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Implementing the Free School Meals Pilot

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DfE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Free School Meals (FSM) pilot was a two-year programme operating in three local authorities (LAs) – Wolverhampton, Newham and Durham – between the autumn of 2009 and the summer of 2011. The pilot aimed to improve the health and educational outcomes for children by ensuring that they eat at least one balanced healthy meal each school day (regardless of family income). The pilot was jointly funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Health (DH) with the expectation that their contribution would be matched locally.

Two different approaches to extending FSM provision were tested as part of the pilot. In the LAs piloting a ‘universal’ offer (Newham and Durham), all primary school children were offered a free school meal. In the contrasting ‘extended’ eligibility area (Wolverhampton), FSM entitlement was extended to cover pupils in primary and secondary schools whose families were on Working Tax Credit whose annual income did not exceed £16,040. This threshold rose to £16,190 in 2010–11.

The DfE commissioned NatCen Social Research, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and Bryson Purdon Social Research (BPSR) to evaluate the impact of the FSM pilot. The key aims of the evaluation were to assess how effectively the pilot was designed and implemented, to measure the impact of the pilot on take-up and child outcomes and to assess the extent to which the pilot offers value for money. This summary presents the key findings from the implementation study, which was carried out between 2009 and 2011. The fieldwork included qualitative school case studies and a survey of catering managers.

Key findings

- Cost savings for families were the main reason given for opting for a free school meal in all pilot LAs. Other factors included the choice and quality of the food available, the dining experience, time savings for parents and how well parents understood the eligibility criteria and application process.
- Take-up was encouraged by involving children in decisions about the menu options, maintaining a strict packed lunch policy, improving the dining experience, familiarising parents with school meals and reducing the stigma of taking FSM.
- Successful delivery of the pilot was underpinned by a willingness to trial new approaches to delivery and working as a school to solve problems, effective partnership working, building sufficient staff resources and capacity, and being able to accurately predict and monitor demand.
- Participants believed the pilot increased the range of food that pupils would eat, built their social skills at meal times and, for some pupils, resulted in health benefits associated with having a balanced meal, such as more energy, concentration and alertness and improved complexion. It was also seen, in universal areas, to have had a ‘levelling effect’, by

ensuring equal access to a healthy and good-quality meal regardless of socio-economic differences between pupils.

- There was strong support for the pilot. It was valued for raising the profile of healthy eating, ensuring pupils received at least one healthy, good-quality meal a day, increasing the range of food pupils eat, building their social skills at meal times, easing the financial stress for parents and providing additional family time.
- In schools, the pilot increased the workload and demands placed on administrative and catering staff, resulted in an expansion of the school infrastructure and changed lunchtime arrangements to cope with the increased volume of pupils taking school meals.

Methodology

This report presents findings from the implementation study carried out by NatCen Social Research between 2009 and 2011. It has explored how the FSM pilot was set up and delivered and the impacts it was perceived to have had on all those involved. The research included:

- A scoping study exploring the design and implementation of the FSM pilot at the LA level.
- Ten school case studies to capture the experiences of implementing the pilot, to explore reflections of take-up in the three pilot areas and to examine the range of perceived impacts of the pilot. Schools were visited on two occasions during the spring terms of 2010 and 2011 (only nine of the ten schools participated in the second stage), during which all those who were directly involved in the pilot were interviewed: senior managers, catering staff, teachers, pupils and parents. The sample was (purposively) selected to ensure variation in the range and type of schools involved in the pilot.
- Repeat surveys of catering managers were carried out in the pilot and comparison schools from which the pupils were sampled for the longitudinal survey (see the report on the impact of the pilot: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR227>).
- Sixty-five of the 74 schools took part in all three rounds of interviews. The purpose of the survey was to monitor any changes in types of meals, staffing, menus, choices, payment methods, dining facilities and pupil behaviour that may be associated with the pilot and to compare changes in the pilot schools with those in other similar schools that continued with standard school-meal arrangements.

Setting up the pilot

Local authorities led the implementation of the pilot in each area, with support provided by the School Food Trust (SFT). The role of the primary care trust (PCT) was primarily limited to engaging in strategic issues affecting the pilot. Set-up activities included promoting awareness of the pilot and ensuring schools had adequate kitchen capacity, equipment, staff and data-monitoring systems in place.

Differences in approach to implementation depended on the pilot type and on the anticipated increase in take-up as a result of the pilot. In universal LAs, schools concentrated on building their capacity to deliver the pilot by extending the school kitchens and by purchasing new equipment. In contrast, in Wolverhampton, there was a need to develop effective data-monitoring systems and to promote the pilot to parents.

- The scale of work undertaken to set up an adequate infrastructure in schools was the most extensive in Durham. The average cost per school of extending and equipping school kitchens and dining facilities was reported to be around £20,000. The catering company contracted by the LA increased its workforce by 30%, which translated into 160 new cooks including staff employed on fixed-term two-year contracts.
- In Newham, there was some investment in additional equipment and furniture in specific schools but facilities were mostly seen to be adequate to deal with the increased demand. There was also a 30% increase in staff recruited in Newham. Due to the uncertainty about the future of the pilot, these were largely temporary agency staff.
- In Wolverhampton, implementation activities involved identifying eligible families, adapting the application process to cope with the extended eligibility and processing applications.

Experiences of the set-up period were largely defined by schools' ability to complete preparatory work by the end of the 2009 summer holiday. This proved challenging where schools were late to receive resources, such as menus and literature for parents, and where major building work was required. Providing early information and guidance on what the pilot would involve and on the revised eligibility criteria were suggested as ways to avoid problems in the set-up, planning and implementation of the pilot.

Delivering the pilot

The primary challenge for schools (particularly in the universal pilot areas) was dealing with an increased volume of pupils taking school meals. Initial teething problems, such as a lack of storage space, insufficient time to train staff to use new equipment and speeding up the lunch service, were addressed quickly and schools soon settled into efficient routines.

A number of key learning points underpinned successful implementation and delivery of the pilot:

- *Effective communication and partnership working between all parties involved in implementing and delivering the pilot.* School staff involved in delivering the pilot identified the need for LA staff and senior school managers to provide clear, accurate and timely information; to be available and responsive; to consult with the relevant staff; and to share information and updates.
- *Building sufficient staff resource and capacity.* This was enabled by having the appropriate levels of staff with the right skills.
- *Being prepared to trial new approaches to delivery until the right solution was found.* This helped schools develop systems to manage the increased volume of FSM.
- *Being able to monitor demand accurately.* SIMS (the School Information Management System) and cashless systems were a helpful resource in monitoring take-up in Wolverhampton.

The following minor challenges continued to present some schools with ongoing difficulties:

- *Management and organisation of the lunch service:* coping with external factors that could slow down the lunch service, such as the arrival of reception pupils who were unfamiliar with lunch routines, increased noise levels and more accidents in dining halls. Responses included extending the lunch break, a buddying system for reception pupils and practices to reduce the noise during lunch.

- *Meal planning and preparation.* Schools found it difficult to accurately predict demand for particular meal options and order the appropriate quantities of food. This problem was addressed using a pre-order system for meal selection.
- *Staffing.* Continuing problems with understaffing and high staff turnover in catering and lunchtime supervisory teams meant some schools found it difficult to achieve both adequate and consistent levels of staff to cover the workload during the pilot.
- *In extended pilot schools,* there were concerns that eligible parents were not applying for the pilot and parents reported difficulties understanding the eligibility criteria and application process. Parents' difficulties stemmed from literacy problems, language issues, and uncertainty about whether they met the new criteria and how to demonstrate eligibility. Some schools responded by providing one-to-one support and guidance to parents but this resulted in a further drain on staff capacity.

In addition to dealing with the delivery of more meals, schools continued to promote awareness of the pilot in all pilot areas, to promote healthy eating and to improve pupils' social skills and dining etiquette.

Experiences of information, support and guidance

Local authorities and catering services were the main source of information, support and guidance for schools throughout the pilot. They helped schools implement changes to the physical school structure, workforce and menus, and in Wolverhampton they helped set up administrative systems and sent schools literature for distribution to parents.

Good relationships between schools and LAs were underpinned by the provision of timely, clear and accurate information and by responsiveness and flexibility in addressing individual schools' needs.

Less positive experiences resulted from delayed or unclear information. For example, although resolved fairly quickly, some case-study schools in Wolverhampton reported that they did not receive adequate information about eligible pupils and eligibility rules. Other issues, not restricted to Wolverhampton, included schools being unable to access additional resources to help manage capacity issues and being unable to modify menus and portion sizes.

Furthermore, it was felt that a platform for the sharing of good practice between schools participating in the pilot (such as a web forum) would have helped with the delivery of the pilot.

Choosing to take up Free School Meals

Take-up was reported as being much more evident in universal pilot case-study schools than in schools in the extended eligibility pilot area, reflecting the findings in the caterers' survey and in the impact study. School staff generally found it difficult to identify a particular profile of children who took up FSM, although age and previous eligibility for FSM were felt to be influential. School staff distinguished between consistent takers or non-takers and children who changed their preferences from week to week, influenced by what was on the menu and whether parents had time to make a packed lunch.

Three approaches to decision-making were identified:

- *Child-led.* In families where the decision was child-led, the priority was to ensure that their child would eat their lunch.

- *Parent-led.* Parents who made the decision to take up the pilot identified the financial benefits, the reduced burden on parent time, the quality of the meals and the social benefits of school meals as factors that outweighed the preferences of the child.
- *Joint.* When the parent encouraged their child to try school meals but left it open for them to return to packed lunches if they preferred, joint decision-making occurred.

An understanding of these models could help schools to identify where to target efforts to encourage take-up.

Cost savings were identified as the main reason for taking up a free school meal. Other factors affecting the take-up of FSM included: the choice of food available; the extent to which pupils and parents felt they had control over what children ate; the quality of the food available; social factors; the dining experience; the impacts on parents of taking school meals; and the eligibility and application process.

A number of initiatives were felt to encourage take-up including: introducing a pre-order system for meal selection; maintaining a strict policy about the contents of packed lunches; involving children in decisions about the menu options; improving the dining experience; offering taster sessions to parents; promoting school meals by emphasising the health and social benefits; and reducing the stigma attached to school meals through, for example, the introduction of a cashless payment system.

Perceived impacts on pupils, families and schools

It proved difficult to disentangle the perceived impacts arising from pupils opting for a school lunch, the actual impact of school meals being free and the effect of the wider activities of the pilot including healthy-eating activities. The ability to isolate the impact of the pilot was further mediated by four other factors: the pilot model (the impact being felt most acutely in universal pilot areas), other initiatives running in the school and LA, the school context, and whether pupils enjoyed and ate their school meal.

- *Pupils.* The primary impacts identified were an increase in the range of food pupils eat for lunch, the associated health benefits of having a balanced meal, improved social skills at meal times, and a levelling effect for children in universal areas who opted for a free school meal. Not surprisingly, there was much less agreement about whether the pilot had impacted on pupil performance and behaviour in the classroom, as there were felt to be other more influential factors driving any differences in this.
- *Families.* The main impacts highlighted for parents and families were the financial and time savings resulting from not having to pay for a lunch and not having to prepare a packed lunch. This was particularly identified for those on low incomes and for those with more than one child. Parents also commented on the positive impact on diets and cooking practices at home, with children tending to be less 'fussy', eating more healthily and asking for new dishes at home.
- *Schools.* The following impacts were identified by schools particularly where there was a large increase in the number of children opting for a free school meal as a result of the pilot:
 - Staff – administrative and catering staff increased their working hours and/or took on additional duties resulting from the pilot.

- School infrastructure – the pilot resulted in an expansion of school kitchen facilities and serving areas and the rearrangement of dining halls to cater for more pupils. Durham saw this impact more than the other pilot areas.
- Lunchtime arrangements – these tended to be modified to accommodate the increased number of pupils taking school meals. Changes tended to involve one or more of the following: staggered lunchtimes, pupil involvement in clearing up their own trays and introduction of the pre-choice menu system.

Reflections on the FSM pilot

The pilot was valued for:

- raising the profile of healthy eating and ensuring pupils get at least one healthy, good-quality meal a day;
- increasing the range of food pupils eat and building their social skills at meal times;
- easing the financial stress for parents and providing additional family time.

Participants made a number of recommendations for improving the delivery of the pilot: providing a longer lead-in time to prepare for the pilot; creating a platform for schools to share good practice about the organisation and management of lunchtimes; and, where schools experienced staffing problems, employing additional staff on a fixed-term basis rather than relying on temporary agency staff. Improving the quality, quantity and range of food on offer was a priority for pupils and parents.

1 Introduction

In September 2008, the Government launched the Free School Meals (FSM) pilot in three local authorities (LAs) in England. The £20 million pilot was a joint initiative of the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Health (DH), with matched funding from participating LAs.

The initiative was launched to assess the health and educational benefits of extending access to free school lunches ensuring that children eat at least one balanced, healthy meal each school day, regardless of family income.

The pilot also included a range of supporting activities in each area to encourage take-up of school meals and make parents aware of the pilot (for example, holding talks and taster sessions). The findings of the evaluation should therefore be considered in relation to the whole pilot approach rather than just the provision of free school meals.

The DfE commissioned a consortium of NatCen Social Research, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and Bryson Purdon Social Research (BPSR) to evaluate the impact of the FSM pilot and assess how effectively it was designed and implemented. This report presents the findings from the implementation study – combining the evidence from the scoping study, the longitudinal qualitative school case studies and the repeat surveys with catering managers carried out by NatCen Social Research between 2009 and 2011.

This introductory chapter maps the policy and research context for the study, the aims and design of the implementation study and the coverage of the report.

1.1 Policy context

Universal entitlement to school meals was introduced under the Education Act 1944 and remained in place for nearly 40 years until the 1980 Education Act removed this obligation. Only pupils from families supported by certain means-tested benefits retained their entitlement. For example, in the late 1990s, entitlement to FSM was extended with the introduction of Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC). Then in 2003, when Child Tax Credit (CTC) replaced WFTC, an additional 75,000 children became eligible for FSM. London Economics estimated, using the current criteria, that 19% of pupils were entitled to FSM in 2008.

Families who meet the income criteria to receive FSM must be registered with their LA. Prior to the pilot starting, London Economics estimated that approximately 15.5% of primary pupils and 13% of secondary pupils were registered for FSM. It also calculated that 24% of pupils in England (approximately 334,000 pupils) who were entitled to FSM had not registered with their LA. In addition, a substantial proportion of school children (an estimated 16% of primary and 25% of secondary pupils) who were registered had not taken up their entitlement. Further analysis

between government regions showed that rates of registration and take-up varied across the country (London Economics, 2008).¹

The FSM pilot was introduced to ensure that children would eat at least one balanced and healthy meal each school day, regardless of family income. The menu options were driven by the national nutritional standards (introduced in 2006), which required LAs to provide a healthy, balanced diet at school.² Two factors underpinned the rationale for the FSM pilot:

- *The importance of school lunches being free.* Although many different reasons are given for not taking a school lunch, the cost (roughly £1.67 in primary schools and £1.77 in secondary schools in 2008) was thought to be a key deterrent for families, particularly those on low incomes.
- *Benefits for child health and behaviour.* Previous research suggested that the take-up of school lunches may have benefits for child health and behaviour as well as impacting positively on eating habits outside of school (Harper and Wood, 2009).³

1.2 The Free School Meals pilot

Two different approaches to extending FSM provision were tested as part of the FSM pilot:

- *Universal model.* In two LAs (Newham and Durham), FSM were offered to all primary school children, regardless of their family income.
- *Extended eligibility model.* In the contrasting 'extended' eligibility area (Wolverhampton), FSM entitlement was extended to cover pupils in primary and secondary schools whose families were on Working Tax Credit whose annual income did not exceed £16,040. This threshold rose to £16,190 in 2010–11.

The pilot ran between the autumn of 2009 and the summer of 2011. It was jointly funded by DfE and DH with the expectation that their contribution would be matched locally. LAs took lead responsibility for implementing the pilot in each area, with help and support from the School Food Trust (SFT). The SFT provides specialist advice to the Government on school meals and children's food and led the implementation of the national nutritional standards in 2009.⁴ It provided support and guidance to LA leads implementing the pilot, facilitated the sharing of good practice between the three pilot areas and worked with LAs and schools to increase FSM take-up. The primary care trust (PCT) played a more limited role, engaging in strategic issues affecting the pilot in each area.

1.3 Aims of the evaluation

There were three primary aims of the evaluation:

1. To measure the impact of the pilot on the take-up of school lunches and the outcomes for children, including diet (at school and at home), health, behaviour, engagement of pupils and attainment.
2. To explore how the pilot was implemented and delivered and help identify models of good practice.

¹ London Economics on behalf of the School Food Trust (June 2008), 'Assessing Current and Potential Provision of Free School Meals – Economic Research on Free School Meals Entitlement and Exchequer Costs'.

² http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/SchoolLife/DG_4016089

³ Harper, C. and Wood, L. (January 2009), 'Please Sir? Can we have some more? Lessons from Free School Meal Initiatives', School Food Trust.

⁴ <http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/about-us/about-the-trust>

3. To assess the value for money of expanding the offer of FSM, based on a comparison of the costs and benefits.

This report explores the implementation of the pilot. It is based on the qualitative components of the evaluation that assessed the process of implementing the pilot and the perceived impacts of all involved as well as a survey of caterers. It specifically addresses the following issues:

- the experiences and views of all involved in relation to the design, set-up and delivery of the pilot;
- the views and experiences of parents and children who did and did not take a free school meal;
- perceptions about the impacts of the pilot on all those involved – pupils, families, schools and catering staff;
- the value and role of the pilot and suggestions for changes or improvements to its implementation.

1.4 Research design

Following an initial scoping study, case studies were carried out in ten selected schools in the three pilot areas. In the universal pilot areas in Durham and Newham, three primary schools were selected in each LA to be a case study; in the extended eligibility pilot area in Wolverhampton, two primary and two secondary schools were selected to be a case study.

These ten case studies were designed to provide detailed evidence about the experience of setting up, delivering and participating in the FSM pilot. However, adopting a case-study design has inevitably limited the degree to which we can reflect the full range of ways in which schools have delivered the FSM pilot in each LA.

The ten schools were initially visited during the 2010 spring term. Eight of these schools were then revisited in the 2011 spring term. At this point, a new secondary school was introduced to the sample.

As is usual in qualitative research, the sample was designed to ensure as much variation in the range and type of schools involved in the pilot as was feasible in a case-study design (this is known as purposive sampling). The following key primary criteria were identified in advance as being important to inform our understanding and selection of schools:

- school type (primary or secondary);
- school size;
- FSM eligibility at the baseline;
- FSM take-up at the baseline;
- FSM take-up since the pilot started;
- whether other policy initiatives focusing on healthy eating or the promotion of school meals were in operation at the school.⁵

A number of secondary criteria were also monitored including local area deprivation, whether a rural or urban setting, the ethnic minority profile of the school, the school meal payment system and the approach taken to catering within each school (i.e. through the LA or in-house school caterers).

⁵ Examples of other initiatives that were available included healthy eating policies, packed lunch policies and health-orientated programmes such as the Active Mark certification, the National Healthy Schools Programme (NHSP) and the Family Initiative Supporting Children's Health (FISCH) programme.

Local authorities were each asked to provide details for 15 schools to allow the research team the opportunity to select schools to meet the sample specification based on the above criteria. Details for 37 schools in total were received from the three participating LAs (15 from Durham, 16 from Newham and six from Wolverhampton). Of these, ten schools were selected to take part as a case study.

Conduct of the case studies

The case studies were carried out in two stages, each focusing on a different aspect of the pilot. The first stage considered the early implementation of the FSM pilot, whilst the second stage focused on the longer-term implementation issues and impacts. Each school case study involved senior school staff,⁶ catering staff, teaching staff, pupils and parents.

Variations in the case-study design reflected the staffing structures in place and the way the FSM pilot was organised. A total of 27 individual or paired interviews and 18 focus groups were carried out at Stage 1 and a total of 16 interviews and 39 groups were carried out at Stage 2. Table 1.1 outlines the completed fieldwork in each of the ten case-study schools.

⁶ Head teacher, deputy head teacher, school administrator, clerical assistant / office clerk, office manager, business manager, healthy schools coordinator, PSHE (personal, social and health education) lead, learning mentor and attendance officer.

