some parents said their children were given an allocated time in which to eat school meals. Lunchtime was therefore thought to be rushed so the school could accommodate everyone. Parents also thought that a combination of waiting for school meals and the desire to spend more time playing meant that when children did sit down to eat, they were rushing to finish so they could leave the dinner hall.



'[School name] is quite big and they do have timeslots for their lunches and stuff so, if they're not finished, I think they just get kicked out the door.'

(Ineligible, semi-urban)

'I don't think they get long to eat their dinner to be honest with you, they only get a, what ten minutes and you don't even ken if they are eating it or not... they get to play afterwards that's why and so they are just rushing it as well, that's what I find with mine. They are just rushing it to get out to play.'

(Eligible, urban)

Having listened to their children's accounts, some parents believed that the dining space was cramped and noisy. Another complained about the system in her child's dining hall. This parent was concerned that pre-ordered choices were already set out on tables for children, giving them no choice of where they sat. Separation from friends at lunchtime was a concern of parents.



'I think it must be cramped, I think it must be chaotic, the schools are bursting at the seams, and they are bigger so we are already seeing like two extra tables have been added in, that's a big flag in itself.'

(Ineligible, urban)

'It's more been, like, more just, "It's too busy and it's too noisy".'

(Ineligible, semi-urban)

'My wee boy, sometimes he, or the teachers are there sometimes, so they'll just say, "Go and sit there. Go and sit there," wherever there's a space so he moans quite a lot o' the times.'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

The separation of those eating packed lunches from those having school meals, particularly where parents said their children were eating packed lunches in classrooms to make space for those having school meals, was also raised as an issue.



'I just worry that, if there's any separation between, like, the school meal kids and the pack lunch kids, cos I don't know if they eat in the same place or if they eat in the classroom and... I suppose that would reassure me that, well it's not, like, a division.'

(Eligible, semi-rural)

'Mine's, this is a frustration, if they want a packed lunch they have got to take it and sit in the classroom which I think is ridiculous.'

(Eligible, urban)

'Yeah that is one thing that I really like about [school meals] actually and it's not really to do with the food but [school name] is bursting at the seams because they closed schools in the surrounding area so my kids would have their packed lunches in the classroom and I think that is really unhealthy and so I really like the fact that she now eats in the dinner hall.'

(Ineligible, urban)

Some parents were also concerned over the ability of younger-aged children to cope with the dining environment and the processes involved in taking a school meal.



Respondent 1: When I think of my wee boy, P1, they're still really young, for what they have to do. They have to queue and then they have to get their own tray and then they have to get the stuff on their own tray and then they have to find their way to a seat...

Respondent 2: And it's really noisy, isn't it, in there? It'd be quite intimidating, especially for the younger ones.'

(Ineligible, rural)

3.2 Drivers of UFSM uptake

Participants described different approaches in terms of who, and how, they decided to take up the offer of UFSM. Lunch menus and pre-ordering forms introduced by schools to help manage anticipated increase in demand, facilitated discussion and negotiation between parents and children. This could either be a barrier or facilitator of UFSM uptake. Parents often described looking at the menu with their child to decide whether their child would attend for school meals and what they would have for lunch. Some parents described a more child-led approach to uptake.



'They go and check it [menu] themselves and so, if, "No, I'm not going today because there's nothing that I would like", so they do choose for themselves whether they want to go or not, and then that's when the packed lunch comes into play.'

(Ineligible, rural)

Children's preferences were driven by menu choices and what their friends did for lunch. Some parents also said their children would request a packed lunch so they could spend more time playing at lunchtime; packed lunches were associated with less queuing time and could be eaten more quickly.



“Well, me and such and such, we’re gonnae go a school dinner tomorrow.” Know what I mean? ...Or else they’ll say, “No, no, we’re going a pack lunch today so that we can go and play for longer,” or whatever.’ (Ineligible, semi-urban)

Other parents described a parent-driven approach to uptake and that they would have final say in whether their child attended for school meals. Parental preference for school meals was primarily driven by cost. A number of parents said they sent their children for school meals even though they were uncertain whether their child was eating enough.



‘[Daughter’s name] goes for school dinners but she sees all her other wee friends with their packed lunch and she goes mummy I want one of them every day. But I am like, “No, you just have to go school dinners I’ve not got money”.’

