

# Improving the Take Up of Free School Meals

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# Contents

## Acknowledgments

	Page
<b>Summary</b>	1
<b>1. Background to the study</b>	4
1.1 Introduction	4
1.2 The research programme	5
<b>2. Free school meals and the school</b>	7
<b>3. Getting onto free school meals</b>	9
3.1 Informing parents about eligibility	9
3.2 Registering eligibility	11
3.3 Staying in the system	11
3.4 Making the decision	12
<b>4. Eating meals in school</b>	13
4.1 The popularity of school meals	13
4.2 A place to eat?	14
4.3 Eating with friends	15
4.4 Value of the free school meal	16
4.5 Free school meals and a balanced diet	17
4.6 Catering for special dietary requirements	19
4.7 Free packed lunches	20
4.8 Positive responses to improve take up	22
<b>5. Stigma</b>	23
5.1 Systems of payment	23
5.2 The problem of packed lunches	25
5.3 Being different	26
<b>6. Conclusions and recommendations</b>	29
6.1 Selling free school meals	29
6.2 Making the process easy	30
6.3 Providing a quality meal in congenial surroundings	30
6.4 Addressing discriminatory practices	30
<b>References</b>	32
<b>Appendix 1: The case study schools</b>	33
<b>Appendix 2: Questionnaire survey and interviews with pupils</b>	34
<b>Appendix 3: Parent interviews</b>	35

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# Summary

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## **Aims of the study**

The study examined how the nature of the school and its meal provision, its management and administration, influenced the take up of free meals. It identified good models of practice and successful strategies for schools to maximise the take up of free provision.

## **The research**

Seven secondary, two middle and four primary schools in seven LEAs in England were selected as case studies. Each school was visited to see how school meals generally, and free school meals in particular, were organised. In addition to observation, over 250 pupils took part in group or individual interviews. School and catering staff were also interviewed. Over 450 secondary pupils completed questionnaires and over 50 parents took part in telephone interviews. Relevant staff in the LEA were also interviewed.

## **Main findings**

### *Stigma*

A third of pupils surveyed and over two fifths of parents identified embarrassment or fear of being teased as a key factor which put people off taking their free meal. Memories of their own school days coloured parents' perceptions of how free meals operate today and they spoke of wanting to protect their children from being 'different' or feeling that they were 'not like

Whilst most pupils reported no instances of those receiving free meals being teased or bullied because of the provision, there was evidence that this did occur, unbeknown to school staff, and especially in schools where only a few pupils took free meals. However, even in schools where pupils reported no overt teasing or name calling, pupils were sensitive to what they believed others thought of them.

Some pupils said that they preferred not to take up their eligibility because they knew that other people would be aware of their free meal status.

Even schools that believe they are providing fair and non discriminatory arrangements for free school meals, continue to operate systems which make pupils on free school meals readily identifiable. Parents and pupils raised two major concerns that gave rise to discrimination, the systems of payment for cafeteria meals and the storage and presentation of free packed lunches.

If pupils have to identify themselves in any way to the dinner staff, either by giving their names or producing tickets or tokens for their meal, this was a source of embarrassment for some pupils. Two secondary schools had recently introduced cashless systems in their cafeterias so that all pupils used smart cards to pay for their meals. This meant that pupils taking free meals could retain their anonymity at the till. In schools where only free packed meals were on offer, some parents who declined to take up meals said that the high profile packaging of the meals and their storage separately from other pupils' home produced lunches had deterred them from applying.

### *The quality of the meal*

Over the past twenty years the proportion of all pupils eating their lunch in school everyday has declined substantially. In three of the seven secondary schools studied, only one fifth of pupils chose to eat in the school cafeteria everyday. When asked why people did not take up their entitlement to free school meals, around two-thirds of pupils and parents considered that the quality and choice of food on offer discouraged take up. Often the choices available in school, particularly in secondary cafeterias, were described as unappealing, with unhealthy options and a restricted and repetitive range of food. Vegetarians and those with

restricted dietary requirements faced very limited menus. In six out of the seven cafeterias, paying pupils spent on average between 20-30p more than the value of the free school meal on their daily lunch and the free school meal failed to provide a well balanced two course meal in most of these cafeterias. Combined with the overcrowded dining rooms and long queues, pupils were put off taking up their free meal, particularly if their friends were bringing a packed lunch from home and they were unable to eat their lunch with them.

Of the six case study primary and middle schools, only three offered a hot meal service. The others, in common with many small schools, provided only a packed lunch for registered pupils. The study found evidence that schools offering only a packed lunch are likely to have lower take up of free school meals than schools offering a hot meal. Schools too were aware of pupils who, although eligible, declined to take free lunch. Parents said that they did not apply because they believed that they could provide a better packed lunch for their children from home. Pupils expressed concerns about having no choice in what the free lunch contained, unlike lunches brought from home where they usually had some say in what their parents packed for them. This lack of any choice or control over the content of the free packed meal worried many children.

However, two schools had taken positive steps to address the packed lunch problem.

One school had introduced a hot meal service. Having no kitchen facilities on site, the meal was brought in by a local contractor. After one term, 40% of all pupils were having the hot meal every day and the percentage of pupils taking free school meals increased from 5% to 14% in one term.

A second school, achieved a modest rise in take up (1%) by using its delegated budget to produce packed lunches 'in house' rather than receiving them from an outside supplier. This

meant that the packed lunches were freshly prepared and gave pupils the opportunity to exercise some choice in the content of meals, letting the sandwich maker know their preferences.

### *Improving access to free school meals*

Although the majority of parents said that they knew that free school meals existed, interviews revealed that 11% of eligible parents had not claimed meals because they did not know their entitlement or how to apply.

Parents questioned why, when they complete forms for the DSS or the Jobcentre, there were no direct links to register them for these additional benefits. Most schools included information about eligibility and availability of free school meals in induction packs for new pupils and often included registration forms, reminding parents about the free provision in newsletters and at open evenings.