		Stage 1			Stage 2		
		Area A	Area B	Area C	Area A	Area B	Area C
School type	Primary	3	3	2	3	3	2
	Secondary	-	-	2	-	-	1
School size ⁸	Small	1	1	2	1	1	1
	Medium	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Large	1	1	1	1	1	1
FSM eligibility at baseline ⁹	High	1	2	1	1	2	1
	Medium	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Low	1	-	2	1	-	2
FSM take-up at baseline ¹⁰	High		2			1	
	Medium		3			3	
	Low		5			5	
FSM take-up since pilot ¹¹	High		3			2	
	Medium		4			3	
	Low		3			4	
Initiatives	Yes		8			7	
	No		2			2	
Total schools			10			9	

The interviews and group discussions with staff lasted between 30 minutes and 1½ hours, depending on the nature of the involvement of each participant in the pilot. Copies of the discussion guides used in both case-study stages are provided in Appendices B and D. Fieldwork took place in March 2010 and February and March 2011. Schools received an honorarium payment of £400 for participating in the case studies.

Survey of catering managers

Repeat surveys of catering managers were carried out in the pilot and comparison schools from which the pupils were sampled for the longitudinal survey (see the report on the impact of the FSM pilot: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR227>).

⁷ Area A is Newham, area B is Durham and area C is Wolverhampton.

⁸ Definitions of school size based on number of pupils varied between local authorities. In area A, the definitions provided by the LA were: large (>250); medium (120–250); small (<120). In area B, these were: large (>500); medium (300–500); small (<300). In area C, primary schools were defined as: large (>250); medium (200–250); small (<200). Secondary schools were defined as: large (>1,000); medium (750–1,000); small (<750).

⁹ Definitions of FSM eligibility at baseline were based on eligibility figures provided by local authorities. In area A, the definitions were: high (>28%); medium (18%–28%); low (<18%). In area B, these were: high (>39%); medium (29%–39%); low (<29%). Definitions were unavailable from area C.

¹⁰ Definitions of FSM take-up at baseline were based on take-up figures provided by local authorities. In areas A and B, the definitions were: high (>90%); medium (80%–90%); low (<80%). Definitions were unavailable from area C.

¹¹ Definitions of FSM take-up since pilot were based on take-up figures provided by local authorities. In areas A and B, the definitions were: high (>90%); medium (80%–90%); low (<80%). Definitions were unavailable from area C.

Sixty-five of the 74 schools took part in all rounds of interviews: prior to the start of the pilot, at the end of Year 1 and at the end of Year 2. The purpose of this repeated survey was to monitor any changes in types of meals, staffing, menus, choices, payment methods, dining facilities and pupil behaviour that may be associated with the pilot and to compare changes in the pilot schools with those in other similar schools that continued with standard school-meal arrangements.

1.5 Analysis of data

All interviews and group discussions were digitally recorded for verbatim transcription. Transcripts were analysed using 'Framework', a method developed by the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen Social Research. The first stage of analysis involves familiarisation with the transcribed data and identification of emerging issues to inform the development of a thematic framework. This is a series of thematic matrices or charts, each chart representing one key theme. The column headings on each theme chart relate to key sub-topics, and the rows to individual respondents. Data from each case are then summarised in the relevant cell. The context of the information is retained and the page of the transcript from which it comes is noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or to extract text for verbatim quotation. This approach ensures that the analysis is comprehensive and consistent and that links with the verbatim data are retained. Organising the data in this way enables the views, circumstances and experiences of all respondents to be explored within an analytical framework that is both grounded in, and driven by, their own accounts. The thematic charts allow for the full range of views and experiences to be compared and contrasted, both across and within cases, and for patterns and themes to be identified and explored.

The analysis of the repeat surveys of catering managers was based on the 65 schools that took part in all three interviews. Since the number of schools in each of the six sample groups (three pilot areas and three groups of comparison areas) was small, the data are mostly reported descriptively in the text, with a few tables and charts focusing on areas in which change was observed. The findings from the comparison schools are only referred to where notably different from the pilot schools.

1.6 Structure of the report

The remainder of this report is divided into five further chapters:

- Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of how the pilot was developed and implemented. It draws on the evidence provided by school and catering staff.
- Chapter 3 reflects on the decision to take up FSM, considering how the profile of take-up has varied across the pilot areas and the factors that were influential.
- Chapter 4 assesses the perceptions about the impacts of the pilot that were reported by pupils, parents and school staff.
- Chapter 5 reports on the reflections of school staff, pupils and parents on the value and role of the pilot. It identifies key aspects of the pilot that were critical for achieving success and presents recommendations and plans for the future.
- In the final concluding chapter, we reflect on the key findings presented in this report and discuss their implications.

The qualitative findings reported have been illustrated with the use of verbatim quotations, case illustrations and examples, which are drawn from across the sample. The quotes used reflect the range and variation of views expressed by case-study participants. They are not intended to be statistically representative. In order to preserve respondents' anonymity, quotations from

respondents are referenced only by respondent and pilot type, and case illustrations use pseudonyms instead of real names. While quotes are verbatim, some have been edited for coherence or to remove text not relevant to the finding.¹² As participants in this study have been asked to recollect their views and experiences since the introduction of the pilot two years ago and the period prior to it, there may be some issues to consider surrounding recall.

The purposive nature of the sample design as well as the small sample size, however, means that the study cannot provide any statistical data relating to the prevalence of the approaches to implementation and the views and experiences of people involved. The report deliberately avoids giving numerical findings because qualitative research cannot support numerical analysis. Purposive sampling seeks to achieve range and diversity among sample members rather than to build a statistically representative sample. The questioning methods used are designed to explore issues in depth within individual contexts rather than to generate data that can be analysed numerically. What qualitative research does do is to provide in-depth insight into the range of experiences, views and recommendations. Wider inference can be drawn on these bases rather than on the basis of prevalence.

¹² Where this is the case, '[...]' indicates an omission and '...' represents hesitation.

2 Implementing the pilot

This chapter presents the views and experiences of setting up and delivering the FSM pilot in three areas – Newham, Durham and Wolverhampton. It is based on the evidence from the qualitative school case studies and the survey of catering managers. We describe the approach taken by each area to implementing the pilot (section 2.1). Section 2.2 explores key activities undertaken by schools to prepare for the pilot and we also discuss schools' experience of implementation (section 2.3). In section 2.4, we consider the information, support and guidance provided by LAs and catering companies to schools, highlighting the importance of timely, clear, responsive and, where necessary, tailored support, for effective implementation and delivery. The challenges experienced in setting up and delivering the pilot as detailed in this chapter did not appear to overshadow the overwhelming support participants expressed for the FSM pilot (discussed in more detail in chapter 5). Finally, section 2.5 considers the way schools planned for the end of the pilot.

Summary of key findings from this chapter

Approaches to implementation:

- The local authority led the implementation of the pilot in all three areas.
- Implementation activities included promoting awareness of the pilot and ensuring schools had adequate kitchen capacity, equipment, staff and data-monitoring systems in place.
- Differences in the approach to setting up the pilot were based on the pilot type. The focus in universal areas was on structural changes to schools and that in Wolverhampton was on developing effective data-monitoring systems.
- The type and scale of activities in each school were in part determined by the anticipated increase in take-up as a result of the pilot, coupled with schools' existing capacity to cater for such increases.
- The individuals involved in preparing for the pilot were senior school staff, catering teams, lunchtime supervisory staff, school administrators and teaching staff.

Experiences of delivering the pilot:

- The primary challenge for schools (typically in the universal pilot areas) was dealing with an increased volume of pupils taking school meals. In addition to dealing with the delivery of more meals, schools continued to promote awareness of the pilot in all pilot areas, to promote healthy eating and to improve pupils' social skills and dining etiquette.
- Initial problems, such as having limited storage space and little time to train staff to use new equipment, were addressed quickly.
- Schools faced ongoing difficulties in the following areas:
 - Management and organisation of the lunch service. Schools experienced difficulty maintaining a speedy lunch service all year round and managing increased noise levels and numbers of accidents in the dining halls.
 - Meal preparation. Schools found it difficult to predict the appropriate quantities of food required for each menu option. Being unable to tailor portion sizes and menus to their needs was also challenging.
 - Staffing. Continuing problems with understaffing and high staff turnover meant some schools found it difficult to cover the workload under the pilot.

- In the extended pilot area, schools continued to find it challenging to promote the pilot and inform parents about the extended eligibility and the application process.

Information, support and guidance:

- Local authorities and catering services were the main sources of information, support and guidance for schools throughout the pilot.
- Support provided by LAs covered: supplying pilot updates; helping schools to build, refurbish and equip kitchens; setting up administrative systems; providing guidance on menus; recruiting and training catering staff; sending schools literature for distribution to parents; and helping to solve individual school problems, such as perceived understaffing or underperformance in catering and administrative teams or wanting to modify menus or portion sizes.
- Positive experiences of information, guidance and support were underpinned by timely, clear and accurate information and by responsiveness and flexibility in addressing individual schools' needs.

2.1 Implementation approaches at the LA level

Local authorities began preparing schools for the pilot when they were announced as the successful bidders in May 2009. Newham and Durham had the least amount of time to prepare because they rolled out the pilot at the start of the new school year.

The three pilot areas shared many of the same priorities for implementing the pilot. These included:

- promoting awareness of the pilot to parents through publicity campaigns and promotional materials;
- putting in place adequate infrastructure in schools: ensuring schools had the right kitchen capacity, the right levels of staff and the correct equipment to cope with the increased volume of meals required on a daily basis;
- setting up data-monitoring systems in schools.

Local authorities were also responsible for providing information, guidance and support to schools. Due to a lack of time, they were unable to engage with each school individually and instead adopted other strategies such as an extranet in Wolverhampton and Durham. Where there was a risk that specific schools may not respond or may have difficulties preparing for the pilot, more-targeted action was taken.

Within universal areas, much of the preparatory work improving kitchen facilities and other school infrastructure was successfully completed in the period before the launch in September 2009. As can be seen from the illustrations below, the approach each area took varied according to the pilot type and needs of individual schools:

Durham

In Durham, funding from DfE and DH to set up the pilot was matched locally by the LA and the PCT in equal proportions. The majority of schools also contributed towards the cost of the pilot from their own budgets (on average between £15,000 and £20,000 per school). The lead responsibility for the implementation of the pilot was held by the lead for Health and Wellbeing at the LA. Durham gave the pilot its own identity and branding in promotional campaigns in order to publicise the pilot and raise awareness of it among parents. A launch event was held, promotional materials such as letters and posters and a media campaign were developed and a sports celebrity was employed to front the campaign. The scale of work undertaken to set up the infrastructure in schools was the most extensive in Durham. The average cost per school of extending and equipping school kitchens and dining facilities was reported to be around £20,000. The catering company contracted by the LA increased its workforce by 30%, which translated into 160 new cooks, and existing staff increased their contracted hours per week. New staff were employed on two-year fixed-term contracts.

Newham

In Newham, locally matched funding was provided exclusively by the LA, although there was some discussion about the PCT contributing in future financial years. The Catering Development Manager led the implementation of the pilot. Newham embarked on a similar promotional campaign to that in Durham. Investments were made in specific schools but facilities were mostly seen to be adequate to deal with the increased demand, possibly as a consequence of the recent refurbishment of school kitchens by the LA. Extra serving counters, cooking equipment and dining furniture were provided to a small number of schools. The catering workforce also increased by around 30%, but Newham used some agency staff as a temporary measure until all new 'permanent' staff could be CRB checked by the start of term. Evidence from schools, however, suggests the use of temporary agency staff continued for the duration of the pilot.

Wolverhampton

In Wolverhampton, the PCT provided all of the matched funding necessary for the pilot to take place. The School Meals Development Officer was responsible for leading the implementation and delivery of the pilot. In contrast to Newham and Durham, Wolverhampton combined promotion of the extended eligibility pilot with publicity material developed for its existing FSM schemes. This material was modified to draw attention to the temporary changes in the eligibility criteria for FSM because of the pilot. In Wolverhampton, it was felt that the existing staff resources and infrastructure were adequate to cope with the demand generated by extending eligibility. The issue of assessing eligibility for provision of meals was predominantly limited to Wolverhampton given the nature of the pilot in this area.

2.2 Implementation approaches at the school level

Schools worked with the LA leads and catering services in each area to prepare for and deliver the pilot.

2.2.1 Key activities in preparing for the pilot

The key activities carried out in schools related to the following areas:

- *Kitchens and dining spaces*

The structural changes mainly revolved around adding new kitchen appliances and light equipment and rearranging dining spaces to increase the seating capacity. The degree of modification required depended on the age and size of the school, the capacity of the school to provide school meals and the predicted level of take-up of school meals under the pilot. Smaller and older schools that were predicted to have a large increase in the take-up of FSM needed the most significant alterations to kitchen and dining spaces. In contrast, schools that were predicted to have lower levels of take-up of FSM, particularly in Wolverhampton, did not warrant significant changes to kitchens or dining spaces.
- *Catering and lunchtime supervisory staff teams*

The capacity of catering and lunchtime supervisory staff teams was increased by recruiting additional permanent staff members and/or increasing the hours of existing staff in proportion to the demand created by the pilot. Catering staff in universal pilot areas also received training in the use of new equipment and refresher training to improve efficiency in meal preparation, for example through the use of quicker cooking techniques.
- *Food-ordering procedures and menus*

Schools carried out a range of activities to help estimate the take-up of FSM, and also to plan for the increase in food required and decide on what menu options to offer. The extent to which menus were revised depended on the predicted increase in the take-up of school meals. Where a large increase was expected, schools reduced the number of options or tailored menus to better suit pupils' tastes, within the framework of nutritional standards. Where minimal differences in take-up were predicted, revisions were either focused on meeting nutritional standards and cost or felt to be unnecessary, especially if existing menus were already working well.
- *Data-monitoring systems*

The key preparatory task in Wolverhampton schools involved amending administrative systems such as the school's database and caterers' computer systems to allow for the recording of pupils taking school meals under the extended eligibility criteria. A key priority was to ensure that these processes were working well and supported the collection of accurate data. The LA also trained administrative staff in recording these data.

Experiences of the set-up period were largely defined by schools' ability to complete preparatory work within the given timescales. For the activities described above, there were two key deadlines for completion. The first was the end of the summer term, before the start of the pilot. The activities that had to be completed by this time included sending out letters, literature and application forms to parents and estimating take-up. The second deadline was the start of the pilot and the activities that needed to be completed by this time were both structural and infrastructural – making changes to kitchens, menus and food-ordering systems and to administrative and data-monitoring systems.

Schools that were able to meet the timescale typically anticipated a small increase in school meal take-up and as a result required fewer associated changes to school structure and infrastructure. It was felt in these schools that plenty of notice had been given to prepare for the pilot. These schools also reported that their preparation activities went smoothly, and there were no outstanding activities at the end of the set-up period in September 2009.

Schools that found it harder to meet the deadlines reported a number of factors they felt contributed to time pressures. These included delays in receiving resources from the LA and catering companies, and a lack of capacity to set up administrative systems before the end of the summer term. It was also difficult for certain schools to acquire kitchen equipment: suppliers had reportedly run out of equipment because of the simultaneous demand from other schools in the area.

In schools where building works were being carried out, completing them on time posed additional challenges. Head teachers reported that the availability of builders had reduced due to the number of schools simultaneously demanding building services during the set-up period. The summer holiday period was also found to be too short for major structural changes, such as full extensions, to be completed. Although alternative, quicker solutions were arrived at, such as the building of temporary structures, a number of other unexpected challenges emerged. These included the discovery of asbestos, the need to install new electrical power systems, having to remove old heating systems, needing to acquire planning permission and needing to locate copies of school plans.

2.2.2 Key activities in delivering the pilot

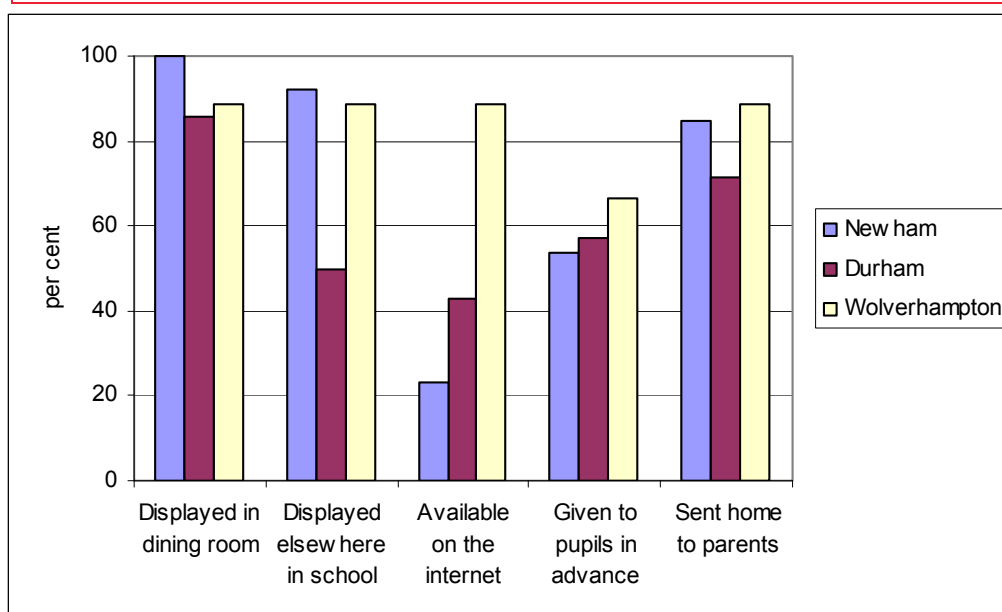
As would be expected, implementation activities differed according to the pilot type: managing the increased volume of school meals was the key issue in the universal areas, whereas providing information about extended eligibility to parents and refining data-monitoring systems were the main challenges in Wolverhampton. In addition to the delivery of school meals, other key activities for schools during the pilot included raising awareness of the pilot, encouraging healthy eating (by, for example, implementing packed lunch policies) and improving the dining etiquette and social skills of pupils.

- *Administrative activities*
Administrative activities associated with the delivery of the pilot included ensuring effective monitoring systems were in place and could accurately differentiate between pupils having FSM as a result of the pilot in Wolverhampton. A number of systems were devised by schools, which included school secretaries annotating school registers and schools adding a field to their pupil databases so they could easily identify the number of pupils who were taking FSM as a result of the pilot. Schools in Wolverhampton also used a range of methods for collecting payment for school meals, with the majority offering a cashless system. There was little change in these arrangements during the pilot. Local authorities were reported to have provided support in setting up administrative systems and helping administrative staff with data-monitoring activities.
- *Information provision to parents and pupils*
Providing information to parents and pupils was particularly important in Wolverhampton, where it was felt that the adjustment in eligibility criteria might be easier for parents to miss than in areas where there was universal eligibility. In response to this, schools engaged in

a number of promotional activities. These included head teachers providing information during meetings with parents and pupils at the start of the term, school administrative staff periodically sending out reminder letters to parents to let them know about the pilot, frontline school staff – such as school secretaries and clerks – informally telling parents about the pilot as and when they had occasion to talk to them, and schools inviting parents to sample school meals alongside their children at the start of term. A number of borough-wide and more-targeted communication activities were also undertaken by the LA. These included activities aimed at increasing registration among eligible parents and borough-wide publicity campaigns.

The survey of catering managers indicates that schools also used a range of methods to enable pupils to see the menu and find out what lunch options were available (see Figure 2.1). In Durham and Wolverhampton, schools reported that they largely retained the same arrangements as at the start of the pilot. The main change was observed in Newham. At the start of the pilot, all 13 schools had relied on giving the menu to pupils in advance. During the course of the pilot, Newham schools increasingly adopted a wider range of approaches in line with the other pilot (and comparison) areas.

Figure 2.1 Reported arrangements for displaying the menu at Year 2



The survey evidence also suggests that there was little reported change during the course of the pilot in the number of schools using different methods to promote school meals to pupils and parents. All 13 schools in the Newham sample were already offering taster sessions to pupils and parents at the baseline survey prior to the pilot and seven schools had ‘theme days’. By Year 2, all except one of the Newham schools held theme days. In Durham, three schools at the baseline and Year 2 did not use these promotional methods. Among the remaining schools, either taster sessions or theme days were offered. Wolverhampton schools were already offering different methods for promoting school meals at the baseline, including taster sessions, theme days and meal deals. The comparison schools for Durham and Wolverhampton followed similar practices to the pilot areas in promoting school meals. The comparison schools for Newham, however, differed from the pilot schools, with fewer than half the schools offering taster sessions (compared with all of the Newham schools).

