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Free school meals in other jurisdictions

Summary

Children whose parents are in receipt of particular income support payments in England, Scotland and Wales are eligible to receive free school meals (FSM). Eligibility criteria across these jurisdictions are broadly similar to those in place in Northern Ireland, and include receipt of Income Based Jobseekers Allowance and Child Tax Credit. However, application rates and subsequent take-up of FSM in these jurisdictions has been lower than expected.

In Ireland, there is no statutory duty to provide FSM, however two schemes are in place to provide funding for meals for disadvantaged children. These operate through the provision of funding to local authorities, or through departmental funding being directed to specific FSM projects.

In addition to overarching FSM policy, there have been a number of policies or initiatives in the other jurisdictions to promote FSM. Table 1 overleaf provides an overview of key initiatives and policies.

Table 1: Key initiatives and policies in other jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	Initiative/ policy	Details
England	Eligibility Checking Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows data from the Department of Work and Pensions; Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs; and the Home Office to be shared and checked
	Universal FSM entitlement pilot for primary schools in deprived areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot aimed to explore whether universal FSM would raise academic and behavioural standards Initial figures indicated a rapid boost in take-up in participating local authorities
Scotland	Trial to give all P1-P3 pupils FSM and subsequent policy permitting universal FSM provision for these year groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trial took place in five local authorities A large increase in uptake was found Subsequently, local authorities have been permitted to provide FSM to all P1-P3 pupils, but are not required to do so
Wales	Legislation requiring that 'reasonable steps' are taken so that pupils who receive FSM cannot be identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legislation introduced in 2009 Only authorised personnel should be able to identify pupils receiving FSM
	Free school breakfast initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This initiative (run since 2004) offers a free, healthy breakfast for all primary school children and aims to improve health and concentration Evaluation found that while the initiative may be useful in addressing dietary behaviour, there was no impact on cognitive abilities or behaviour
	Draft Bill including provision for flexibility over pricing of school meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed legislation aims to give schools and local authorities flexibility in pricing The aim is to help families who may have difficulty in meeting the cost of school meals

1 Introduction

In England, Scotland and Wales free school meals (FSM) are available to disadvantaged children whose parents are in receipt of particular income support payments. However, the application rates for FSM and subsequent take-up have been much lower than expected in these jurisdictions. In Ireland there is no statutory obligation to provide pupils with free school meals. However, two schemes are in operation providing funding for school meals for some disadvantaged children.

In addition to the overarching FSM policy in England, Scotland and Wales, there have been a number of initiatives or pilots around FSM provision, at the governmental or local level. The School Food Trust has reported that initiatives around FSM tend to have one or more of the following aims:¹

- Increasing the take-up of meals by pupils who are already eligible;
- Increasing registration rates of those who are otherwise entitled; and
- Increasing take-up by introducing universal free school meals.

This Briefing Paper explores the provision of free school meals (FSM) in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. It considers FSM policy and a number of initiatives that are in place or have been in place in these jurisdictions.

2 England

Eligibility

Children in England are eligible to receive FSM if their parents are in receipt of any of the following payments:²

- Income Support;
- Income Based Jobseekers Allowance;
- An income-related employment and support allowance;
- Support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999;
- The Guarantee element of State Pension Credit;
- Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual income (as assessed by HM Revenue & Customs) that does not exceed £16,190.

¹ Harper, C. and Wood, L. (2009) *Please Sir? Can we have some more? – lessons from Free School Meal initiatives* School Food Trust

² *Current eligibility for free school meals* [online] Available at: <http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/parents-carers/for-parents-carers/free-school-meals>

Eligibility Checking Service

In March 2008 a FSM Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) was launched by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The service allows for data from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Home Office to be shared and checked to determine FSM eligibility.³ In particular, it can be used to:⁴

- Check FSM eligibility for new applications without requiring written proof of entitlement;
- Check for continued eligibility for FSM without requiring recipients to re-apply or re-submit proof of entitlement;
- Audit FSM databases to ensure that FSM do not continue to be offered once eligibility has ceased.

DWP has reported that this system has resulted in a quicker and more efficient service for local authorities,⁵ while the Minister of State for Schools, Nick Gibb, has stated that it has reduced bureaucracy and encouraged more parents to sign up for FSM.⁶

Initiatives

A 2009 report by the School Food Trust evaluated a number of FSM initiatives in the UK in previous years. It found that the take-up of FSM is influenced by a number of factors, including:

- Choice and quality of meals;
- Ambience of the dining facility;
- Presentation;
- Customer service;
- Menu planning; and
- Effectiveness of marketing.

