Evaluation of the Free School Meal Pilots: Findings from the qualitative scoping study *Annex*

Authors: Rosalind Tennant, Nilufer Rahim and Mehul Kotecha

Contents

Summary

Scoping study findings

- In each of the pilot areas, the LA is taking responsibility for leading the implementation of the pilots, with the local PCT taking a relatively minor role. This is the case even in Wolverhampton where the PCT has agreed to supply all of the matched funding.

- Work by LAs to support schools to participate in the pilots is ongoing in each area. For example, LA staff are attending head teacher and governor forums and posting information and advice on the local extranet routinely used to communicate with schools. Individualised approaches are limited to schools identified as being potentially non-responsive or having difficulty preparing for the pilots – with these schools, detailed planning and troubleshooting activity is underway. In all areas, the LA catering service is playing a key role in providing support and guidance relating to infrastructure and nutrition.

- Work is also underway to raise awareness of the pilots among parents and pupils via range of promotional campaigns. In Newham and Durham, where these activities have been ongoing for some time, there is a sense that they are having a positive early effect on take up of the pilots. Future campaigns are planned to target schools with low take up of the pilots.

- Wolverhampton is experiencing some difficulties identifying families that are appropriate for the pilots because of the volume of applications from parents at the start of the pilot and difficulties finding administrative resource to deal with this. This has led to delays to notifying schools about eligible pupils. There have also been delays to getting the correct information from parents to support their application for the pilots and this has delayed the processing of applications. Both these difficulties have led to strained relationships between some schools and the LAs.

- LAs and schools have needed to review their infrastructure to deliver the pilots and this has identified gaps in capacity, staffing levels and skills, and equipment. The work required to address these gaps has meant that the necessary infrastructure has not been in place in all schools when the pilots started. The use of contingency measures, albeit temporarily, has been frustrating for school and catering staff and is thought to have affected early take up where this has occurred.

- There has been a need to increase staff numbers to deal with the anticipated increase in take up of FSM in Durham and Newham, however this has not been without challenges including some difficulties retaining staff. Challenges have also been reported relating to integrating new and existing kitchen staff, and in helping existing staff become familiar and comfortable with new infrastructure arrangements. As well as introducing changes to infrastructure and staffing, some schools have also changed they way they deliver lunch to cope with extra take up of school meals. This has included introducing a longer lunch hour and having teaching assistants in the lunch room.

- Consultations about LAs' requirements for monitoring information and the feasibility for schools of collecting this information are ongoing. In all the pilot areas, there are concerns about the accuracy of the data currently being collected and disseminated.

Emerging issues from the scoping study

- Different arrangements for matched funding are in place in the participating LAs and future phases of the evaluation should explore how these funding arrangements continue and what implications these funding arrangements have for the implementation and delivery of the pilots. Similar reflection on the management arrangements in each area will also be helpful.

- In some schools, the launch of the pilot was afffected by administrative challenges and difficulties ensuring that the infrastructure needed to support the pilots was in place in every school. This raises questions about how such failures affect subsequent implementation and delivery of the pilot, as well as how far the interim arrangements put in place in these schools are fit for purpose.

- A wide range of activities is underway in each of the areas to promote the pilots to parents and encourage eligible pupils to take up school meals. Despite this, across the three areas there is concern that these efforts will not impact upon entrenched, negative attitudes and behaviours towards school meals. Subsequent phases of this evaluation should explore this prediction further and weigh the relative importance of the different factors affecting parental and pupil views.

- This scoping study heard the perspectives of stakeholders in participating LAs and PCTs that take up was progressing well and had exceeded expectations. Subsequent components of the evaluation will test these perceptions and provide evidence for actual levels of take up in each of the three areas, as well explore in more detail expectations for take up to understand what underpinned them.

1   Introduction

This short report forms an annex to the baseline evaluation report of 5 November 2009 and presents findings from the qualitative scoping study. A separate report was necessary to ensure that we could include findings from the Wolverhampton pilot area which began operating later than the other two areas (Newham and Durham).

Since the fieldwork for this scoping study was conducted, an announcement in the Pre Budget Report[1] has indicated that the Government will further extend eligibility to FSM to all primary school pupils in working families with a household income below £16,190. This extension will be rolled out to up to 50 per cent of eligible primary school pupils from September 2010 and to all from September 2011. The LAs involved in the first stage of this extension will therefore be preparing for launches in September 2010. This serves to increase the short-term relevance of this scoping report, and the findings from the first wave of qualitative case studies, for identifying implementation experiences, highlighting potential challenges to implementation and providing guidance to participating LAs.

This first section of the report sets out the design of the scoping stage and the coverage of the remainder of the document.

1.1   Research design

The aims of this scoping stage were:

- to explore existing school meals policy and practice;
- to gather perceptions and expectations of the pilot;
- to look at implementation plans within the three pilot areas; and
- to identify early and future anticipated challenges.

The findings set out here will be used to inform and shape other parts of the evaluation approach and to contextualise the findings presented in subsequent evaluation outputs.

This scoping stage has involved two activities:

- *in-depth interviews with key staff responsible in each area*
  Interviews were undertaken with local authority (LA), catering company and primary care trust (PCT) staff in each pilot area. A total of ten key staff were interviewed across the three pilot areas between late September and mid November 2009. Interviews were conducted with individuals, pairs and triads of participants and they were conducted using a topic guide developed in consultation with DCSF and steering group partners (see Appendix A).   All interviews were recorded with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed using 'Framework', a qualitative data analysis tool developed at NatCen.

- *a brief review of key documents*
  Key local documents were reviewed to gain a clearer understanding of the way in which the pilot has been rolled out in each area, to support evidence from interviews and to

---

[1] Pre Budget Report (2009) Securing the recovery: growth and opportunity, HM Treasury. (http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/prebud_pbr09_repindex.htm)

provide more detail where necessary, and has been included in this report where appropriate. Documents included in the review included:
- the FSM pilot bid;
- local press cuttings;
- minutes of key meetings;
- leaflets publicising the pilot; and,
- implementation plans.