Even when parents knew they were eligible, some needed to be reassured about how free school meals operated in their child's school before they would apply. Some were concerned that, in registering their child for free school meals, they did not know what they would be committing their child to receiving.

### **Conclusions**

The study identified a number of good practice strategies which might be adopted to encourage more parents and pupils to take up free meals.

- Schools can improve take up of free provision by providing meals that parents value and pupils want to eat.
- In schools with a cafeteria the value of the free meal should keep pace with the purchase price of a healthy meal.
- Schools, LEAs and benefit providers need to ensure that parents are aware of their eligibility. Benefit providers could

offer parents direct registration of eligibility with the LEA.

- Schools should send regular reminders to ensure that, should parents' circumstances change, they are aware of their eligibility.
- Schools need to 'sell' the free school meal option to parents especially in schools where only a minority of pupils qualify for free lunch and there is no 'grapevine' of information. They should let parents see what is on offer as a free meal and stress the value, nutritionally and financially.
- Having a free school meal should not prevent pupils from eating with their friends who bring packed lunch from home. If dining space is limited, then cafeterias should provide the option of a packed meal which pupils can take out to eat with friends.

- Schools need to be vigilant to discourage teasing and name calling of pupils on free school meals especially in schools where few pupils take free school meal pupils.
- Schools with cafeteria systems should where possible introduce cashless systems such as swipe cards to help eliminate identification at the tills.
- Schools with low eligibility for free meals and providing only packed lunches should reduce the high profile of the free meals by encouraging pupils to bring their own lunchboxes for the free meals and explore ways of storing all packed meals together.
- Schools should ensure that the food offered provides sufficient choice and variety for free school meals pupils who follow restricted diets.

# 1 Background to the study

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## 1.1 Introduction

In the past, school meals have played an important role in the nutrition of children from poorer families, with the free school meal ensuring that children received at least one substantial meal a day. As, on average, a child eats nearly two hundred meals in school each year, food in school accounts for around a fifth of all their meals. The 1980 Education Act abolished the minimum nutritional standards that controlled the quality of school meals and the fixed price national charge. These changes, combined with the shift towards free choice cafeteria systems, means that today many children do not have a 'traditional' meal in school at midday.

At the same time, there is increasing concern about the diets of children and young people, particularly those living in low income households. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey of Young People (Food Standards Agency 2000) and the National Audit Office Report *Tackling Obesity in England* (NAO 2001) both highlight the nutritional deficiencies of the diets of children and young people, with the consumption of too much sugar and fat and an insufficient intake of fibre, vitamins and minerals. Recent initiatives, such as the Healthy Schools programme, designed to encourage and promote healthy diet from within the environment of the school, and the National School Fruit Scheme to provide free fruit for 4-6 year olds may make improvements to the daily diets of pupils.

Free provision of school meals ensures that the most needy children get something to eat while at school, and recent moves by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to reintroduce compulsory nutritional standards for school meals (DfEE, 2000) should guarantee that children who eat the provided dinner

receive a balanced meal at least once a day. In these circumstances, it becomes even more of a priority to ensure that children who have the right to a free meal actually take it.

Currently only those children whose parents are in receipt of Income Support or income based Jobseeker's Allowance or who receive these benefits in their own right are entitled to free school meals. Children of asylum seekers are also eligible in certain circumstances. It is estimated that 1.8 million children are entitled to a free school meal but that around 20%, for a variety of reasons, do not take up their entitlement; take up is known to vary by region and by school (McMahon and Marsh, 1999).

In late 2000, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) commissioned Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) to undertake a study to investigate some of the reasons behind this non take up of entitlement and to explore how the nature of the school and its meal provision, its management and administration, influence the take up of free meals. At the same time the study set out to identify good models of practice and successful strategies to maximise take up.

The specific objectives were:

- To compare the strategies employed by schools to minimise the identification of pupils taking free school meals, such as the systems in place to collect dinner money, the use of cashless cafeterias, customising of provided packed lunches; to investigate how these strategies are reflected in the proportion of pupils taking up free meals in those schools.
- To investigate pupils' views and experiences of the management and administration of free meals in their

school and their perception of any school strategies in place which encourage or discourage take up; to seek their views of what the barriers are to take up and how best the take up of free meals could be encouraged in their school.

- To identify the reasons parents fail to register their child's eligibility with the school and to explore parents' concern about stigmatisation within the wider community, should the school fail to handle the issue discreetly, or for their child in school.
- To examine the extent to which, and the reasons why, parents respond to pressures from their children who express preferences for money to buy lunch, either in or out of school, or to eat a home produced packed lunch rather than take up their free meal.

### 1.2 The research

The study focused on a sample of case study schools, selected from seven different LEAs. The DfEE Annual School Census (ASC) and Ofsted reports were used to provide background data for the selection of the schools. As one of the main aims of the study was to find examples of good practice, LEAs with reported high take up of school meals by registered pupils, as recorded in the ASC, were initially targeted as a source of schools for inclusion. Within each LEA, one secondary school which reported high take up was selected, and one feeder primary or middle school of each of those selected secondary school. One LEA with low take up was also included in the study and again a secondary and feeder school were selected. Two further secondary schools were selected in one LEA which had recently introduced a policy of cashless cafeterias. In total, thirteen schools were selected for study, including examples of both high and low levels of registered eligibility. There was also a range of meal provision, with

some schools offering only a packed lunch, whilst others cooked hot meals on the premises. Schools 1-7 were secondary schools and Schools 8-13 primary or middle schools. In five LEAs, both a secondary and a feeder middle or primary school were selected. For more details of the case study schools, see Appendix 1.