- *Menu choice*
The catering survey evidence illustrated that Newham schools had a four-week menu cycle. Durham schools had either three- or four-week cycles. In both areas, there was no change during the period of the pilot. Six of the nine Wolverhampton schools switched from a four-week cycle to either two or three weeks between the baseline and Year 1.

In Newham schools, the menu changed twice a year. In Durham, there was a trend towards this arrangement during the pilot. Overall, Wolverhampton schools changed the menu less frequently than the universal pilot areas – half the schools changed the menu only once a year.

There was evidence that Newham and Durham schools increasingly accommodated special diets within the normal menu during the time of the pilot. In Newham, none of the schools reported including special nutrition or religious or ethnic diets within the normal menu at the baseline, but most schools did so by Year 2. In Durham, an increasing number of schools accommodated these diets as well as allergies and intolerances during the pilot. There was little change in Wolverhampton.

Newham and Durham also demonstrated increasing flexibility during the pilot in terms of whether special menus needed to be ordered in advance. All the Newham schools imposed this requirement at the baseline, whereas only four schools did so by Year 2. In Durham, three schools removed this requirement between the baseline and Year 2.

- *Preparing and delivering school meals*
These activities were not dissimilar to those undertaken prior to the pilot. They included preparing and serving meals, cleaning the kitchen and equipment, and supervising and clearing the dining hall. The key difference was the increase in the scale of these activities as a result of increased numbers of pupils taking school meals, particularly in universal pilot areas. A greater number of pupils using the dining room meant, for example, that tables needed to be cleared more regularly and crockery and cutlery needed to be washed more often to cope with the increased volume.

2.2.3 The role of staff in setting up and delivering the pilot

Typically, senior school staff (such as head teachers and deputy heads), senior catering staff, kitchen staff, lunchtime supervisory staff, school administrators and teaching staff set up and delivered the pilot. The nature of the responsibilities performed by each staff type is summarised in Table 2.1.

Type of staff	Specific examples	Key responsibilities
Senior managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head teachers • Deputy head teachers • School business managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaise with LA staff and catering contractors • Coordinate building activities, identify kitchen requirements and order kitchen equipment • Lead in promotional activities to parents about the pilot • Supervise lunchtime staff • Cover staff absences in catering or supervisory teams • Provide additional supervisory cover • Dine with pupils to teach table manners • Devise strategies to increase uptake among non-takers • Operate reward system for healthy eating • Monitor packed lunches (for adherence to packed lunch policies to increase school meal take-up)
Senior catering staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catering managers • Cooks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify kitchen requirements and order kitchen equipment • Devise lunchtime menus (in compliance with nutritional standards) • Store and order ingredients
Kitchen staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant cooks • Kitchen assistants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare food • Serve food • Provide ancillary services such as clearing tables and washing up • Provide and receive training (in preparing and serving food)
Lunchtime supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General assistants • Supervisory assistants • Lunchtime supervisors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure steady flow of pupils through the lunch system • Encourage pupils to try different foods and finish meals • Deal with accidents • Clear tables • Provide and receive training (in lunchtime supervision)
Administrative and finance staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School secretaries/clerks • School administrators • Data managers • Office managers • Finance officers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the pilot to parents • Collate expected take-up figures • Order kitchen equipment • Collect application forms for the pilot • Coordinate and process pre-order systems and communicate figures to kitchens • Collate information on FSM uptake and share this with the LA
Teaching staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Teaching assistants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform pupils about lunch menus • Provide additional supervisory cover during the lunch break

The level of staff involvement was largely dependent on the following factors:

- the pilot design (i.e. universal or extended) and the related expected increase in take-up;
- the existing capacity within the school to deal with the pilot;
- whether or not the school employed its own in-school catering provision.

Although the roles and responsibilities varied according to the pilot type, school staff had some common responsibilities irrespective of pilot design. For instance, administrative staff in all three areas sent letters to parents about the pilot and senior members in all three areas took responsibility for liaising with LA staff. Tasks associated with kitchen spaces, such as coordinating building, identifying kitchen requirements and ordering kitchen equipment, were typically undertaken by senior staff, catering staff and administrative staff respectively and were more likely to be needed in universal pilot areas. In schools piloting extended eligibility, responsibilities were focused on setting up administrative systems and tended not to involve catering staff and catering companies.

Where roles and responsibilities of school staff varied between schools operating under the same pilot type or area, they depended largely on the scale of alterations taking place in the school. Where the scale of modifications was large – for example, where building works and kitchen refurbishments were needed – key roles were fulfilled by all types of staff. In schools that had less to do to prepare for the pilot, the responsibilities were shared between fewer types of staff. Head teachers tended to be heavily involved in managing the preparation period in schools undertaking major modifications, but took only a supervisory role in schools requiring minimal alterations. Where the catering provision was owned by the school, head teachers and senior staff were much more heavily involved in organising and managing the set-up period and reportedly received less hands-on support from the LA.

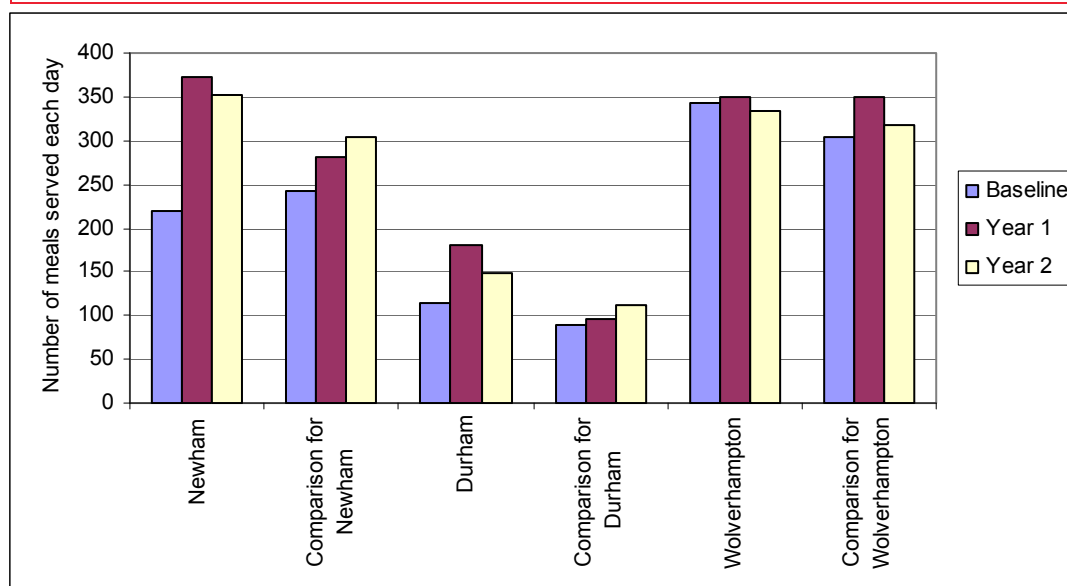
Senior management and teaching staff helped with the lunch service when there was a shortage of catering staff teams. In these circumstances, they guided pupils to serving hatches, encouraged pupils to eat their lunch, supervised pupils in the playground and cleared the dining hall. Teaching staff also tended to play a greater part in these duties particularly where their own responsibilities had changed irrespective of the pilot. For instance, since relinquishing her teaching responsibilities in the second year of the pilot, a deputy head teacher in a universal pilot area reported spending more time in the dining hall at lunchtime.

Naturally, some roles and responsibilities changed during the life of the pilot. For example, tasks such as ordering new equipment, coordinating building activities and devising menus typically occurred at the preparatory stage.

2.3 Implementation experiences

The primary challenge for schools implementing the FSM pilot was dealing with an increased volume of pupils taking school meals. This challenge was most evident in universal pilot areas and in schools where extending eligibility resulted in a large increase in school meal takers. The evidence on the number of meals served from the survey of catering managers showed that schools in Newham and Durham experienced substantial increases during the pilot (see Figure 2.2). In these areas, there was a substantial rise between the baseline and Year 1, followed by a slight decrease between Year 1 and Year 2. In contrast, the number of meals served rose steadily and to a smaller extent in the comparison primary schools. In Wolverhampton, there was less change over the course of the pilot and also less of a difference in the pattern of change between Wolverhampton and comparison secondary schools. These changes and variation underpin much of what is reported in the rest of this section, focusing on how schools responded to the challenge of increased demand and how these changes affected the dining experience for pupils.

Figure 2.2 Reported change in average number of meals per school served at lunchtime



Schools varied in the extent to which they enabled flexibility in the choice of whether to take school meals or not. In Newham and Wolverhampton, all responding schools at the baseline and Year 2 allowed pupils to decide on the day whether to take school meals. This is somewhat surprising given the large increase in demand, particularly in Newham, and the difficulty that schools in this area had in predicting demand for different lunch options. Durham schools took a different approach, with schools ranging from allowing pupils to decide on the day to requiring a termly commitment. Among the Durham schools requiring pupils to decide in advance, there was an even split between whether or not pupils were required to have school meals every day.

Most schools across the pilot and comparison areas allowed pupils to choose options from the menu at lunchtime in the dining hall. At the baseline, all pupils had the same choices regardless of whether they received FSM.

Dealing with increased volumes of school meal takers caused a number of issues in terms of the management and organisation of the lunch service, the preparation of school meals and staffing. In Wolverhampton, the challenges resulting from the pilot revolved more around the application process and monitoring take-up. These issues are discussed in turn below.

2.3.1 Management and organisation of the lunch service

Due to the rise in the number of pupils taking FSM, schools concentrated on improving the efficiency of the lunch service to ensure pupils had enough time to eat and play without lunchtimes overrunning. Initially, schools found it difficult to process the number of lunches quickly enough, clearing tables, replenishing cutlery and crockery between sittings and preparing the dining hall for afternoon lessons.

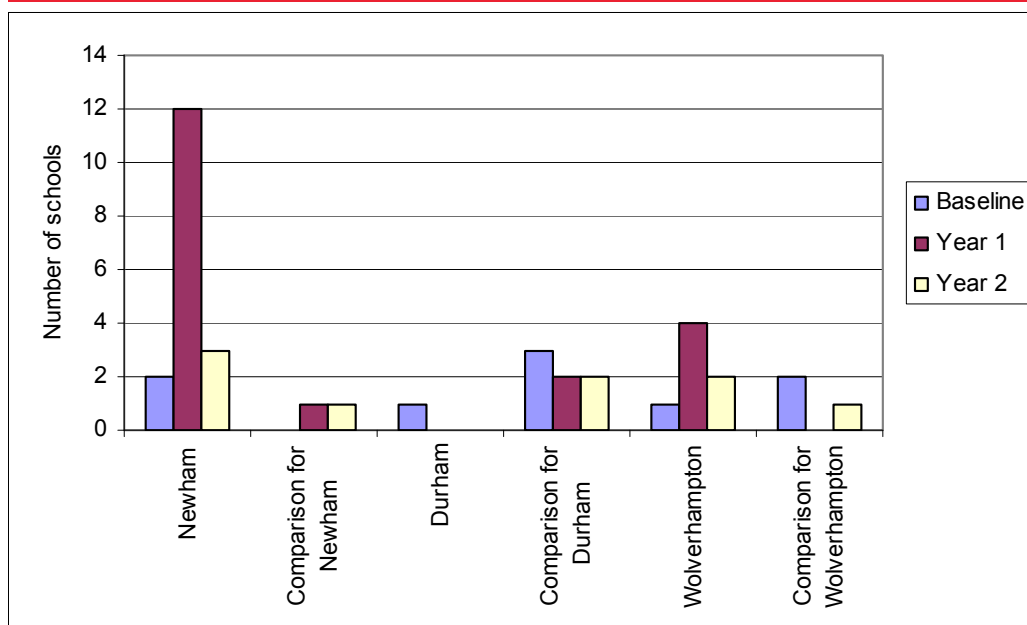
Catering managers reported fluctuations in the lunchtimes of the pilot schools in the Year 1 survey, which suggested that they tried different approaches during the course of the pilot. In Newham, the majority of schools had different start times at the baseline and Year 2, but more schools adopted the same lunchtime in Year 1. In Durham, a few additional schools moved to different start times at

Year 1 and then reverted to the same lunchtimes at Year 2. In Wolverhampton, the fluctuations were smaller.

Newham schools appeared to have faced particular challenges in serving the pupils in the time available (Figure 2.3). Between the baseline and Year 1, the number of schools reporting a problem serving pupils rose from two to 12, but for most schools the problems were resolved by Year 2. (In a separate question, four Newham schools reported that they had increased the time available for lunch between the baseline and Year 1, but this did not appear to ease the problem immediately.)

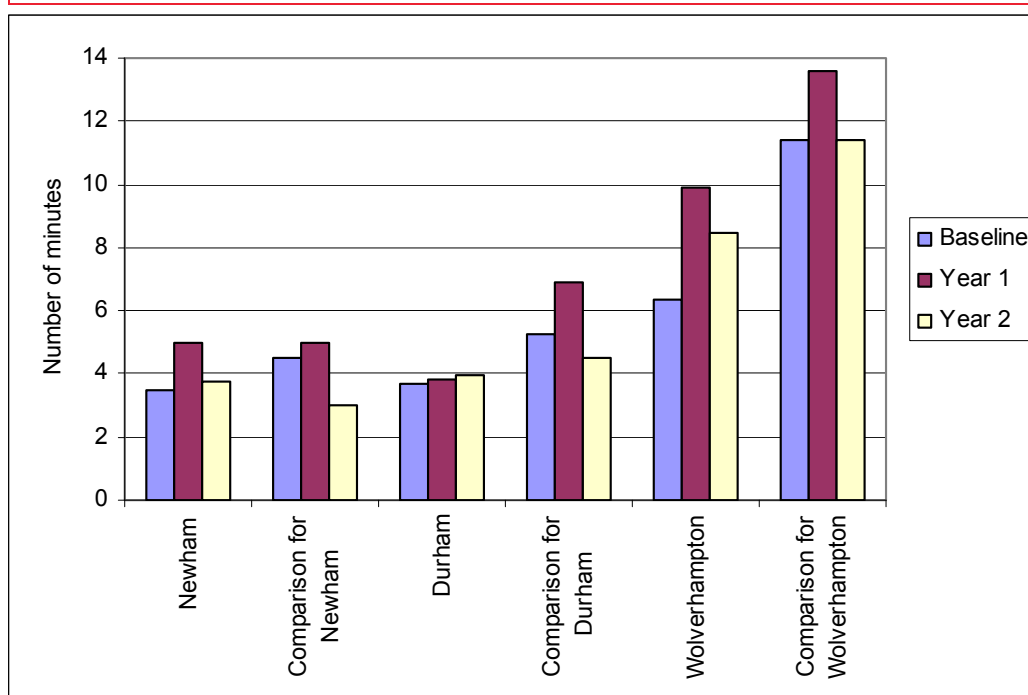
By contrast, none of the Durham schools reported a problem in Year 1 or Year 2, perhaps because they had more space. Some additional schools in Wolverhampton faced problems in Year 1, but some schools managed to overcome the difficulties by Year 2.

Figure 2.3 Reported change in number of schools reporting a problem serving pupils in the time available



Despite the challenges faced by Newham, the catering managers reported only a small rise of 2 minutes in the average queuing time between the baseline and Year 1, which had then decreased again by Year 2 (Figure 2.4). Wolverhampton schools experienced a proportionately similar rise between the baseline and Year 1, but with a longer waiting time to start with; this meant that pupils taking school meals were waiting for 10 minutes on average in Year 1. This may have had a negative influence on the decision to take school meals, especially given that 39% of parents in the Wolverhampton sample whose pupils did not take school meals at the baseline cited the time taken to get served as a reason for their choice. The waiting time had decreased a little by Year 2.

Figure 2.4 Reported change in average queuing time



Based on the case-study evidence, it appeared that schools generally adjusted to increased numbers and developed systems and practices such as new queuing and serving systems that helped them settle into ‘finely tuned’ and efficient lunchtime routines (see section 4.4.2 for examples) as the pilot progressed. There were, however, a number of ongoing problems that schools experienced as the pilot progressed:

- *Slower service with new intakes of reception children*

A common issue in all schools, regardless of the type of FSM pilot, was the way new reception pupils slowed down the pace of the lunch service. Unfamiliar with lunchtime practices and the school dining environment, new reception pupils were slower at choosing food and shy about communicating what they wanted to catering staff. As depicted by one classroom teacher,

“they were like a rabbit in the headlights when they got to the dinners, because often they don’t know what things are and they don’t speak.”

(Classroom teacher, universal pilot)

Lunch also took longer for new reception pupils because they were not accustomed to eating independently and were easily distracted.

This issue appeared to be more problematic for schools participating in the FSM pilot because it disturbed the efficient lunchtime pace that was essential to the smooth delivery. Schools therefore had to step in to minimise the impact of reception pupils on the pace of service. One approach to dealing with this issue involved extending the lunch period for reception pupils during the first school term. Another involved putting reception pupils on the first sitting with the guidance of older pupils until they were acclimatised to school lunchtimes.

- *Controlling noise levels*
Heightened levels of noise were most problematic in larger schools and schools with the greatest increase in school meal takers, as there were more pupils, both eating and queuing, than before the pilot. Increased use of cutlery and crockery, along with more things falling on the floor, also contributed to noise levels. A number of approaches were taken by schools to reduce the 'din'. One school implemented a silent lunchtime policy, which prohibited pupils from talking. This was put in place after a previous strategy of playing calming music in the dining hall had not reduced noise levels. This policy was intended to continue for the duration of the pilot. In another school, a system of rewards was implemented for quiet pupils alongside a noise-activated traffic light which responded with a red light and siren to unacceptable noise levels.
- *Increased number of accidents*
Spillages were also reported to be more common in the busier lunch halls, with more pupils carrying food and drink. In spite of increased efforts to prevent accidents, this problem was to an extent seen as unavoidable due to the inevitably more chaotic and busy environments the pilot had created.
- *Creating sufficient capacity*
Finally, despite reorganising dining hall furniture and staggering lunch intakes, one school continued to find it difficult to create enough extra capacity in dining halls to accommodate the increased volume of pupils within the lunch period. The school facing this problem considered extending the lunch break to alleviate this problem. The findings from the catering managers' survey suggested that most schools managed the increased take-up without needing to change the number of serving or eating areas. Even so, most of the schools in the universal pilot areas reported that there was enough room for pupils to sit down to eat their lunch. (The two schools in Newham that said there was not enough room at the baseline had resolved the problem by Year 1.) By Year 2, Newham schools were mostly at full capacity in their dining halls at lunchtime. Durham schools appear to have had no difficulties with space: even by Year 2, most of the schools reported that they had a little spare capacity in the dining hall. In Wolverhampton, three schools reported insufficient space to sit down at the baseline and Year 2; of the schools that did have enough space, half had additional capacity and half did not.

There was some change during the pilot in whether pupils having school lunch could sit with pupils bringing packed lunches. In Newham (where space was more of an issue and the increase in number of meals provided most marked), fewer schools over time allowed pupils to sit together. By contrast, in Durham, the number of schools allowing pupils to sit together rose from nine to 13 between the baseline and Year 2. There was little change in Wolverhampton.

In Newham and Durham, schools also experimented in other ways with how pupils were seated together in the dining hall. In Newham, for example, there were various arrangements across schools at the baseline, with half the schools allowing pupils to sit where they liked and others having different arrangements. In Year 1, all 13 schools required pupils to sit in class groups; but then in Year 2, the schools reverted to a range of arrangements. In Wolverhampton, all schools allowed pupils to sit where they liked. In the majority of schools across the pilot areas, teachers sat with pupils while they ate their lunch either every day or on most days.

2.3.2 The preparation of school meals

The capacity for catering staff to manage the increased volume of lunches was another challenge identified by participants in the case studies. For example, schools did not have space in their kitchens for storing all the ingredients needed to cater for the additional school lunches. Installing new equipment or expanding kitchens helped address this problem but resulted in further pressures on finding the time to test and learn to use the new facilities and equipment whilst delivering meals. These problems were largely resolved in the first few weeks of delivery.

In the longer term, schools experienced difficulty predicting the appropriate quantities of food required for each menu option, which meant that some meals either ran out early or were wasted. Where lunchtime intakes were staggered, pupils on the later sittings sometimes reported that their desired option ran out. This was not a uniform issue and was avoided where catering teams based estimates on their knowledge and experience of pupils' likes and dislikes. Other effective ways of addressing this issue included reserving quantities of popular meals so that there was still some left for the second intake of pupils, having pupils on school councils monitor the popularity of meals and report back to caterers, and rotating the order in which classes go to lunch so that each had a fair chance of receiving the meal they wanted.