The following table provides examples of initiatives in England.⁷

³ DWP (2010) Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

⁴ Department for Education: *FSM Eligibility Service for Local Authorities* [online] Available at: https://www.cloudforedu.org.uk/ofsm/documents/CD_OFSM-ECS.pdf

⁵ DWP (2010) Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

⁶ House of Commons Debate, 5th September 2011

⁷ Harper, C. and Wood, L. (2009) *Please Sir? Can we have some more? – lessons from Free School Meal initiatives* School Food Trust

Table 2: Examples of free school meal initiatives in England

Initiative	Aims	Findings
Islington: Universal FSM entitlement (2009-present)	To provide FSM to all nursery and primary children who wish to avail of them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Significant improvement’ in take-up of FSM • Increased costs and increases in administration; • Not yet sufficient evidence to assess the links to behaviour and attainment⁸
Universal FSM entitlement pilot for primary schools in deprived areas (2009-2010)	Explore whether universal FSM would raise academic and behavioural standards, reduce obesity and improve health generally ⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While costs would increase, economies of scale could be realised¹⁰ • Initial figures indicated a rapid boost in FSM take-up in each pilot authority¹¹
Eat Well Do Well, Hull (2004-2007)¹²	A key principle of the programme was the relationship between healthy eating and academic attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reported reduced disadvantage in relation to perceptions of health and health behaviours • Impact on creating calmer learning environments • The subsequent re-introduction of charges had a ‘negative impact on schools, children’s behaviour and opportunities for learning’
Leeds school meal strategy (2007)¹³	Explore factors influencing the take-up of FSM and identifying good practice by evaluating a series of interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food choice, queuing and social aspects of lunchtime, such as eating with friends, were the key factors influencing take-up • Free school meal uptake did not rise consistently in all the pilot schools • The best solution to mitigate against stigma is for a cashless system to be installed

⁸ Islington Council (2011) *Report of the Health and Wellbeing Review Committee*

⁹ House of Commons Library (2011) *School meals and nutritional standards*

¹⁰ London Economics (2008) *Assessing the current and potential provision of free school meals* London: London Economics

¹¹ GMB (2010) *The DCSF/ DoH free school meals pilots in Durham County Council and Newham London Borough Council*

¹² Colquhoun, D. et al. (2008) *Evaluation of Eat Well Do Well Kingston upon Hull’s School Meal Initiative* University of Hull

¹³ Sahota, P. (2009) *Leeds Free School Meals Research Project Investigating why many children do not take their free school meal entitlement* Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University

3 Scotland

Eligibility

In Scotland, children of parents who are in receipt of any of the following payments are eligible for FSM:¹⁴

- Income Support (IS);
- Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA);
- Any income related element of Employment and Support Allowance;
- Child Tax Credit (CTC), but not Working Tax Credit, and income less than £15,860 (with effect from April 6, 2011);
- Both maximum child tax credit and maximum working tax credit and income under £6420 (with effect from April 6, 2011).

Legislation came into force in August 2009 enabling local authorities to extend free school meal entitlement. This legislation extended entitlement to pupils whose parents or carers are in receipt of both Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit with an income below the threshold for receipt of Working Tax Credit set by the UK Government.¹⁵

In 2007-08 a trial took place in five local authorities in which all P1-P3 pupils were offered FSM. The trial saw a large increase in uptake among the pupils, going from 53% to 75%.¹⁶ Following an evaluation of the free school lunches trial carried out in 2007/08, the Scottish Government announced a decision to roll out FSM to all P1 – P3 pupils in Scotland from August 2010.¹⁷

Since August 2010 local authorities have been permitted to provide free school lunches to all P1-3 pupils, and may provide food and drink at school free of charge at any point of the school day (with the exception of lunch time). However, they are not required to do so. Some local authorities and individual schools provide free fruit, breakfasts or other free school meals to children and young people.¹⁸

Initiatives

Table 3 overleaf provides an overview of FSM initiatives and policies in Scotland.

¹⁴ *School lunches* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/HLivi/schoolmeals>

¹⁵ *The Education (School Lunches) (Scotland) Regulations 2009* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2009/178/note/made>

¹⁶ *School meals in Scotland 2010* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/07/06095048/2>

¹⁷ *Free school meals* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2008/10/02082551>

¹⁸ As above

Table 3: Examples of free school meal initiatives in Scotland

Initiative	Aims	Findings
Free School Meal Trial for P1 to P3 pupils in five local authorities (high levels of deprivation) (2007-2008) ¹⁹	Consider the changes in take-up, practical issues for schools and health benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The trial resulted in significantly increased uptake of school meals in both those already registered and those not previously registered • There is no evidence that the trial had impacted upon pupils' awareness of healthy foods. • Teachers did not report any behavioural changes in pupils at lunchtime or in afternoon classes.
Investigating local authority procedures in Scotland for identifying and registering children for FSM ²⁰	Investigate barriers to registering children eligible for FSM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies to encourage representation include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better provision of information for potential applicants; • A cashless system for school meals; • More sharing of information between government departments

4 Wales

Eligibility

Children whose parents receive any of the following support payments are eligible for FSM:²¹

- Income Support
- Income Based Jobseekers Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and their annual income does not exceed £16,190. (HM Revenue and Customs are responsible for assessing the level of annual income.)