(Eligible, urban)

‘Since this 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. The dinner lady has actually stopped members of my family, saying, “This is the child that doesn’t eat in school, he doesn’t really eat any of the...” He says he eats some of the dinners but I think he’s not really eating much of it. But he’s going, whether he likes it or not.’

(Ineligible, semi-urban)

Convenience and nutrition also played a role in parental preference for school meals. One parent described how attending for UFSM took the pressure off having to make a cooked meal at dinnertime; there was an assumption that the child had eaten adequately at school.



‘I just prefer him going school dinners. It’s easier for me, it’s better for him.’

(Eligible, rural)

‘It’s just the reassurance... You know they are getting something hot and a dessert.’

(Ineligible, urban)

‘It takes the pressure off a bit. Especially when I, like I work, normally work full-time... By the time I get home it’s 6.30pm and then I have to try and cook something, so if I know she’s having school dinners, I can then just give her a sandwich or something small that’s, like, cocktail sausages and a little platter, of like, cheese and biscuits, so that I know she’s already had her dinner as such.’

(Ineligible, rural)

Fussy eating could be a driver for uptake of school meals or not, depending on the parent's perspective. For some parents, attendance for school meals was seen as a strategy for dealing with fussy eating. Exposure to a wide variety of foods and seeing peers eating different foods was thought to encourage fussy eaters to try new things. For other parents, concern over fussy eating instilled a reluctance to take up school meals; these parents preferred the greater control that a packed lunch offered in ensuring children were provided with food that parents knew they would eat. However, even among some parents previously eligible for school meals, the concern over fussy eating was so great, they would not take up UFSM entitlement.



'Because we did pay for [son's name] to have school lunches, just because he can be quite difficult with eating and I thought if he's going school lunches he will probably eat what all his peers eat.'

(Ineligible, urban)

'He's very fussy so I know if, what I put in the pack lunch, I know it's stuff that he likes so he's gonnae eat it.'

(Eligible, semi-rural)

3.3 Unintended consequences of implementation

3.3.1 Potential unintended consequences identified by NHS Health Scotland

Potential unintended consequences of UFSM, both positive and negative, were identified by NHS Health Scotland.⁸ These were: an effect on claims for other benefits (e.g. clothing allowance) due to administrative links with FSM; other aspects of school life suffer (e.g. PE, breakfast clubs); school meal quality suffers or improves; increased inequalities; P4–P7 and other siblings are put off having school meals or encouraged to take up school meals; food waste increases; and parents' time freed up.

Parents were able to comment on some of these in the discussion groups, such as whether or not their time had been freed up, but had little to say on others. The convenience that the UFSM policy had offered previously ineligible parents, many of whom said they had increased their child's uptake of FSM since the introduction of the policy, was a recurring theme throughout the discussions.



'It's easier I think because see when I am making packed lunches I've either got to do it at night if I am working first thing in the morning and then by the time you get in from work get them ready, I forget half the time. And then I am up at the crack of dawn trying to make a packed lunch... It's just so much convenience.'

(Ineligible, urban)

Another two of the potential unintended consequences identified by NHS Health Scotland did not appear to be a concern for parents. Those parents previously eligible for FSM thought the new policy would have little impact on their access to the school clothing allowance. They said that they intended to apply for the clothing grant in the same way. There was also no perceived change to school meal food quality since the introduction.

3.3.2 Further unintended consequences identified in discussions with parents

The discussions with parents identified several other unintended consequences. First, new administration systems for UFSM such as pre-ordering systems had some consequences for parents previously eligible for school meals. Some parents described ordering systems as rigid procedures with certain days for returning forms. Should parents forget they would miss out on UFSM for the following period. This resulted in previously eligible parents spending money to buy food to prepare packed lunches.



‘It’s just annoying with the slip, if you forget it then you are like...Like they don’t get the school dinners you have to give them the packed lunch.’

(Eligible, urban)

Ordering systems also encouraged greater discussion about school meals. One eligible parent described how looking at menu choices had led her child to put more pressure on her to provide a packed lunch. Rising cost of food was a particular concern of this group of eligible parents.