1.2   Structure of report

The remainder of this report has two main sections. Section 2 sets out the key contextual issues across the pilot areas that are relevant to the evaluation, while Section 3 describes the main implementation issues and the challenges encountered in getting the pilots launched. The final brief section makes some concluding observations and reflects on the implications for the remainder of the evaluation.

2 Background to the pilot areas

This section gives some background on the three areas, setting out key relevant characteristics and circumstances for the evaluation.

2.1 Area context

Perhaps the most fundamental issue of background is the nature of the three pilot areas, particularly in relation to key issues which might affect eligibility for or take up of free school meals. The areas differ in terms of deprivation. Newham and Wolverhampton are particularly deprived, being ranked sixth and 26th most deprived LAs in the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation[2]. By contrast, Durham is ranked 50th and has greater variation in levels of deprivation, with deprivation said to be exacerbated by the rurality of certain parts of the authority.

There are reportedly above average rates of childhood obesity in all three pilot areas. Referring to figures provided by the National Childhood Measurement Programme, staff in Newham identified that it has the third highest obesity rate nationally for children in reception and the second highest rate for children in year 6. Respondents in Durham and Wolverhampton also reported above average rates of overweight and obese children in comparison to the national average figures.. The rate of underweight pupils was also seen as problematic in Newham and Wolverhampton. Newham reported having the sixth highest underweight rates in the country for children in reception and the third highest for children in year 6. Similarly, Wolverhampton reported having almost twice the regional and national average of the proportion of children that were considered underweight.

2.2 Provision of school meals in the pilot areas

Newham and Wolverhampton both have catering teams that are internal to and directly employed by the LA which can help prepare and deliver meals to schools; whilst in Durham, the LA works with an external contractor that is employed on the LA's behalf to deliver school meals to schools.

In all three areas, the majority of schools tend to use the catering services made available by LA. It is possible for schools to use other catering services that they source themselves but take up of this option is relatively low. For example, fewer than 10 secondary schools in Wolverhampton opt to use the services of a private catering service. Where private caterers are used, it is usual for the local authority to still give support to schools. For example, in Durham the LA catering support service provides advice around menus and nutritional content to schools using private caterers.

Prior to roll-out, it was usual for primary schools in each of the pilot areas to operate a cash-based system for paying for school meals. Only one primary school in Wolverhampton was said to operate a cashless system (e.g. use of pin technology or biometric cards) for payment for meals. How the cash was paid varied across the three sites. In Newham, pupils paid cash to school secretaries at the beginning of each day; in Durham, a similar system was in operation but was done on a weekly basis. There seemed to be a variety of ways in which payments occurred in primary schools in Wolverhampton, with some primary schools charging pupils at the point of sale. There was more use of cashless systems in secondary schools across the three areas, although this was still said to be limited.

---

[2] The English Indices of Deprivation 2007, Communities and Local Government (http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/733520.pdf)

2.3 Take up of school meals prior to the pilots

All three pilot LAs have an above average number of pupils who are eligible for FSM, compared with the average for England. Take up of school meals is also higher than the national average among pilot primary school pupils, while among secondary school pupils (in Wolverhampton), it is lower.

Table 1 below provides an overview of eligibility for FSM and take up of school meals prior to the pilots for the three areas, based on 2008 Schools Census data provided in the bid documentation.

Table 1:   FSM eligibility and take up of school meals prior to the pilots

Area	Eligibility for FSM		Take up of school meals	
	Primary	*Secondary*	*Primary*	*Secondary*
Durham	20.2%	_	49.5%	_
Newham	28.6%	_	45.2%	_
Wolverhampton	23.8%	18.7%	40.6%	29.6%
England	*15.9%*[3]	*13.1%*[1]	*39.3%*[4]	*35.1%*[2]

The interviews with staff identified a range of longstanding barriers to take up of school meals (including FSMs) locally. These chimed with much of the published literature on barriers and included:

- Parental perceptions of FSMs – particularly the stigma sometimes associated with taking FSM, sometimes said to be fuelled by parents' own experiences of taking them at school;
- The dining environment – where pupils having packed lunches are separated from those having school dinners this can dissuade those who are eligible for school meals from taking them in order that they can take lunch with friends who do not take school meals.
- Policies that allow pupils to go off-site during lunch times – these were seen to encourage pupils to have their meals outside of the school, thereby affecting the take up of FSMs;
- The ability of the school to adequately provide for special dietary requirements, or parental confidence in the systems currently in place. For example, many Muslim families in Newham wanted Halal meat to be available in schools but there was not, it was felt, widespread confidence that the meat provided had the correct halal certificate.
- Payment systems - the majority of schools were reported to offer cash-only payment systems, with pupils usually being required to pay cash in advance (sometimes on a weekly, half-termly or termly basis). This was said limit flexibility for parents and children and consequently to adversely affect take up;
- The force of habit – the fact that many children were not used to taking school meals was in itself seen to present a significant barrier to take up of free school meals; and,
- The perceived poor quality or choice of meals on offer was felt to affect the attractiveness of school meals to children and parents.

2.4 Take up of FSM following pilot launch

While these scoping interviews took place at a very early stage of implementation, there was said to be signs in all three pilot areas that take up was progressing well. In Newham and Durham take up was reported to have exceeded expectations for such an early stage in delivery and to have risen to averages of 75 per cent and 85 per cent of pupils respectively within the first few weeks of implementation. In Newham, take up was expected to rise further when children who were

---

[3] Source: Summer 2009 Schools Census cited in bid documentation

[4] Source: School Food Trust (SFT)

observing Ramadan at that time were able to eat lunch, and when the next intake of reception pupils started school. In Wolverhampton, early figures indicated that the number of applications to register for FSMs had increased four-fold, and number of meals served had increased. It is worth tempering these figures by pointing out that in all three pilot areas there were concerns about the accuracy of take up figures, as not all schools were returning consistent information. This challenge is discussed further below.

