NHS Health Scotland – Process evaluation of the implementation of universal free school meals (UFSM) for P1 to P3: Research with schools and local authorities

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in Scotland

For information only to England, Northern Ireland and Wales

Key Issues:

The purpose of this briefing is to advise our members of the release of NHS Health Scotland's latest publication 'Process evaluation of the implementation of universal free school meals (UFSM) for P1 to P3: Research with schools and local authorities' and to share the lessons learned for local authorities.

APSE was involved with this study through an online survey with its Scottish network.

The full report is accessible by clicking this link:
http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/26927-UFSM%20main%20report%202016.pdf

---

1.0   Background on the report

The NHS Health Scotland report 'Process evaluation of the implementation of universal free school meals (UFSM) for P1 to P3: Research with schools and local authorities' was released in March 2016. Its objectives were:

1. to identify key variations in implementation
2. to identify the factors that may contribute to differences in UFSM uptake
3. to identify the barriers and facilitators to implementation (and describe how these were overcome/utilised)
4. to identify and measure any unintended consequences of implementation or uptake (and identify the ways these were mitigated in local authorities and schools)
5. to identify learning to further improve the implementation and uptake of UFSM for all P1 to P3 pupils

For the research at local authority level, this was achieved by carrying out surveys of local authorities facilities managers in February 2015 in Phase 1, and the collection of more in-depth case study data from six local authorities between July and December 2015. Research involving schools focused on in-depth interviews with school senior managers, head cooks and P1-P3 teachers as well as observations of the school and dining hall environment. The research on parents was published separately and is not covered below. The full methodology is detailed between pages 4 and 11 of the full report.

2.0   Summary of concerns and solutions in implementation:

Staffing	
Barriers	**Response**
1. Staffing levels (a lack of experienced staff)	1. Additional funding was made available in all local authorities for catering staff and funding was increased in rural areas for support staff. The hours of existing staff were extended often (although there was some reluctance for those whose benefits would be impacted if they were to take on extra work).
2. Inadequate dining hall supervision	2. Having P1-P3 teachers, classroom assistants and senior managers stay with children during lunch breaks when required was a common response.
3. Difficulties in catering staff interacting with children when time was pressured	3. Local authorities and schools should work together to consider how training on supervision and food choice could be provided for staff. One head cook noted that they often took more time to speak with children during clean-up activities.

Equipment and infrastructure	
Barriers	**Response**
1. Limited capacity of school buildings (including concerns over future capacity)	1. Implementing structural contingencies, such as cooking meals off-site, modifying ordering procedures, and making use of additional multi-purpose spaces within the school (e.g. physical education spaces, assembly halls). Staggered servings and early lunch servings for P1-P3 children.
2. Kitchen and serving space capacity	2. A range of changes were made including the installation of a new cooking kitchen and additional equipment (e.g. tableware, tables, seating, freezers). One school made an arrangement with a larger local school allowing the cook to combine smaller orders with the larger school, so orders could be received on a daily delivery basis,

	reducing the need to store food.
3. Gaining the support of schools in making changes	3. The study identified partnership working between school catering and education staff as an important facilitator for improving implementation of UFSM. This involved ensuring representation from education on planning groups, extending invitations to facilities management to attend head teacher cluster meetings, conducting joint visits to schools by representatives from education and facilities management.

Dining arrangements	
Barriers	**Response**
1. Increased pressure on preparation of food	1. Cooks identified methods to save time when preparing more meals (e.g. preparing fruit that wouldn't spoil earlier in the day, or making larger biscuits iced on a single side rather than smaller sandwiched biscuits).
2. Meeting increased demand of popular food options	2. Some head cooks kept detailed diaries of uptake for each meal choice to enable them to plan better in terms of ordering and preparation. They also came into work early on those days, which could be taken in lieu during in-service days.
3. Concerns over separation of school meals and packed lunch children	3. Local authorities and schools are being encouraged to review the dining hall experience in individual schools and address any concerns. National agencies should facilitate the identification and sharing of good practice examples which have improved the dining hall experience for children.
4. Concerns over Primary 1's readiness and delays (not having skills to adapt to new quicker system)	4. Pre-ordering systems, introducing tray systems, additional serveries, increasing supervisory staff, and the use of P7 dining hall monitors were additional measures to reduce the impact of expected delays. P1 children were also often brought to the dining hall ahead of the lunch bell to ease these difficulties.
5. Increased queuing in seven out of ten schools	5. Two schools allowed P3s to play outside for longer before coming into the dining hall and one school encouraged children to sit down in the hall when they arrived then to join the queue once it was less busy.

