



Briefing 09/10

March 2009

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

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and Email Contacts (Scotland)

CC: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts (England, Northern Ireland and Wales)

Research findings by the Scottish Government

Key issues

An evaluation of the free school meal trial for P1-P3 pupils.

Insight into the Governments drive to improve the health of the nation.

A key summary of results and findings plus future implications.

1. Introduction

The free school meal trial for P1-P3 pupils was part of the Governments ongoing drive to improve the health of the nation. Part of that goal is to encourage good eating habits from an early age.

The trial ran from October 2007 until June 2008. Five local authorities took part in Scotland. East Ayrshire, Fife, Glasgow, Scottish Borders and West Dunbartonshire. These particular authorities were chosen as they include areas of recognised deprivation, cover urban areas, small towns and rural areas throughout different parts of the country.

The main findings from the trial covered a number of important factors

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

The change in uptake was based upon analysis of data collected from each school before the trial started in October 2007, against data collected again in late February 2008.

Further information upon the original research conducted can be found at www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch .

2. Results and Impact of the trial

Uptake increased from 41% to 69% among pupils not already free school meal (FSM) registered. Among pupils who were previously FSM registered, uptake increased from 89.2% to 93.6%. Uptake increased in all five trial areas. In total, uptake among all P1-P3 pupils increased from 53% to 75%.

Uptake of school meals after the trial began by children who were not previously FSM registered and who did not take a school meal before the trial, was not affected by the area in which they lived. Pupils from deprived areas and from less deprived areas were equally likely to take up the free school meal.

Uptake increased more in schools with lower levels of FSM registration, where pre-trial uptake had tended to be lower. As the five trial areas have a higher proportion of FSM registered pupils than Scotland as a whole, should it be rolled out, uptake across the rest of Scotland is likely to be higher.

Parents of the pupils taking part in the trial indicated that if school meals were no longer free, their child would still take a school meal more frequently than they did pre-trial. This suggests that if charges were reintroduced, overall uptake will decrease but remain higher than pre-trial.

The main reason for non-uptake is that some children are 'fussy-eaters'. Generally parents of such children want them to have school meals and would welcome help to encourage their children to eat a broader range of foods.

The main challenge faced by schools taking part in the trial was the size of dining areas coupled with the time available for lunch. Possible solutions include

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

It would also be better if any future changes coincide with the beginning of the term year in August in order to avoid pupils getting into a routine that is then changed.

The quality and quantity of the food did not change with the trial, although popular options did tend to run out. Provision for special dietary needs was not affected. The greatest impact was upon catering staff whose workload increased. The employment of extra staff eliminated this issue.

Free school meals can have an impact on children's health, wellbeing and educational performance. The trial provided an opportunity for children to try new foods, resulting in some children asking for these foods at home, allowing parents and their children to talk about food and food preferences in a more confident manner. Providing school recipes to parents would allow them to cook the meals their children liked at school.

The costs of the trial varied from £1.79 per additional meal in Fife to £4.65 in Scottish Borders. Costs tended to be higher in areas with a higher percentage increase in uptake where significant changes had to be made to staff and equipment levels.

There was evidence that children ate only the parts of their meal that they liked, vegetables and soup were often left untouched. During any future roll-out, steps should be taken to ensure that pupils are eating all or most of their meals. Links with parents should also be strengthened in order to ensure success from the initiative.

3. Conclusion and APSE comment

Providing free school meals saw a rise in uptake among P1-P3 pupils rise from 53% to 75%. The uptake was higher in smaller schools and in schools with on-site (as opposed to off-site) cooking facilities. Uptake increased more in schools with lower levels of FSM registration, where pre-trial uptake tended to be lower.

The main reason for non-uptake was that children are 'fussy eaters'. The research indicates that initiatives to enhance parent's skills to encourage young children to eat a wider range of foods would have a positive impact on uptake.

Practical issues were overcome by staggering dining times, allowing slightly lengthened lunchtimes, operating different queuing systems and in some cases employing extra staff.

The quality of food was not affected and children received the opportunity to try new and a broader range of foods. Many parents displayed an interest and willingness to discuss their child's diet, in some cases, even a desire to cook meals at home that were enjoyed by their child at school.

Costs varied, from £1.79 per additional meal in Fife to £4.65 per additional meal in the Scottish Borders with roll-out having the potential to impact upon children's health, wellbeing and educational performance in the medium to long term.

APSE believes that any effort to improve the diet of children is important, particularly in relation to health and obesity issues. Ensuring that children have a healthy and varied diet during their school career may see a change for the better in their health, overall wellbeing and future.

APSE would welcome any comments to this, which should be sent to gmooney@apse.org.uk

Pat Taggart
Principal Advisor

Gary Mooney
Research and Advisory Officer