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Chapter Eleven

An assessment of universal free school meals

*In which we learn why some countries – and some
English councils – offer free school meals to all children;
we consider the costs and benefits of this approach; and
we recommend that the government should introduce
universal free school meals in all primary schools.*

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Thirty years ago, Finland was one of the world's unhealthiest nations. Diet was poor and rates of smoking were astronomical. “In the 1970s, we held the world record for heart disease,” says Pekka Puska, director of the National Institute of Public Health in Helsinki.⁷³

Then in his mid-twenties, and freshly graduated from medical school, Puska believed this epidemic of ill health had to be tackled at its cultural roots. In 1972, he started an experimental project in the eastern region of Finland, the Province of North Karelia, where one in ten working age men and women were on disability benefit due to diseased arteries.

Puska’s most important insight was that educating people isn’t enough to change their behaviour: you need to make it easy for them. “The whole environment had to change,” Puska told us when we spoke to him. “The food industry, restaurants, cafeterias, supermarkets. We had to make sure that the healthy choices became the easy choices.”

Puska and his team set up lots of different initiatives, all designed to nudge people toward healthy behaviour. They cleared paths and gave free tractioned shoe clamps to the elderly so they could walk in winter; they increased the number of bike paths and created safe, well-lit cross-country ski paths; they worked with local food industries, including sausage manufacturers, to reduce fat and salt levels; they even created a X-Factor-style TV show where Finns competed to see who was healthiest. It was a huge hit, with over a quarter of the male population tuning in.

Within five years, risk factors and deaths from heart disease started to fall dramatically. Puska was asked to roll his project out across the country. By 2009 the annual mortality rate from heart disease in men had fallen by 85% in North Karelia – and by 80% across the whole of Finland. Average life expectancy has risen by seven years for men and six years for women.

But the Finns didn’t just get ‘nudged’ onto a healthier path. The Finnish government was not afraid to intervene on a grand scale – most notably, by improving the diets of school children. Puska was able to do this because, since the War, Finland has provided free school meals to every pupil.

“The free school meal was essential. If we were to change our national diet, it was critical that this started in schools,” says Puska. “All of the evidence shows that a childhood habit for healthy eating is likely to stay with you for life.”

Finland now spends 8% of its total education budget on high-quality school food⁷⁴. This has piqued the curiosity of other countries, including Britain. In autumn 2009, the Labour government decided to run free school meal pilots in three boroughs in this country – Durham, Newham, and Wolverhampton – to see what impact they might have⁷⁵.

In Durham and Newham all children in primary schools became eligible for free school meals. In Wolverhampton they extended the entitlement to an extra 15% of children in both primary and secondary schools. In total, 90,000 children were made newly eligible for free school meals, at a cost of £28 million, which was funded jointly by the Department of Health and the Department for Education. The trials ran until the summer of 2011.

⁷³ School Food Plan Interview with Prof Pekka Puska.

⁷⁴ Finnish National Board of Education: *School Meals in Finland, Investment in learning*

⁷⁵ Previously, Hull council ran its own three year trial starting in 2004.

At the same time, Islington Council decided to run its own pilot project, funding universal free school meals across all of its primary schools.

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The ambitions for the universal free school meal programme in England were broader than those in Finland, where the primary purpose is to provide “a pedagogical tool to teach good nutrition and eating habits⁷⁶. In England the stated objective was to gather data showing whether universal free school meals would not only improve the children’s diet and health, but also their behaviour, attendance and academic performance⁷⁷.

In Newham and Durham the results were significant. Take-up of school meals rose from just under 50% in both areas to 72% for Newham (it is now 87% as part of a continuation of the pilot) and 85% for Durham. As you would expect, more children ate vegetables at lunch (up by 23%) and there was a steep decline in consumption of the items associated with packed lunches: sandwiches fell by 27%, soft drinks by 16% and crisps by 18%.

Academically, the benefits were clear. Students in the pilot areas were on average two months ahead of their peers elsewhere. Between 3% and 5% more children reached the target levels in maths and English at key stage 1. Across both pilot areas, 4% more children achieved the expected levels in English at key stage 2. This is a bigger improvement than the 3.6% boost that followed the introduction of a compulsory ‘literacy hour’ in 1998. Furthermore, these improvements were most marked among children from less affluent families.

There were hidden benefits, too – harder to quantify but felt strongly within the schools that took part. Many teachers told us that the UFSM project had helped to foster a sense of cohesion within their school. “We don’t charge richer parents separately for lessons, or books, or drama,” said one teacher in Islington. “Why is it acceptable to charge for the food?”