‘See now, that thing, that sheet she’s started from just the end of last year, but since it started now you are actually asking them what they want and ticking it they will be like, “I don’t like that, I want packed lunch that day”.’

(Eligible, urban)

Some parents also described concerns over progression into P4, especially those previously ineligible who under the UFSM system were attending more frequently. Concern related to the financial readjustment of having to pay for school meals again. This was highlighted by the ineligible parents, but some eligible parents also considered that it would be difficult for this group.



‘It’s going to be hard; it’s going to be a real adjustment.’

(Ineligible, urban)

‘Ah think that’s the hard thing about your kid going every day. Cos then it’s like, that’s a tenner a week or probably then it’ll be more. That’s a lot of money.’

(Ineligible, semi-rural)

‘See for the people that it’s just happening to for a few months, it is gonnae be quite confusing cos you’re gonnae save and you’re gonnae get used to spending that money. And then you’re gonnae get hit with it again.’

(Eligible, semi-urban)

Several parents said that they would return to packed lunches once their children reached P4. Packed lunches were perceived to be a more cost-effective solution in families with more than one child.



'I'll be really honest and that, after the summer, when she's P4, it will be more cost efficient for me anyway, for her going pack lunch.'

(Ineligible, rural)

'I'll just revert back to what we did before.... I think because if I have to pay for something, I'd want to make sure that she is eating it.'

(Ineligible, rural)

An anticipated reduction in uptake for school meals once their children reached P4, gave some concern about children not being able to eat and spend time with friends at lunchtime.



'Although, my daughter's already saying, she's already freaking out about P4... She's in a split class so she's currently in a P2/3 class so, after the summer, that class will consist of a P3/4 class so if the kids that are then in P3 are still taking advantage of the free meals every day and I'm back to, "You're only getting it if it's something you're gonnae eat proper well", that I'm not having to do another meal at night-time, then that's what she was already saying to me cos a couple of her friends are in the younger group. She's like, "But if that happens, I'll not be able to sit with them for lunch." And she's already getting worked up. I'm like, "Look, it's not till after the summer," and, "We'll sort it," but I hadn't really thought of that.'

(Ineligible, rural)

'All the kids that can't afford – their Mums and Dads can't afford it – they might go away and sit with their pack lunch friends again. Instead of just sitting with your friends, you play with them every day, I think it will separate them. When it's not free.'

(Eligible, semi-urban)

Finally, UFSM provision for P1–P3 had influenced perceptions of social norms among participants. Parents generally perceived that school meal uptake among P1–P3 children had increased since the introduction of the policy. This perception had therefore normalised school meals for many parents and children. As a result, increased uptake provided the opportunity to eat with friends. Some parents thought this provided social benefits for children.



‘So you see it amongst the other parents, they are sending their kids for the meals.’

(Ineligible, urban)

‘The wee yin did kind of jump to going for a meal from pack lunches and I think because there’s more of her pals benefiting from the meals, she’s wanting to do meals. So I think it’s quite a good social thing as well.’

(Eligible, rural)

‘I mean [son’s name] did say... “And now he’s going... and so and so goes, and so and so goes”, and you know you could see them all sitting around the table all chatting away or whatever you know.’

(Ineligible, urban)



4.1 Factors influencing uptake of UFSM

From the perspective of parents the change to UFSM provision for P1–P3 appeared to be working well. In line with research objective 2, the findings have identified factors that may contribute to UFSM uptake. Exploration of the assumptions in the theory of change underpinning the programme suggested that many of the preconditions for gaining positive outcomes were becoming established. Uncertainties remained about the background of the policy, particularly the rationale for stopping UFSM at the P3 age group. However, parents appeared very supportive of the change to UFSM and generally framed their thinking about the policy in terms of perceived benefits for themselves and for others. The financial benefit UFSM offered families not previously eligible but who, although working, struggled financially, was especially welcomed. Increased uptake and cash savings, particularly for those newly eligible families on low incomes, were key outcomes identified in the theory of change. Several participants in the sample of those previously ineligible for FSM considered themselves to be members of a ‘borderline’ group of parents who were on low incomes but over the threshold for claiming benefits. Similarly, many in the group of parents who were eligible for FSM under the previous regime sympathised with ‘borderline’ parents, drawing on examples of working family and friends. Related to this, many parents were supportive of the policy as they believed it could help children in families affected by in-work poverty.

