

Leeds School Meals Strategy



Transforming school food and drink in partnership

The Free School Meals Project

Overview and Findings of Phase 1

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Presentation Overview

- Introduction
 - Project objectives
- Review of the literature
- Outline of FSM research study
- Research findings – Phase 1
 - Factors affecting Free School Meal uptake
 - Factors affecting uptake of school meals generally
- Outline of Phase 2

Why is the uptake of free
school meals low ?

How can we increase take-up ?

Project Objectives

Phase 1

1. Explore factors that influence uptake of all school meals with a focus on free school meals (FSM)
2. Explore the processes and systems that schools use to administer free school meals
3. Investigate views of pupils, parents, teachers, caterers
4. Identify examples of good practice that are feasible, acceptable and cost effective

Phase 2

1. Develop, implement and evaluate interventions that aim to increase take-up of free school meals

Phase 1

What does the literature tell us?

Free School Meal Uptake

- Limited specific UK studies
- US studies:
 - Administration processes could limit uptake (USDA, 2004)
- Child Poverty Action Group (DFEE, 2001)
 - Stigma, meal quality, the environment and awareness
 - Stigma as an issue gained considerable currency
- FSM (Scotland) Bill Consultation Report (2005):
 - 85% respondents felt stigma existed, supported universal free meals

Free School Meal Uptake cont.

- Universal free meals in Hull introduced (2004)
 - achieved average 64% uptake of school meals - Other factors?
- Highlands Needs Assessment 2006 :
 - Food choice, option to leave the premises and queue length. Being able to socialise critical.
 - Most parents (77%) felt there was no stigma
 - Factors affecting uptake of FSM no different to factors affecting paying pupils
- To conclude:
 - Minimum requirements:
 - Minimal discrimination, maximum awareness, easy claiming process
 - Need to focus on school meal uptake in general

Paid School Meal Uptake

- Multitude of factors
- Food:
 - Quality
 - Price
 - Presentation - packaging and display
 - Pupils need to **taste** new food
 - To be seen as “normal” to eat certain products
 - Be involved in the offering
 - Information - (signage / menu boards)
 - Long term education – whole school approach
- **Parents:**
 - Perception of quality of school meals often low

Paid School Meals Uptake cont.

- **The Environment:**
 - Queuing - quick delivery key
 - Décor / style of dining room
 - Mess !
 - Where they sit
 - Role modelling by staff
- **Packed lunch** - freedom in terms of seating and contents
- **Incentives schemes** (stickers, rewards e.g. Sports passes, electronic equipment)

Phase 1

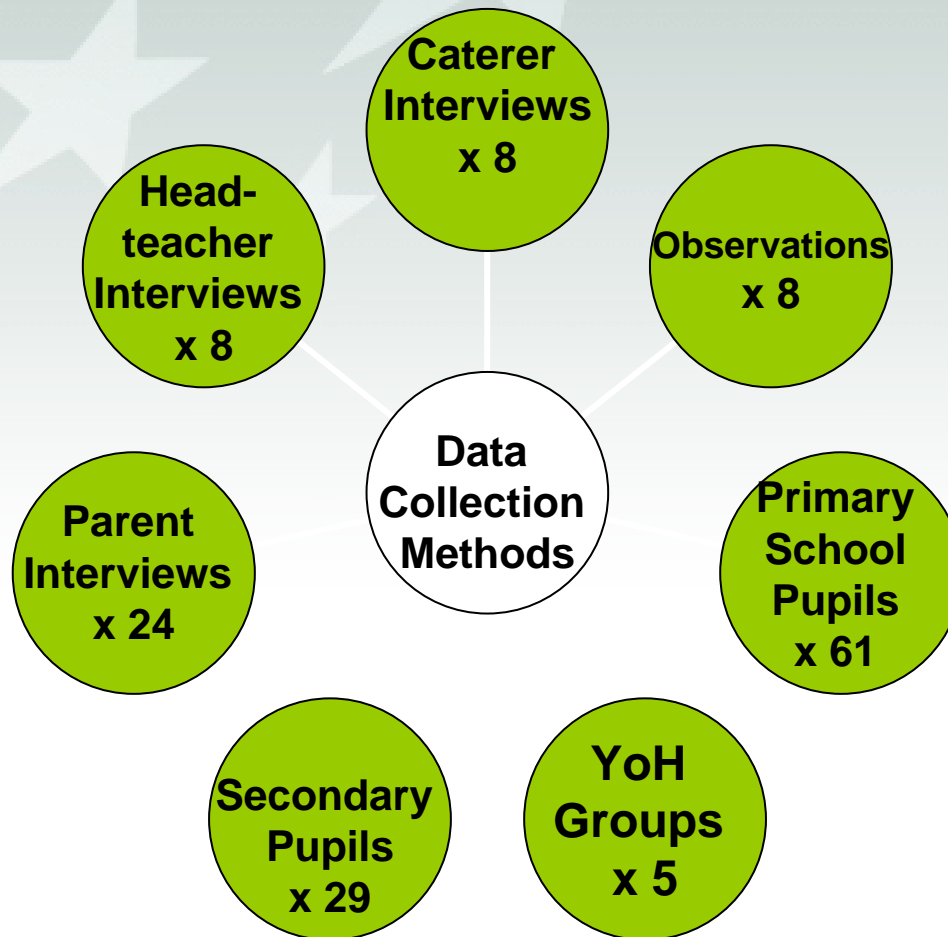
Exploratory Research in Leeds Schools

Selected Schools

4 Secondary schools and 4 Primary schools from across Leeds

- A high number of pupils entitled to FSMs.
- Schools with high uptake and low uptake of FSMs
- Schools with high and low ethnic minority intake
- A range of providers including The Catering Agency which is part of Leeds City Council, opted out and Privately Funded Initiative (PFI).
- Cash and cashless systems (in the secondary schools)

The Research Method cont.



