



SCHOOL FOOD MATTERS



Myles Bremner, Chief Executive Officer of Bremner & Co and former Director of the Government's School Food Plan, reviews the reality of the universal free school meal pilot programme.

School food continues to ride high in the headlines, with Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, recently announcing that all London primary school children would continue to receive free school meals for a second year if he wins the next mayoral election. While great news for London, a de facto postcode lottery continues to leave 80 per cent of England missing out

It is therefore the aim of the School Food Review,¹ a coalition of more than 40 organisations working to improve the school food system, for all primary school children in England to receive free school meals as they already do in Wales and Scotland. As an active member of the School Food Review, ISBL is working to ensure that the voice of school business professionals (SBPs) is heard because so often it is your role that connects the school food jigsaw together.

Using the School Food Review's three entwined headings of Equitable Access, Quality Assurance and Fairer Funding, this article aims to provide you with a rundown of everything going on in school food so you can be best prepared for ensuring a great school food experience in your own school.



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Equitable access

London's universal primary free school meal policy was rolled out at pace. Schools across all 33 London boroughs worked impressively to ready themselves from the start of the 2023/24 school year – and we know SBPs and catering teams had to work hard to make the required changes. The Mayor's programme is undergoing a comprehensive evaluation, with teams from the Child Poverty Action Group, ICF (expert evaluators), Impact on Urban Health and the Education Endowment Foundation working closely with schools. Full results will be shared in this magazine in September, but early findings are extremely encouraging, with the policy helping family budgets as well as dinner money debt levels, which was identified as a stressful situation for schools and parents alike. Uptake of meals is high, and children are enjoying eating healthier school meals. In September, we will report on more impacts on how the policy is supporting pupil and school outcomes.

It's not just primary school meals, however. Tower Hamlets is now providing universal free school meals to all secondary pupils in its 22 schools, and Southwark has extended provision to all pupils where households receive universal credit.

Of course, universal free school meals can make it harder for schools to register benefits-related free school meal pupils. Each council has a different set-up, with schools and many multi-academy trusts now having their own eligibility checking services. It can be an arduous and time-consuming process, which is why there are increasing calls for the introduction of a new and improved free school meal auto-enrolment system because according to the Government's own figures, up to 11 per cent (that's 250,000 children) are entitled but are not currently registered. This is a shocking figure, and councils and schools are taking matters into their own hands.

Across the country, councils are introducing new, local 'opt-out, auto-award' free school meals registrations. Over the last year, a small number of councils have adopted a new free school meals process using an 'opt-out/right to object' model. This involves identifying families through existing data sets and writing to parents to inform them that their children will be automatically registered unless they opt out. The results have been impressive, and opt-out rates are extremely low. For example, FixOurFood research² has pooled data from five local authorities in England who implemented a free school meals auto-enrolment process in October 2023. Results suggested that more than 2,500 additional children were registered to receive free school meals, bringing in more than £4.5 million in additional school funding; Wakefield City Council alone registered an additional 1,183 children through the opt-out model. We will keep you updated on progress with national government to introduce a new national scheme. As Henry Dimbleby, author of the School Food Plan and the National Food Strategy, commented: "It cannot be right to let paperwork stand between a child and a hot meal."

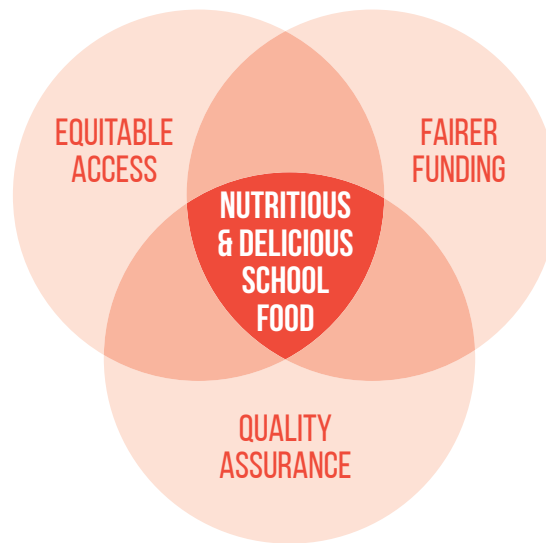
Quality assurance

The Government has previously announced measures to introduce a schools reporting mechanism for school meals, new training and guidance for school governors,



School Food Review Manifesto

Nutritious and delicious school food for every child to thrive



and pilot programmes for food safety officers to look at school food quality as part of their wider environmental health inspections. There's no immediate news or further progress in this area, but we'll provide updates as they come.

We'll also provide updates on what impact the new procurement rules and changes (as part of the Transforming Public Procurement programme) will have on catering.

Fairer funding

Of significant interest for all SBPs is the funding for school food, which is proving to be a challenging and often increasingly confusing landscape. Free school meals funding (part of the main school grant) and the universal infant free school meals (UIFSM) grant funding is set at £2.53, and it's increasingly clear that the rate is not keeping pace with real costs. The London Mayor has increased the additional key stage 2 free school meals funding to £3 per meal from next September, a massive hike up from national rates, but surely a more realistic one. ISBL is playing an active part in proving to the Government that current funding rates are falling way short and that schools are at risk of having to heavily subsidise school meals or even risk reducing quality. These outcomes are completely counterproductive to the whole economics of school food, and we hope that the next price announcement (expected in June 2024) will start to address this significant gap. ■



INFO

- 1 www.schoolfoodmatters.org/what-we-do/campaigns/food-policy/school-food-review
- 2 <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/press-release/outdated-opt-system-means-250000-children-missing-out-free-school-meals>