Parents were positive about the nutritional content of school meals, especially compared with packed lunches. Having a hot meal for lunch was important to many parents. The school meal sandwich option was also seen to have an advantage over a packed lunch as it limited the potential for less healthy foods. These parental perceptions are similar to some of the reasons why a healthier diet was identified as a key outcome of UFSM uptake in the theory of change. Perceptions of palatability and appeal to children were more mixed. Some parents were impressed by the variety of menu choices and believed exposure to different foods helped increase the range of foods their child would eat. Parent tasting sessions were encouraged by those who had the opportunity to attend one, as they often improved parents’ perceptions of school meal food. However, there was criticism that some of the foods on offer were unfamiliar to young children, and that meals comprised unusual combinations of side and main dishes. There was uncertainty among some parents as to how much their child was eating and many felt there was a lack of monitoring and feedback from schools. There was concern about the ability of younger-aged children to cope with dining hall systems. Indeed, much of the criticism of school meals by the parents related to the dining environment. Many perceived long wait times and queues, resulting in less time for children to play. Some thought meal times were rushed and that dining halls were cramped and noisy. Parents were especially concerned over the separation of their child from friends because of dining hall arrangements. Such concerns usually came from the children themselves. It is likely that parents held many of these views before the introduction of the UFSM policy, but the perceived increased uptake of school meals, placing stress on the dining environment, added to their concerns.

Parents generally believed that any stigma about FSM was not an issue for their P1–P3 children. Although it was an issue for some parents previously eligible for FSM, in most cases perceived stigma did not seem to affect FSM uptake by this group, before or after the introduction of the UFSM policy. There was one exception of a parent who, under the new system, was happy to receive UFSM, but under the previous system had refused to claim for the benefit. Several other parents in this sample group noticed their children asking to go to school meals more often because their friends were now going, suggesting that more parents were taking advantage of UFSM more regularly under the new system. There was no evidence to suggest stigma was perceived by P1–P3 parents, previously ineligible, who were now taking up UFSM; and no evidence to suggest stigma was an issue for those parents previously ineligible who were not taking advantage of the change in policy. For this latter group of parents, fussy eating appeared to be the primary driver for the decision to continue with packed lunches. Both sets of parents, previously eligible and ineligible, were in agreement that universal provision helped reduce any stigma perceived by parents associated with FSM.

While parents have been identified as key to the uptake of UFSM, in some families uptake was driven by the child. Child preferences were centred on menu choices, what their friends were doing, and having enough time to play. In other families, the parent made the decision about uptake and this was primarily driven by cost, although fussy eating was a major concern for some. Increased convenience for parents, many of whom described busy family lives, was a further driver for uptake.

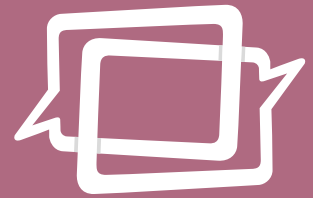
4.2 Unintended consequences of UFSM

In line with research objective 4, the study also explored unintended consequences of UFSM. The findings suggest that UFSM has had a positive impact on parents' time, one of the potential unintended consequences identified in the theory of change for the UFSM policy. Another potential unintended consequence identified by NHS Health Scotland relevant to parents was the impact on siblings with respect to whether they were put off or encouraged to take up school meals. However, little was said about this in the discussions. This may be because the research was conducted too early in the UFSM implementation for parents to have formed an opinion. There was no perceived change to food meal quality or impact on other benefits linked with UFSM among parents.

The discussions suggest that universal provision for P1–P3, and the associated perception of increased uptake, had normalised school meals for P1–P3 parents. However, the discussions also suggest that the normalisation of school meals may result in unintended consequences when children progress into P4, particularly for parents who become ineligible for FSM again and who are struggling financially. The findings suggest that the transition into P4 may create issues as children return to packed lunches because of the increased cost of school meals. Families who go back to packed lunches may feel stigma because they cannot afford to meet the cost of school meals. Alternatively, parents may feel under pressure to continue with school meals even though their financial situation may mean difficulty in sustaining attendance.