¹⁹ MacLardie, J. et al. (2008) *Evaluation of the Free School Meals Trial for P1 to P3 pupils* Edinburgh: Scottish Government

²⁰ Granville, S. et al. (2006) *Investigating local procedures for identifying and registering children eligible for Free School Meal Entitlement* Edinburgh: Scottish Executive

²¹ *Free school meals* [online] Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/foodanddrink/freeschoolmeals/?lang=en#named1>

- Guarantee element of State Pension Credit.
- Working Tax Credit 'run-on' - the payment someone may receive for a further four weeks after they stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit.

Recent legislation

The *Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009* included a number of measures concerning FSM. One of these requires local authorities or governing bodies to take 'reasonable steps' to ensure that pupils who receive FSM cannot be identified as such by any person other than an authorised person.²²

A Bill was introduced to the National Assembly for Wales in April 2012 which included draft legislation to give local authorities and schools greater flexibility over the pricing of school meals.²³ The aim of this is to help families who may find it difficult to meet the cost of school meals, and to encourage children to try out school meals with a view to increasing take-up.²⁴

Initiatives

Table 4: Example of free school meal initiative in Wales

Initiative	Aims	Findings
<p>Primary school free school breakfast initiative (2004-present)²⁵ (funded by Welsh Assembly Government)</p>	<p>To provide a free, healthy breakfast for all children of primary school age to help improve the health and concentration of pupils and assist in raising standards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An evaluation found that students in intervention schools reported significantly higher numbers of healthy food items consumed at breakfast • Parents of students reported significantly higher rates of breakfast consumption at school and lower rates for breakfast eaten in the home • The initiative '<i>represents a potentially effective approach for addressing population dietary behaviour in the long term</i>' • However, there was no evidence for impacts on students missing breakfast, cognitive abilities or school behaviour.²⁶

²² *Proposed Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009 Explanatory Notes* [online] Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/mwa/2009/3/pdfs/mwaen_20090003_mi.pdf

²³ *School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill* [online] Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/legislation/programme/assemblybills/schoolstandards/?lang=en>

²⁴ Welsh Government (2011) *School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill: White Paper*

²⁵ *Primary School Free Breakfast Initiative* [online] Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/foodanddrink/breakfast/?lang=en>

²⁶ Murphy, S. et al. (2007) *An Evaluation of the Welsh Assembly Governments Primary School Free Breakfast Initiative* Cardiff Institute for Society, Health and Ethics

5 Ireland

School meals provision

In Ireland the Department of Social Protection provides funding towards school meals for disadvantaged children through two schemes:²⁷

- Urban School Meals Scheme;
- School Meals Local Projects Scheme.

The Urban School Meals Scheme for primary schools is operated by Local Authorities and part-financed by the Department of Social Protection. Under the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 1981 County Borough Councils, Urban District Councils and Town Commissioners may make arrangements for meals to be provided for primary school children. The Department will fund 50% of a local authority's expenditure on the provision of meals for eligible children. However, there is no statutory obligation to provide this service.²⁸

The School Meals Local Projects Scheme is non-statutory and involves the provision of funding from the Department directly to primary schools, post-primary schools and local groups and voluntary organisations who operate their own school meals projects. The scheme was set up to assist school meal projects operating outside the statutory Urban School Meals Scheme.²⁹

The scheme specifies that eligible projects must already be in place and be able to demonstrate ongoing viability, and that they must target areas of disadvantage or children with special needs. Nonetheless, there is no automatic entitlement to funding. Payment is provided at a set rate, on a per child per day basis.

²⁷ *School Meals Programme* [online] Available at:
<http://www.welfare.ie/EN/Schemes/SupplementaryWelfareAllowance/Pages/SchoolMealsScheme.aspx>

²⁸ *School Meals Programme* [online] Available at:
<http://www.welfare.ie/EN/Schemes/SupplementaryWelfareAllowance/Pages/SchoolMealsScheme.aspx>

²⁹ As above