Every head teacher we met was impressed by the results of the project. “Our children did better in exams,” one told us. “At the same time, the culture in the school improved in subtle but important ways. It’s been great to avoid the old them-and-us divisions of the packed lunch kids going off to eat separately from the school lunch children.” Another put it simply: “It makes the school a better place.” There were logistical problems to be overcome. Kitchen staff had to adjust to preparing more meals than any of them could remember. Many schools had to change the way they served the food to manage queues that were suddenly twice as long. Even apparently simple things, such as finding space to store the extra food, took time to resolve.

Alison Young⁷⁸ was responsible for leading the project in Durham. It wasn’t easy, she concedes, but they always found a way around the problems. “Many people feel that schools today cannot cope logistically with higher take-up,” she says. “It’s not true. We showed that the kitchens, dining halls and teams can deliver 85% take-up, and probably more. It just

⁷⁶ Finnish National Board of Education, *School Meals in Finland, Investment in learning*

⁷⁷ Kitchen et al, *Evaluation of the free school meals Pilot: Impact Report*, DFE-RR227, 2010

⁷⁸ Lead for Health and Wellbeing, Durham County Council.

wouldn't have been successful without the heads on board – for example, them allowing longer for lunch breaks so we could get everyone through.”

Universal free school meals have proved hugely popular in the schools that have tried them. Islington council continues to offer them to all primary school children, as does Newham. Both councils decided to fund the meals itself once the government pilot was terminated (take-up in Newham is now 86%, or 90% when you take into account absences. In Islington, take-up rates reached 82%). Durham council could not find the money and the pilots have now ended.

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Not everyone, however, is convinced of the merits of universal free school meals. Leaving aside, for a moment, the problem of cost, there are three main arguments against rolling out UFSM throughout England.

1. Any future government wanting to make savings might be tempted to end UFSM. This might lead to a mass exodus from school dining halls, bringing the service to its knees financially.

We are not convinced of this. The pilot project in Durham had the opposite effect: once children were accustomed to eating school meals, they continued to do so even when they had to pay. Take-up across Durham is now 65%, compared to 50% before the trial.

2. The quality of food served would decline. Offering meals for free removes the imperative to please the ‘customer’. Because parents and children are not paying for the food, the providers will not listen to them and will cut corners to suit themselves.

Again, the pilots show that this is not the case. Parents in the pilot areas were more likely to describe their children’s school meals as healthy and high-quality. They were more likely to think that a school meal is healthier than a packed lunch. Interestingly, they were also more likely to say that their child is willing to try new food⁷⁹. In our own visits to Durham and Newham we saw first-hand how much the children love the food being made for them.

At Sheringham Primary School in Newham, we met Florence, an inspiring school chef who takes as much pride in making tasty, top-quality food as any restaurant chef we know. We ate Florence’s tandoori chicken, perfectly flavoured rice, lentil dhal and a beautiful cabbage salad. It was easy to see why all the teachers choose to eat her food, for which she charges them £2.35 a day. We sat with a table of year 6 children. “Go and tell the world that Sheringham

⁷⁹ It is worth noting that some people believe adopting universal free school meals would mean, effectively, a nationalisation of the school meal system. This is not the case. The Durham and Islington programmes were both delivered by private caterers – Taylor Shaw and Caterlink respectively. There is no reason why they couldn’t have made their food in-house, if they had preferred.

school lunches are the best,” one said. As we left, one of the lunchtime supervisors told us: “Make sure people know what a difference free lunches have made to the children.”

3. It is not right that the children of better-off parents should get their school meals for free.

We have heard this argument made as a point of principle. We do not accept it. If you applied this reasoning across the board, you would need to dismantle the state school system and, indeed, the NHS. If there is a net benefit to children and the country as a result of universal free school meals, it should not matter if children from wealthier families get fed well too.

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In our view, then, universal free school meals are a good thing. But at what cost?

The government estimates that providing free school meals to children currently costs around £428 million per year. Before we started this work, it was estimated by the Department for Education that expanding this to all school children in England would cost an additional £2 billion, bringing the annual total to £2.4 billion. However this estimate did not take into account the economies of scale that come with increased take-up, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Taking this into account, we estimate that offering free school meals to all children would cost an additional £1.5 billion bringing the annual total to £1.9 billion. Clearly this is still a huge number. It represents 3.3% of the total education budget of £57.2 billion – equivalent to 1.8% of the total NHS budget.

To make the case that this is a sensible use of taxpayers’ money, we need to show that it would benefit the nation more than any number of other worthy causes. This isn’t easy, not least because there are very few initiatives that bear direct comparison.