5

Conclusions and recommendations



5.1 Conclusions

The UFSM policy appeared to be working well for the P1–P3 parents sampled. Several assumptions in the theory of change were supported by the focus group discussions: parents were supportive of the policy; universal provision appeared to reduce the perceived stigma of FSM for P1–P3; and parents held positive views over the nutritional content of school meals. FSM were a welcome financial benefit for parents previously ineligible for FSM under the old criteria. However, there was some parental concern over the dining environment and the impact of progression into P4, especially for those who would no longer be eligible for FSM.

The findings from the research with parents will be complemented by the research with schools and local authorities, due to be published at the end of the study. Together these three streams of research will provide a comprehensive overview of implementation and uptake of UFSM.

5.2 Recommendations

This section suggests some recommendations identified from the study findings. The key learning identified here could help further improve implementation and uptake of UFSM (research objective 5).

5.2.1 Increased communication and understanding

While there was good parental awareness of the introduction of the UFSM policy, the discussions identified a lack of communication and parental understanding about the background and rationale for the policy. Improved communication and understanding may contribute to more positive parental perceptions of universal provision for P1–P3 and influence uptake. There is also a need for ongoing communication so that parents with children entering P1 in the new school year are fully informed of the policy.

5.2.2 Increased engagement with parents

The discussions found that parents welcomed invitations to attend parent tasting sessions at their child's school. Often, sampling the food on offer had positively influenced parents' perceptions about palatability and appeal of school meals. Providing more parents with the opportunity to attend a tasting session may therefore influence parents' perceptions of school meals and uptake. Furthermore, engaging with parents about the dining environment and lunchtime systems may help alleviate parental concerns about the lunch environment, monitoring and supervision, and children having enough time to play. This would also provide an opportunity for parents to raise concerns to the school and suggest improvements.

5.2.3 Closer examination of the dining environment

Parents were critical of the dining environment for school meals. Closer examination of the dining environment, along with parents and children's perceptions of the dining environment, is required to explore whether there are issues that need to be addressed.

5.2.4 Further examination on the impact of progression into P4

Parents expressed concern over the transition into P4, when many would no longer be eligible for FSM. While cost savings to families are identified in the theory of change as a key outcome of the UFSM policy, the consequences of removing the benefit, for example when a child reaches P4, requires further examination. Further research is therefore recommended to explore possible effects of this stage on potential financial, social and health impacts.

6

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Parents' views about free school meals

Recruitment questionnaire

Spring 2015

Hello / good evening, I am doing some research on behalf of the University of Stirling to find out what parents with young children in primary school think about free school meals. We know that some parents take up the option of free school meals and some do not. We are running some focus groups with local parents to see what people think of free school meals and in particular to get their views on the recent changes in this area. Do you think you might be interested in taking part? Can you help me by answering a few quick questions to check if you would be eligible?

Section 1: Inclusion/exclusion criteria

If 'do not recruit', thank person for their time and say goodbye. For all others, please complete all questions.

Q1 What is your local authority/council area? (i.e. the council area in which you live most of the time)

Go to Q2 if participant is resident in the designated council area. Otherwise do not recruit.

Q2 Do you have any child currently in P1, P2 or P3?

Yes Go to Q3

No Do not recruit

Q5 Are you a primary school teacher?

Yes Do not recruit

No Go to Q6.

Q3 Does this child/these children live with you?

Yes Go to Q4

No Do not recruit

Q6 Do you work in the field of diet and nutrition?

Yes Do not recruit

No Go to Q7

Q4 Does this child/these children attend a state school?

Yes Go to Q5

No Do not recruit

Q7 Does your work involve overseeing food policy for local government?

Yes Do not recruit

No Go to Q8a

Section 2: Previous eligibility for free school meals

Q8a Was your family eligible for free school meals last year?

- Yes Go to Q8b
- No Recruit as previously **not eligible** – Go to Q9b
- Don't know/ Not sure Go to Q8b

Q8b Here is a list of eligibility criteria. Can you tell me which (if any) apply to you?