The principal methods for data collection were

- Over 40 interviews with school caterers, LEA and appropriate school staff to look at practice in monitoring and evaluating take up by registered pupils of meals; and to identify policies to encourage take up of school meals by all pupils, and by eligible pupils specifically.
- Observations in each school to identify practices which encourage take up such as the management and supervision of school meals including dining room arrangements for queuing and 'sittings', methods of payment, the range of foods on offer, arrangements for pupils with a packed lunch from home and the availability of other catering options either on or off site.
- Interviews, with over 250 pupils, individually, in pairs or small groups, to collect their views and experiences. Most interviews took place during class time although some were conducted during the lunch period. In paired or group interviews, pupils were not asked directly if they were eligible for free meals, although pupils often volunteered this information to the interviewer. Some schools arranged one or two group interviews to consist entirely of pupils taking free school meals, but most were mixed groups or, in schools with few eligible pupils, composed entirely of ineligible pupils. Further details of these interviews are given in Appendix 2.

- A short questionnaire survey of over 470 secondary pupils provided data on the usually lunchtime options for pupils and confidential data on their views about free school meals (See Appendix 2).
- Telephone interviews were conducted with over 50 parents. Parents were contacted via a letter sent out by each school. In addition, parents whose children had volunteered to talk further on the subject of school meals were contacted for their permission for their children to be interviewed, and were themselves asked for their views. Nearly three-quarters of the parents interviewed were either currently entitled or had in the past been entitled to free school meals for their children (See Appendix 3).

The study was intended as a short qualitative study to explore the issues which might bear on take up and this is reflected in the analysis of the data collected. Interviews with parents used a structured schedule and were coded for speed of analysis with SPSS as were the pupils' questionnaire survey data. Group interviews with pupils were tape recorded and analysed thematically. Throughout the report, 'eligible' is used to denote parents and pupils who qualify by their benefit status for free meals, 'registered' denotes those who have registered with the school or LEA to have a free meal and 'take up' denotes those who are actually having the provided meal.

## 2 Free school meals and the school

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There is a duty on LEAs to provide free school lunches to eligible pupils who are registered for meals. The funding for those meals is distributed to LEAs through the system of Standard Spending Assessments (SSA). The SSAs include a component which reflects the variation between LEAs in the proportion of school-age pupils in households in receipt of Income Support or income based Job Seeker's Allowance benefits. LEAs are free to decide how to distribute the funding they receive through SSAs to their schools. This chapter looks briefly at the background to free school meals within the LEA and within schools.

The DfEE Annual School Census (ASC) records the number of pupils at each school who are known to be eligible for free school meals and for whom specific refreshment provision was made on census day. Little is known of how accurately these figures reflect the true level of eligibility within each LEA, or within each individual school. Generally, higher levels of eligibility might be expected in primary schools than in secondary schools, with parents moving into paid work as their children get older and losing their right to free meals. School 9, a middle school taking pupils from Year 4 to Year 7, with 11% of pupils registered for free school meals demonstrated this process. The principal feeder infant school, from which most of the pupils transferred, recorded 33% of pupils registered.

The ASC also records take up of free meals, as eligible pupils who took their free meal on census day. Take up percentages must be interpreted with considerable caution as they only indicate take up by registered pupils. Since the registered figure is not necessarily a true reflection of eligibility in a school, the take up figure may be misleading, for example, a school may record 100% take up by registered pupils

but in reality only a third of eligible pupils may be registered.

Over the past decade the issue of free school meals is one which has become increasingly important within schools. The percentage of pupils registered as eligible for free school meals is now generally accepted as an indicator of social deprivation within the school population (Sammons *et al* 1994). The indicator is now included in the DfEE's Autumn Package benchmark of school performance information, which is used as background information for Ofsted inspections.

Many schools were aware in the past of children in school who were eligible for free school meals but did not register for them. In the most recent Ofsted inspection reports for four case study schools, specific mention of under registration was made. Schools 3, 8 and 10 sent letters to all parents, requesting them to register if they were eligible for free school meals, (although reassuring parents that disclosure would not commit their child to having to eat the free school meal). For School 3, this exercise revealed that whereas 13% of pupils qualified for free school meals, only 3% were actually registered, at School 8 that a further 2% were eligible and 1% at School 10.

However whilst schools sought to gain a true picture of the eligibility within their school and to encourage parents to register their children, none of the schools had any proactive policy to encourage pupils to take up the food on offer. Whereas schools with a set price meal are likely to know if registered pupils are taking their free meals, in schools with a cafeteria system there were no systems in place for regularly monitoring or maintaining high take up. Moreover, beyond altruism, there are no incentives for schools to increase the take up of the free meal.

Indeed for some schools there are strong disincentives. Whilst there is no requirement for LEAs to use the ASC figures when deciding how to distribute funds to schools, this is a common practice. LEAs are free to fund school meals using a count by term but many set budgets annually to reduce administration. With budgets set by completion of the ASC in January of the preceding academic year, schools with delegated budgets may be allocated funding for the following year based on the percentage of children registered at that time. In some LEAs the budget is set below the full figure to cover the cost. Consequently, a school making a determined effort to increase numbers

taking the free meal and encouraging all children to take their meal everyday, can find itself with a budget deficit. School 11 increased the number of children taking free meals from 24 to 62 over a period of a term. The school had to carry the cost from the school budget of providing the additional free meals for two terms, estimated at around £5000.

- **There are no incentives to schools to encourage pupils to take free school meals and some evidence to suggest that schools may be better off if pupils do not take up the meals**

### 3 Getting onto free school meals

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This chapter explores the ways in which parents get to know about their eligibility and reviews the administrative systems in place for parents to register for free meal provision. It also considers how families make their decision about whether to apply to take up their eligibility.

#### 3.1 Informing parents about eligibility

Even within this small sample of LEAs, there was a range of practice for informing parents about their eligibility, with in many cases an underlying assumption that parents know about free school meals. Although the majority of parents said that they knew that free school meals existed, interviews revealed that a substantial minority did not 'know the system', and did not know who was eligible and how to apply. For those who did know, information came from a range of sources, from friends, from what they recalled of their own school days, from the DSS or Jobcentre, from reading pamphlets in the post office or directly from the school.