Pre-order systems, in which pupils placed orders for each menu option in advance, were expected to help avoid this problem because kitchens would know exactly how much of each meal to prepare. In fact, the situation exacerbated the problem in schools where pupils changed their minds on the day and picked the wrong option which meant other pupils could not receive the option they had pre-ordered. These schools reverted to the previous system where caterers based estimates on their own knowledge.

"it just became a real problem when the cook had food left over and some children were not getting the choice that they wanted because she'd run out, you know, through no fault of her own, because of children taking a meal they weren't supposed to have!"

(Head teacher, universal pilot)

Where the pre-ordering system worked effectively, pupils' choices were monitored at the point of service to ensure they were picking what they had ordered (see the case illustration below).

Case illustration

In one Durham school, pupils were given a menu and chose their lunch options with their parents for the next four weeks. They were then reminded every morning about what they had ordered and given the opportunity to change their minds on the day. At lunchtimes, they wore a coloured band to indicate their choice to serving staff. The deputy head teacher monitored the pupils in the lunch queue to ensure they picked the correct colour band. This system was reported as being very popular as it ensured pupils ate the lunch they wanted but also enjoyed choosing from the menu with their parents.

A further problem experienced by schools in two pilot areas was catering companies' inflexibility around modifying portion sizes and menus. Strategic staff in schools operating under both pilot types reported dissatisfaction with catering services that refused requests for older pupils to receive more substantial portions than younger pupils.

A more exceptional problem resulted from catering providers controlling menus centrally and so individual schools were unable to tailor menus to their pupils' tastes and remove unpopular foods

from the menu. In contrast, one school described the effective way they had worked with a catering company to revise the school menu on the basis of take-up figures for each option.

2.3.3 Staffing

The evidence from the caterers' survey revealed the challenge of staffing the increased take-up of school meals. As would be expected given the pattern of change in the number of meals provided, all the Newham schools and the majority of the Durham schools reported an increase in the number of catering staff between the baseline and Year 1. In Year 2, a handful of schools reported an increase, but the majority reported that the number of staff had stayed the same between Year 1 and Year 2. For most of the Wolverhampton schools, the number of staff stayed the same across the three years. Among the comparison schools, similar numbers reported increases and decreases in the number of catering staff. Only in Newham was there an increase in the overall number of staff members on duty at lunchtime, peaking at an average of nine in Year 1 and falling to seven in Year 2.

The case-study participants also highlighted the way the FSM pilot had created additional work for school staff, although this was balanced alongside the diminishing of other roles such as the collection of dinner money in the primary schools in the universal areas. This was particularly the case for administrative, catering and lunchtime supervisory staff, albeit in ways that varied according to pilot type. Increasing staff hours and recruiting new staff helped to ease pressure at the beginning of the pilot, but some schools continued to find it difficult to achieve both adequate and consistent levels of staff to cover the workload under the pilot. As discussed in section 2.2.3, these issues sometimes resulted in teaching staff playing a larger role in the delivery of the FSM pilot.

The extent to which staffing was an issue in schools depended on the perceived receptiveness of LAs and catering companies to requests for additional staff. There were positive and negative experiences of how requests to LAs for additional staff were dealt with – either being granted fairly easily or requiring a lot of persuasion.

In contrast to catering and administrative staff, who were employed by catering companies or the LA, employing lunchtime supervisory staff fell under the remit of individual schools. Understaffing in these circumstances resulted from schools not being able to afford to hire additional staff due to a reduced school budget or a lack of response to the job advertisement. It was presumed in one school, situated in an affluent area, that this latter issue was because lunchtime supervisory work was not seen as a desirable job.

As the pilot progressed, high staff turnover in catering teams was an issue that was limited, in the main, to Newham schools and was attributed to the use of temporary agency staff. There was a perception that the frequent introduction of new staff slowed down the lunchtime process and could cause lunchtimes to overrun due to the time taken to train and brief replacement staff in the use of equipment or in the preparation of food. High staff turnover was also seen to detrimentally affect the relationship between catering staff and pupils. The challenges associated with the use of temporary agency staff were, however, mediated by effective management by senior catering staff. In contrast, retention was reportedly reasonably stable in Durham, where additional staff were recruited on two-year fixed-term contracts.

2.3.4 Application process and monitoring take-up

During the early delivery of the pilot, schools in Wolverhampton reported that they were unable to identify which families were eligible for the pilot. This was because the LA did not have sufficient resources to process the volume of applications from parents and had problems getting the correct information from parents to support their applications. As previously mentioned, schools in Wolverhampton were also required to take a more active approach in informing parents about the pilot.

As the pilot progressed, Wolverhampton schools reported receiving quick and timely information from the LA about eligible parents. Despite this, schools continued to find their role in informing parents about the pilot and providing guidance around eligibility and the application process challenging. The LA continued to be concerned that eligible parents were not applying for the pilot. In addition, schools continued to receive queries from pupils whose parents did not understand the eligibility criteria and application process. Parents' difficulties stemmed from literacy problems, language issues and uncertainty about whether they met the new criteria and about how to demonstrate eligibility.

In Newham, there were also difficulties with encouraging parents who were receiving FSM under the old criteria to re-register under the FSM pilot. Parents were less inclined to register because, under the pilot, their child would automatically receive a free school meal without them needing to register. However, it was important for parents to register for FSM in order for the LA to maintain updated figures about eligible families. In response, schools were asked to make a concerted effort to encourage parents to apply.

2.4 Experiences of information, support and guidance

Local authorities and catering services (but not local PCTs) were the main sources of information, support and guidance for schools throughout the pilot. Schools were aware of the support offered by other agencies such as the School Food Trust (SFT), for example in improving the healthiness of packed lunches. However, none of the schools in the sample had directly taken up support from the SFT, although they had benefited from the partnership working between the SFT and the LA.

The main forms of support provided by LAs covered supplying pilot updates, helping schools to coordinate building activities, sourcing suppliers for kitchen equipment, supplying light equipment such as cutlery and crockery, setting up administrative systems, providing guidance on menus, sending schools literature about the pilot to distribute to parents, personally promoting the pilot to parents and helping to solve individual school problems. In addition, considerable attention was given to providing guidance and support to schools on how to manage the increased volume of school meals.

Local authorities continued to provide schools with information about the pilot and helped them to deal with queries from parents once the pilot went live. The LA was also seen to be an effective resource for the provision of training to catering staff to help with planning and predicting the correct quantity of meals, to administrative staff on data-monitoring activities and to supervisory staff on nutrition and encouraging pupils to eat. LAs continued to provide schools with practical support during the early delivery of the pilot. This included the provision of kitchen equipment, help in devising letters and leaflets for schools to use for promotion and sending LA representatives to schools to take part in promotional activities.

As the pilot progressed, schools settled into an effective delivery routine and their support needs diminished, with some schools requiring no further help or support from the LA. Where schools did require support, this was in response to specific issues such as staffing, underperformance in catering and administrative teams or wanting to modify menus or portion sizes.

Wolverhampton schools continued to have close working relationships with the LA because the nature of the extended pilot engendered an ongoing need for partnership working. Throughout the pilot, the LA continued to alert schools to newly registered pupils and sent schools promotional letters and literature about the pilot for parents. The initial teething problems of schools receiving late notification of eligible pupils and of parents finding the literature difficult to understand were resolved early on.

2.4.1 Views of information, support and guidance

Positive experiences of support and guidance were underpinned by strong existing relationships between individual schools, the LA and, where relevant, catering companies. During the set-up period, schools reported receiving clear and accurate information from LAs as well as tailored guidance about preparing for the FSM pilot. Positive experiences of support and guidance resulted when the LA contact had listened to them, regularly communicated with them and tried their best to meet their requirements. Schools also described being satisfied that they could contact the LA and catering companies and gain advice as and when the need arose.

Less positive experiences were associated with a perceived lack of forward planning by LAs during the early set-up period and failure to communicate information at all or in a consistent way about the pilot to catering teams and schools. Although resolved fairly quickly, during the early implementation of the pilot, some schools felt they lacked information about the data collection and monitoring requirements associated with the pilot or about key aspects of the pilot such as pupils' entitlement to free milk. Schools also expressed concerns about the speed of the LA's response to requests for additional kitchen equipment and catering staff. This resulted in short-term confusion for schools about the pilot and placed additional pressure on existing school staff.

As the pilot progressed, schools valued proactive approaches by LAs and catering services to improving the running of the pilot and to providing advice about health and safety and nutritional standards of food. Such approaches were characterised by regular visits to schools, requests for feedback about the implementation of the pilot and willingness to tailor menus around the tastes of pupils in individual schools. Conversely, schools were less satisfied when catering companies were unwilling to modify menus and portion sizes for individual schools.

It was felt that the support offered by LAs could have been improved where schools had experienced difficulty accessing additional staff resources or advice around staffing. For example, in a universal pilot area where the number of meals had more than doubled, the LA was reportedly reluctant to provide additional members of kitchen staff. In another example, strategic staff in a school that owned its own catering provision felt they lacked sufficient support and guidance from the LA around dealing with staffing issues such as redundancies, which they anticipated having to make if take-up figures fell after the pilot ended.

2.5 Implementing the end of the pilot

The extent to which schools could plan their post-pilot exit strategies and school meal arrangements depended on the point at which LAs finalised decisions about the future of the pilot and school meals.

In Wolverhampton and Durham, where plans had not been confirmed at the time of the Year 2 interview, school staff and parents were uncertain about when the pilot would end and what the future plans were. In schools where there was an awareness of the options being considered, this existed because the head teacher was part of an LA-level network. Uncertainty about the future naturally caused some anxiety among both parent and staff respondent groups, with parents finding it difficult to plan ahead financially.

In the absence of communication about the options being deliberated at the LA level, schools in Wolverhampton and Durham contemplated funding a continuation of FSM or subsidised lunches themselves. However, tighter constraints on school budgets meant that this was not a viable option.

In Newham, the decision to continue the pilot for a further financial year was known although not all parties were aware of it. In one school, parents had been informed about the decision by leaflets posted to their homes, while some staff in the same school were unaware of the decision.

2.5.1 Communicating the end of the pilot to parents

In spite of schools' lack of awareness about firm plans for the future, they considered ways in which to communicate information about post-pilot arrangements to parents, such as school newsletters and coffee mornings. To be certain that all parents were informed about the decision, one school planned to send two to three warnings about the pilot coming to an end in forthcoming newsletters. Schools were also planning ways in which to encourage the continued take-up of school meals, which will be discussed in section 5.2.2.

In terms of staffing levels, schools were concerned about having to make redundancies to catering staff and lunchtime supervisory teams if take-up levels dropped after the pilot. This concern was most pronounced among schools that owned their own catering provision and schools in which additional staff were hired specifically to cope with the demand of the pilot. In order to anticipate necessary staffing levels, one school planned to survey parents about whether they would take up school meals after the pilot finished.

3 Choosing to take up FSM

This chapter describes participants' perceptions of the take-up of the FSM pilot (section 3.1) and the process by which the decision was made to opt for FSM (section 3.2.1). The impact study provides data on take-up figures

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR227>. Previous research identified a number of barriers to taking a free school meal, including lack of awareness of eligibility, the stigma of receiving free meals, the quality and choice of food on offer and the dining experience.¹³ We discuss this evidence in light of our findings and reflect on whether these barriers were addressed by the pilot (section 3.2.2).

Summary of key findings from this chapter

Reflections on the take-up of FSM:

- Take-up was more evident in universal than in extended eligibility pilot areas, reflecting the findings in the impact study.
- Cost savings were identified as a primary reason for take-up.
- School staff generally found it difficult to identify a particular profile of children who took up FSM, although age and previous eligibility for FSM were felt to be influential.
- School staff distinguished between consistent takers or non-takers and children who switched between the two options. Menu options and whether parents had time to make a packed lunch appeared to have a bearing on these decisions.

Three approaches to decision-making were identified:

- Child-led decisions were made in families where the priority was to ensure that the child was happy.
- Parent-led decisions were made when the priorities were the financial benefits, the reduced burden on parent time, the quality of the meals and the perceived social benefits of a school meal. These appeared to outweigh the preferences of the child.
- Joint decision-making occurred when the parent encouraged their child to try school meals but left it open for them to return to having a packed lunch if they preferred.

Factors affecting the take-up of FSM included: the choice of food available; the extent to which pupils and parents felt they had control over what children ate; the quality of the food available; social factors; the dining experience; the impacts on parents of taking school meals; and the eligibility and application process.

A number of initiatives were felt to encourage take-up. These included: introducing pre-order schemes; maintaining a strict packed lunch policy; involving children in menu selection; improving the dining experience; offering taster sessions to parents; running promotional activities; and reducing stigma through a cashless payment system and improved confidentiality to ensure that children did not feel singled out.

¹³ Pamela Storey & Rosemary Chamberlin, *Improving the take up of free school meals*, DfEE Research Report RR270, 2001.

3.1 Profile of take-up

Perceptions of the take-up of FSM across the schools we visited were explored in order to help understand the decision-making process more effectively. As might be expected, take-up was reported as being much more evident in universal pilot case-study schools than in schools in the extended eligibility pilot area, reflecting the findings in the caterers' survey and in the impact study. However, a number of confounding factors were identified as making it harder to assess the effect the pilot had on take-up. For example, changes in the economic context, which meant generally higher numbers of children were eligible for FSM, and changes in the social and demographic characteristics of the schools, which resulted in higher numbers of children being eligible than previously, were viewed as affecting the level of take-up of school meals. The impact study provides robust evidence of the impact of the pilot on the take-up of FSM.

A distinction was also made between consistent takers or non-takers and children whose preferences changed from week to week. With the exception of one case-study school that only allowed pupils to change their lunch option on a termly basis, all others permitted pupils to change their preferences daily or weekly. It is difficult to draw conclusions from the data as to why some children changed preferences, although there is some evidence to suggest that the choice of menu options and whether parents had time to prepare packed lunches were influential. For example, if the child was aware that a meal they particularly liked was being served, they would opt for school meals on that day and then revert to having a packed lunch for the rest of the week. Schools also reported seasonal fluctuations in take-up, with more children taking up school meals in winter months because of a preference for hot meals in cold weather.

Aside from these observations, school staff generally found it difficult to identify whether there was a particular profile of pupils who took up school meals as a result of the pilot. They did, however, single out two specific characteristics that were influential:

- *Pre-pilot eligibility for FSM*

It appeared that the pilot made more difference to families who were previously eligible for FSM but had not opted for them in case-study schools in the universal pilot areas. Parents explained that the pilot had removed the stigma of applying, and eliminated barriers in relation to awareness of eligibility and the application process itself (see section 3.2.2). That said, school staff varied in the degree to which they could assess the impact of the pilot on pupils who were previously eligible for FSM but had not taken them up.

- *Age*

Age appeared to impact on willingness to take up school meals in a variety of ways. Older pupils in primary schools reportedly opted out of school meals because they perceived them to be slower than packed lunches and therefore limited the time they had to play and participate in lunchtime activities. Older children were also felt to have more influence with parents over whether to take up school meals and therefore more likely to have packed lunches despite parental preferences to the contrary. In contrast, younger children were reported as more likely to take packed lunches because they were less familiar with school meals and less capable of eating a cooked meal in the time available during the lunch break. It was also felt that younger children were more likely to go home for lunch because they were less comfortable in the dining hall environment than older children.

3.2 Deciding whether to take up FSM

The process by which decisions were made to take up school meals is based largely on evidence from group discussions with children, parents and teachers. Being group data, there are limits to how far conclusions can be drawn about individual motivations and decision-making processes.

3.2.1 Decision-making process

From discussions with parents and children about how they made the decision whether to take up FSM or not, three models of decision-making, discussed in turn below, were identified. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, it is not possible to comment on which model was more prevalent.

Child-led

In families where the decision was child-led, it was common for siblings to be taking different options, with one child opting for school meals while another took packed lunches. From the parents' perspective, the priority was to ensure that the child was happy. A particular concern was that a child who was unhappy with the decision would not eat any lunch, and parents wanted to avoid this. There is some evidence to suggest that finances were less of a concern for these families, and therefore the financial incentive of free meals under the pilot was not strong enough to override the child's preferences. In one case, for example, a parent described how she would be happy to pay for school meals if her child wanted them (as she had previously done for an older sibling) but, because the child refused to eat them, she provided a packed lunch.

The following case illustrates the child-led decision-making process:

Case illustration

In family A, the decision to take school meals was made by the children. Mark, the older child, always enjoyed having school dinners and continued to opt for them during the pilot. His younger brother, Steven, was described by his mother as 'picky' and had never liked school meals because he would be made to eat things he did not like. Despite the pilot offering FSM and his older brother encouraging him to try them, he was resistant and continued to take a packed lunch. Steven's mother was happy to support him doing this as she was reassured that he was eating his lunch and not going hungry and, in her words, "if the child's happy, the parent's happy". In this family, the financial savings to be made from taking up the pilot were not a primary consideration, and the child's personal preferences were prioritised.

Parent-led

From the evidence, it was difficult to tease out the exact circumstances in which the decision was solely parent-led, although school staff felt that parents were more likely to make the decision on behalf of their child if the child was younger, whereas older children had more autonomy. Parent-led decisions to take up FSM were of two types – those where the financial benefits outweighed the preferences of the child and those where a range of factors contributed to the decision. In the latter case, the factors included the reduced burden on the parents' time, the quality of the school meals and the social benefits they felt their child would receive from participating. In contrast, parents who chose not to take up the pilot gave reasons including concerns over quality, concerns that younger children would not have enough time to eat and a desire to have greater control over their child's diet.

The following case illustrates the parent-led decision-making process:

Case illustration

In family B, the decision to take up school meals was made by the parents with little or no discussion with the children. While the parents were swayed by the healthy aspect of school meals, it was the fact that they were now free that persuaded them. Prior to the pilot, the family was spending £50 a month on packed lunches for the two children. Saving this money made a big difference to the family finances.

Joint decision

For this group, both parents and children described reaching a joint decision on whether to take up the pilot. Typically, these parents encouraged their child to try school meals, as they were free, but also left the option for their child to return to having a packed lunch when they wanted to.

The following case illustrates the joint decision-making process:

Case illustration

In family C, the decision whether to take school meals or packed lunches during the pilot was made jointly between the parents and the child. Prior to the pilot, the child always had school meals, and she continued to do so initially during the pilot. However, the pilot also coincided with a change in the school meal provider and the child no longer enjoyed the meals that were being provided as there were limited choices available that she liked. Although the parents encouraged her to take school meals, the child was returning home hungry and so a joint decision was made to change to a packed lunch.

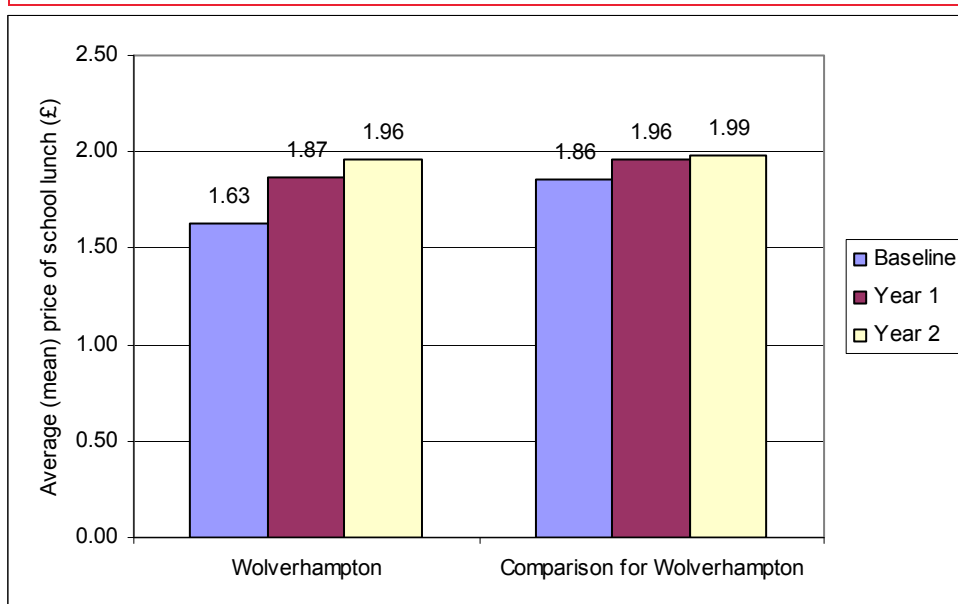
3.2.2 Factors affecting level of take-up

Cost

Cost savings were consistently identified by school staff, parents and pupils as the primary reason for the increase in take-up. Based on the survey of catering managers, we know that for pupils in Wolverhampton who did not meet the criteria for FSM and therefore continued to pay, the average price of lunch rose substantially between the baseline survey prior to the start of the pilot and Year 1, from £1.63 to £1.96 across the nine schools.¹⁴ As can be seen in Figure 3.1, by Year 2, the average price of lunch in Wolverhampton was on a par with the price in the comparison schools for Wolverhampton.