(Please tell me the letter which best matches your answer)

Showcard1

(Read out statements and tick all which apply)

A Receive child tax credit, but not working tax credit and income is less than £15,910

- Recruit as previously **eligible**
Go to Q9a

B Receive income support or income based job seekers allowance

- Recruit as previously **eligible**
Go to Q9a

C Receive maximum child tax credit and maximum working tax credit with an income of less than £6,420

- Recruit as previously **eligible**
Go to Q9a

D Receive support provided under part VI of the immigration and asylum act 1999

- Recruit as previously **eligible**
Go to Q9a

E Receive universal credit

- Recruit as previously **eligible**
Go to Q9a

F None of these apply

- Recruit as previously **not eligible**
Go to Q9b

G Don't know/Not sure

- Do not recruit

Section 3: Frequency of attendance

Ensure a mix of children who attend for school meals in each focus group

Q9a Did your child/any of your children in P1–P3 ever attend for free school meals last year?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know/ Not sure Do not recruit

Q9b How often has your child/have your children in P1–P3 attended for school lunches this year? (i.e. since implementation of free school meals in January 2015)

Showcard 2 (Read out options and tick which apply)

	1 st child	2 nd child	3 rd child	
Year (P1, 2 or 3)	_____	_____	_____	
Every day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Nearly every day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
About once or twice a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Occasionally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Don't know/Not sure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do not recruit

Q9c How often did your child/your children in P1–P3 attend for school lunches last year? (i.e. before implementation – up to the end of December 2014)

Showcard 2 again

	1 st child	2 nd child	3 rd child	
Year (P1, 2 or 3)	_____	_____	_____	
Every day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Nearly every day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
About once or twice a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Occasionally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Don't know/Not sure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do not recruit

Section 4: Further information**Q10** Which primary school(s) does your child/do your children in P1, P2 or P3 attend?

Participant profile**Sex:**

Male

Female

Number of children in primary school

Years: i.e. P1, P2

Number of children in secondary school

Years: i.e. S1, S2

Occupation of chief income earner:

Social class:

(To be determined

by recruiter)

ABC1

C2DE

Participant's name

Participant's age (in years)

(Use Showcard 3 if participant prefers not to give exact age, and record age band)

Contact number

Address

Post code

Showcard 1

- A Receive child tax credit, but not working tax credit and income is less than £15,910
- B Receive income support or income based job seekers allowance
- C Receive maximum child tax credit and maximum working tax
- D Receive support provided under part VI of the immigration and asylum act 1999
- E Receive universal credit
- F None of these apply to me
- G Don't know/Not sure

Showcard 2

- Every day
- Nearly everyday
- About once or twice a week
- Occasionally
- Never
- Don't know/Not sure

Showcard 3

Age Band

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| A | 18-24 |
| B | 25-34 |
| C | 35-44 |
| D | 45-54 |
| E | 55-64 |
| F | 65-74 |
| G | 75 or above |

Parents views about free school meals

Information sheet

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, we would like you to understand why the study is being done and what it would involve for you.

Please take time to read this information carefully and talk about it with others if you want. Feel free to ask us about anything that is not clear. Our contact details are at the end of this sheet. We will do our best to explain and to provide any further information you may ask for.

Who is carrying out the study?

This study is being carried out by researchers at the Universities of Stirling and Glasgow. The study is being funded by NHS Health Scotland. Project number: 2014/15 RE013

What is the purpose of the study?

We want to find out what you think about free school meals and school meals in general. From January 2015 the Scottish Government made free school meals available for all pupils in the early years of primary school. We know that some parents take up the option of free school meals and some do not. We would like to know more about why that is.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are a parent with a child in the early years of primary school and we are interested in your views. We want to speak to a range of parents, regardless of whether they have previously been eligible for free school meals or not, and regardless of whether they have accessed free school meals or not.

Do I have to take part?

No, taking part in the study is entirely up to you. You are free to say that you do not want to take part in the study at any time without giving a reason. Your choice will not affect your rights to receive free school meals, and no one in the school your child or children attend will be aware you have been invited to take part.

What does taking part involve?

You will take part in a one-off group discussion with around five other parents. The group will be led by an experienced researcher from the University of Stirling. The discussion will be quite relaxed and will last up to 90 minutes. During the conversation the researcher will ask you questions about your views and experiences of school meals in general and free school meals. The researcher will also ask you what you think about the food choices on offer and what kind of things you think could help with the uptake of free school meals. You are free to contribute as much or as little as you wish. You can stop the conversation with the researcher at any time without giving a reason. The discussion will be recorded on an audio tape. This is to make sure that we can listen carefully and don't miss anything that you say. Your name and anything that could lead to anyone being able to identify you will be removed from the recording.