However, in interview, four parents separately reported that they had, at the time of their eligibility, not been aware of their eligibility. One mother had not found out that her two children were eligible until she started helping out as a classroom assistant. Families receiving Income-based Jobseekers Allowance appeared particularly likely to be unaware of the full range of benefits to which they were entitled. One mother, with three children in primary school, described why they had not applied for free school meals when, a few months previously, her husband had been unemployed for two months:

*'It wasn't embarrassment, it was complete ignorance on our part. By the*

*time we knew, we weren't eligible. It was like getting blood out of a stone at the Jobcentre about any benefits. No one mentioned free school meals. We had never been in that position before, so we didn't know.'*

A single mother described a similar situation. With two daughters in secondary school, she spent three months on Income-related Jobseekers Allowance.

*'No one mentioned free school meals at the Jobcentre or at school, so we never knew we were eligible'.*

- **Agencies dealing with eligible families should not assume that every family is aware of its entitlement**

The parents quoted above were on benefits for only a short period and with numerous applications to be made, not all information is read thoroughly at that time or is fully understood. Several parents questioned why, when they complete forms for the DSS or the Job Centre, there were no direct links to register them for these additional benefits.<sup>1</sup>

*'You have to jump through so many hoops to get something. There's no*

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<sup>1</sup> From June 2001 a new system will be piloted in certain areas which will integrate the administration of free school meals and welfare benefits. The Benefits Agency and the Employment Service will provide a standard free school meal application form for parents entering the benefits system. The form, validated by the agency, will be sent straight to the LEA. Parents will not be required to provide any further verification and the LEA will be informed directly by the agencies when the eligibility ceases. If the pilot scheme is successful, the system will be reproduced nationally.

*reason why there should not be direct links from the benefits office to the LEA and the school. If it could work, it would cut down on the processing.'*

Such a system would benefit families who find the very process of application, with yet more bureaucracy, a disincentive to take up free school meals. A pupil in Year 8 described why she had not taken up free school meals when her parents separated. She said that her mother, with whom she lived, was already under stress and could not face the prospect of filling in yet another form.

- **Better communication between agencies could improve take up by directly informing the LEA of pupils eligibility**

One mother, who had been eligible but had not applied, suggested that either the school or the LEA should write direct to every eligible child and make the offer of the free school meal, to promote the concept of the meal as a right rather than something they have to apply for.

*'Let's all opt in. At the moment, everyone is excluded until you apply, let's try it the other way, everyone is included unless they opt out.'*

Most schools include information about eligibility and availability of free school meals in induction packs for new pupils and often include registration forms. Some continue this process with regular reminders to parents about the free provision in newsletters and at open evenings. In some cases, schools and school governors write specifically to parents to encourage registration of eligibility. (However head teachers and school administration staff admit that any campaigns to encourage registration are more often motivated by their concern regarding the Performance and Assessment Report (PANDA), league tables and inspections, rather than attempts to address welfare priorities.)

- **Schools need to ensure that all parents are regularly reminded that free school meals are available and the registration process clearly laid out**

There was some evidence of parents and pupils being unclear about what registering would commit them to. Pupils not registered for free school meals believed that they would be made to have the free meal every day whether they wanted it or not.

*A.. 'Because you have to have a free school meal everyday and sometimes, you like to mix it up a bit, like sometimes have school lunch, sometimes have packed lunch.'*

*B. 'And it's a set meal as well. And you can only have a certain meal everyday.'*  
[Year 8 pupils]

*A.. 'And I think if you don't have it, they question 'Why didn't you have it?'*

*B. 'It's good that they are worried about what you are eating but...'*

*A.. 'But if you don't have it, then they'll say why and if its packed lunch then they'll write you off the list.'* [Year 6 pupils]

Even though parents may know that they are eligible, they do not always know how the free school meal system actually works in school. Parents recalled their experiences, or their observation of the experiences of others, when they were at school themselves. They needed reassurance that free school meals were better arranged in the school their children attended. Schools need to offer more information to parents beyond that the provision is there. One mother explained that she had not applied because she was uncertain what she would be 'letting her children in for'. She felt that had she been told more about what was on offer, how the system worked in the school, perhaps if the school had suggested that her children try it for

a week or two, then she might have been more likely to register.

- **Parents need to be reassured about how free school meals are organised in school.**

### 3.2 Registering eligibility

Again, parent interviews revealed that misunderstandings occur about the process of registering children for free meals, especially when assumptions are made that parents know more about the system than they really do. One mother, with longstanding but unregistered eligibility, described how, impressed by the cafeteria on the induction tour of her daughter's new secondary school, she decided to take up the free school meal. She ticked the school form to confirm that she was eligible for free school meals, not realising the need to register with the LEA before the start of term. When the daughter started at her new school, there was no free meal for her. Only then did the parent discover the requirement to register at the local LEA office.

Registration processes for families who decide to apply for free school meals vary from LEA to LEA. In the seven LEAs examined in this study there were three main methods;

- Visit to school
- Visit to LEA or benefit office
- By post

Parents generally found visiting the school the easiest option, particularly when their child attended primary school which was usually close to home and to which they were likely to be frequent visitors anyway. School staff stressed that they always tried to be discreet when handling enquiries and registrations. Parents reported that the schools were helpful and handled the process well although one mother said that she had been put off applying herself after witnessing the head teacher very

publicly discussing an application with another mother in the front reception hall of the school.

Alternatively, in some LEAs, parents made their application and renewals at the central office. Whilst this method was preferable for parents who had reservations about dealing with school staff, attending the benefit office or LEA or dealing with the registration by post could be problematic if it required either a special journey on public transport, or the need to photocopy proof of eligibility.