¹⁴ The difference cannot be accounted for adequately by outliers. Notably, both Wolverhampton and its comparison schools had one school each at the baseline with substantially lower-priced meals than the other schools.

Figure 3.1 Change in average price of school lunch in Wolverhampton and comparison secondary schools



Costs aside, across all the case-study schools we visited, there were pupils who preferred to have a packed lunch or go home for lunch during the pilot. Staff, parents and pupils identified a wide range of barriers and facilitators to taking up school meals under the pilot. Each of these is discussed in the sub-sections that follow, both in terms of facilitators and barriers to take-up.

Choice of food available

The survey of catering managers indicated that the number of lunch options was not generally an area in which schools made changes during the course of the pilot. Newham schools retained three choices from the baseline to Year 2 of the pilot. Durham schools varied from offering one choice a day to five or more (although most of the schools offered two or three choices). Wolverhampton was the only area in which there was a slight trend towards offering more choices. By Year 2, all schools offered three or more choices and five of the nine schools in Wolverhampton offered five or more choices. The comparison schools moved to offering fewer choices on average, suggesting that this trend was associated with the pilot rather than simply reflecting the practice of schools in general.

Lack of choice was a key theme identified by both parents and pupils as a barrier to take-up of school meals under the pilot. This was highlighted as a particular issue for children who were vegetarian, had dietary restrictions as a result of allergies, were 'fussy' or 'picky', or were unable to eat particular foods because of religious observance or cultural background. In cases such as these, parents and children felt that providing a packed lunch or going home for lunch offered them a greater choice of food than was available at school. Schools had made efforts to address concerns of this kind by providing a larger variety of vegetarian options, accommodating special diets to address specific food allergies and offering halal meat for example. Where the choice of food on offer was felt to be good, this was seen as an important facilitator to take-up, and some parents and children felt school meals offered more choice and variety than packed lunches. However, not everyone shared this view, and some children and parents continued to feel that the options were too limited.

Another aspect affecting the range of choices for pupils was whether the school ran out of specific menu options due to high demand. At Year 1, some Newham and Durham schools ran out of menu choices more frequently than they had done at the baseline, suggesting that, with the marked increase in the number of meals provided, it was more difficult to judge the quantities required. In Newham, ten of the 13 schools reported that they ran out of specific lunch options less than once a term at the baseline, compared with 11 schools running out of options at least once a week at Year 1. By Year 2, the problem had receded somewhat. In Durham, running out of specific options was reported to be less of a problem. One possible explanation is that more schools required pupils to choose school meals in advance. During the course of the pilot, the number of Durham schools running out of choices less than once a term increased from seven to 12. There was understandably little change in Wolverhampton given the smaller changes in school meal take-up observed.

Unfamiliarity with the food on offer sometimes underpinned the view that there was a lack of choice or that food options available did not reflect cultural backgrounds, for example for BME (black and minority ethnic) children. These barriers were generally felt to reduce over time as children became more familiar with school meals and the food on offer.

Further evidence that the choice of food available directly impacted on take-up was illustrated by one school where a change in menu in the summer term (which introduced seasonal meals and removed some popular options) resulted in a large number of children opting for packed lunches. When these changes were reversed, the take-up levels increased again, indicating how crucial menu choice can be in affecting take-up.

Schools adopted a range of approaches to tackle barriers related to choice. These included:

- *Pre-ordering schemes*

A pre-ordering system that allowed children to pre-order their lunches and guaranteed their first choice of meal was trialled in a number of pilot schools to address these issues. Parents and children would receive the menus in advance and choose their preferred option, enabling the kitchen to plan exact quantities for each meal. Schools trialling this approach met with varied success. Where this scheme worked well, school staff felt it had improved take-up and children and parents were positive about it guaranteeing their choice of meal. Parents found it valuable as they were more involved in the choices their child was making and were better informed about the food on offer. This system was particularly valued for younger primary-age children, as it enabled parents to prepare children for foods they may be unfamiliar with and removed uncertainty from lunchtimes, which was felt to cause anxiety for some younger children.

Where schemes of this kind were less successful, schools had found the administrative burden of the schemes too great, with increased administrative time required to coordinate choices and communicate with the kitchens. Children changing their minds or forgetting their choices meant options ran out prematurely and some schools abandoned the approach because of these issues. The school that identified the scheme as a success emphasised the importance of good organisation to make the scheme viable. Reminders of each child's choice were displayed in classrooms, the dinner hall and the school office so that children knew which option they had chosen.

- *Pupil involvement in menu choice*
School staff stressed that involving pupils in decision-making regarding the school menu helped to address issues related to choice. In one case, for example, the school council regularly gathered views on school meals and fed back to the kitchen staff, to ensure that as far as possible the children's views were accommodated. In this way, particularly unpopular choices were removed from the menu and replaced with alternative options.
- *Strict packed lunch policies*
Limited choice in school menus was often contrasted with packed lunches, which could be tailored to the individual tastes of the child. Some of the children who participated in the case studies also reported being able to have treats, including chocolate and crisps, in their packed lunch, which encouraged them to take packed lunches rather than healthier school meals. Some schools had recognised this as an issue and had introduced strict packed lunch policies to ensure that packed lunch standards mirrored those of school meals. This was perceived to improve the nutritional value of packed lunches, but also to discourage children choosing packed lunches because they could include a range of less healthy treats.

Restricting the ability of pupils to leave the school premises at lunchtime may have served to promote the take-up of school meals by limiting the alternative options. In Newham and Wolverhampton, catering managers in the survey reported a reduction in the number of schools that allowed pupils to leave the premises at lunchtime. In Newham, seven schools reported that all or some pupils were able to leave the school at lunchtime at the baseline, and this fell to two schools in Year 1 and Year 2. The number of schools in Wolverhampton allowing pupils to leave the school at lunchtime fell from five to one between the baseline and Year 2.

Quality

Of key concern to teachers, parents and children was the perceived quality of school meals. Perceptions of 'quality' encapsulate a range of considerations that were viewed as important, including the nutritional value of the food on offer, the expertise with which it was prepared and its freshness. Where school meal quality was perceived to be high, this was an important facilitator to take-up because it made the dining experience an enjoyable one and reassured parents that children were eating healthy meals that would promote health, learning and growth. In contrast, where food was perceived to be of poor quality both by parents and by children, this was a barrier to take-up. Food that was watery, lumpy or served cold were all identified as reasons for preferring to take packed lunches.

"I'm in year 5 and used to be on school dinners until a few months ago when, cos I wasn't eating, cos mainly I didn't like it, and when I did eat it there wasn't enough, so now I'm on packed lunches. [Facilitator: Why didn't you like it?] There was just some meals, like some of them were ok, but the ones like chicken pie, I didn't like it because the gravy was all watery and slimy."

(Packed lunch taker, universal pilot)

Some concerns were also raised by pupils and parents over perceptions of food hygiene; examples being given included glasses not being washed adequately between sittings, dirty cutlery and food being cross-contaminated during serving. While food quality was acknowledged as centrally important by school staff, it was also acknowledged that there was sometimes a difference between parent perceptions of school meal quality, based on their own childhood memories of school meals, and the reality. Measures to tackle the barrier of *perceived* rather than *actual* poor

quality included offering taster sessions to parents to try school meals for themselves. This was felt to be a particularly effective way of dispelling myths about the poor quality of school meals, and parents who had experienced taster sessions described these very positively.

Control

Control over what they had for lunch and over portion size were regularly raised as important issues for the children who participated in the case studies. School meal portions that were both too small and too large were issues raised as barriers to take-up compared with packed lunches where children felt better able to control portion size to suit their tastes. This appeared to have influenced children to opt for a packed lunch as it was felt to offer greater autonomy than school meals:

"[In] packed lunches you can eat how much you want ... but with school meals you can't choose how much you want."

(Packed lunch taker, universal pilot)

For parents, views were divided over whether packed lunches or school meals were felt to offer greater control over what and how much their child ate. For parents who preferred packed lunches, being able to see how much their child had eaten at the end of the day offered more reassurance:

"If you were to ask the majority of parents I think what they will say [is that] the benefit of a packed lunch is they can actually physically see what their children ate or drank. I can see what [my child] has tucked into, so if he's left a sandwich I know exactly."

(Parent, universal pilot)

Concerns of this kind were particularly raised in relation to younger children who were less able to communicate how much they had eaten at lunch. However, the alternative view was also voiced that dinner staff were more likely to ensure children ate school meals, and for this reason school meals were preferred:

"I've got peace of mind that they're eating everything. Because I know for a fact that in the packed lunches they could just leave it and chuck it in the bin and I wouldn't know ... Where it feels with school dinners now at least the dinner nannies¹⁵ always encourage them"

(Parent, universal pilot)

The common ground for both sets of parents was to ensure that their child ate well at lunchtime, although views on how this could best be achieved differed. Evidence of this kind suggests that good communication with parents about what and how much their child is eating at lunchtime could facilitate take-up of school meals in families where this is a concern.

Social factors

Friendship groups played an important part in determining attitudes to school meals, and peer influence was cited as a facilitator and a barrier to take-up by all participants. Separate seating arrangements for children taking packed lunches and those taking school meals meant that the desire to sit with friends in the dining hall strongly influenced whether children chose to take up school meals or not. Because children taking packed lunches tended to be quicker at eating, this also encouraged peer groups who wanted to play together to opt for a packed lunch.

¹⁵ Dinner nannies is a regional colloquialism for dinner ladies.

“If you were on school meals you have to wait for them to say, like, you can clear [up] but if you’re on packed lunches as soon as you finish you can go down and get more break time and you get more time to play with your friends and things.”

(Non-taker, universal pilot)

In circumstances where children originally took up the pilot and later reverted to packed lunches, parents cited the influence of friends as being a key element in their decision.

With the increased take-up of school meals in the universal pilot areas, however, peer pressure was felt to be having a positive impact on take-up. There was evidence to suggest that taking school meals was increasingly seen as the ‘norm’, with only handfuls of children taking packed lunches. In these circumstances, the desire not to stand out by eating different food from everyone else encouraged take-up.

For parents in particular, the social benefits that school meals were felt to bring were important facilitators to take-up. Sitting down together and eating the same food were important experiences that parents highly valued and wanted for their children. One parent, for example, viewed the lunchtime experience of all the children sitting down and eating the same thing together as an important way of building a school community and a sense of cohesion:

“The only time you get together [as a family] is for meals. It makes a big difference when we sit together, it gives a family a sort of family feeling ... [When you get] all the children sitting together enjoying the meal ... you create an environment there ... that increases the unity.”

(Parent, universal pilot)

In the school operating a silent lunchtime policy, parents did not feel the school lunchtime provided pupils with a pleasant and sociable dining environment. However, parents appreciated the rationale behind the policy, which was to maintain a fast lunchtime pace and allow pupils enough time for play by encouraging children to focus on their meals rather than speak to each other.

Parents hoped that, through peer and staff influence, children would learn social skills including table manners and dining etiquette, such as how to use a knife and fork, particularly where cutlery was not used at home, and be encouraged to try new foods and broaden their diets.

Dining experience

Alongside the factors considered above, the overall dining experience was raised as an issue that could both hinder and facilitate take-up. Children described finding queuing for school meals frustrating and time-consuming and contrasted this with how quick the process was if opting for a packed lunch. With increased take-up of school meals under the pilot, there was some concern that queues had increased and this was a disincentive to take-up. Schools had adopted a range of approaches to improve queuing times, including reorganising the dining hall, instituting two lunch sittings and rotating which year groups went first, but despite measures of this kind, the length of time involved in queuing was still seen as a disincentive to take-up for some.

Equally important was the role of serving staff in either facilitating or discouraging take-up.

For some non-takers, serving staff not listening to them, treating them rudely and rushing them to decide, as well as language barriers, were all cited as reasons why they preferred packed lunches. One pupil explained:

“Most of the time I feel like having packed lunch because most of the dinner ladies are really really really really rude [...] one of them, when I said, ‘oh can I have this?’ and someone was talking behind me, she just said shut up to them.”

(School meal taker, universal pilot)

For younger children, feeling too shy to ask for what they wanted was also raised as an issue. The important role that kitchen and serving staff played was acknowledged by school staff. In one school, for example, a high turnover of temporary staff was felt to have a negative impact because staff were not there long enough to get to know the children. In contrast, more positive impacts were underpinned by friendly, helpful and patient service from school dinner staff. One head teacher explained:

“It’s their interaction with the children. They’ve been very accommodating where a child has got upset because their particular choice isn’t available. [...] They’ve been very accommodating in ensuring that there’s food prepared for children who’ve come in late, for example if a class has gone out on a trip and is back late [...], so they’re really accommodating, friendly staff. They’re very patient with the children, so they’re good people, nice people, as well as being efficient at what they do.”

(Head teacher, universal pilot)

One school identified having a cook who had worked at the school for a long time and knew the children well as a facilitator to take-up. A further example of kitchen staff promoting the take-up of FSM involved one school inviting a child and their parents to meet the cook to discuss their concerns.

Parental burden

As highlighted above, cost was an important consideration in families’ decisions to take up school meals under the pilot. In addition to this reduced financial burden, parents and children also highlighted the reduced burden on parents’ time as a key facilitator. In particular, working parents and those with a number of children appreciated not having to spend time shopping for and preparing packed lunches, or in some cases collecting children from school and preparing meals at home. Reassurance that their child had eaten a cooked meal at lunchtime also meant that some parents felt less pressure to provide a cooked meal in the evening.

Eligibility and the application process

Previous research has identified the stigma of applying for FSM and a lack of awareness of eligibility as two major barriers to take-up.¹⁶ The impact of the pilot on these issues is discussed below, first in relation to the universal pilot areas and then in relation to the extended pilot area:

- *Universal pilot areas*

In the universal pilot areas, the barriers relating to lack of awareness of eligibility disappeared as all families were eligible. Letters sent home, word of mouth and the generally high-profile nature of the pilot meant that awareness levels of the pilot amongst parents were generally felt to be very high. Pre-pilot barriers relating to the application

¹⁶ Pamela Storey & Rosemary Chamberlin, *Improving the take up of free school meals*, DfEE Research Report RR270, 2001.

Ofsted, *Food in schools: encouraging healthier eating*, report ref. 070016, 2007.

process (specifically literacy and language barriers) were also removed as parents did not have to apply for their FSM entitlement.

The universal nature of the pilot also meant that issues of stigma were felt to have been reduced. Views varied on how far barriers related to stigma continued to affect take-up pre-pilot as it was felt that a lot of progress had already been made to combat these issues. Examples of measures taken included cashless payment systems and improved confidentiality to ensure that children did not feel singled out. Parents explained that negative experiences in their own childhood relating to the stigma of FSM continued to colour their views and had discouraged them as parents from applying for FSM for their children. Children also described being bullied in the past for having FSM. To a large extent, the universality of the pilot was felt to have removed these barriers, although staff observed evidence of families refusing to take up FSM as a matter of pride.

- *Extended eligibility pilot area*

In the extended eligibility area, awareness of eligibility continued to be a concern that the pilot was not felt to have fully addressed. Parents reported finding letters sent home about the pilot to be useful and informative, but in some cases these were not felt to give enough information for parents to judge whether they were eligible or not. In one case, for example, a parent had only taken up her entitlement in the second year of the pilot, because she had previously believed herself to be ineligible. More detailed information that enabled parents to determine their eligibility was felt to be important. In addition to awareness of eligibility, school staff reported some barriers amongst parents in relation to completing the application forms. Literacy difficulties, language barriers and a reluctance to discuss private financial concerns were all identified as barriers to take-up. Staff also reported that parents who were intimidated by form-filling were worried they would be accused of benefit fraud if they completed the paperwork incorrectly.

In terms of barriers related to stigma, parents in the extended eligibility area also acknowledged that measures had been taken prior to the pilot to minimise concerns of this kind, but it was still felt to be an issue:

“So there will be some parents now that probably would still think, well, ‘I’m not going to apply for it’ because they might think, oh, if so-and-so found out, or if they knew that I did this, so they still don’t want to come forward ...”

(Parent, extended pilot, primary school)

One way in which a school in the extended eligibility area sought to tackle barriers related to stigma was to impress upon parents the benefits to the school in terms of additional resources if parents who were eligible applied for FSM. By appealing to the altruistic desire of parents to support the school, this was felt to be an effective approach to encouraging take-up and overcoming concerns in relation to stigma.

4 Impacts

The second visit to the case-study schools focused on the perceived impacts of the FSM pilot on pupils, their families and schools. The impacts discussed in this report are therefore based solely on participants' observations and are what might be called perceived impacts. The impact study provides an objective measure of the impact of the FSM pilot on take-up, diet, behaviour and attainment <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR227>. It compares the outcomes from the pilot areas with those from a control or comparison sample in order to establish what would have happened to outcomes had the FSM pilot not been introduced. In order to set the context for the discussion of impacts, it is important to clarify that it is hard to disentangle the impacts arising from pupils opting for a school lunch and the actual impact of school meals being free (section 4.1). We also identified four further mediating factors that have a bearing on the ability to isolate the impact of the pilot. The impacts are reported in relation to pupils (section 4.2), families (section 4.3) and schools (section 4.4).

Summary of key findings from this chapter

It is hard to disentangle the impacts arising from pupils opting for a school lunch and the actual impact of school meals being free. These impacts were further mediated by four other factors that have a bearing on the ability to isolate the impact of the pilot:

- the pilot model (the impact being felt most acutely in universal pilot areas);
- other initiatives running in the school and in the LA;
- the existing school context;
- whether pupils liked school meals.

The impact of the pilot was also perceived to be the greatest on 'new' school meal takers, i.e. pupils who switched from packed lunches to school meals.

The impact of the pilot was observed at the level of pupils, families and schools.

The key reported impacts on pupils included broadening the range of food that pupils would eat, building their social skills at meal times, health benefits associated with having a balanced meal, and levelling out any differences in the lunchtime experiences of pupils in the universal pilot areas. There was much less agreement about whether the pilot impacted on pupil performance and behaviour in the classroom, where a range of other factors were seen to play a greater part.

The reported impact on parents and families included the financial savings made as a result of the pilot, which benefited particularly those on low incomes and those with more than one child, and the savings in time that the pilot made possible – particularly in terms of time saved in preparing packed lunches. Parents also commented on the positive impact of the pilot on diets and cooking practices at home, with children tending to be less 'fussy' at home, eating more healthily and helping to introduce families to new menus at home.

The reported impact of the pilot on schools was observed at the level of staff, infrastructure and lunchtime arrangements. These impacts were particularly important for schools where there was a large increase in the number of children opting for a free school meal as a result of the pilot.

- Staff. The impact of the pilot was felt most acutely by administrative and catering staff. The workload of administrative staff tended to be reduced as a result of the pilot, particularly in the universal areas, where payments for meals no longer needed to be processed at the level of the individual child. In contrast, catering staff experienced an increase in workload and the size of the workforce increased, as did their working hours and roles and responsibilities as a result of the pilot.
- School infrastructure. The pilot had resulted in an expansion of school kitchen facilities and serving areas and the rearrangement of dining halls to cater for more pupils.
- Lunchtime arrangements. These tended to be modified to accommodate the increased number of pupils taking school meals. Changes tended to involve one or more of the following: staggered lunchtimes, pupil involvement in clearing up their own trays and the introduction of the pre-choice menu system.

4.1 Assessing impacts

In order to set the context for the discussion of impacts, it is important to clarify that we observed two different types of impacts reported by participants:

- the impact of pupils changing the type of lunch they were taking, particularly from packed lunches to school meals, which could have happened irrespective of the pilot;
- the impact of school meals being free.

Where appropriate, we have tried to disentangle these two types of impacts.

These impacts were further mediated by four other factors that have a bearing on the ability to isolate the impact of the pilot: the type of pilot model, other initiatives running in the school and in the LA, the school context and whether pupils liked school meals. We now consider these factors in turn.