Will taking part in this study be confidential?

Yes. All information collected from you during the study will be kept strictly confidential. We will not share what you tell us with your child's school, parents at other discussion groups, other family members or your local authority. The researchers you speak to are not part of your local authority or school. However, if you tell us something which we believe places you or others at serious risk, we are obliged to pass this information on to the relevant persons. For example if the researcher were to become aware of a significant child protection issue.

What you tell us will be looked at along with those of others taking part in the study. No-one will be able to recognise you from any report about the study as you will not be named in any study reports. The audio recordings of your conversation with the researcher will be listened to and written down in full. Your name and anything that could lead to anyone being able to identify you will be removed from these written notes. Only members of the research team will have access to these audio recordings and written notes and these will be kept in offices at the University of Stirling at all times (in locked filing cabinets and password protected computers). At the end of the study the audio recordings will be wiped out. The written notes will be stored for up to ten years and then they will be destroyed, according to University policy.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Taking part in the study may not help you personally, although you may like having a chance to talk about your experiences and to know that what you tell us may help guide improvements in the provision of free school meals in the future.

What are the disadvantages of taking part in the study?

Taking part in the study will use up some of your time. Also, some people may find talking about free school meals in the context of personal financial situation difficult. The researcher will be sensitive to all the issues raised but if you find talking to the researcher makes you anxious or upset, you can stop the conversation at any time.

What if there is a problem?

If you have cause to complain about the way in which you have been treated by a member of the research team during the study you can contact Professor Linda Bauld at the University of Stirling. Contact details are at the end of this sheet. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The study findings will be presented in a report for the people who are paying for the study to take place, NHS Health Scotland. The findings may also be written as articles for public health journals, newsletters and other publications, and presented at local and national meetings.

Will I receive money for taking part?

Yes, you will receive £30 at the end of the interview as a 'thank you' for taking part and to cover any expenses you have incurred. You will be required to sign a receipt for this gift.

Who has reviewed this study?

All research conducted by the University of Stirling is looked at by an independent group of people, called a Research Ethics Committee, to protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity. This study has been reviewed by the School of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Stirling.

Contact for further information

If you would like further information about any part of the study, please contact: Allison Ford, Research Fellow, Institute for Social Marketing, School of Health Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, Tel: 01786 467357, Email: a.j.ford@stir.ac.uk

If you need information and advice about nutrition, food provision and dealing with food poverty you might find it helpful to visit the following websites.

<http://www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/>

<http://www.firststepsnutrition.org/>

<http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

Your local council will be a good starting point for information if you have any questions about school meal provision in your area.

Contact for concern or complaint

If you have a concern or complaint and would like to speak to someone independent who is not involved in the study, please contact: Professor Linda Bauld, School of Health Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, Tel: 01786 467347, Email: Linda.bauld@stir.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

We are grateful to you for thinking about taking part in the study

Uptake of free school meals**Discussion group consent form for parents**

Please initial box

1. I have read and understood the study Information Sheet for Parents (V1.0 20.01.2015).
2. I have had the chance to discuss the study and ask questions. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
3. I understand that taking part in the research is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, without giving any reason. This will not affect my eligibility for free school meals.
4. I agree to take part in a group discussion.
5. I agree for the discussion group to be audio-recorded.
6. I agree to anonymised quotes from the discussion being used when reporting the study findings.
7. I understand that any information I give will be confidential and that only the research team will have access to this information. All materials will be stored safely at the University of Stirling. Audio-recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. Written notes will be destroyed after 10 years, in line with University policy.

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent
(if different from researcher)

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

1 copy for participant and 1 copy for researcher

Thank you. We are grateful to you for taking part in the study

Parents' views about universal free school meals

Discussion guide

Version 2.0 09.02.2015

Introduction:

- Who we are.
- Explain purpose of research – Evaluation of the implementation and uptake of free school meals for NHS Health Scotland. As part of this we are speaking to parents to understand their views and experiences of school meals. Want to hear from them what they know about school meals, what they think of them, what their children think of them, their preferences and tastes etc.
- Format of discussion, tape recorder, confidentiality, anonymity.
- Opportunity to ask questions.
- Introduce selves.