*'It's awkward. We're both disabled and we have to travel to [town]. It would be a lot easier to do it through the school.'*

- **Parents should be able to complete the registration process either at school, a central office or by post, whichever is the best option for them.**

There were substantial variations between LEAs in the time taken between parent's application and their child receiving a free school meal. In the best examples, lunch was provided from the day of registration, even if registration took place away from the school, with the LEA office contacting the school immediately so that pupils could receive lunch on that day. However in one area, processing was reported to take up to two weeks. During the period between application and confirmation, the free school meal was not supplied and parents were not reimbursed for the cost of the meals they provided for their child during that time.

- **Free school meals should be provided as soon as parents make their application.**

### 3.3 Staying in the system

There was also variation in the length of time for which the registration remained effective. In five LEAs, the registration ran for a full year. In the others, it ran for lesser periods. Renewal

forms or confirmations of continuing eligibility were either sent by the school or by the central office. Whilst some parents had no problems completing the forms on time, all the schools mention difficulties with parents who failed to complete their renewal before it expired, resulting in a free meal not being provided for their children. Where schools were aware that renewal was imminent they were able to remind the pupil or send a further reminder letter. Where renewal was not made by the specified date, some LEAs invoiced parents for the cost of meals, whilst other LEAs continued to provide meals. Within the terms of the current legislation, charging parents for the cost of meals is illegal if parents have already established their eligibility for free school meals.

- **Confirmation of continued eligibility should be as easy as possible and proof of continued eligibility should not be required more than once a year.**

### 3.4 Making the decision

Once parents become eligible and are aware that they can receive meals for their children, not all parents decide to apply. Interviews with parents and pupils revealed that the parent's decisions can be heavily influenced by the child's view of free meals.

*'There was a time once when I was going to have one, a packed lunch. I just said no, I'd seen what S had in his and I thought 'No'. [Year 6 girl]*

Whilst some parents responded to their children's wishes about whether or not to take up free school meals, some parents admitted that they had never discussed the prospect with their children.

One mother, living in a rural area with three children in primary school said that she had

never pursued the option because she didn't want her children to think that they were different, she wanted them to carry on as 'normal' despite the change in their circumstances. She was 'too proud'. She had never talked about it with her children and she had felt it was going 'backwards', going onto benefits, as she had been 'brought up to be independent and feeling you have achieved'. Also, by providing them with a packed lunch she believed that she knew what they were eating and that going onto free school meals would negate her role as a mother. She saw her contribution of the daily packed lunch as *'something that Mummy had lovingly prepared. I don't want to be done out of a job'*.

As children get older, parents do discuss the options more openly. Another mother who had previously made the decision not to put her two children on free school meals when they started school thought that now they were older she would discuss it with them.

One girl in Year 6 explained that she wanted her mother to make the decision. Currently at a school with packed lunches she had not registered. With the prospect of a cafeteria meal at her secondary school, the decision was up for revision.

*'When I go to [Secondary] my Mum says I might have free school meals. I want her to choose and she says 'It's up to you'. I want her to choose because she knows best.'* [Year 6 girl]

Both parents and pupils talked about the decision to take or not take free meals, whether the decision was taken jointly or not, as one which was influenced by their perception and experiences of both the free meal system and school meals more generally. The following sections look at how these views and experiences dispose parents and pupils to take up the provision.

with staff aware that pupils are diving into their school bags between lessons to extract a quick bite or two. Particularly for pupils who have had a long journey to school and with little or no breakfast, mid morning break can become the main daily trip to the cafeteria, with some pupils not eating again at lunchtime. Some schools acknowledged this change of practice and two of the seven case study secondary schools permitted pupils to use their free meal provision at breaktime. However, school meal legislation is clear that the free school lunch should be provided in the middle of the day.

The unattractiveness of school meals is for many pupils and parents an important factor in the take up of free meals. In schools where only a minority of children opt to pay for school dinner, parents whose children are eligible for a free meal reported being under pressure to supply a packed meal. As one mother, struggling financially to provide a packed lunch for her Year 10 daughter who had just given up her free meal, observed;

*'Now she is at an age where she wants to be exactly like her friends – I can't do it full time, it's not viable.'*

The questionnaire survey of secondary school pupils showed the variation in use of the school cafeteria as the main lunchtime option and demonstrated that eating in the cafeteria everyday is not the norm (see Table 4.1). On average, less than one third of non-free school meal pupils used the cafeteria everyday for lunch and nearly two fifths (38%) reported that

**Table 4.1 Pupils having cafeteria lunch everyday and pupils never taking cafeteria lunch by secondary school (questionnaire survey data- non free school meal pupils only)**

School	Pupils	% eating in cafeteria every day	% never eating in cafeteria
1	37	19%	30%
2	52	47%	28%
3	80	18%	44%
4	69	21%	46%
5	25	29%	46%
6	104	40%	36%
7	34	29%	41%
All schools	401	30%	38%

they never used the cafeteria for lunch. There was substantial variation between the schools, almost certainly reflecting pupils views and experiences of the lunch on offer and the general attractiveness of the dining facilities. School 2 with the highest proportion (47%) of pupils using the service very day employed its own chef and the school ran the service. Pupils praised the hot ‘specials’ which included regular roast dinners and the cafeteria also served the standard school lunch of pizza, burgers or chips. Whilst the building housing the kitchen and dining rooms were unattractive, the interiors were well decorated, background music helped to improve the atmosphere and the lunch period was staggered to reduce congestion. At this school, only 23% of pupils (compared with 37% for all schools) believed that pupils would be put off taking their meal because of the food on offer. Take up as recorded in the ASC was 90% at that school. Similarly, the facilities in School 6, used everyday by 40% of pupils, were called the Café and the general layout and presentation of the food imitated that of high street outlets. At four other secondary schools, well over 40% of pupils never used the cafeteria and here there were comments about the limited range of food on offer and the cost, together with issues around the general unattractiveness of the dining areas.

