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# FREE SCHOOL MEALS

## LEEDS

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### What are the objectives of the programme?

The [Free School Meal programme](#) aims to increase the uptake of free school meals (FSM) in the Leeds area by children who are entitled to it. Free schools meals are a welfare benefit in the UK. Leeds Council provides practical support to schools and families through identifying and removing barriers that may prevent children from benefitting from the scheme.

The FSMP is part of an integrated [Leeds School Meal Strategy](#) which strives to continuously improve the diet and health of children and young people. Removing foods high in fat, sugar and salt and providing adequate nutrition is expected to have a positive effect on educational outcome and reduce the prevalence of diet-related diseases in later life (such as diabetes and coronary heart disease).



### Timeline

The Leeds School Meal Strategy was launched in 2006. The major elements of the FSM programme include: conducting free school meal action-research (carried out in 2007-2009); the launch of a free school meal toolkit (in 2009); and a community asset-based programme (a new element to be piloted and disseminated in 2011).

### Background

In order to promote adequate child nutrition, the UK benefits system provides a free school meal (FSM) for children in families on a low-income. However, the Leeds annual school census found that over 8,000 families (34% of the entitled) failed to claim their FSM every day.

There is a fundamental difference between ability-to-learn and willingness-to-learn, which is influenced by many factors, not least the food and drink we consume. Thus, for children and young people from lower socio-economic groups the FSM makes a significant contribution to their overall health and learning outcomes<sup>1</sup>, since the FSM often provides the only substantial meal of the day, and the highest percentage of a child's daily nutrients ([CPAG](#), 2007; Cade et al 2008).

To address these concerns, Education Leeds first commissioned a [two-year study](#) to investigate why 8,000 entitled children failed to claim the FSM. This served as a base from which to develop a set of interventions to improve the uptake of the FSM. The programme

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<sup>1</sup> Marmot inequalities review (2010) - Fair society healthy lives. <http://www.marmotreview.org>.

was piloted in ten schools and it provided a basis to draw up a [toolkit](#), which has since been used in a number of schools. It has significantly contributed to reducing child poverty and promoting social inclusion and it is now integrated in the Leeds child poverty prevention strategy.

## How does the project work?

In the pilot phase, ten inner city schools (five primary and five secondary) were selected, for their high numbers of FSM-entitled pupils with low uptake of school lunch and a representative ethnicity composition. The intervention design was based on (1) research carried out by Leeds Metropolitan University investigating barriers to FSM uptake and (2) data collected from pupils and parents using an anonymous questionnaire.

These combined studies suggested the following barriers to FSM uptake:

- Poor parental knowledge regarding their FSM-entitlement and method of claiming it. It was found that schools were generally passive in relaying information on this topic;
- Fear of stigma was identified as an important barrier as 17% of second-level pupils felt uncomfortable about being identified as FSM children and were worried about being teased, while 21% of parents said they did not feel comfortable about claiming.
- Other barriers included concerns for: cultural appropriateness of food; poor value for money; poor administration and monitoring of eligibility; poor quality of food; small portions; poor choice; unpleasant dining environment including noise levels in school canteens; long queues; and rigidly short meal times.

In response to these findings, the city did the following:



Efforts were made to remove the stigma attached to receiving free school meals: The focus was put on helping families and pupils feel comfortable about claiming. Four [one-minute films](#) were developed by a group of Year 10 media students, and aimed to destigmatise poverty. The films were shown across the UK in over 5,000 schools and GP surgeries. At the same time, efforts were made to make sure that FSM children could not be identified as benefit claimants at any

stage. In the UK, schools meals are provided as a general service to children who wish to take them, so children on FSM and those who pay eat the same food together.

Improvements were made to the quality of school meals and the dining environment: Schools worked with their catering providers and school councils to change menus and dining arrangements.

Developing the 'grab-a-bag' form of FSM: The research identified reasons why pupils didn't avail of the FSM. FSM secondary school pupils often made unhealthy choices (such as going hungry or snacking on foods high in fat and sugar) instead of queuing for FSM, to be able to socialise with friends or participate in sports and leisure activities. To address these obstacles a new guidance and legal framework was implemented that allowed children to pre-order a school meal in a 'grab-bag' style system that could be collected in the

morning.

Assisting schools in providing culturally appropriate food: In response to concerns expressed by families and community faith leaders about the cultural appropriateness of food, a [Cultural and Religious School Food policy](#) was developed. This policy was informed and endorsed by local faith leaders. It sets out minimum guidelines for the preparation and serving of food. It also promotes traceability of source, access to procurement specifications and certificates for all types of foods including Halal.

Supporting schools in disseminating information among parents about the FSM entitlement and method of claiming: a communication programme focused on raising awareness with families; providing reassurances; demonstrating a caring ethos; and culturally appropriate food (if applicable).

Supporting schools in developing better administration systems: A poor administration system meant that often children accidentally missed out on their entitlement. The school improved the quality of data; its administration systems and monitoring of who is eligible and who is taking the FSM.

The dissemination phase involved sharing the intervention design locally and nationally. The toolkit '[How to increase free school meal uptake](#)' describes six basic steps to achieve this and practical guidance for schools. The toolkit was distributed free of charge.

## What are the results so far?

A number of project components are now fully developed including: guidance documents; enabling policy frameworks; 'how to' toolkits; and four one-minute pupil-led films. These are used in schools both locally & nationally.