In Newham and Durham, the take up of school meals by children with special dietary requirements, such as intolerances to gluten, lactose, and nuts, was also said to have increased. The increase was viewed as substantial in Durham, and highlighted to LA staff how few children with such needs had taken up school meals before the pilots. It was not clear to those interviewed why these children had not taken the opportunity to have a school meal in the past since those providing the service had always been required to meet diverse needs. This is something we will be able to explore further in the case studies.

2.5   Ambitions for the pilots

There was understandably much support for the aims of the pilot amongst those interviewed. Three broad ambitions were highlighted. These were:

- **Increasing the take-up of school meals**
  Across all three areas the pilots were seen as an important way of increasing the take up of school meals. Each of the pilot areas had previously carried out extensive work in encouraging higher FSM take up and the FSM pilot was therefore seen as a natural extension of this work. The goals of the pilots resonated strongly with locally held strategies and were felt to offer a way of bringing about an increase in the number of families and children who benefited from free school meals.

- **Impacts on children's health, behaviour, concentration and attainment**
  Access to at least one hot, healthy, balanced and nutritious meal a day was expected to have positive impacts on the child's health and wellbeing. In particular, it was also hoped that the pilot would have a positive impact on levels of pupils who were overweight or obese. There was, however, some doubt expressed about how much of a change the pilots in themselves could bring about since school meals constituted only a small proportion of children's diets.

- **Impacts on wider diet and nutrition**
  There were high hopes that the pilots, with their emphasis on tasty, healthy food, would have a positive influence on the meals prepared by parents at home. Strategies for achieving this included promoting messages about the benefits of healthy eating to parents and children, making direct and indirect suggestions to parents of healthy meal options that could be cooked at home, and familiarising children with healthy foods that they may then request at home.

2.6   Fit with other national and local strategies

The FSM pilots were seen to fit in well with national programmes such as the National Healthy Schools Programme (NHSP) for which healthy eating was a key component and to complement a number of local programmes and priorities in all three pilot areas (such as those aimed at reducing

rates of childhood obesity, increasing physical activity and healthy eating). The different local initiatives highlighted by participants[5] were:

- *Newham*
  Lowering rates of childhood obesity was a key priority shared by the LA and PCT and a number of activities were taking place to tackle and raise awareness of the issue. For example, the local authority was planning to participate in a British Heart Foundation project designed to encourage healthy behaviours in children that did not just revolve around nutrition.

- *Durham*
  As well as working towards 2010 targets for the Physical Activity and Obesity Strategy, the Family Initiative Supporting Children's Health (FISCH) had been visiting schools and working with specific age groups to deliver a rolling programme around physical activity and healthy eating. It also delivered targeted support by working with children and their families who were developing signs of becoming overweight or who were overweight and/or obese. Work was also being carried out to improve the content of packed lunches and to teach parents to cook healthy meals through cookery clubs for young mums, road shows, parent taster events and 'cook and eat' sessions.

- *Wolverhampton*
  Both the LA and PCT were working towards encouraging healthy eating and physical activity in the local area. A number of activities were taking place to these ends, including a programme of equipment purchase to support physical activity in schools (e.g. dance mats, youth gyms and Wii Fit), a 'Swim 4 Life' programme offering access to free swimming sessions for those under 16 and those over 60, and participation in the 'Food Dudes' programme - a programme designed to encourage children to eat more fruit and vegetables.

---

[5] Note that these were the initiatives raised by participants as being particularly relevant to the FSM pilots. It is not a definitive list of local activity and there may well be other local or national initiatives in operation in these areas.

3 Implementation issues and challenges

This section describes local roles and responsibilities for implementing the pilots. It also identifies what were seen as the key priorities guiding implementation across the three pilot areas and the challenges encountered in meeting them.

3.1 Local roles and responsibilities for implementation

In all pilot areas, partnership working was seen as a key factor in the successful implementation of the FSM pilots. The PCT and the LA obviously have long standing relationships and work together on a multitude of shared priorities. For example, in Durham, the PCT and LA work together on planning, coordinating and training activities for NHSP. Cooperating to deliver the FSM pilots is seen to be an extension of this sort of joint working. Descriptions of the bidding process depicted a shared approach by both parties in putting forward the proposals. However, while partnership between the agencies remained key in implementation, the nature of the arrangements differed somewhat. Two key aspects are worth noting here:

- *The funding arrangements for the pilot*
  Each of the pilot areas received funding from DCSF and DH to set up the pilots and the expectation was that this would be matched locally. How this matched funding was raised differed considerably across the three areas. In Durham, the requirement for matched funds was split equally between the LA and the PCT, with the majority of the schools also contributing towards the cost of the pilot from their own budgets (on average between £15K-£20K per school). In Newham, the matched funding is currently provided exclusively by the LA, although there was some discussion about the PCT contributing in future financial years. In Wolverhampton, the PCT has agreed to provide all of the matched funding necessary for the pilot to take place.

- *The lead responsibility for implementation*
  It is fair to say that in each of the three areas, the LA has the lead responsibility for the implementation of the pilots. This is reflected in the fact that the lead person responsible resides within the LA. In Durham, this role is held by the LA lead for Health and Wellbeing, in Newham it is performed by the Catering Development Manager, and in Wolverhampton it is carried out by the School Meals Development Officer. At this early stage of implementation, there was said to be minimal involvement of the PCT across the three areas, although this is not necessarily seen negatively. Colleagues from the PCT are seen to engage in the strategic issues affecting the pilot where necessary and to trust LA leads to proceed with implementation. Moreover, it was felt that LA staff were rightly seen as better placed to coordinate the activities of the pilots given the close relationship they have with schools in general, and their involvement in the delivery of school meals in particular.

