

Influencing the policy debate on free school meal provision

IMPACT CASE STUDY

Summary

From September 2014, all children in state-funded English infant schools (comprising Reception, Year 1 and Year 2) have been eligible to receive a free school meal under the Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) policy.

The policy (DfE, 2014) aims at improving children's educational attainment, social skills and behaviour; ensuring children have access to a healthy meal a day and develop long-term healthy eating habits; helping families with the cost of living, and removing disincentives to work. At a cost of around £400 per pupil per year (at £2.30 per pupil per meal) plus over £175 million on capital spending for school kitchen improvements in the first three years, this policy is a sizeable investment in children.

We investigated whether the UIFSM policy has delivered its aims by looking at impacts on the take-up of meals, absences from school, children's bodyweight and attainment. This unique study questions whether this very expensive intervention does make a difference.

Despite some shortcomings, we find that the policy has yielded significant benefits for children, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and UIFSM deserves the support of those who campaign against child poverty.

Specifically focusing on the impact of UIFSM in relation to bodyweight, we find that children's bodyweight reduces throughout the first year of school when high quality free school meals are available to all. Furthermore, quality school meals bring more children into the healthy bodyweight range.

Given that it is notoriously difficult to shift children's bodyweight and interventions such as physical activity and nutrition information programmes have not yielded the desired outcomes, these effects are of great importance to policy and practice.

What have we changed?

Prior to our research **there was no evidence that the UIFSM policy was effective**. UIFSM was a Liberal Democrat policy (2014) and was vulnerable to being axed. In February 2020, UIFSM was on the Department for Education's long-list of potential cuts to meet a 5% budget reduction. Shortly afterwards, the Covid-19 pandemic led to school closures.

The Covid-19 pandemic moved the importance of universal programmes for supporting disadvantaged households into the political spotlight. Together with widespread reductions in parental incomes, this elevated the importance of school food provision as a safety net against food insecurity.

We have provided the evidence that high-quality school meals free on a universal basis **reduces children's bodyweight throughout the first year of school**. Our evidence **contributes to a body of work** that was instrumental in the policy debates around retention of UIFSM and school provision and holiday hunger:

- Our research was cited in [the Research Briefing for the Opposition Day Debate on Free School Meals](#), calling for continued funding provision for free school meals (FSM) over school holidays until Easter 2021
- The government committed to providing funding over Christmas/New Year 2020/2021 school holidays. Media coverage suggests our work was influential in bringing about this change. [BBC report '[What free school meals are children supposed to get](#)' (search for 'lowering obesity levels')]
- Our research was cited by Alex Norris MP in a Westminster Hall debate on obesity in the Covid-19 pandemic (10 November 2020), making the case that UIFSM is an enhancement to the school environment that improves people's health outcomes. [[Citation by](#)

[Alex Norris MP](#) (search for ‘Research by the Nuffield Foundation found’)

- Our research was used by the School Food Matters charity, who describe it as ‘persuasive’ in encouraging Conservative MPs to support the policy. Its Chief Executive commented that: “As a charity dedicated to improving children’s access to healthy, sustainable food during their time at school, we rely on research like this to support our policy and advocacy goals and are pleased to testify to its impact with policymakers”
- Councillor Quintin Peppiatt of the London Borough of Newham [cites our research in a letter to the Newham Record](#). This contributed to the debate on keeping Newham’s Universal Free School Meal programme for all primary school children, which was resolved in favour of keeping the policy

Our research continues to inform and influence a range of people and organisations, including:

- The DfE and DHSC who attended a presentation organised by the Open Innovation Team. The results on body weight were shared with the Chief Medical Officer for England who was ‘pleased’
- Shadow Minister for Public Health, Sharon Hodgson MP (and Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on School Food), Shadow Minister for Children and Families, Steve Reed MP, Chief Executive of the Child Poverty Action Group, Alison Garnham, all stated they are committed to using our evidence to champion the cause of extending free school meals
- Lead Association for Caterers in Education (LACA), the representative body for the school food sector across England, Scotland and Wales, are using our research to evidence the need for proper funding and extending the policy to older children
- Members of the Jamie Oliver ‘Bite Back 2030’ campaign asked for a presentation to them (June 2020) to feed our results into their campaign.
- The Child Poverty Action Group asked us to [write an article](#) for their policy magazine *Poverty*, focusing on the benefits of UIFSM to disadvantaged children
- Our research is cited in [POSTnote 640 Childhood Obesity and National Food Strategy: Independent Review. The Plan](#), published on 15 July 2021 as part of the National Food Strategy, an independent review for Government led by Henry Dimbleby

Research methodology

For full details about the research methodology please refer to the [UIFSM impact report](#) and Holford A and Rabe B, [Going universal – The impact of free school lunches on child body weight outcomes](#), draft research paper, March 2020

A quick-read policy brief is [here](#) and full details about the project are [here](#).

Funding

This research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation with long-term support from MiSoC. The Nuffield Foundation is supporting a new study – ‘The impacts of Universal Free School Meal schemes in England’. This follow-on research investigates the longer-term impacts of UIFSM provision on attainment, bodyweight and absences up to age 11. Details can be found [here](#).