The type of pilot model

Not surprisingly, the impact of the pilot was much more readily observable by staff, parents and pupils in the universal pilot areas, where there was, inevitably, a much higher level of take-up than in the extended eligibility pilot area. However, the types of impact that participants cited in the extended eligibility area did not differ from those cited by participants in universal areas, with parents, for example, citing the usefulness of the financial savings (see section 4.3) in both pilot types.

Other initiatives

Both staff and parents found it difficult to disentangle the influence of the FSM pilot from impacts arising from other school and LA initiatives. These initiatives were seen to work alongside and sometimes to complement the pilot in producing observed impacts on health and pupil performance – including on the behaviour, attendance and attainment of pupils. These other existing initiatives can be grouped into the following two categories:

- *Healthy eating and living initiatives*
Schools across the three pilot areas described a range of healthy eating initiatives operating alongside or prior to the introduction of the pilot and sometimes as a part of their 'Healthy Schools' accreditation. Examples of such initiatives included the input of school councils in making school menus healthier and more palatable, the monitoring of packed lunches so that they met basic healthy eating guidelines, the Family Initiative Supporting Children's Health (FISCH), healthy eating cookery clubs, Breakfast Clubs and initiatives around making school 'tuck shops' healthier. Likewise, schools also supported a range of

programmes designed to enable pupils to become more physically active in schools. These included schools establishing local sporting partnerships and generally encouraging more sporting activities within the school day.

- *Learning- and performance-related practice*
Schools had an array of different teaching and behavioural practices in place that were identified as having an impact on the performance of pupils. These included practices to improve the general leadership of schools, specific initiatives to improve the quality of teaching within schools (e.g. through the use of educational consultants), stimulating the learning environment provided by schools and specific strategies used to target pupils in need – including the use of one-to-one tuition with struggling pupils and detention schemes designed to deal with aggressive behaviour in schools.

The school context

Participants drew attention to the historical and current context of their school in accounting for observed impacts, particularly those around pupil behaviour and performance. This, for example, led to parents and staff being unable to comment on the difference the pilot made to the perceived performance of pupils as this was felt to be of an already high standard prior to the pilot. In terms of the current context, staff discussed a 'cohort effect' where pupil behaviour and performance hinged as much on the characteristics of a particular intake of pupils as on any initiatives running in the school, such as the pilot. This included the effect of factors such as language skills and how geographically transient families were.

"Ours is more cohort based ... I've got a cohort where some children [...] pay for [school meals] but actually all of those children are on the Special Needs register; actually it makes no difference if they pay for a meal or not, it's their special need which is the overriding fact [in determining performance]."

(Head teacher, extended pilot, primary school)

Discussion of the school context also took into account the proportion of pupils that had FSM prior to the pilot. Those schools with a high proportion, usually in the extended eligibility area, tended to notice very little difference during the pilot, as there was not a substantial change in the number of pupils having school meals.

Whether pupils liked school meals

Pupils' attitudes toward school meals were also seen by staff and parents to have a substantial bearing on the impact of the pilot. If pupils liked their meals, they were felt to be more likely to consume them and to derive the health and other benefits associated with school meals (discussed in section 4.2), as well as to continue to opt for them. Conversely, where the child did not enjoy the menu options available at school, parents complained that their child still came home hungry from school and this undermined the confidence of parents that their child was benefiting from a hot and well-balanced meal at school. Some parents placed their child back on packed lunches as a result of this.

4.2 Impact on pupils

Having discussed the factors that mediate the observed impact of the pilot, this and the following two sections describe the types of outcomes that the pilot was perceived to have. This section will deal with the impact of the pilot on pupils in relation to five key issues. These impacts were

attributed directly to pupils changing from a packed lunch to a school meal and only indirectly to school meals being free.

4.2.1 Dietary preference

Eating school meals was seen to broaden the dietary repertoire of pupils. Both staff and parents observed pupils being more willing to try new food and being 'less fussy' eaters as a result of the pilot. For example, parents reported their children were more willing to eat vegetables and they specifically requested food at home that they had tried at school, such as lasagne and pasta. In some cases, these foods were outside the normal cultural diet of the pupil (discussed further in section 4.3).

The following case illustrates the way the pilot impacted on diet:

Case illustration

Nalim is a parent with two children who attend a primary school in a universal FSM area. Her children opted for FSM when the pilot was launched. A key change that Nalim noticed is that her children are now more willing to try food, such as beetroot, that they would not have entertained before they moved on to school meals. Nalim attributes this to the efforts of the lunchtime supervisors, who she feels encourage pupils to try new food. Nalim is happy with this as it makes it easier for her to provide a balanced diet at home.

This impact was attributed to three factors, one of which is alluded to in the case study above:

- *Approach of kitchen staff and lunchtime supervision staff*
Staff were seen to encourage pupils to sample new foods by, for example, presenting healthier food in an attractive way, as well as being less likely than parents to yield to the 'fussy' demands of pupils.
- *Peer-to-peer modelling*
Pupils were felt to be more likely to sample different foods if they saw their friends and classmates consume these foods. This related to pupils wanting to fit in with peer groups.
- *Variety of food offered in school meals*
School meals were seen to expose pupils to a wider variety of food than they would have from packed lunches – where there was a tendency for pupils to opt for their favourite food items. In contrast, school menus tended to rotate on a regular basis, enabling pupils to sample different meals. For example, staff commented on pupils not being aware of certain vegetables, such as broccoli, when they started having school meals.

4.2.2 Health

The evidence from the survey of catering managers revealed that most schools encouraged pupils to choose healthy options at lunchtime. Strategies included promoting fruit, vegetables and salad as 'healthy options', providing healthy food free and rewarding pupils through verbal praise and, in primary schools, stickers or badges. There was little change during the pilot.

Schools also encouraged healthy eating among the pupils bringing packed lunches to school. All of the Newham schools, most of the Durham schools and half of the Wolverhampton schools had a

packed lunch policy. The majority of schools in the comparison primary schools also had a packed lunch policy, whereas this was true of only one comparison secondary school for Wolverhampton.

According to the catering managers, these efforts appear to have had a positive impact on the food options chosen by pupils, with some schools reporting an increase in the number of pupils choosing healthier options in all of the pilot areas in each year of the pilot. Results from the impact study indicate pupils in universal pilot areas were also less likely to report eating crisps at least once a day <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR227>. There were no significant changes in how often children reported eating fruit, vegetables or chips. In contrast, there was little impact on children's diet and eating habits in the extended entitlement area.

Choosing food did not necessarily equate to eating it. A separate question asked about changes in the proportion of food eaten rather than thrown away. The most notable change during the pilot was in Newham. Eleven of the 13 Newham schools reported an increase in the proportion of food thrown away rather than eaten between the baseline and Year 1. This tailed off to some extent by Year 2, falling to four schools. By contrast, half the Wolverhampton schools and nearly half of the Durham schools reported an increase in the amount of food eaten across each year of the pilot.

The impact study detected no significant differences in Body Mass Index (BMI) for children in either the universal or extended entitlement pilot areas. However, staff, parents and pupils in the case studies believed that pupils, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, were reaping the health benefits of eating a varied, hot and healthy meal at least once a day. One teacher reflected:

"There's certainly individual children I can think of, they come from quite disadvantaged schools [backgrounds]; they've certainly enjoyed the food more and eaten more and they've been more energetic, and particularly the colour of their skin [...], instead of the pallor that some of them had, that's been quite noticeable, but I'm not sure about generally but it's difficult to say, isn't it?"

(Deputy head teacher, universal pilot)

The health benefits of the pilot rested on the nutritional content of the school meals, whether pupils liked them and the existence of other healthy eating initiatives within schools. Where these initiatives existed, such as healthy eating sessions during PSHE lessons, the pilot was generally seen to complement them by providing a practical illustration of what a healthy meal should look like in addition to the knowledge about healthy eating that pupils gained.

4.2.3 Social skills

The pilot was also seen to have improved the social skills and table manners of pupils by virtue of encouraging pupils to sit together for meals. These improvements included enabling pupils to use cutlery effectively, especially those who were 'new' meal takers and may have been used to using their hands when eating packed lunches. In addition, sitting down to a school meal had enabled pupils to meet and socialise with other pupils whilst eating their school meal (sometimes they were seated with pupils from outside their year groups rather than their immediate circle of friends).

"And it's good for them to use their fork and knife all the time you know ... it's good for them to go together and eat and learn how to use the fork and knife ... They learn to talk to each other,

listen as well to each other ... it's like getting together ... they're not learning from the school, they're learning from each other."

(Parent, universal pilot)

However, there was the view amongst pupils who took a packed lunch and their parents that the FSM pilot in universal areas sometimes had the effect of alienating them, particularly when there was a separation in the seating arrangement between packed lunch and school meal takers. This alienation arose because children who took a packed lunch tended to be the minority in universal areas. Its effect, exacerbated by any separation in seating, was that those with packed lunches had less opportunity to socialise with their peers and hence develop their social skills.

4.2.4 Levelling differences

Parents and staff, particularly in universal pilot areas, observed that the pilot appeared to have a levelling effect among pupils taking school meals. There were two ways in which this levelling effect was observed:

- *Ensuring equal access to a healthy and good-quality lunch*
Staff noticed that there could be quite a difference between the types of packed lunch that children brought to school. They attributed any differences in the content and healthiness of packed lunches to the income levels of parents, perceiving that parents on a higher income were able to provide a better-quality and healthier packed lunch than those who were less well off. For example, some pupils were seen to have meals with a high sugar content in their packed lunches in comparison with others. The pilot was seen to address this by ensuring that all pupils received a free school meal of a similar standard, variety and quality.
- *Removal of the stigma attached to FSM in the universal pilot areas*
A second reason the pilot was perceived by staff to have a levelling effect was that it removed any remaining stigma associated with FSM in the universal pilot areas, as all pupils were entitled to receive a free meal. Stigma was seen to be particularly an issue for parents who experienced bullying as a result of being on FSM as a child. However, not all respondents were convinced that such a stigma still existed, due to the way schools managed the payment and organisation of FSM prior to the pilot, which meant that children on FSM were not easily identified.

4.2.5 Pupils' behaviour and performance

Views about whether the FSM pilot impacted on pupils' behaviour and performance were mixed among case-study participants. Both pupils and staff had noticed better concentration in afternoon lessons since the pilot began and perceived this to be a result of pupils having a fuller, healthier meal at lunchtime.

"I think there's a notable difference between their attention levels in the afternoon. Because it used to be, oh well you know, if you want them at their best get them in the morning. There's not that huge [difference] anymore."

(Teacher, universal pilot)

However, some staff were reluctant to attribute this solely to the pilot as they felt that other ongoing healthy eating initiatives were likely to have contributed to improved concentration. In contrast,

observations were made about pupils either feeling more tired and lethargic after eating a large school lunch or feeling hungry due to the size of the portions or because they did not like their lunch and did not eat it. One pupil who was taking FSM said:

“I think it actually makes you, it makes it harder for you to concentrate because you feel tired and full.”

(Pupil, universal pilot)

Commenting on her classmates' behaviour since the start of the pilot, another pupil observed:

“Sometimes people in class are a little bit more quiet. I mean, this doesn't happen very often, but sometimes they don't eat any dinner and they're starving so they don't really say that much. I know it's better to teachers, but they used to be [...] we weren't hyper; we were just a bit loud. We were just running around, and when we came in, we were still fine, but now, people just come in slouching like this, or like this {enacts slouching with heavy sigh}”.

(Pupil, universal pilot)

Staff who observed that attendance, behaviour and performance (such as SATs results) may have improved since the introduction of the pilot were inclined to attribute this to other learning-related initiatives in the school (discussed in section 4.1).

4.3 Impact on families

Parents reported five key ways in which the pilot had impacted on families personally or their home life, including: financial savings; time; diet and cooking practices; convenience and peace of mind; and parents' relationship with the school. However, out of these, the financial savings made by parents can be most directly attributed to the pilot. Other outcomes can be seen to be directly accounted for by the change in the type of meal a child had – although this was facilitated by the financial incentive provided by the pilot.

4.3.1 Financial savings

Parents overwhelmingly referred to the financial savings that they made as a result of the pilot, which were appreciated in the current economic climate. Financial savings were particularly experienced and appreciated by parents who were on a low income and those who had more than one child who transferred from paying for school meals or from packed lunches.

“I've been able to get them, being able to get them extra things at home, foods that they liked at home because I have a budget of what I can spend because there's only my husband works really ... so the money that I was saving on packed lunches I've been able to get them the things that they liked at home, so come July they're going to lose them little bits of things because I've then got to pay ... but at the moment free school meals have been a godsend to us.”

(Parent, universal pilot)

Over and above enabling parents to give their child a school meal where they may not have otherwise been able to, the savings made were seen to ease the financial stress experienced by parents in a range of ways. The savings meant that they could afford to buy much-needed essentials for their family, such as food for the household or essential educational

equipment/activities for their child. Savings were also allocated to fund improvements in leisure activities, as the following case illustration shows:

Case illustration

Jenny is a parent whose child goes to a primary school in a universal pilot area. Until recently, only her husband had a job and the family was struggling to make ends meet. Although she now has a part-time job, being on the pilot has meant that her child can have a hot meal and the money saved has also meant she can buy more food for the household. The financial savings also go some way in helping her fund her child's swimming classes, as well as family weekend outings.

4.3.2 Time

Parents of pupils who had previously taken packed lunches reported that the pilot saved them the time and trouble needed to make packed lunches for their child. This not only included the time needed to make the packed lunches in the evening or the morning, but also the considerable effort needed to negotiate with the child what they wanted to have in their packed lunch and to try to ensure it was varied and healthy. Parents sometimes reported spending more quality time interacting with their child in the morning or evening as a result of not having to produce a packed lunch, which was also acknowledged and appreciated by pupils:

"You get to see them [parents] before they go cos when they make your packed lunches, you're still getting dressed and they're just like going, you don't even get to see them before you wake up."

(Pupil, universal pilot)

Parents of children who ate a school meal also reported feeling less pressure to cook a hot meal in the evening or to prepare food for children after school. This was particularly, though not exclusively, important for parents who were working. However, the exception to this was parents whose children came home hungry because they did not enjoy their school meal and/or had received a small portion. These parents felt they had to bring meal times earlier than they would have liked, which highlights the importance of the extent to which the impact of the pilot is mediated by pupils liking school meals, as discussed in section 4.1.

4.3.3 The diet at home and cooking practices

As mentioned in section 4.2.1, the pilot was seen to make some pupils more adventurous about the food they ate and this also impacted on their eating habits at home. Parents reported children being 'less fussy' eaters at home and also opting for healthier meals than they would have done before. For example, parents mentioned children being more willing to eat certain vegetables at home, such as peas and sweetcorn, after having been on the pilot.

"... he never used to eat like green peas ... sweetcorn and [then said] 'oh mummy buy sweetcorn' [as a result of being on school meals]."

(Parent, universal pilot)

Aside from the obvious health impacts of this, the expansion of the child's menu range saved parents the effort needed to convince their child of the importance of having a varied diet at home. It also meant that parents did not have to prepare separate meals for different children due to their 'fussy' eating habits.

The knowledge that children acquired from having school meals was also seen to influence what food was eaten at home and how it was cooked. In the case of the former, parents from minority ethnic backgrounds, for example, reported their child had requested more typically 'European' food such as pasta and fish fingers.

Parents with access to the school lunchtime menu in advance generally used this to help coordinate their meals at home so that they did not replicate what their child ate at school.

4.3.4 Convenience and peace of mind

Provided that their child was enjoying their school meal, parents felt reassured by their child being on the pilot as they believed they were receiving a hot meal that they felt was, more often than not, nutritionally balanced. Parents also commented on being reassured that their child would also sample a variety of foods that they may not get at home. Staff shared this peace of mind with parents, with some staff reporting suspicions that, for certain children, the school meal may be the only hot meal they have the whole day.

Finally, parents in the universal areas appreciated the convenience of not having to complete application forms, which they felt to be burdensome because of the paperwork involved, in order for their child to access FSM. They were also pleased not to have to face the prospect of their application being rejected by the LA. Conversely, in Wolverhampton, school staff reported that for parents with literacy and English language difficulties, application forms appeared either confusing or longwinded due to the need to get information translated and this added to the 'hassle' of producing evidence of eligibility:

"It looks so confusing that I think some people might just look at the form and think, I can't do that and that could be the reason for some of them not actually taking it up because they think they've got to bring all these things and prove it."

(Head teacher, extended pilot, primary school)

Where school staff had the linguistic capacity to communicate with parents in their first languages, language barriers did not appear to act as a significant barrier to parents' willingness to apply or reapply for FSM.

4.3.5 Parents' relationship with the school

On the whole, school staff across the sample felt that they had a good relationship with parents prior to the pilot, so its introduction was not seen to have affected this relationship particularly. For example, school staff described their approach to parents who had fallen behind with payments for school meals prior to the pilot as one that had always been sensitive and flexible. However, parents who found it a challenge to pay for school meals felt that, since the introduction of the pilot, they no longer avoided teaching staff for fear of being reminded of late payments. This was implicitly seen to facilitate parents being more able to informally discuss issues such as pupil progress and school issues with school staff during routine encounters (e.g. when parents drop their child at school).

4.4 Impact on schools

The impact of the pilot on schools was observed in relation to two key areas: staff – including the impact on staffing levels, roles, responsibilities, workload and working hours – and school

infrastructure and lunchtime arrangements. These impacts are explored in the sub-sections below, but it is worth noting here that they were most pronounced in universal pilot schools that experienced a high level of take-up of school meals.

4.4.1 Staff

The impact of the pilot was perceived to be the most significant on administrators and catering staff, including kitchen staff. In many respects, the pilot significantly reduced some aspects of administrative and office staff's workloads particularly in the universal areas. This was because they were no longer required to help parents complete FSM application forms, to process meal payments and to chase up parents for late payments.

However, this impact was offset by an increase in workload reported as a result of producing pilot-monitoring data for the LA and because of changes in the way the pilot was delivered in some areas. For example, the introduction of the 'pre-choice' system in Durham schools increased the workload of administrative staff, who had to collate the lunchtime choices pupils made – although the benefits of this system in improving the flow of pupils in the dining hall were seen to outweigh the extra workload involved.

“... they [administrative staff] were dealing with numbers and there was a lot of paperwork that has to go in to the authority so even though they weren't dealing with the financial side there's all sorts of figures that the county LA wanted on a regular basis and that's taken time, so I had to increase the hours to accommodate that.”

(Head teacher, universal pilot)

In contrast, catering staff (including kitchen staff and lunchtime assistants) experienced a significant increase in their work within universal areas, in three ways:

- *Workload*
Staff across all levels experienced an increased workload in order to meet the demands of the pilot. This included kitchen staff having to cook more meals and lunchtime assistants spending more time helping pupils during lunchtime (e.g. helping to cut their food up or clear up after lunch). This increase in workload was slightly offset by lunchtime assistants having to spend less time helping the largely reduced number of packed lunch pupils have their meals (e.g. helping them unwrap food items).
- *Size of workforce and working hours*
Schools in universal areas tended to recruit more catering staff in order to meet the demands of the increase in volume of pupils having school meals. This involved more staff being recruited at all levels, including kitchen staff and catering assistants. Catering staff also experienced an increase in their working hours as a direct result of the number of pupils having school meals, which translated into an increase in wages for some staff. For lunchtime supervisors, this was sometimes temporary, with hours returning to normal once schools had established a routine for dealing with the increased number of pupils in the dining room.
- *Roles and responsibilities*
There was also evidence of roles and responsibilities changing for catering staff. This was particularly pronounced in some schools for catering assistants, whose role had been

broadened to include responsibilities for cooking meals in addition to the preparation work they had undertaken before the pilot. Participants also commented on catering staff having to acquire new skills to manage the logistics of serving enough meals, such as learning to judge the correct portion sizes so that there were enough meals for all pupils.

On the whole, the pilot in the two universal areas was seen to have a minimal impact on head teachers and teaching staff, as they tended not to be as engaged in delivering school meals as the catering staff. However, teaching staff in some schools did report getting more involved in the actual supervision and monitoring of dining hall activity than before the pilot. Head teachers, for example, actively monitored dinner queues during lunchtimes or generally spent more time with pupils during the lunch break. Teachers also reported a change in their roles, particularly in relation to spending less time collecting dinner money or dealing with issues that accompany packed lunches, such as pupils forgetting their lunch or leaking drink containers.

4.4.2 School infrastructure and lunchtime arrangements

In universal areas, the pilot signalled an expansion and/or rearrangement of the school infrastructure. An obvious example of this was the expansion of school kitchen facilities and the introduction of additional serving hatches to accommodate the increased meal production, but dining halls were also rearranged to cater for more school meal takers and fewer packed lunch pupils.