The existence of attractive alternatives is as relevant to the issue of whether children have school meals as is the condition of the food and cafeteria. In four of the secondary schools surveyed, older pupils were generally allowed out to buy meals at local shops. At schools which permitted going out, pupils spoke of the good value of food on offer in local supermarkets, takeaways or chip shops.

### 4.2 A place to eat?

Facilities for eating varied from school to school, and pupils’ comments around the physical space and organisation of the school cafeterias and dining rooms suggest that they were often put off, even before they tried the food on offer. Although pupils approved the attractive dining areas in some schools for example those that had a café atmosphere, at others, with resources concentrated into expanding academic facilities, dining arrangements tended to be a poor relation. Schools reported that although their school population had increased two or three fold since the dining areas were originally designed, there had been no increase in space provided, to match the rise in pupil numbers. At School 4, despite a doubling in the number of pupils, the space for the cafeteria had been substantially

*packed lunch in the common room with your mates'.*

Whilst most pupils either did not mention the staffing of the cafeterias or commented on the kindness of dinner staff, in one school, four groups of pupils from different year groups spontaneously reported that the attitude and behaviour of the school meal assistants deterred pupils from using the cafeteria.

### **4.3 Eating with friends**

For pupils on free school meals, eating in the cafeteria can become a discriminatory experience if all their friends bring a packed lunch from home which they eat elsewhere. Two parents, with children in primary schools, reported that their children were requesting packed lunches instead of their free hot meal so that they could eat with friends, even though both parents preferred their children to have the hot meal. In those schools, pupils with packed lunches ate in the same hall as those taking hot meals, and although there were no reasons for separation, dinner supervisors preferred to keep the two groups of diners apart.

At School 2, those taking the hot meal were allowed to take it through to eat with friends eating their home produced packed lunch. In School 1, where space was more limited and the packed lunch pupils ate elsewhere, pupils could buy the equivalent of a packed lunch from the cafeteria to take to the 'packed lunch' room to eat with friends. Similarly School 12, as well as making hot lunches, also made up packed lunches to provide additional choice for pupils. By doing this, they were able to provide for one registered child who, because of behavioural problems, had been excluded from school over the lunch period. He collected his school supplied packed meal and returned home to eat it.

- **Having a free school meal should not prevent pupils from eating with friends who bring packed lunches**

[Year 9]

*'If you bring your own, you don't have to queue. And you can eat it at any time'.* [Year 8]

At one school, a young man in the sixth form who was still eligible for free school meals found it easier not to bother and more sociable to eat with friends;

*'I used to eat in the cafeteria when I was on free school meals but now I just bring a packed lunch now. It's easier, it's less hassle. You can eat your*

#### 4.4 Value of the free school meal

The value of the free school meal varied substantially from school to school. In the case study primary and middle schools, the value of the meal was not relevant since all three schools with a hot meal offered a set meal at a fixed price. However, in secondary schools with their cafeteria system, the value of the entitlement can become crucial. The lowest value in the case studies was 90p and the highest value £1.65.

However more important than the differences in the face cash value of the free meal was what the free meal price actually bought in the school cafeteria. Table 4.2 compares for each school, the value of the free meal with the average amount spent by non free school meal pupils who used the cafeteria everyday for their lunch. In all except School 5, the daily average spend by those not on free school meals was around 20p- 30p higher, so that at the school where the ticket value was 90p, the average spend by other users of the cafeteria was nearly 30p per day more. (School 5 offered a daily ‘set menu’ for £1.35 and this may account for the closer match in the daily spend. The set menu was a popular choice with all pupils because of the speed with which it was delivered and the consequently short queue.)

**Table 4.2 Value of free school meal and average (mean) spend on lunch at case study schools**

School	Value of Free school meal	Average spend by pupils not on free school meals
1	1.34	<b>1.57</b>
2	1.20	<b>1.53</b>
3	0.90	<b>1.19</b>
4	1.65	<b>1.85</b>
5	1.35	<b>1.37</b>
6	1.45	<b>1.62</b>
7	1.45	<b>1.78</b>

The new national requirements for nutritional content (DfEE 2000) include the recommendation that the free school meal should provide a two-course lunch and a drink. Even in School 4, with the highest value ticket (£1.65), pupils were severely restricted in what they could afford to have. On the day of the study visit, the hot meal of the day was fish and chips, priced at £1.75, without additional vegetables or a pudding. The school’s perception of the free school meal ticket was that it provided a supplement towards lunch, rather than providing an adequate meal. Pupils on free school meals rarely took the cooked meal because it was too expensive and opted instead for a sandwich, but even then found that they could afford little else.

- A. ‘Sandwiches are so expensive on a dinner ticket. You can’t get a sandwich and a drink at the same time.’
- B. ‘I bring extra money with me.’
- C. ‘I can’t bring extra money, so I starve.’ [Year 9s]

- A. ‘It’s not like even you get a lot on the dinner ticket - £1.65.’
- B. ‘I think it should be at least two pounds then we would be able to get a beneficial healthy meal.’
- C. ‘It shouldn’t have a value – it should be that you just get a meal.’ [Year 8s]

Parents at that same school supported their children’s experiences that the meal ticket failed to buy a meal. One mother observed that it provided only a snack, ‘a baked potato is not a meal’ and that she felt obliged to cook dinner for her daughter in the evening. At another school, a mother with a son in Year 10 observed that in the last year or so he came home ‘starving’ from school;

*‘It was all right until a couple of years ago and then he started coming in saying ‘I’m starving’. At that age, they eat as much as a grown man.’*

*'They used to let you off but now they say you've got to have the right amount of money or you've got to put that back.'* [Year 9]

In one school, pupils complained that prices were not marked clearly, so it was difficult for them to know whether they were spending up to or over their allowance, a situation which led them to embarrassing exchanges at the till.