Warm up discussion:

- Discussion about local food provision:
 - What is the area like for food shopping, types of outlets, food available.
 - Who does the shopping for the household, always the same or different person, how frequently do you do food shopping, how is it managed i.e. shopping lists/meal plans.
- Family eating habits:
 - What happens in your household, do you tend to eat meals together with children or separately, what kind of food do you prepare, i.e. in the week breakfast/dinner time, do you tend to follow the same routine or do things change.

Parental awareness and understanding of FSM:

- What kinds of communication (if any) do you receive from your child's school about school meals generally?
 - Format of communication, how often, detail.
 - How often to you enquire about school lunches.
- Do you ever see/hear anything about school meals in the wider media?
 - What have you seen/heard, where, when.
- Do you ever hear anything about FSM from school, local authority, media?
- What, where from, when did you hear about it.
- What do you know about FSM?
 - Who are FSMs available to.
 - Has this always been the case.
 - Has anything changed in the provision of FSM.
- What changed, when, how did you hear about the change

Engagement with school meals

Pay particular attention to whether there has been any change pre and post universal provision

- Within your family, what do your children do for school lunches?
 - Which children, primary/secondary, which year group.
 - How often?
 - What are they eating?
- How do you decide whether your child takes school meals/packed lunches/money/eats at home.

Parental preferences

- What is your preferred lunch for your child? Why?
 - Does your child receive this?
 - Why, how often does this happen, if child does not have parents' preferred lunch, why not?

Influence of children's tastes and preferences

- Do you talk to your child about their lunch?
 - Why, what do you ask, want to know?
- What do your children say about school meals/packed lunch
 - Types of food available, amount of choice, variety, taste, portion size, dining environment – queuing, space, noise, eating/social time.
- What are your child's food preferences? Do they make healthy choices?
- What do their friends do? Any influence? Peer pressure?
- How much do you think they eat?
- Given enough time to eat properly?
- Does anybody check what/how much they are eating?
- How does fussy eating relate to lunch choice
- Apart from at lunchtime, what other food/drink does your child consume in school?
 - When? Does this have any influence of what they eat at lunch?

Parents' perceptions of school meals (explore in relation to alternative options i.e. packed lunches, eating at home?) Any changes since universal provision?

- Advantages/disadvantages of school meals vs packed lunches.
- What is made available vs what children choose to eat.
- Choice of food available.
- Portion size.
- Food quality.

- Nutrition/health.
- Cost.
- Balanced meal (1 hot meal a day).
- Cater for restricted diets.
- Convenience.
- Control of diet.
- Dining environment, room provision/layout.
- Spending time with friends.

For those previously eligible and taking up FSMs

- Explore frequency of uptake (daily, occasionally etc...) and reasons why.
- How did you feel about being entitled to FSM?
- Were your children aware that they are getting FSM?
 - How do you know this, what have they said/done?
 - How do they feel about having FSM?
 - What happens on school trips when those eligible for FSMs are provided with a packed lunch from school?
 - To what extent do you think other children in the school were eligible:
- How do you know this?
- What was the take up?

Perceptions of universal FSM provision

- What does everyone think of this policy – good/bad idea – why?
- Why would schools introduce this – why has it been introduced?
- How supportive is your school of FSMs?
- Does your interest in accessing school meals change with universal provision – explore reasons why.
- What are benefits/disadvantages of universal provision?
 - For parents – those previously eligible/ineligible.
 - For children.
 - For schools.

- Explore perceptions of potential consequences (positive and negative):
 - stigma related to FSMs, does universal provision change this in any way and if so, how.
 - impact on children’s diet, health, behaviour.
 - impact on food choices/quality.
 - impact on the dining experience / ability to sit with friends.
 - impact on other activities – PE/breakfast club.
 - impact on older siblings (P4–P7).
 - impact on lunch time routine when move to P4?
 - impact on food waste.
 - impact on parents’ free time.
 - (For those previously eligible) impact on linked benefits, e.g. school clothing allowance

Improving uptake

- How FSM could be made more appealing to children/parents.
- What kind of things could the school/local authority do to help uptake of FSM?