  The task of getting the pilots off the ground was described as a time consuming job for those involved within the LA. Those with lead responsibility reported that coordinating the pilots in the run-up to their implementation occupied a substantial portion of their time (estimated at between 40 to 90 per cent of their working week). However, this sort of commitment was seen as a good investment in making the pilots operate well, although it did require those responsible to delegate some of their usual responsibilities to other colleagues.

3.2   Key priorities for implementation

The limited amount of time between the award of pilot status and the launch of the scheme meant that each of the areas had to prioritise the issues that they felt would facilitate successful delivery. It is worth noting that Newham and Durham had the least amount of time because they rolled out the pilots at the start of the new school year. Difficulties in securing the funding for Wolverhampton meant that this area started two months later than the others in November 2009[6]. The interviews with those concerned however did highlight a similar range of key priorities during that time. These were:

- Providing support and guidance to schools;
- Increasing awareness amongst parents;
- Assessing eligibility;
- Putting adequate infrastructure in place in schools;
- Assembling the required workforce;
- Maximising capacity; and
- Developing workable systems for monitoring take-up.

These issues are discussed in the remainder of this section, along with the challenges faced in achieving them.

Providing support and guidance to schools

A key cornerstone of implementation across the three areas was to ensure that the relevant schools had the right kind of support and guidance to help them participate in the pilots. Given the number of schools in each area, there was not the time required for a personal approach with all of them. Consequently, a number of other strategies were used. For example, in both Wolverhampton and Durham, schools were informed about the pilots through an extranet, which is used routinely to communicate with schools. The importance of the pilots was sometimes reinforced by other activities. Durham sent schools a letter which detailed the nature of the FSM pilot, the rationale behind it and how it was going to work. They also employed a high profile athlete to attend head teacher and governor forums. Newham also met with all head teachers where possible to inform them and guide their preparations for delivering the pilot. Where there was a risk that specific schools may not be responsive or may have specific difficulties preparing for the pilot, specific action was taken by the local authorities. For example, in Durham, the LA reported carrying out detailed planning and troubleshooting with individual schools.

In addition to briefing individual schools about the pilots and what it would mean for them, there was considerable attention shown to providing guidance and support to schools on how to manage the lunch service with increased meal numbers. There was some difficulty in both Newham and Durham on getting schools to accurately estimate the likely demand for meals. This was said to be because some school heads had made assumptions and guesses about take up rather than analysis of current rolls or small scale survey work.

In each area, the local authority catering services played an important role in providing support and guidance to schools and had dealt with a range of queries from schools since being awarded the pilot. There was a general view that the local authorities and, where relevant, the local authority catering service, had built a strong relationship with schools and were able to trouble shoot on a

---

[6] Whilst funding was formally secured in Wolverhampton in November 2009, this area had undertaken limited publicity and other launch activities prior to this. The LA had secured temporary local funding for the initiative from September to November 2009 to meet early take up of the pilot.

diverse range of issues. One set of these related to the infrastructure or workforce issues (discussed below). Another set concerned the nutritional content of meals. In Newham, for example, the LA sought commitment from schools to encourage a whole school approach to healthy meals for all. It also planned to revitalise SNAG (School Nutrition Action Groups) meetings in all primary schools to encourage ownership of the catering service and engagement with the programme aims.

Increasing awareness amongst parents

The LAs used a number of dissemination strategies to raise the profile of the pilot amongst parents in their local area. These included:

- holding launch events which promoted the pilots;
- posters placed in community venues, such as GP surgeries and bus stops and placing adverts in the local and community papers;
- personal letters to parents from the local mayor;
- distribution of leaflets and other promotional materials, such as fridge magnets;
- encouraging teachers to talk to parents and pupils about the pilot;
- promoting the pilots during community events and health-related events; and,
- generating media coverage about the pilot in the local press and on local radio.

In order to raise awareness among parents, both Durham and Newham gave the pilots their own identity and branding in promotional campaigns. In contrast, Wolverhampton combined promotion of the extended eligibility pilot with publicity material developed for their existing FSM schemes, with this material being modified to draw attention to the temporary changes in the eligibility criteria for FSM because of the pilot. The partnership in Wolverhampton felt that this was an appropriate way of publicising the pilot because of concerns that the pilot would create confusion about eligibility amongst those already registered for FSM.

In Newham and Durham, where publicity efforts had been underway for sometime, the publicity and marketing strategies were felt to have had considerable impact and to be key to early successes in boosting take up (discussed earlier). In Newham, marketing approaches such as taster sessions for parents were seen to be very successful. Furthermore, as the location for the Olympics, Newham had benefited from visits from high profile guests, such as Education Secretary Ed Balls, who dropped in on a school to sample the food whilst on a visit to the Olympic site, and had attracted national as well as local press attention. Durham also had a visit from a schools minister and a high profile sports celebrity as the face of the campaign and both were felt to have raised awareness of the pilot in Durham. In Wolverhampton, publicity campaigns were only beginning in earnest at the time respondents were interviewed so there was no immediate feedback on progress or examples of the campaigns.

Despite these efforts there was concern across the three areas that even the most effective campaigns may not shift entrenched attitudes and behaviours. There were concerns for example that negative perceptions of school meals would continue to affect take up. Staff interviewed in the pilot areas argued that children could be fussy eaters and simply may not want to eat school meals because they did not like the type of food offered, although they did believe that aversions to food types could be overcome in time. It was also felt there would always be a small minority of parents with negative attitudes towards school meals who would not want their children to take them. In order to combat this particular issue publicity campaigns across the pilot areas placed particular emphasis on tackling these views, ensuring that the publicity underscored the wide ranging nature

of the food available and that promotional activities should include opportunities for parents and children to taste the food offered.