Since the beginning of the project, Leeds has seen:

- a 10% increase in FSM uptake;
- Over 200 schools have improved their dining hall environment and experience;
- Paid school meal uptake increased as well, since the majority of barriers identified for low uptake of FSM and paid school meals were the same;
- Many schools have utilised the FSM and packed lunch policy toolkit as part of their health improvement plans, while many intend to use the resources in future health improvement plans;
- The FSM project generated a 'snow-ball' effect of actions that impacted on whole families and school culture. It established sustainable changes to improving the quality of food, access to food, the dining environment, growing food, the dining experience, monitoring of food waste and fostering cultural inclusion. It gave the schools the opportunity to contact families, and let them know that the school supported them. It generated a health-promotion culture in the school, sending messages to pupils about efforts to ensure no child is left behind. Schools report that many parents have become more open towards the schools and are now more involved in their children's education;
- A number of partnership programmes and providers utilised the developed tools ([click here to see examples](#))
- The local healthy schools programme utilises the tools in their training programme,

and adopted school meal uptake as a key performance indicator;

- The Leeds child poverty action plan and the childhood obesity prevention action plan both include school meal uptake as a key performance indicator to monitor improvement for health and wellbeing in children and young people;
- Leeds catering providers (private and public) utilise the resources to inform staff training and business plans;
- Strategic key partners utilise the resources to inform their local health improvement plans;
- Leeds youth council actively inform, support and endorse the strategy and its programmes;
- School Governors are more engaged in school food, and encourage schools to use the resources;
- The local media have regularly and positively reported and promoted progress to help raise awareness, influence families and schools attitudes and behaviour towards school food and use of its resources;
- The Education Leeds website receives accolades from other UK local authorities and positive feedback on the strategies many evidence based resources and good practice;
- Universal welfare systems can be improved at little or no cost, that directly supports families, caterers and schools.

## Was the project evaluated and were there any follow-up activities?

The programme was developed based on research findings and informed by similar local pilot. Its impact should be considered as the-sum-of-all-parts. There has been no formal evaluation of the school meal strategy as a whole, as school food policy is sociologically complex. However, the feedback from schools, parents and frontline practitioners (together with increased school meal uptake) provide indirect evidence of the project's success in improving children and young people's health - and reducing child poverty and childhood obesity.

Currently, a community strand of the project is being developed (click here to see more details). The community strand of the project is an asset-based intervention - it utilises existing resources to achieve its goals. The programme provides free training to a range of front-line practitioners whose daily work entails contact with families in such services as housing, substance dependency units, job centres and family relate specialists. The role of these professionals does not, at first glance, appear to be directly related to promoting school meals. However, as their day-to-day work is in supporting vulnerable families and helping to reduce poverty, they can also assist the families through helping them to claim FSM .

The training aims to raise awareness of FSM amongst the front-line practitioners. It highlights the importance of increasing FSM uptake and endows the practitioners with a range of skills for example, how to address parental concerns about stigma - since many barriers to FSM uptake were often influenced across generations, by their beliefs, or experiences in school and UK the welfare system. The training also provides practical tools such as a check list to verify eligibility or information on assisting to fill in the claim forms.

The pilot programme currently operates in a community with high deprivation (the Inner-

East area) and will define a process to be streamlined across the city.

The community programme also supports school food catering providers to actively increase uptake (rather than just cost management), and to utilise the FSM toolkits and resources in their business plan.

The community strand also responds to local research investigating head teacher perceptions. It found that head teachers often consider their obligation to promote health as a burden, and consider it the responsibility of other partners - especially the health sector. This finding is important as the success of the Leeds School Meal Strategy is heavily dependent on the head teachers discretion and the value they place on the school meal to aid learning. This community approach was developed to lessen the burden and promote a shared equitable responsibility by making school meals everyone's business.

## What lessons did you learn?

Helping partners understand how school meals can support and deliver their objectives is the greatest challenge. The best solution is to associate the provision of FSM with others' objectives.

School food is more than a 'meal on the plate' - it provides a powerful, healthy public policy that positively influences behavioural change for children and young people. It can improve educational attainment and attendance, pupil participation and behaviour; promote financial and education inclusion; engage with hard-to-reach families; reduce child poverty and obesity... to name but a few.

Understanding the gap between policy-making and its implementation at the frontline is vital from the outset. It is important to be aware that some policies can have a unintentional negative impact on some families. This problem can be avoided by engaging the client in the policy process from the beginning, assessing their needs and introducing solutions that respond to them.

It is important to reiterate the importance of engaging stakeholders (e.g. school staff, catering managers, parents) from the outset as the success of the intervention depends on their involvement and contribution.-The strategy would not be sustainable, if the feeling of ownership and willingness to engage was absent. Thus the length of the project must consider the time spent to engage, inspire and influence these strategic stakeholders in understanding how school food delivers a shared agenda.

## What resources were dedicated to the project?

The project requires a 'short-term' dedicated programme lead officer and administration support.

Leeds City Council received the following amounts per academic year:

- Year 2005-2006 - £425,711
- Year 2006-2007 - £709,000 (approx)
- Year 2007-2008 - £709,000 (approx).

Future school programmes will require less investment than this, providing that findings and resources are shared and adapted accordingly.

Estimated funding allocations (2006-2008):

- Pupil-led dining room improvement programme for 220 schools = £400,000
- Small cooking equipment for 250 schools = £400,000
- Accredited training programme for 1,000 catering staff = £500,000
- Research commissioning = £100,000
- Staff and administration costs (balance).

## Who is responsible for project implementation/delivery?

The Leeds school meals strategy is currently led by the Leeds school meal strategy adviser (5 year contract 2006-2011), and two support officers (two year contract August 2007-August 2009) to work in partnership across the city.

## Contact person for Leeds school meal strategy

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More information:

<http://www.educationleeds.co.uk/schoolmeals/infopage.aspx?pageno=639>

If you have an example of a good practice that you would like to include in the database, please send an email to [caroline.greene@eurocities.eu](mailto:caroline.greene@eurocities.eu).