Complementing this expansion, there were also changes in how lunchtimes were arranged. These changes tended to have one or more of the following characteristics (some of which have already been discussed in detail in chapter 2):

- staggered lunchtime queuing, with different classes and/or year groups having their lunch at different times, usually involving younger pupils having their lunch first as they tended to be the slowest eaters;
- getting pupils to clear their own trays: in some instances, older pupils were encouraged to help younger pupils by both acting as role models and actually helping them clear away their trays;
- introduction of the pre-choice menu system.

As a result of the above measures, schools did not report having to extend the school day or to change lesson times after lunch. However, pupils did note that queues were still long and that dining halls tended to be busier and noisier than before. Furthermore, some pupils perceived having less time for play and that, more exceptionally, lunchtime activities were rearranged to deal with the volume of pupils having school meals – especially for pupils who came to lunch last in any staggered queuing system. Pupils with experience of being the last to go to lunch (where there was no pre-order menu system) sometimes felt that they did not get their choice of meal and/or that their portion was smaller.

5 Reflections on the pilot

This penultimate chapter reflects on the value and role of the FSM pilot (section 5.1), which participants at both the school and LA level saw as overwhelmingly positive. It highlights the lessons learnt and innovative practices in implementing and delivering the pilot (section 5.2) and discusses participants' recommendations for improving the delivery of the pilot (section 5.3).

Summary of key findings from this chapter

The primary ways the pilot was valued by LAs, schools and families were:

- raising the profile of healthy eating;
- ensuring pupils get at least one hot, healthy, good-quality meal a day;
- broadening pupils' diets and social skills;
- supporting equality and fairness;
- easing financial stress for parents;
- providing additional family time.

Underpinning successful implementation and delivery of the pilot were a number of key learning points:

- Effective communication and partnership working: school staff involved in delivering the pilot identified the need for LA staff and senior school managers to provide clear, accurate and timely information; to be available and responsive; to consult with the relevant staff; and to share information and updates.
- Building sufficient staff resource and capacity: enabled by having the appropriate levels of staff with the right skills.
- Being able to accurately monitor data: SIMS (the School Information Management System) and cashless systems were a helpful resource in monitoring pupils in Wolverhampton.
- Being prepared to trial new approaches to delivery.

A number of initiatives were felt to encourage take-up, including: introducing pre-order schemes; maintaining a strict packed lunch policy; involving children in menu selection; improving the dining experience; offering taster sessions to parents; promoting the nutritional and social benefits of school meals; and reducing stigma through cashless payment systems and confidentiality.

Participants' recommendations for improving the delivery of the pilot included: giving schools a longer lead-in time to prepare for the pilot; creating a platform for sharing good practice; consulting pupils and parents more; improving the accessibility of menus by adding pictures of the food; improving the quality, quantity and range of food on offer; and employing additional staff on a basis more suited to the pilot.

5.1 Perceptions of the role and value of the pilot

Reflections about the role and value of the FSM pilot were often positive, as the following quote illustrates:

"I think the pilot has been excellent, an amazing opportunity for the kids and the families [...] the last two years have been fantastic, really good opportunity for everyone to enjoy hot, healthy meals for free, lovely. {Laughs} Exclamation mark!"

(Teacher, universal pilot)

Testament to its success is the decisions to continue to fund the pilot in Newham and Wolverhampton and to subsidise the cost of school meals in Durham drawing on local funding sources.

Schools expressed the importance of being able to offer parents something for nothing with no strings attached:

"it was lovely to be able to offer to parents, if you like, something for nothing, because you never get that in this world, but the fact that there were no strings attached, that it was exactly what it said, a free school meal for any child regardless of background, I thought it was fantastic, so it was nice to be able to offer them that option."

(Head teacher, universal pilot)

The primary ways in which the FSM pilot was valued by the participating respondent groups are now summarised. The FSM pilot:

- *Raised the profile of healthy eating amongst pupils, parents and schools.* An additional link was made between healthy school meals and the positive benefits to pupils' concentration and performance despite the lack of discernible impacts in these areas.
- *Guaranteed at least one hot, healthy good-quality meal a day for many more pupils.* As discussed in the previous chapter, this achievement is tempered by levels of take-up and the extent to which pupils ate their lunch.
- *Broadened pupils' diets and social skills.* The pilot also enabled pupils to take more responsibility for their food choices and honed their dining etiquette and social skills.
- *Increased equality, fairness and social cohesion.* Perhaps more evidently under universal eligibility, the pilot facilitated a levelling of opportunities for children from different socio-economic backgrounds who opted for a school meal. In providing the same lunch to all pupils, regardless of cost, the pilot allowed children to feel more equal to one another. There was also a sense that the pilot created increased cohesion by bringing different pupils together at the dining table.
- *Eased financial stress for families.* Naturally, the extent to which the pilot relieved financial stress depended on the financial status of families, their prior eligibility for FSM and the number of children they had. It appeared that the greatest benefits were for parents on limited incomes, with more than one child at primary school but who were previously just above the threshold for being eligible for FSM.
- *Provided a bit more free time for parents.* The pilot helped save parents the time and inconvenience of preparing packed lunches for their children. Pupils reported spending more time with their parents as a result of the pilot.
- *Strengthened partnership working.* The pilot was reported to have brought different stakeholders together to work toward a common goal, at both the LA and school level. Local authorities observed a strengthening of the use of a 'whole school approach' within schools and an improvement in relationships between different types of school staff.
- *Benefited the local community.* The pilot was seen to put money back into the pockets of the local community, which could then be spent in the local economy. It had also created over 100 new jobs in Durham and Newham.

However, a number of underlying concerns about the pilot and its policy aims were expressed. There was some question about the fairness of both the extended and universal eligibility models. The extended eligibility was seen as unfair because, unlike universal eligibility, it benefited only a select group of children. In later stages of the pilot, however, universal eligibility was criticised for benefiting families from more affluent backgrounds who were not deemed to be in need. This was suggested as wasteful in the current economic climate. Adding to perceptions of unfairness, pupils on packed lunches held the misconception that the absence of an income from school meals resulted in schools not being able to spend as much money on other things, such as play equipment.

Finally, initial enthusiasm for the pilot and its policy aims was occasionally offset by parents who were concerned about the perceived poor quality of food and small portion sizes.

5.2 Key learning points from the evaluation

A number of key learning points were highlighted for increasing the take-up of school meals and implementing and delivering the FSM pilot in schools.

5.2.1 Implementing and delivering universal and extended pilot in schools

The key features for ensuring successful implementation and delivery of the FSM pilot in schools included: effective communication and partnership working; building sufficient staff resource and capacity; being able to monitor data accurately; and being prepared to trial new approaches to delivery until the most appropriate system was found. We now consider these features in turn.

Effective communication and partnership working

Unsurprisingly, the implementation and delivery of the pilot depended on effective communication practices and partnership working between key groups involved in delivering the pilot, including the LA, catering companies, strategic and operational school staff, parents and pupils. Such practices were characterised by:

- *Providing clear, accurate and timely information*
The provision of clear, accurate and timely information from the LA to schools about the pilot, potential emerging problems and how to deal with staffing issues was a key feature of success.
- *Being on hand to deal with specific queries*
Schools valued LAs and catering companies being available to discuss issues and provide tailored solutions to individual school needs.
- *Consulting with relevant groups*
The opportunity for schools to raise early questions and concerns was highlighted as being key to effective practice. Within schools, the consultation of catering staff and pupils, and the invitation for feedback and suggestions for improving lunchtime systems, aided effective implementation and delivery.

- *Consistent sharing of information and updates on developments*
This was important to ensure that all those involved in delivering the pilot were aware of their roles. Sharing information also helped all parties to feel involved, motivated and supportive of the pilot.
- *Being responsive to the needs of pilot schools*
Schools valued LAs and catering companies being as responsive as possible to further requests for support or resources and taking a proactive approach to improving the support they provided.

Building sufficient staff resource and capacity

- *Having the appropriate staffing levels*
The right level of staff to deliver increased volumes of meals or fulfil administrative tasks was instrumental to effective implementation and delivery. Staff capacity was increased either by hiring new staff or by extending the hours of existing staff. In addition, the use of teaching staff and members of the school's senior leadership team, including the head teacher, proved a useful way of increasing capacity for supervising the dining room and playground.
- *Equipping staff with the right skills*
Catering companies in universal pilot areas provided refresher training in meal preparation to senior catering staff to support efficiency and to increase capacity for delivering meals. Training in the use of accurate data-monitoring systems was essential for administrative staff in Wolverhampton.
- *Dedication and commitment of the staff*
Critical to success was the dedication and willingness of staff to carry out additional new and unfamiliar tasks to a high standard. For example, administrative and catering staff were noted for their willingness to trial and revise new systems until they were effective and to demonstrate patient, accommodating, caring and attentive behaviours towards pupils.

Being able to monitor data accurately

Having effective monitoring systems in place to record take-up figures was important because it helped schools to plan for and manage the volume of meals as well as to report take-up data to LAs. It was particularly important under extended eligibility, where there was a need to differentiate between newly and previously eligible pupils. The SIMS (School Information Management System) and cashless payment systems were useful in meeting this end: compared with previous paper-based systems, they more easily helped serving staff to differentiate between eligible pupils.

Being prepared to trial new approaches to delivery until the most appropriate system is found

A 'trial and error' approach to testing out different systems for managing the lunch break helped schools develop systems and processes for moving an increased volume of pupils efficiently through the lunch system. This was most effective when systems were modified and retested until they fully met schools' needs. Gaining advice from LA contacts and catering managers as well as consulting all relevant staff, including kitchen staff and lunchtime supervisors, about ideas for new approaches was seen to support the most creative and appropriate strategies.

Innovative solutions developed by schools, with the guidance of LAs, included:

- *Experimenting with the organisation of the lunch break*
Effective strategies included extending the lunch break, typically by between 10 and 15 minutes, or staggering the lunch break so that children in different school years ate their lunch at different times. Rotating staggered intakes represented the fairest approach as it ensured that every pupil got the chance to go in first.
- *Tailoring and streamlining menus*
Reducing the number of options available each day helped to make preparing meals more straightforward and make choosing a meal easier for pupils. Tailoring menus to feature more frequently options that were proving to be popular among pupils helped to ensure pupils chose their meal and ate it quickly.
- *Pre-order systems*
Systems that involved families pre-selecting meal options in advance helped catering staff to prepare correct quantities of food and made choosing and queuing more efficient. Such systems were effective where pupils were given the opportunity to change their minds on the day and were monitored to ensure they took the correct option.
- *Removing the option for pupils to have extra servings*
In order to improve the flow of pupils in the dining hall, some schools stopped allowing pupils to have extra servings – ‘seconds’ and ‘thirds’ – once they had eaten their meal.
- *Maximising the space available to pupils to select and eat their lunch*
Adding extra serving hatches allowed more pupils to be served simultaneously. Where dining hall space was limited and could not be expanded, tables and other furniture were rearranged to make more effective use of the dining hall space.
- *Increasing pupils’ lunchtime responsibilities*
Asking pupils to clear their own lunch items helped to create space to process more lunches more quickly and so improved the flow of pupils using the dining room. Tasking older pupils with helping younger pupils with menu selection and clearing away helped to encourage reception pupils to choose and eat more quickly and become more familiar with the lunch environment.

5.2.2 Strategies for improving take-up of school meals / FSMs

Effective initiatives aimed at children included:

- *Pre-ordering schemes*
Pre-ordering schemes that guaranteed children their preferred choice of meal were viewed positively by parents and children where implemented successfully.
- *Pupil involvement in menu choice*
Ensuring pupils’ views were heard through regular consultation on menus was seen as a positive way of involving pupils and improving menu choice and quality.

- *Packed lunch policy*
Clear guidelines for the content of packed lunches – for example, prohibiting crisps, chocolate and fizzy drinks – helped to discourage the take-up of packed lunches.
- *Dining experience*
The role of kitchen and serving staff was central to children’s dining experiences. Consistency in staffing and good communication between children and serving staff were viewed as important facilitators to improved take-up of school meals. Any measures that tackle queuing times are also likely to improve take-up.

Initiatives aimed at parents included:

- *Taster sessions / community lunches*
Encouraging parents to sample school meals to combat misconceptions regarding quality and to offer reassurance regarding choice was felt to have a positive impact on take-up by building trust.
- *Communication*
Improving communication with parents who are concerned about what and how much their child is eating during the day is likely to help allay concerns of this kind. Sending menus home in advance, and communicating with parents on an individual basis if they have concerns, may encourage take-up.
- *Promotional activities*
Raising awareness of FSM through a variety of means, including assemblies, newsletters and open days, and emphasising key benefits, including the social and nutritional benefits of take-up for children and the reduced financial and time burdens for parents, may be effective as these issues were identified as key facilitators. For extended eligibility rather than universal pilot areas, ensuring parents have the appropriate information to assess their own eligibility is key.
- *Reducing stigma*
Ensuring the confidentiality of pupils on FSM by, for example, using paperless payment systems was felt to be key to reducing stigma linked to FSM take-up. Highlighting the benefits for the school when eligible parents take up their entitlement was also felt to improve take-up and reduce stigma.

5.3 Strategies for improving the delivery of the pilot

Local authorities, school staff, parents and pupils had a number of suggestions for improving the ways in which the pilot was delivered in schools.

As is common in most pilot initiatives, a request was made for more time to prepare and set up the pilot.¹⁷ In universal pilot areas, this was needed to allow time for major structural works to schools and to embark on recruitment drives. In the extended eligibility area, it was needed to raise awareness and resolve the administrative processes. It was also suggested that a platform for sharing good practice would have been helpful in developing the initial ‘game plan’:

¹⁷ The preparation period began when the successful areas were announced in May 2009 and ended at the start of the September 2009 term. A similar pilot had never previously been undertaken.

“perhaps there could have been something web based or internet based where schools can just upload ‘Well this is how we manage our lunchtimes, it’s done such and such a way’, that would have been really helpful because schools across the country have the same sorts of problems, and different schools solve those problems in different ways, and what there isn’t as yet is enough communication between schools sharing good practice, and that would have been really useful.”

(Head teacher, universal pilot)

It is not clear whether these schools were aware of the online resources provided by agencies such as the SFT.

In retrospect, schools would have made greater use of pupil councils and School Nutrition Action Groups (SNAGs) to promote school meals and healthy packed lunches. They also saw value in sending menus out to parents to improve awareness of school meals.

In terms of the food available, pupils and parents would have appreciated larger portions, improved quality and choice of food, plenty of food being available so that everyone could have the option they wanted, and a better selection of food and drink – including fresh fruit and drinks other than water. A further suggestion made by pupils was to add pictures to menus so that they could see whether they liked the look of the food on offer before making a choice.

Where recruitment was concerned, schools felt they should have emphasised the specific time frame of the pilot and the temporary duration of catering staff contracts – until the pilot ended. Schools that experienced difficulties with the high staff turnover of temporary agency staff felt employing staff on a more permanent basis would have helped because:

“they’re familiar with the routines, they’re familiar with children, they’re familiar with staff, it makes it more seamless. You can see the difference in the staff who are permanent than agency. Agency [staff] turn up, do their work and off they go. Whereas you’ve got staff in there with their own kids, encourage them to try food [...] and know where to go if there’s an issue. Agency staff don’t have that level of commitment or enthusiasm.”

(Head teacher, universal pilot)

6 Conclusion

This report presents findings from the scoping study, qualitative school case studies and caterers' survey carried out by NatCen Social Research between 2009 and 2011. It has explored how the FSM pilot was set up and delivered and the impacts it was perceived to have on all those involved. The findings will also be used to amplify and illustrate the evidence arising from the impact study <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR227>.

Ten school case studies were carried out to explore in detail how the FSM pilot was set up and delivered within each school. However, adopting a case-study design has inevitably limited the degree to which we can reflect the full range of ways in which schools have delivered the FSM pilot in each LA.

In this final chapter, we reflect on the key findings presented in this report and discuss their implications, covering the role and value of the pilot, its preparation and implementation, take-up and impacts.

The role and value of the pilot

Schools expressed strong support and enthusiasm for the pilot. Underpinning these views was a general approval of the values and policy aims of the pilot as well as its capacity to benefit pupils and families. Schools expected the pilot to bring benefits for pupils' health, to reduce the financial burden on parents, and to support equality and fairness by providing more children with access to a healthy meal, regardless of family income.

Positive reflections of the pilot were made in spite of any difficulties experienced during its set-up and delivery. Furthermore, schools' observations of a narrow and mixed set of tangible performance and health impacts on pupils did not detract from the overall sense of it being a worthwhile endeavour.

While the principle of universal eligibility was generally seen as favourable, there was some concern about the cost benefits of rolling out a service to families from more affluent backgrounds who were not deemed to be in need. Where such views were expressed, the extended model, in which entitlement would continue to be means-tested but against wider parameters, was viewed as a fairer option due to its capacity to target those families with limited incomes.

Preparing for and delivering the pilot

Among school staff in the three pilot areas, there were broadly held perceptions that, in spite of a number of challenges, the FSM pilot was set up and implemented successfully.

Issues arising during the set-up of the pilot

The issues schools experienced during the set-up period related largely to communication between the LAs and schools and to information, support and guidance provided by LAs to schools.

During this period, schools reported a lack of consultation from LAs on their decision to bid for the pilot, limited guidance from LAs on planning for the pilot in the event of a successful bid and limited opportunities for schools to ask questions of the LA and raise concerns with them. The limited time

frame for preparing for the pilot (mid-May 2009 to September 2009) also caused difficulties in Durham schools that required major structural activities, such as demand outstripping local supply for equipment and labour.

It was suggested that the period between submitting the bid and the announcement of the pilot could have been used to greater effect to prepare for the pilot. Schools suggested that LAs could have held information sessions to discuss how best to build the appropriate infrastructure for the pilot. It was felt that LAs could also have played a helpful strategic role identifying which schools were likely to need to undertake structural work to accommodate the pilot and they could then have anticipated difficulties for participating schools by advising services of potential demand and sourcing additional services in the local area if necessary.

In the extended eligibility area, difficulties included the delayed receipt of resources such as literature for parents and a lack of clarity about the eligibility criteria. The experience of schools in the extended pilot area highlights the importance of LAs providing clear guidance on how to interpret changes to eligibility criteria.

Issues arising during delivery of the pilot

While the key challenges confronting schools in Wolverhampton were monitoring take-up of FSM and assisting parents with the application process, in the two universal areas the major issue was dealing with an increased volume of pupils within the school lunch break. The scale of the challenge was by no means uniform; it depended on the extent of the increase in the number of pupils taking school meals and schools' capacity to absorb the increase. Early implementation was most challenging where dining rooms or kitchen facilities were not capable of dealing with the volume of children that the pilot had ushered in. For some schools, limitations on the capacity and lack of resources in the kitchen or dining halls exacerbated existing time pressures. These findings highlight the importance of building sufficient staff resources and capacity for the successful delivery of the pilot.

Schools adapted well to issues arising during early implementation, initial teething problems were addressed quickly and schools soon settled into efficient lunchtime routines. Where ongoing issues persisted beyond the early weeks of delivery, effective strategies involved using a 'trial and error' approach to testing out different systems for managing the lunch service. Gathering ideas for new practices from a diverse range of school staff was felt to support the most creative and appropriate strategies. The success of this approach was reflected in a range of innovative practices designed to improve the efficiency and management of lunch breaks. For example, catering staff described testing out menus and being attentive to what was popular and unpopular amongst pupils (whilst always adhering to nutritional standards) in a bid to ensure pupils chose their meal and ate it quickly. In a further example, a pre-ordering system introduced in several schools with the aim of more accurately predicting demand for each menu option was effective only where the process was adapted to prevent pupils from taking the wrong meal at the point of service.

It was felt that a platform for the sharing of good practice between schools participating in the pilot (such as a web forum) would have enhanced experiences of implementation. That schools were unaware of platforms such as the SFT's online forums suggests more could have been done to promote existing such resources.

In addition to building sufficient staff resources and capacity and being willing to trial new approaches to delivery to solve problems, successful delivery of the pilot was underpinned by effective partnership working. The accounts of school staff suggest that the extent of partnership

working (between local authorities, catering companies and all types of school staff) had an important impact on the implementation of the pilot. The provision of clear and timely information was a key aspect of good partnership working without which schools described experiencing some early challenges.