Those interviewed in Newham and Durham had plans for future publicity activities in response to early figures about take up in both areas. For example, there were plans to target low- to mid-take up schools by looking at reasons for lower take up and in doing so to help provide tailored solutions. In Newham, thought had been given to publishing school take up data in a table to increase competition between schools and encourage them to raise take up levels. Both Newham and Durham also had specific plans to increase pupil take up. In Durham, there were plans to create 'food champions' in schools who could spread the message about what healthy food is and how important it is. These food champions were imagined to be pupils who the LA thought would have more influence over other pupils in raising the popularity of FSMs. In Newham, the LA was considering giving out stickers to pupils and allowing pupils to vote for their favourite meal as part of National School Meals Week[7].

Assessing eligibility

The issue of assessing eligibility for provision of meals was something that was, in the main, limited to Wolverhampton since in that pilot area eligibility was extended to include more pupils but was not universal. An important part of implementation was to identify the appropriate families involved. This proved to be a considerable challenge locally. This concerned two different issues. First, the LA struggled with the volume of applications from parents at the start of the pilot and did not have sufficient resources to deal with it. This delayed the notification to some schools about which pupils were newly eligible for FSMs. These problems meant that the LA had to recruit additional administrative staff in order to both process applications and to visit schools to increase understanding about the pilot. Second, there were problems getting the correct information from parents concerned, despite efforts by the LA to make the process of applying easier by removing the requirement to provide proof of Child Benefit. This delayed administrative staff in processing applications. Because of some of the difficulties encountered here by specific parents, there was a perception amongst schools that some information requests were either unreasonable or repetitive. This undoubtedly led to strained relationships between some schools and the LA at the outset - however, it is worth noting that as the pilot has progressed, these initial problems of establishing eligibility were said to have subsided.

One issue of eligibility that was shared across the three areas concerned establishing eligibility for meals to satisfy special dietary requirements. In some schools parents had expected suitable meals to be provided for their children at the start of term without having notified schools that their child would be taking school meals from the start of term. This was problematic because procedures for catering for children with special dietary needs involved receiving a note from the doctor and consulting a nutritionist to come up with a suitable diet and therefore needed prior notification from parents.

Putting adequate infrastructure in place in schools

An obvious priority across the pilot areas was to ensure that schools had the infrastructure and staff resources to deliver the extra number of meals required on a daily basis. In question here was whether schools had the right kitchen capacity, the right levels of staff, and the correct equipment to cope with the increased volume. An immediate activity in each area was to get a clear sense of whether:

---

[7] This competition was publicised to parents and children and winners announced during National School Meals Week in October.

- schools had their own kitchens;
- school kitchens and dining areas had the capacity to accommodate the additional demand for school meals;
- the catering workforce was of a sufficient size and could dedicate the necessary hours needed to accommodate the anticipated increase in demand for school meals;
- the catering workforce had the necessary skills to deliver a quality service; and,
- schools had sufficient furniture and appropriate equipment in place to deal with the demand – this ranged from dining furniture, meal serving counters and modern combination ovens, to 'light' equipment, such as bowls and cutlery.

The needs identified by this review differed across the pilot areas. In Wolverhampton, it was felt that the existing infrastructure was adequate to cope with the demand generated by extending eligibility and no significant upgrade or refurbishment was carried out. However in the other areas there was need for work to prepare for the pilots. Durham identified a range of requirements around extending and equipping school kitchens and dining facilities, although the scale of the work varied considerably from just a few thousand pounds to major projects costing about £175,000 (though the cost of larger projects was sometimes shared by other parties, such as the local diocese). The average spend per school in Durham was said to be around twenty thousand pounds. The scale of refurbishment required was such that the LA had to prioritise some schools over others and to earmark others for assistance later on. This sort of investment in infrastructure was not shared in the other two pilot areas. In Newham, there was some investment in specific schools but facilities were mostly seen to be adequate to deal with the increased demand. However, extra serving counters were installed in around 12 schools and extra cooking equipment in five schools, as well as additional dining furniture. The lesser need for improvement in Newham perhaps reflects the more recent investment by the local authority there in refurbishment of school kitchens, including putting in new serving counters and purchasing kitchen equipment (combination ovens, food processors etc.). In 2008/9 alone, eight kitchen facilities were newly built or upgraded.

While a lot of the necessary alterations were achieved in a short space of time, there were also considerable difficulties in some schools. In Durham, it was felt that there could have been a better assessment of the time required to carry out the work required, prompted by the fact that some of the planned alterations were a lot more complicated than originally thought. The scale of work needed in some schools was not immediately obvious and required site surveys by the catering company which delayed the work being done. The progress in others was hampered by unexpected problems. For example, in one school building works had to be stopped in order to safely remove asbestos. This meant that it was not possible for every school in Durham to have the infrastructure it needed at the start of the new school term, albeit only for a handful of schools.

The requirement for new or different kinds of equipment to cope with demand also presented difficulties for some schools. In Newham, the limited time available meant it was difficult to order new equipment and have it installed by the start of term. In one school the caterers were said not to have been able to agree the equipment required until the last week of the term which made it impossible to ensure everything was in place for the first week in September. There were also teething problems with new equipment that was put in place to cope with the increased demand. For example, new equipment that was installed in a school in Durham blew the electrical system which meant a replacement had to be fitted. The increase in equipment in other schools meant that new ventilation systems also had to be put in.

These difficulties in getting the right infrastructure in place has meant that a minority of schools were not set up to deliver the service they needed from the outset. However, in both the areas affected, appropriate contingency measures have been put in place. These have involved either

bringing in some or all of the meals required for the schools concerned or using mobile kitchen facilities as a temporary solution. It was expected that any outstanding building works would be resolved by the end of the calendar year. Nevertheless, these teething problems had been the cause of much frustration for school and catering staff and it was felt had led to lower take up of meals in the minority of schools where they occurred.