Conversely for some pupils, there were issues around not being able to carry over any unspent money – if one day they under spent because they were not hungry, were going to a club or had brought something from home, then there was no way to carry over credit to the next day.

At one school, the pupils complained about prices in the cafeteria continuing to rise by around 5p per term, although the value of their meal ticket rose by only 5p a year. Many pupils were well aware of prices in neighbouring shops or at *Macdonald's*, and compared school cafeteria prices unfavourably with these competing outlets.

Schools where outside contractors managed the cafeteria appeared to do little to monitor prices to ensure that pupils could buy an adequate meal for the value of their free provision.

- **Schools should check regularly that meal ticket value keeps pace with cafeteria prices**

#### **4.5 Free school meals and a balanced diet**

The restricted buying power of the free school meal in the secondary school cafeterias meant that pupils had only a limited choice unless they supplement their free meal with extra cash. This contrasted with all three primary schools with a hot meal service. Here, the menu offered

a choice at a fixed price and provided a nutritionally balanced two course meal.

*'She usually has free school meal but they are awful, the same thing everyday, pizza or chicken burger. I give her an extra pound a day towards a drink or if I'm short then she takes a drink in a bottle. She gets sick to death of the same things, everything is all dried up and nasty. The hot meals in her primary school were good.'*

Concerns were raised by parents and pupils in secondary schools that the value of the meal ticket encouraged pupils to eat unhealthily. At School 5, the 'set price' menu offered sausage roll, chips, gravy and a drink, a selection that fails to fulfil the requirements of a nutritionally balanced meal. Overall in the questionnaire survey, 8% of pupils mentioned the limited choice or unhealthiness of the food on offer as a deterrent to having school meals. Girls were twice as likely to offer this as a reason than were boys. In the interviews, girls were critical of what they find themselves eating to stay in budget. They could afford the unhealthy items but if they ate healthy food, they could not afford as much.

A. *'You've got enough money to get something unhealthy, sausage rolls, spring rolls, burgers.'*

B. *'Which is annoying 'cos if you want to get something healthy then I think like, you should be able to, because that's obviously better for you but you're persuaded to get something*

A. *'Because you get more.'* [Year 9 girls]

*'Since I went on the dinner ticket I, I think lots of people, have put on lots of weight because of how much of the junk food there is.'* [Year 10]

Schools varied in the extent to which they actively attempted to encourage healthy eating. The head teacher of one school explained;

*'The school tries to do the 'healthy eating thing' but in the end there has to be a compromise between that and giving them something they will eat.'*

A parent at that school supported the head's account. Parents had complained about the emphasis on a 'chips and gravy' diet. The cafeteria manager had attempted to improve the options, but demand had dropped and she had returned to the less healthy menus. The mother explained that she tried hard to provide a healthy diet at home but was appalled at what her children were eating at school.

In two schools, using the same contractor, pupils spoke about the choices they could make between the different types of meals provided - Traditional Tastes, Fast Fillers, a Meal Deal (usually a burger, chips and a drink) and Healthy Hits. One of the schools attempted to encourage the take up of the Healthy Hits by awarding points to the pupils who chose them and giving prizes of CD tokens to those with most points. At the other school, there was no sign of particular encouragement to choose healthy meals, with posters by the serving hatch advertising the chip baps.

One parent describing the restricted choice available to her daughter on free school meals, believed that schools, when providing the free school meal, were missing an opportunity to educate the school population to better eating habits.

*'They need to be learning about nutrition in secondary school, not just shoving food down their throats.'*

- **The value of the meal ticket should permit pupils to make healthy choices and to buy sufficient items to satisfy**

### the statutory requirements for balanced meals

Four secondary schools reported rules, instigated by either the school or the LEA, that the free school meal must include at least one protein item, although this applied to pupils in Years 7-9 only in one school. The other secondary schools reported no restrictions and indeed, in those with cashless cafeterias, such restrictions would be unworkable.

A. *'You have to buy at least a sandwich or a hot food. You can't like just buy chocolate because they have a go at you.'*

B. *'You either have to have a sandwich, a salad or some hot food with a drink.'*

C. *'You're not allowed to have a doughnut, crisps and a chocolate bar.'*  
[Year 7s]

Pupils felt that at times these restrictions were too inflexible especially if they had brought in a home made sandwich to supplement their lunch and they were forced to buy another.

*'Sometimes you might bring your own sandwiches in. I think we should have the choice ourselves, because if we want to eat unhealthily then we should be able to and if we just want to, get an apple and a bottle of water.'*

### 4.6 Catering for special dietary requirements

Pupils on free school meals who are vegetarian or require special diets for cultural or medical reasons reported facing additional problems around restricted choices. Unless they arrived promptly at the cafeteria when it first opened for lunch, there might be little or nothing left to eat which fitted with their special requirements. A parent whose daughter had an allergy to dairy products found problems with the cafeteria running out of items she could eat. This meant

that she tended to eat the same thing almost everyday.

*'She can't eat pizza because of the cheese so that restricts the choice. She doesn't eat chips out of choice, so it's jacket potato almost everyday.'*

The problem could be acute in schools where pupils with dietary restrictions based on religious grounds form an isolated minority. In one primary school, with pupils from 24 different countries and over 50% of pupils from families where English was not the first language, there were no problems. The school insisted that the menu offered no items containing pork or beef and there was always at least one vegetarian main dish, more often two.

However in School 4, with 5% of pupils from households where English is not their first language, pupils raised more serious issues around restricted choice. Coupled with the limitation that she must purchase a protein item, one girl recounted how she found herself forced to buy items containing pork which she was unable to eat.

*'It's sausage rolls and hot dogs and that bacon thing they do. It's all pork. Sometimes if there's not many savoury stuff left and if you're Muslim and you can't buy pork, they make you buy pork.'* [Year 9]

There were similar problems for vegetarians, with only a limited range and often a very repetitive menu.