Maximising take-up of the pilot

Unsurprisingly, cost savings were identified as the primary reason for opting for FSM. School staff found it difficult to paint a profile of the type of pupils more likely to opt for FSM. Take-up of school meals was not static, with some children alternating between school meals and packed lunches depending on what was on the menu and whether their parents had the time to prepare a packed lunch. Schools may secure more stable take-up amongst this group by withdrawing the flexibility for pupils to alternate between packed lunches and school meals and by addressing reasons behind the change.

Our evidence suggests that there were three models of decision-making – the child-led model, a parent-led model and a parent and child model. An understanding of these models could help schools to identify where to target efforts to encourage take-up, for example by inviting decision-making parents to school meal taster sessions or decision-making children onto School Nutrition Action Groups (SNAGs) to evaluate satisfaction of menus.

A range of other factors influenced take-up. School meals were preferable where the school menu was seen to offer a wider range of food than packed lunches. In spite of efforts by schools to accommodate difference, dietary or religious requirements and the restrictive tastes of self-professed ‘fussy eaters’ limited the choice of food from the school menu. Strategies aimed at tackling barriers relating to choice included the pre-ordering system, involving pupils in menu choice and implementing strict packed lunch policies to prohibit foods that made packed lunches more appealing than school meals, such as crisps, chocolate and fizzy drinks. Where food was perceived to be of poor quality both by parents and by children, this was a barrier to take-up. Control over the type and amount of food eaten was an important factor for both parents and pupils and an area where packed lunches could be seen to offer more autonomy. Evidence suggests that giving pupils and parents more control over menu choices through pre-ordering systems, increasing pupils’ input into menu design and good communication with parents about what and how much their child is eating at lunchtime could facilitate take-up of school meals in families where control acts as a concern.

The capacity for school meals to build social skills and improve dining etiquette was an important facilitator for parents and an area schools could build on to incentivise take-up. Pupils’ desire to share time and experiences with their peers acted as a strong influence on take-up. The overall dining experience acted as a barrier to school meals for pupils and a particular issue mentioned was the long queues. Queuing for longer was frustrating for some pupils because they felt as though it limited their time to play. While this may be an inevitable impact of a universal pilot model, this finding highlights the importance of arriving at workable solutions to problems in delivery to minimise such barriers. Pupils’ accounts also suggest the importance of having personable and friendly serving staff in encouraging take-up.

Another key facilitator to the take-up of school meals was the reduced burden on parents’ time. This was cited as particularly beneficial to working parents, a group that may benefit from targeted encouragement from schools to further encourage take-up.

Rolling out the pilot to all pupils had the additional advantage of addressing any confusion about eligibility and of removing any stigma attached to FSM. In the extended eligibility area, stigma and awareness of eligibility continued to be concerns that the pilot was not felt to have fully addressed. It was felt that more could be done to promote the pilot to parents and to assist them with the application form – including addressing any literacy difficulties, language barriers and a reluctance to discuss private financial concerns. Issues of stigma had, to a large extent, been removed through payment systems that anonymised FSM takers. Despite this progress, issues of stigma, which to a degree were still present in the extended eligibility area, were in part addressed by appealing to the altruistic desire of parents to support the school, by informing parents that applying for FSM would help the school to acquire additional resources.

Impacts of the pilot

The impacts described in this report are based on the observations of staff, parents and pupils. They provide a helpful illustration of the range of ways in which the pilot appeared to make a difference to children, families and schools. The key impacts identified by participants, which contributed to feelings that the pilot had been successful and worthwhile, include a broadening in the dietary preference of pupils, the introduction of healthier choices to diets, improved social skills of pupils in interacting with one another, and a levelling of differences in meals eaten by pupils at lunchtime, in terms of quality and healthiness. The least discernible effects of the pilot were seen to be on pupil performance and behaviour in the classroom and on physical health, where a range of other factors were seen to play a greater part.

The quantitative impact study provides an objective measure of the impact of the FSM pilot on take-up, diet at school and at home, child behaviour and concentration, Body Mass Index (BMI), attainment, and authorised and unauthorised absences

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR227>. It compares the outcomes from the pilot areas with those from a control or comparison sample in order to establish what would have happened to outcomes had the FSM pilot not been introduced.

Unsurprisingly, a number of factors tempered the ability to assess the impacts of the pilot, particularly the ability to isolate the role of the FSM pilot from the wider school context and other school initiatives and activities that encouraged exercise and healthy eating practices and addressed attendance, behaviour and learning management.

Context aside, it was clear that the other factor to bear in mind when considering the impact of the pilot was whether the pupils actually liked and subsequently ate their FSM. Whether pupils were eating their meals very much underpinned positive or negative impacts of the pilot. It is important to highlight the need for schools to drive for an increase not only in take-up but also in satisfaction with and consumption of school meals.

Appendix A

Stage 1 Introductory Letter to Schools

Dear [NAME OF HEAD TEACHER]

Evaluation of the Free School Meal pilot

We would like to invite your school to participate in an evaluation of the Free School Meal (FSM) initiative, which is currently being piloted in [NAME OF LOCAL AUTHORITY]. The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), in collaboration with the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), has been commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department of Health (DH) to carry out this evaluation.

The evaluation

There are a number of components to the evaluation, but we are contacting you about the qualitative part which will explore how FSM is being implemented in schools and the impact it is having on the school, its staff and its pupils. Following a scoping exercise, where we spoke to local authority and PCT staff involved in the FSM pilot, we are embarking upon a series of case studies of schools within the three participating local authorities. We hope to involve each case study school in the evaluation twice - first in early 2010, and then again in early 2011.

Your school's involvement

We would very much like your school to participate in this evaluation. Participation is completely voluntary and the school will receive a £400 compensatory payment in recognition of the staff time involved.

During our first visit in early 2010, we would like to speak to you and other members of staff involved in implementing FSM (such as the Healthy Schools/PSHE lead, the catering manager and administrative staff). This would involve staff taking part in one interview with a researcher lasting no longer than one hour. We would also like to carry out a mini group discussion with catering staff, again lasting no more than one hour. In some schools, we would also like to conduct two mini group discussions with pupils. We will need to ask you for your help to identify relevant people to include in these discussions, as well as help to arrange them. In order to minimise disruption to the school, we suggest conducting as many of these discussions as possible in one visit.

In early 2011, we would like to visit your school again to speak to a similar group of people, as well as to classroom teachers and parents of pupils. We will be able to provide more information about this and discuss this with you during our first visit.

Confidentiality and anonymity

The information you give will be treated in the strictest confidence in accordance with the Data Protection Act. The identity of participating schools and individual staff will only be known to the research team and will not be shared with the DCSF or local authority.

What will happen next

A researcher will contact you by telephone in [MONTH/TIME PERIOD] to tell you more about the evaluation and invite the participation of your school. In the meantime, if you have any questions

or would like to discuss the research further please do not hesitate to contact me on [TELEPHONE NUMBER] or by email at [EMAIL ADDRESS].

Who is NatCen

NatCen is Britain's largest independent, not-for-profit social research organisation and is independent of all government departments and political parties. If you would like to find more about us, please visit www.natcen.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely,

[NAME OF RESEARCHER]

Appendix B

Stage 1 Strategic Staff Topic Guide

Interviews with strategic staff

(Head Teacher/ Deputy Head/ Healthy School or PSHE lead/ administrative staff)

Part 1: Researcher introduction

- Introduce self, NatCen (as independent research contractor)
- Explain research, that we are in first school case study stage, who we are interviewing and what we want to explore (how changes in eligibility for FSM have affected the day to day planning and delivery of school meals and how pupils are reacting to the changes brought about by the pilot)
- Explain interview will last about 1 hour, that participation is completely voluntary and that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to
- Explain recording, data storage and confidentiality
- Explain reporting and that individuals and schools will not be identified in the report.
- Check if any questions before we start and ask permission to start recording

Part 2: Themes / topics to be explored

A) Participant background and contextual Information

Aim: to obtain information about the respondent and school, and about respondents' understanding and views of the FSM pilot.

- Role and responsibilities
 - Description of role
 - Responsibilities in relation to school meals
 - Role in implementation of FSM
- School characteristics (*note to researcher: check details provided by local authority*)
 - Type of school (primary/ secondary/ PRU/ special school)
 - Size of school (no. pupils and staff)
 - Pupil demographics (e.g. deprivation, levels of being overweight and obesity)
 - Entitlement and take up of school meals before FSM pilot
 - Entitlement and take up of FSMs before and after pilot
 - School meal provision (LA contracted caterers/ private caterers)

B) Early experiences of implementation

Aim: to explore experiences of the implementation of the pilot including the set-up period, changes in school meal delivery and lunch time arrangements in response to the FSM pilot, and any support and guidance received.

Bid process and set up period

- Experience and views of bid process
 - Views of the FSM pilot, including policy aims
 - Initial views about LA plans to bid for FSM pilot
 - Nature of communication/information about pilot from LA
 - Views about involvement in the pilot
 - Nature of any consultation by LA with school
 - Nature of any other involvement in bid
 - Nature of and views about any request for contribution to funding by LA

- Overview of pilot set-up
 - Communication of bid outcome by LA (timing, channel)
 - Nature of information received about pilot set up (from who, what included, how useful)
 - Timetable for set up period
 - How responsibilities for set up were organised/delegated
 - Respondent's role and responsibilities in this

- Description of activities during set-up period. To include discussion of kitchens, kitchen staff, queuing and payment areas, dining areas, and equipment.
 - Nature of changes necessary
 - How were they made
 - Whose responsibility were they
 - Any still outstanding in September and beyond
 - Any challenges encountered and how were they overcome
 - Is anything still outstanding and needs to happen – why; when will it be done

- Support, guidance and partnership working during pilot set up (to include with LA, PCT, Catering Services, School Food Trust, DCSF, DH, other schools)
 - Level and nature of contact
 - any opportunities for networking /sharing good practice
 - nature and views of any partnership working with these groups
 - Nature of information, support and advice received
 - Views about support; anything lacking
 - Any challenges in working with LA, catering services and PCT and how overcome
 - Could anything have been done differently

- Overall views of implementation of pilot including bid process, pilot set-up and support and guidance received
 - What has worked well
 - What has worked less well/challenges and how overcome
 - Impact of any challenges (on implementation or delivery)
 - What could have been done differently/improved

Early delivery of the pilot

- Promotion and awareness of FSM pilot
 - Promotion activities undertaken by school (nature of, who aimed at, when took place)

- Perspectives on effectiveness of promotion activities and reasons for
 - Perceptions of current awareness of FSM pilot among pupils and parents
 - Perspectives on current attitudes of parents and pupils towards FSM pilot
 - Current activities targeting parents of non-takers
- Main changes to the way lunch is planned and delivered since start of pilot (compare to pre-pilot and compare very early days to later to present day). To include discussion of:
 - School meal provision (menus, options, quality of meals)
 - Queuing and payment
 - Length of lunch period/lessons
 - Way in which pupils are released for lunch
 - Role of teachers and meal time supervisors during lunch time
 - Role of pupils, school councils and SNAG groups in feeding in ideas or feedback into changes
 - School meal payment systems (*where relevant*)
 - Any other changes
- Take up of FSM since implementation of pilot (*note to researcher: probe for any differences by pupil sub-groups*)
 - Current levels of take up
 - Comparison with pre-pilot levels
 - Perceived barriers and facilitators to take up
 - Anticipated future changes in take up and reasons for
 - Monitoring of take up and responsibilities for (individual school monitoring and LA monitoring requirements)
- Support, guidance and partnership working during early delivery (to include with LA, PCT, Catering Services, School Food Trust, DCSF, DH, other schools)
 - Level and nature of contact
 - any opportunities for networking/sharing good practice
 - nature and views of any partnership working with these groups
 - Nature of information, support and advice received
 - Views about support; anything lacking
 - Any challenges in working with LA, catering services and PCT and how overcome
 - Could anything have been done differently
- Overall views of early delivery of pilot
 - What has worked well
 - What has worked less well/challenges and how overcome
 - Impact of any challenges on delivery
 - What could be improved
 - Any plans for changes to delivery and reasons for

C) Reflections on early impact

Aim: to explore perceptions of early impacts of the FSM pilot on the school and plans for future delivery of the pilot.

- Impact of FSM pilot on
 - individual and individual's role
 - kitchen staff
 - school staff
 - delivery of school meals
 - the school day generally
 - pupils (concentration, health, behaviour, other)
 - any other impacts
- How fits with expectations of early impacts, any explanations for discrepancies
- Anticipated future impacts and reasons for

- Overall reflections on early delivery and impact of the pilot
 - what has gone well and less well
 - what could be improved, and what difference this would have made (for whom)
 - thoughts about the future delivery and impact of the pilot (for school staff, the school, pupils)

Appendix C

Stage 2 Introductory Letter to Schools

Dear **XXXXX**,

Evaluation of the Free School Meal pilot

We are writing to invite your school to participate in the second and final case study stage of the evaluation of the Free School Meal (FSM) initiative which National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) is carrying out for the Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Health (DH). This stage of the evaluation is investigating the impacts of the pilot. School visits are scheduled to take place in the 2011 spring term.

We are extremely grateful for the contribution your school made to the evaluation earlier in 2010 and would very much value your participation in the next and final stage of the study. It is really important for us to hear your views of the impact of the FSM pilot as this will provide very valuable evidence to inform any future policy developments in this area.

Your school's involvement

We very much hope you will be able to participate in this final stage of the study. Participation is completely voluntary and the school will receive a £400 compensatory payment in recognition of the staff time involved.

The research design for this stage is slightly different to that of the first. It will involve an individual or paired strategic staff interview (such as with the head teacher/ and or member of staff with responsibility for overseeing the pilot). We would also like to hold three mini-pupil groups of about five pupils in each group. In addition we would like to carry out one group discussion with classroom teachers and two small group discussions with parents.

We will need to ask you for your help to identify relevant people to include in these discussions, as well as help to arrange them. NatCen will lead on arranging parent discussion groups themselves to reduce burden on schools. In order to minimise disruption to the school, we suggest conducting as many of these discussions as possible in one visit.

What will happen next

A researcher from NatCen will contact you by telephone in the w/c 20th December 2010 to tell you more about the evaluation and invite the participation of your school. In the meantime, if you have any questions for the research team or would like to discuss the research further please do not hesitate to contact [NAME OF RESEARCHER] on [TELEPHONE NUMBER] or by email at [EMAIL ADDRESS].

Confidentiality and anonymity

The information you give will be treated in the strictest confidence in accordance with the Data Protection Act. The identity of participating schools and individual staff will only be known to the research team and will not be shared with either the DfE or DH or your local authority.

The evaluation

NatCen, in collaboration with the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), has been commissioned by to carry out this evaluation.

Who is NatCen

NatCen is Britain's largest independent, not-for-profit social research organisation and is independent of all government departments and political parties. If you would like to find more about them, please visit www.natcen.ac.uk.

If you have any further questions about the research, please call me, [NAME OF RESEARCHER] on [TELEPHONE NUMBER] or by email at [EMAIL ADDRESS].

Yours sincerely,

[NAME OF RESEARCHER]

Appendix D

Stage 2 Strategic Staff Topic Guide

Interviews with strategic staff

Aims of the study

The interview aims to explore participant's role in and experiences of the implementation of the FSM pilot in the school and views of the impact it has had. The discussion will focus on:

- The participant's role and responsibilities in the school, particularly in relation to school meals
- Take-up of free school meals
- Ongoing implementation and delivery issues
- Impacts of pilot on school staff, lunchtimes and the school day, pupils, and families
- Plans for the end of the pilot

A) Researcher introduction

- Introduce self, NatCen (as independent research contractor)
- Explain research, that we are in second and final school case study stage, who we are interviewing and that we want to explore (impacts of the Free School Meal pilot)
- Explain that as participants in a national pilot their views and experiences are very valuable and their feedback will contribute toward learning and could hold relevance for future policy development in this area
- Explain interview will last about 1.5 hour, that participation is completely voluntary and that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to
- Explain recording, data storage and confidentiality
- Explain reporting and that individuals and schools will not be identified in the report.
- Check if any questions before we start and ask permission to start recording

B) Participant introduction

Aim: to obtain information about the respondents and about overall patterns in take up since the pilot started.

- Roles and responsibilities
 - Description of role within school
 - How day to day responsibilities relating to FSM pilot have changed since first interview

C) Overview of take up of free school meals

- Take up of FSMs
 - General pattern of take up of FSMs since start of pilot (based on observation, exact figures not needed)
 - Variation between different types of pupils e.g. those previously eligible for FSM, year groups, minority groups e.g. transient groups (particularly in Newham)
 - Views about changes in take up

- Facilitators and barriers to take up (including those felt by parents as well as pupils, delay in funding in Wolves)
- Reflections on efforts made by school to increase take up
 - Helping parents to apply for FSMs (Wolves)
 - Publicity campaigns
 - Open evenings
 - Parent school meal taster sessions
- Lessons learnt about increasing take up of free/school meals from the pilot that will put into practice when pilot ends

D) Experiences of implementation and delivery of pilot (priority section)

Aim: to explore any changes to the implementation and delivery of the pilot or problems arising in the last year and how they have been dealt with and to ascertain the level of support from local authority or others schools have required and received

- Implementation and delivery
 - Overview of changes made to school to accommodate FSMs
 - Changes to delivery of school meals since last interview, e.g. new system for meal selection in Durham schools
 - Impact of changes
 - Ongoing or recent delivery issues and how dealt with e.g. equipment, workload associated with increases in take up, catering staff sickness or absence, queuing times
- Support, guidance and partnership working in past year (to include with LA, PCT, Healthy School teams, Catering Services, School Food Trust, DfE, DH, other schools)
 - Level and nature of contact, compare to early stages of pilot
 - any opportunities for networking /sharing good practice
 - nature and views of any partnership working with these groups
 - Nature of information, support and advice received
 - Views about support; anything lacking
 - Any challenges in working with LA, catering services and PCT and how overcome
 - Could anything have been done differently
 - In retrospect, how could support, guidance and partnership working have been improved from the very beginning and how could that have changed things now
- Overall views of implementing and delivering the pilot
 - What has worked well
 - What has worked less well/challenges and how overcome
 - Impact of any challenges
 - What could have been done differently/improved

E) Reflections on impact (priority section)

Aim: to explore perceptions of early impacts of the FSM pilot on school staff, lunchtimes and the school day, pupils, and families

- What are the impacts of the FSM Pilot. *Allow for spontaneous impacts and if not already mentioned, probe on the following:*
 - **Staff** working in school including senior, kitchen, administrative and teaching staff
 - Workload
 - Working hours
 - Roles and responsibilities
 - **Lunchtimes** and the **school day** including lunch breaks, queuing and seating systems, delivery of school meals, food on offer, structure of school day
 - Food - quality, selection and portion size
 - Awareness of pupil dietary requirements
 - Queuing and seating systems
 - Length of lunch breaks
 - Length of classroom lessons
 - Impact of pilot on **pupils**
 - Attitudes towards food and healthy eating
 - Attitudes towards free school meals
 - Absenteeism/ attendance
 - Concentration
 - Health and weight
 - Behaviour
 - Attainment/ performance
 - Attitudes towards children who take FSM (to explore stigma)
 - Time for play or engagement in other school activities e.g. football practice at lunch
 - Any other impacts
 - Impacts on **families**
 - Parents' views about healthy eating and their cooking practices at home
 - Time taken to make packed lunches
 - Family finances
 - Parents' attitudes towards free school meals
 - Awareness of FSMs eligibility and processes for registration
 - Parent/school relationships
 - Any other impacts on families
 - How easy it is to attribute changes to FSM pilot
 - What other initiatives in school play a part
 - What other factors could play a part
 - How impacts fit with expectations of and ambitions for impacts, any explanations for discrepancies
 - What has gone well
 - Not so well
 - What could have improved and how

F) Plans for the end of the pilot

Aim: to explore plans for the end of the pilot

- Schools' plans for provision of school meals after 2 year pilot ends
- Options considered
- Impact on staffing e.g. administrative and catering staff and strategies
- Plans to communicate end of pilot to parents and expected response
- Implications of pilot ending for parents
- Expectations impact on take-up
- Plans and motivations for increasing registration and take-up of FSMs

G) Overall thoughts on the FSM pilot

Aim: to gain overall and concluding thoughts about the pilot

- Views about the value and role of the FSM pilot
- Facilitators and barriers to successful FSM pilot
- What participants think about the experience of taking part in the pilot
- Thoughts about how would have done things differently
- Thoughts about overall impact of pilot
- How participants feel about the pilot coming to an end

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