Assembling the required workforce

The need to increase staff resources was, again, limited to Durham and Newham, since it was felt that existing staff numbers in Wolverhampton were more than adequate to deal with the extra number of meals generated by extending eligibility. This was a considerable challenge to both areas where a sizeable increase in staff numbers was required. It was achieved by existing staff being contracted to work for a greater number of hours per week and also by increasing staff numbers. In both areas it was estimated that the number of catering assistants employed had increased by around 30 per cent.

While both Durham and Newham did get an adequate number of staff in place for the start of the school, this was not without its difficulties. Newham, for example, had difficulties ensuring that all of the staff they needed could be CRB checked by the start of term and so had to use some agency staff as a temporary measure until all permanent staff could be cleared. While recruitment was not generally a problem, helped in no small part by the current levels of unemployment, there have been problems with retention. In Durham, the catering company felt that the hard work involved in kitchen work often came as a surprise to new employees which led to contracts being abandoned.

There have also been difficulties in integrating these new staff, although here the experience in Newham in this regard seems to have been far more favourable. In Newham, integrating staff was not perceived to be difficult and it was felt that new staff had learned quickly from existing staff on the job. In Durham, however, the integration of new staff was seen as a particular challenge. Bringing together old and new staff was felt to create some difficulties in team working and it was felt that these team-building issues would take time to bed down and to operate at their most effective. This was not helped in Durham by the widespread nature of infrastructure improvements which, in some schools, had made it difficult to train staff on new equipment in advance of opening for the new term. This meant that staff in some schools had limited time to become accustomed to new, and sometimes different, equipment

Maximising capacity

While refurbishment and additional equipment was able to help some schools in preparing or delivering meals, these sorts of approaches were not always available to others because of constrained space. In these circumstances it was felt important that schools were able to maximise the space that they have available. This generally meant that schools had to think of strategies for increasing the throughput of pupils during meal times. In Newham, for example, teaching assistants had been put on lunch duty, encouraging children to eat their food more speedily. This however was not always a successful strategy as it was said to be difficult to speed children up without compromising their lunchtime experience. Some schools in Newham also decided to extend the school lunch hour in order to ensure there was adequate time for all children to be served lunch. This was a particular issue there because some primary schools had between 800 and 900 pupils on their roll.

Difficulties in dealing with capacity issues were exacerbated by the fact that so many of the new meal takers were unfamiliar with the infrastructure or the routines involved in taking meals. This was an issue which was said to occur at the start of each school year because reception children,

who were new to school and had never had school meals before, could take time in acclimatising to making a choice about what to eat. However, it was felt that a similar effect was happening with children at all ages who were new to school meals following the roll out of the pilot. There was some concern that this could elongate service times and put pupils off continuing to take school meals.

Developing workable systems for monitoring take-up

A key concern across the three pilot areas was ensuring that effective monitoring systems were put in place to record the success of the pilots. Each of the local authorities was keen to ensure that these procedures had the buy in of schools and were not considered to be too onerous. Consequently, schools were consulted around what kind of monitoring information it was feasible to collect on day-to-day basis and the impact different requirements had on the desire of schools to participate in the pilot. Feedback from this process prompted Wolverhampton to renegotiate certain requirements with DCSF.

In Newham and Wolverhampton, schools share monitoring data with the LA electronically. In Newham, NHSP Coordinators within schools were tasked with recording take up and communicating with the LA. In Wolverhampton, this task was completed by different people in each site and this required that those involved received training in the use of online systems and in the procedures for collecting and recording the data. In Durham, the use of online systems was still at an early stage and it was expected that school clerical assistants will be tasked with entering data on a daily basis around school meal take up, the types of meals taken up and the number of pupils that are entitled to FSM in a given school. Here also the LA reported difficulties in obtaining accurate figures from some schools because they were unsure about how to fill out record forms. There was some suspicion that take up figures were being affected by this.

A final issue which was limited to Wolverhampton concerned the challenges experienced in getting accurate documentation from schools on their Financial Returns. The LA needed this information so that money spent in the period between September and November, when the pilot was not officially funded, could be recouped from the PCT or DCSF. Although schools were consulted during the bidding stage about the type of information they would need to provide, LA staff in Wolverhampton reported that when the time came to collect the information many schools failed to provide it or provided inaccurate information. There were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the LA required schools to provide their Financial Returns via a web-based system and although the system was seen as simple and easy to use, it proved challenging for schools because of the variable IT infrastructure and IT and administrative data expertise in schools. Secondly, the use of different operating systems and types of computer in schools meant that some schools were unable to use the LA intranet, through which they could access the Financial Returns spreadsheet. Thirdly, collecting the information constituted a further administrative burden to schools at a time when they already had to deal with extra administrative work associated with the pilot. At the time of interview, however, two thirds of the Financial Returns had been received and LA staff felt that the response from schools was slowly improving.

4 Concluding observations

The final section of this report highlights a number of emerging issues that will benefit from further exploration in subsequent phases of the evaluation. It also suggests a potential, minor amendment to the design of the qualitative components of the evaluation for discussion.

Emerging issues

This scoping study has raised a number of issues that will benefit from further exploration as the evaluation continues. It will, for instance, be interesting to explore how the early implementation activities in each area continue, how successful they are in the longer term, and which appear to underpin successful implementation and delivery of the pilots. For the challenges identified, the evaluation should explore how far these are associated with early implementation or are intrinsic to the pilots and therefore whether or not they perpetuate. More generally, it will be important for subsequent phases of the evaluation to reflect on how the activities and issues described by stakeholders in the LAs and PCTs are reflected in the accounts of school staff, parents and pupils. For example, how are the activities aimed at supporting schools to participate in the pilots or to raise awareness of the pilots among parents experienced by these groups, and what works from the perspective of parents and pupils? Exploration of these issues should be built into the design of materials for future phases of the evaluation, and these questions reflected upon in subsequent reports of findings. This section highlights some key emerging issues organised around four themes: funding and management; infrastructure; promotion and awareness-raising; and, levels of take-up.