The Research Findings

Key Themes:

1. Free School Meals
2. School Meals Generally

The FSM Claiming Process

- **Headteachers felt parents put off claiming due to:**
 - Bureaucracy
 - Low confidence – hesitate to ask for help
 - Low literacy or English as a second language
 - Wishing to remain independent / pride
 - Desire for privacy
 - Isolated families – lack of know how
- **Parents (who had successfully claimed):**
 - Process relatively easy, often automatic (although some had help)
 - Felt others missed out because on low income but not on benefit
 - Felt some others may lack the confidence to claim

The Role of the School

- **Parents** felt schools generally did not actively encourage take up
- **Head teachers** confirmed secondary school involvement low
- **Primary schools** far more actively involved by:
 - Approaching parents (e.g. mounting debt as indicator)
 - Assisting to claim
 - Liaison with Leeds Benefit Services (LBS)
 - Team-work within the school (admin / parent support staff) and with LBS key
 - Working with families critical “its relationships that are the key, not processes”
- **More information about entitlement requested from schools**
 - Short format for teachers / parents / administrators (eligibility criteria/ claiming process)

Payment

Parents felt that:-

- For primary school children it was not an issue
- Parents preferred the cashless system in secondary schools
- Some concerns about possible bullying and often commented on their personal experience of claiming/eating FSMs when they were at school.
- FSM allowance was generally considered not sufficient for secondary school pupils. (£2.00-3.00)

Head Teachers felt that cashless systems united paying and FSMs and would limit stigma if it existed.

Was Stigma a Concern?

- Most **heads** felt not
- Majority of **secondary pupils** said not
 - Requires confidence?
 - Idea of cashless liked by one school
- One **primary school** felt teasing may be an issue
- **Parents:**
 - Most felt it was a right they were entitled to
 - Not an issue for primary children
 - In secondary some concerns cashless preferred
 - Reassurance needed

They're not bothered

It's not a bad thing

Pupils

it's not an issue ... plenty of people get council dinners at our school

All the bullies get FSM anyway

they all think it's free anyway

I think there is stigma ... I don't care but .. some parents don't want to put their kids through it

Parents

Provision

Parents and pupils:-

- Small or inadequate food portions;
- A lack of familiarity with choice of food on offer;
- Choice restricted to Meal Deals or Meal of the Day;
- The only drink available is water;
- Lack of awareness of what a FSM constitutes;
- Lack of awareness of changes in school meal provision as a result of the new school meal standards.

The Dining Environment

- **Feeling pressurised** to eat certain items / to eat quickly.
- **Queuing.** Long queues meant pupils had less time for other activities.
- **Sociability.** Being able to sit with friends was seen as critical.
- **Closed gate vs open gate policy.** Whether pupils were allowed to go outside the school at lunch-time
- **Pupils make the decision and parents were unlikely to resist** – unless couldn't afford it.

“they ask to go onto pack lunches, but I say you’re staying on school lunches as can’t afford to go onto pack lunches”

To Summarise

What is affecting the uptake of Free School Meals?

Food Issues:

- Food preferences. Security – will there be something they like?
- The amount of food available – will there be enough?
- The price (in secondary)
- Feeling pressurised to eat certain items / to eat quickly

Organisational Issues:

- Queuing. Meant had less time
- Sociability. Being able to sit with friends critical
- Whether they could go outside the school at lunch-time

- Pupils make the decision - parents unlikely to resist

Getting Parents to Claim

Issues:

Lack of awareness of eligibility;

Lack of awareness of claiming process;

Lack of awareness of school meal offering;

Lack of trust / misconceptions exist.

Minimising Stigma

Issues:

- Some concern by parents that their child may be identified;
- Head teachers did not raise stigma as an issue in schools where majority of children were eligible/claiming;
- Stigma maybe a concern in schools where eligibility was low.

Conclusion

- Minimum requirements to increase FSM uptake should aim for:-
 - Minimal discrimination, maximum awareness, and an easy claiming process
 - The need to focus on school meal uptake in general
 - provision and dining room experience

Phase 2

1. Develop, implement and evaluate interventions that aim to increase take-up of free school meals
 - Primary outcome - increased uptake of FSM's.
 - In addition qualitative data collected to assess the effectiveness of the various interventions.
 - learning from phase 2 would be able to be used by all schools within the Leeds area to increase their uptake of free school meals.

Pilot schools

- **five primary** and **six secondary** schools in the Leeds area
- high numbers of pupils **not taking** the free school meals
- included schools representing **different levels of ethnic minority** pupils,
- a range of **different catering providers**
- the secondary schools to have both **cash and cashless** based systems.