Communication and engagement	
Barriers	**Response**
1. Concerns were raised that communication to parents from local authorities on the arrangements for UFSM, such as eligibility, had not always been adequate	1. Some schools used their own communication strategies to reach parents (such as speaking directly to parents if children were not taking a free meal after the introduction of the policy). The study also recognises the need for action for Scottish Government and local authorities to raise awareness of the policy (particularly among parents with English as a second language).
2. A lack of engagement from parents regarding school meal systems and menus	2. Taster sessions appeared to be a worthwhile facilitator to improving children's and parent's perceptions of school meals. There are differing opinions about whether parents should be involved or whether children should be allowed to make their own choices unassisted by their parents.
3. Negative staff attitudes to the policy (e.g. believing that other policies may be more appropriate for reaching families who need the support the most)	3. The study recognises that more needs to be done to communicate the rationale for the policy to local authority staff in terms of its expected benefits for children and families.
4. Encouraging the uptake of UFSM amongst children	4. In all but one school, the class teacher or a member of support staff ran through the lunch choices with the children. Some teachers were particularly enthusiastic about the lunches, explaining the choices on offer, praising children for trying new foods and describing foods as 'yummy' or 'tasty'.

3.0   Impact of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM)

Uptake of free school meals – While the uptake of UFSM was reported to have increased across all schools and local authorities, the increases were lower than reported by Healthy Living Survey data.

Impact on financial benefit – School senior managers believed that newly eligible working families on low incomes not benefiting under the previous FSM system were benefitting most from the new UFSM policy. However, managers also felt that the previous FSM system adequately covered those who needed the support most and that there were no perceived improvements for FSM-eligible families under the new UFSM system through access to linked benefits.

Impact on nutritional benefit

Positive opinions

- the introduction of healthier school packed lunch options increased uptake and were a welcomed alternative to home packed lunches due to their perceived higher nutritional quality

Negative opinions

- there is concern about whether children were receiving a nutritionally balanced meal as they tended not to eat what staff perceived as the healthiest foods available, and many did not attend for school meals on days in which the perceived healthier options were available
- concern about pupils not eating enough to achieve a nutritional balance (systems measure food waste not plate waste)
- some were critical of the amount of processed foods used
- there was a rise in food waste on days with the least popular lunch options (although the research wasn't conclusive as to whether this was proportional to the increased number of pupils taking free school meals)

4.0   APSE Comment

APSE welcomes the release of the NHS Health Scotland report into the implementation of universal free school meals for P1 to P3 and widely agrees with the nine action areas highlighted in the research.

The use of multiple research streams (in this report, research with schools and local authorities, also research with parents in a separate report) over two phases has allowed researchers to build up a more comprehensive account of the implementation process, illustrating the range of barriers in the first instance and then following up on whether schools and local authorities perceive that these barriers have been overcome. The report also highlights that there is more work to be done to promote and sustain the uptake of UFSM.

The implementation of universal free school meals has been a standing topic at the last several meetings of our APSE Scotland Soft FM advisory group with local authorities officers and managers across Scotland sharing their progress and best practice in this area. Previous presentations and minutes are available on the APSE website and can be accessed by clicking here. APSE members can attend these advisory group meetings free of charge, please contact Garry Lee at glee@apse.org.uk or by phone at 01698 459051 to register.

Garry Lee   Louise Melville
Research & Coordination Officer   Principal Advisor (Scotland)