The scoping study has highlighted that different arrangements for matched funding are in place in the participating LAs: in Durham the responsibility is shared equally by the LA and the PCT, in Newham the LA is solely responsible and in Wolverhampton the PCT provides all the matched funding. Future phases of the evaluation should explore how these funding arrangements continue, in particular in Newham where there are discussions with the PCT about sharing the responsibility for funding in the future, and what implications these funding arrangements have for the implementation and delivery of the pilots. Similar reflection on the management arrangements in each area will be helpful. In all three pilot areas the LA is currently taking the lead responsibility for implementation but it is not yet clear whether and how the PCT may be involved in the future, particularly where the PCT provides some or all of the matched funding.

This scoping study has also highlighted that in some schools, the launch of the pilot was afffected by administrative challenges in, for example, assessing pupil eligiblity or estimating demand. There were also difficulties ensuring that the infrastructure, including sufficient catering staff and suitable equipment, needed to support the pilots was in place in every school. This raises questions about how such failures affect subsequent implementation and delivery of the pilot. For example, what is the nature of any impact on the pilots in these schools, are they able to recover once these issues have been addressed and, if so, how do they achieve this. It will also be interesting to explore how far the interim arrangements put in place in these schools, such as mobile kitchen services, are fit for purpose. The qualitative school case studies in particular will provide an opportunity to explore these issues in some detail.

There is clearly a wide range of activities underway in each of the areas to promote the pilots to parents and encourage eligible pupils to take up school meals and in some this activity has been ongoing for some time prior to the launch of the pilots. Despite this, across the three areas stakeholders expressed concern that these efforts would not impact upon entrenched, negative attitudes and behaviours towards school meals. Subsequent phases of this evaluation will want to

explore this prediction further and weigh the relative importance of the different factors affecting parental and pupil views. Targeted promotional campaigns are planned across the pilot areas to schools with lower take up and it will be interesting to explore what form these take and perspectives about their efficacy.

This scoping study did not set out to measure early take up of the pilots however it heard the perspectives of stakeholders in participating LAs and PCTs that take up was progressing well and had exceeded expectations. This raises a number of questions that should be explored as the evaluation progresses. Subsequent quantitative components will test these perceptions and provide evidence for actual levels of take up in each of the three areas. The evaluation should also explore in more detail expectations for take up, including the perspectives of schools, to understand what underpinned these expectations. It should also encourage stakeholders to reflect back on planning and early implementation activities and to evaluate the efficacy of work undertaken to prepare for launch. This could provide a useful steer to LAs who implement these or similar schemes in the future, helping them to plan for implementation. Finally, it will be interesting to explore with parents and pupils themselves their attitudes and behaviours towards the pilots and the relationship between these views and take up of the pilots. The qualitative school case studies will provide an excellent opportunity for this.

Evaluation design

The current evaluation design already provides extensive scope and opportunity to explore each of these emerging issues as the evaluation progresses. However, in collecting and considering the findings from the scoping study, the research team now considers that there will also be advantages to involving the same staff from the LA and PCT in each pilot area later in the evaluation. This would encourage further critical reflection on early implementation decisions and activities, facilitate exploration of how issues identified as difficult or challenging at the implementation stage played out in the delivery of the pilots, and capture information relevant for providing guidance to LAs who may implement these or similar schemes in the future. In the context of the planned extension of eligibility to FSM from September 2010, this reflection will be particularly useful. This could take the form of short, face-to-face interviews with the relevant individuals, during both the stage 1 or stage 2 qualitative case studies when the research team will be visiting the pilot areas anyway, or could be achieved using focused telephone interviews. In either format, this would represent a relatively small burden for the research team and it is therefore proposed as an additional element with minimal associated costs. This additional commitment from participants in the scoping study has not yet been sought and inviting these participants to contribute further to the evaluation will need to be planned. The research team will welcome discussion of the purpose and timing of this possible addition to the evaluation design with the Department in due course.

Topic guide for scoping interviews

Evaluation of the Free School Meals pilots: Qualitative scoping implementation study
Topic guide for depth interviews with key local authority and PCT staff

---

Interview aims:

- To explore existing FSM policy and practice;

- To understand in detail the process of developing the implementation plan in each LA, from the perspectives of those involved in designing it;

- To gain a clear understanding of the ways in which the pilot has been rolled out in each LA;

- To explore what has worked in rolling out the plans as well as highlight any problems encountered or anticipated; and,

- To understand perceptions of support and guidance provided to local authorities about how implementation should occur.

Part 1: Introduction

- Thank for agreeing to take part and for setting up interview
- **Introduce self and NatCen** (emphasising the independence of NatCen)
- **Introduce the study**
  - o Large scale evaluation study commissioned jointly by DCSF and DH to evaluate the pilot scheme to extend FSM
  - o Qualitative research to understand implementation and impact: scoping study and case studies in schools
- **Details about their participation**
  - o *Why they have been selected to take part in interview* **-** As part of the scoping study we want to gather views and early experiences of key LA and PCT staff about the FSM pilots
  - o *Voluntary nature of participation* – both overall and in relation to any specific questions
  - o *Recording of the interview* - to have an accurate record of what was said; held securely by the research team
  - o *Confidentiality* **-** and how findings will be reported
  - o *Length of interview* **-** approximately 1 hour if individual, 1.5 if paired and 2+ if group
- **Any questions?**