The Department for Education made a game attempt, in its official evaluation of the free school meals pilots⁸⁰ to evaluate how much ‘bang per buck’ UFSM delivered. It compared the costs of the pilots, and the resulting academic improvements, to three other initiatives:

- The Jamie Oliver ‘Feed me Better Campaign’. This started in Greenwich in 2004. Jamie Oliver obtained permission from the local authorities to improve the food served in schools. His attempts to do so were filmed for the Channel 4 documentary *Jamie’s School Food*.
- Literacy Hour. A minutely-structured daily lesson in the English language for primary school children, first introduced in a small group of local authorities in 1996, before being rolled out in nationwide in 1998.

⁸⁰ *Evaluation of the free school meals Pilot*, DFE-RR227

- Every Child a Reader. This scheme was piloted in a selection of schools in 2010. It was designed to improve the literacy of children who were struggling during the early years of primary school. Its central idea was to provide these children with one-to-one coaching for up to 20 weeks.

For each initiative, the DfE calculated the cost per pupil of each 1% improvement in literacy. At key stage 1, the cost for the UFSM pilots was £235 for each percentage point – more effective than Every Child a Reader, which cost £295 for the same increase. But Every Child a Reader was known to be an expensive intervention, so that isn't much of an endorsement for UFSM. And the other two initiatives did not apply to children at key stage 1, so no comparisons could be drawn.

At key stage 2, UFSM had a significant impact on literacy levels – but the cost per percentage point of improvement, at £112, compared poorly with the Jamie Oliver campaign (£16) and Literacy Hour (£14). However, the authors of the evaluation note that the impact of the Jamie Oliver campaign might have been down to more than the food. The excitement of having a famous chef – and accompanying TV cameras – roaming the schools of Greenwich almost certainly reduced absenteeism and improved behaviour.

We would also point out that the academic benefits of UFSM are broader than those of, say, Literacy Hour. Eating well improves performance in all academic subjects, and a busy, popular dining hall brings intangible benefits to the culture of the school.

Plus, of course, these assessments are based purely on academic impact. They take no account of the positive impact on children's health, the unifying social effect of having the whole school eating together, or the many other pleasures that come from eating good food in company.

RECOMMENDATION

Government should embark upon a phased roll out of free school meals for all children in all primary schools, beginning with the local authorities with the highest percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals.

We believe that there is enough evidence – both from abroad and from English schools – to justify the partial introduction of universal free school meals. We are recommending that the government should embark on a phased roll-out of free school meals in all primary schools across the country.⁸¹

Our focus is on primary schools because UFSM trials have already been successful here, and because it is far easier to implement in schools that offer a set meal, as most primary schools do. (Introducing universal free school meals into secondary schools would require a considerable reworking of the usual cafeteria-style service, where children have much more choice. This would require further trials).

The phased introduction would start with schools in the local authorities where the highest percentages of children were eligible for free school meals.

The cost of this programme would be substantial. The following table shows the cost of a staged roll-out of free school meals starting with the highest FSM authorities. It assumes that 85% of children not taking up free school meals at the moment (i.e. those currently not eligible and those currently eligible but not taking it up) would take up the additional free school meals. Given the take-up of free school meals, this gives an overall take-up of 88%, or around 92% adjusted for absences. This is in line with the current take-up in the extended free school meal pilot in Newham. It also assumes that, given the economies of scale, the average cost of a meal in primary schools will be £1.76.

⁸¹ People in the sector have suggested many different approaches to introducing universal free school meals. The government could, for instance, offer free school meals to all children in the first term or first year of school. This would give them the healthiest start possible, at a critical period of their development. Alternatively, the government could offer a subsidy to children not eligible for free school meals, to encourage them to choose school meals rather than packed lunches. We believe offering them to all children is the approach that not only has the greatest cultural impact on schools, but has also been clearly shown to work. Nevertheless, we have calculated the costs of all these various initiatives, and put them on our website.

	Average FSM percentage	Number of authorities	Additional # children eating for free (thousands)	Additional Funding Required (£ million)
Tranche 1	28.7%	45	647	185
Tranche 2	19.0%	45	732	224
Tranche 3	14.2%	27	765	241
Tranche 4	10.3%	35	820	262
Total	19.0%	152	2,964	912

This is the only recommendation in this plan that the government has not agreed to implement immediately. We hope that, at the very least, the subject will be further debated across government departments and by people working in the field. We would also strongly encourage councils to follow the lead of Islington and Newham and consider funding this themselves.