Part 2: Themes / topics to be explored

A) Background

Aim: to ascertain nature of respondent's role in relation to the FSM pilot and to obtain an overview of FSM strategy prior to the pilot areas being chosen

- Respondent's **role**

- How long been in post
- Nature of involvement, role and responsibilities in relation to FSM pilot
- How FSM role fits in with other responsibilities

- Existing **school meal provision**
  - Procurement arrangements for school meals provision
  - Catering workforce (size of workforce, training)
  - School meal compliance with school food standards
  - Children with specific dietary requirements (including religious/ cultural requirements/ preferences) and menus
  - School kitchen capacity
  - Dining space
  - Facilities
  - Methods of payment for school meals
  - Challenges in school meal provision

- **General overview of patterns of FSM entitlement and take-up** across the LA (prior to the pilot areas being chosen)
  - Proportion of children entitled to FSM (rough estimate only required, e.g. in comparison to national trends)
  - Take up of FSM (rough estimate only required, e.g. in comparison to national trends)
  - Challenges in FSM provision
  - Barriers to FSM take up
  - Strategies or policies implemented to increase take up
  - How strategies / policies have developed over time

- Childhood **health and obesity** locally
  - Patterns of childhood obesity / being overweight locally (rough estimate only required, e.g. in comparison to national trends)
  - Strategies to tackle childhood obesity
  - Other health initiatives / programmes (healthy weight, fitness)

B) Bidding to become a FSM pilot authority
Aim: to understand in detail the process of applying to deliver the FSM pilot before the FSM pilots were chosen

- **Decision to apply** for funding to deliver pilot
  - Reasons / motivations for applying
  - Challenges to bidding for funding
  - Involvement of key stakeholders (consultation / collaboration)
  - Processes followed to reach agreement to apply – how decision was reached

- o Any comments on process of completing application (involvement of stakeholders, approval of final application)

- **Costs and matched funding** arrangements
    - o Estimation of direct costs
    - o Estimation of other costs (what were these)
    - o Decision making process about how funding would be matched
    - o Challenges in raising matched funding
    - o How spend is being recorded

- Key **risks / challenges to delivering pilot** identified at the application / planning stage

C) Overview of implementation plan and experiences of the set up period

Aim: to gain a detailed understanding of the implementation plan and how the pilot was set up (focus on period when pilot was being set up)

- Overview of **implementation plan/ bid**
    - o Responsibilities for coordination
    - o Timetable
    - o Support / guidance for schools
    - o Marketing plans
        - ▪ schools
        - ▪ parents
        - ▪ pupils
    - o Communications strategy (e.g. to manage expectations / handle negative publicity)
    - o Management information collection
    - o Plans for monitoring and evaluation
        - ▪ data collection systems
        - ▪ responsibilities for data collection
        - ▪ responsibilities for monitoring and evaluation
        - ▪ how monitoring and evaluation will feed back into delivery of pilot
    - o Reporting mechanisms / structures implemented within the LA / PCT / Local Strategic Partnership
    - o How the FSM pilot links into the vision for the area i.e. the Community Strategy / Local Area Agreement (LAA)

- Key **changes to existing school meal provision arrangements**
    - o Procurement arrangements for school meals provision
    - o Catering workforce (size of workforce, training)
    - o School meal compliance with school food standards
    - o Children with specific dietary requirements (including religious/ cultural requirements/ preferences) and menus

---

- o School kitchen capacity
- o Dining space
- o Facilities
- o Methods of payment for school meals

- **Partnership working**
  - o Experiences / views of what's working well and challenges in relation to:
    - LA co-ordinator role
    - Partnership working (including structures in place to facilitate partnership working) between the following:
      - LA
      - PCT
      - Caterers
      - Schools
  - o Links into the Local Strategic Partnership (which Boards, at what level, frequency)

- Experiences of **support / guidance during set up period**
  - o For LA / PCT
    - View of central coordinator role
    - Other sources of support / guidance (e.g. DCSF, DH, independent consultants, School Food Trust)
    - Nature of support / guidance
  - o For schools / catering services
    - Decision making processes relating to forms of support / guidance provided
    - Sources of support / guidance
    - Nature of support / guidance

D) Early experiences of implementation

Aim: to explore what has worked in the first few weeks of the pilot and highlight any challenges arising

- **Overview of early experiences of implementation**
  - o School meal provision and take up (general overview of any changes)
  - o Partnership working (explore partnership working between LA, PCT, schools, catering services)
  - o Funding
  - o Marketing / publicity

- Experiences of **support / guidance during first few weeks of the pilot**
  - o For LA / PCT
    - View of central coordinator role

- ▪ Other sources of support / guidance (e.g. DCSF, DH, independent consultants, School Food Trust)
- ▪ Nature of support / guidance
  - o For schools / catering services
    - ▪ Decision making processes relating to forms of support / guidance provided
    - ▪ Sources of support / guidance
    - ▪ Nature of support / guidance
  - o Explore any differences in experiences of support during early implementation compared with support received during set-up period

- **Key successes and challenges** to implementation
  - o What has worked well
  - o What has not worked so well
  - o Solutions to challenges
  - o Anticipated challenges

- **Next steps**
  - o Improving and sustaining take up
  - o Improving delivery

Part 3: Close of interview

- *Ask if there is anything we have not covered about the FSM pilot or FSM in general that they would like to comment on*
- *Thank them for taking part and explain next steps*
- *Ask LA coordinator if she/he is happy to be re-contacted and provide guidance on the selection of schools for case study?*
- *Ask the LA Coordinator if she/he can send documents for document review e.g.*
  - o *Implementation plan*
  - o *Policy documents/ strategies e.g. wider health/fitness initiatives and pre pilot strategy documents*
  - o *Leaflets publicising FSMs*
  - o *Press cuttings*
  - o *Minutes for significant meetings*
- *Reassure about confidentiality and field questions*