*'The poor vegetarians, there's only two or three things they can actually have and it tastes so foul.'* [Year 12]

As one parent with two children taking free school meals observed:

*'There's always chips on. We have a varied diet at home, couscous, pasta,*

*rice but they prefer chips, so it's pizza, burger and chips They tend to get chips and gravy. Mainly because there's nothing vegetarian on offer, no one wants a baked potato everyday. There's not a lot of vegetables'*

- **Schools need to monitor that the range of food offered provides sufficient choice and variety for free school meal pupils with special and/or restricted diets**

### 4.7 Free packed lunches

In common with many primary and middle schools, Schools 8, 9 and 10, had no hot meal service and children brought a packed lunch from home or were supplied with a free packed meal. This study provides evidence from both parents and pupils that schools offering only a packed lunch are likely to have lower take up of free school meals than schools offering a hot meal.

Both children and parents have positive perceptions of the value of hot food. Children in the primary schools with only a packed meal discussed how they were looking forward to attending the secondary school where there would be a cafeteria. Secondary schools serving these primary schools were very conscious that their new intake of pupils had no culture of a hot meal at lunchtime and that children who had previously not registered for free meals took up their free meal option when they moved on to secondary school.

- A. *'It's a novelty having a hot meal'*
  - B. *'People need a hot meal midday'*
  - C. *'It's good to have something hot.'*
- [Year 7 pupils]

One mother of a primary school pupil believed that younger children were more in need of a hot meal at midday than older children.

*'I think they have got it the wrong way round. It's more important for younger children to have a meal, younger children need the meal, yet it isn't like that. The meals are in the secondary schools – they've done it the wrong way round.'*

Pupils appeared knowledgeable about the content of the supplied free packed lunches, even in School 8 where only a handful of children ever took the free provision. In the schools visited, the packed lunches contained a well balanced meal, offering a round of sandwiches, cake, biscuit or pudding, a drink and fruit. Some contained items which were coveted by children bringing home made lunches. However when asked if they would have the free packed lunch, pupils were generally very hesitant, expressing a much repeated fear that the bag might contain items that they did not like. Although few primary school children prepared their own packed lunches at home, they usually had some say in what their parents packed for them. This lack of any choice or control over the content of the free packed meal worried many children.

*'Cos you've got stuff which is already made and you can't really choose, like you can at home. And also it's not always that nice stuff.'* [Year 5]

*'The stuff, you don't really know what's going to be in it, in the sandwiches, Sometimes they do one buttered sandwich and tuna mayonnaise sandwich. I don't fancy it very much.'* [Year 6]

- A. *'Cos there might be stuff that you don't want, all wrapped up so you don't know what's in there.'*
- B. *'And there might be stuff that you are allergic and you don't realise.'*
- A. *'Parents know what you like and don't like so they don't put the other'*

[Year 4 pupils]

Parents too, shared these reservations, especially as they were aware of their children's own preferences and dislikes. One mother with a daughter in Year 1 had not applied for her free lunch. Describing her daughter as 'faddy', she preferred to pack a lunch that she knew her daughter would eat rather than have her eat nothing.

Another mother who had similarly declined free meals expressed her concerns that the packed lunches needed to be presented differently for the youngest children, with food cut up for them, especially the fruit which was difficult to tackle whole.

Both children and parents talked about supplementing the packed lunch with additional items from home. One mother always sent additional food because her son did not eat the prepared sandwiches. Pupils talked about having tried the free packed lunches in the past but giving up, not because they were no longer eligible, but because the meal was not what they wanted.

*'Mum said you don't really eat anything out of it 'cos its mostly things you don't like in there. So that's why we started bringing our own.'* [Year 5]

*'No, I've had it before and I don't like it because they forced me to eat it'.  
[What did it have in it?]  
'Cold milk, cold pizza, sandwiches with sausages in and I don't like bread  
[Year 4]*

Seven, of the 11 parents interviewed who had not applied for free meals despite current or past eligibility, commented that they had never applied because, as only a packed lunch was on offer, they could provide that themselves.

*'They won't get what they want and if you can't give them sandwiches and a yoghurt and something, it's a poor do. And the sandwiches did look revolting, they weren't made on the premises.'*

One mother remarked that her daughter brought home the remains of her free packed lunch everyday. She herself had tried the sandwiches and admitted that they did taste horrible, having taken on the taste of their plastic packaging.

*'The sandwiches tend to leak and go soggy, they don't look appealing- if they prepared them in the school then they might be fresher and better. She brings home what she leaves and we throw it away, which is a waste.'*

Although schools which provided only packed meals were aware that parents did not apply for free meals, there was often a reticence to acknowledge the underlying problem, the quality of the provision on offer. One mother highlighted this point when she described the school's reaction when her Year 6 daughter was seen by the school to be regularly throwing most of her free packed lunch away. The school rang the parent because they were anxious that her daughter might be dieting. The mother explained that her daughter had a good appetite and ate well at home and now at her new school enjoyed her free meal everyday.

*'If it had been good food she would have eaten it, as she does now at secondary school where she can get a proper meal, roast dinners, for her meal ticket.'*

### 4.8 Positive responses to improve take up

Two primary schools, aware of the issues around limited choice in the supplied packed lunches had taken steps to improve the provision and to increase the take up of free meals.

#### *Making the packed lunch in school*

School 10 had dispensed with the outside contractor supplying the packed meals and used the delegated budget to employ a lunchtime assistant to prepare the packed meals. The number of pupils applying for free school meals had increased by less than expected, a modest 1% since this step was taken. Half those known to be eligible were still not taking up their free provision. As the budget for the expected increase in take up had been allocated for the year, the additional funds were being used to make the free packed lunches better quality than they might have been had every eligible pupil taken up the provision. Even so, because this school is in an LEA with one of the lowest free lunch allowances, the lunches were still far from lavish.

By taking the step of producing lunches on site, the school felt that it could address the issues around lack of choice for their pupils. The head teacher and the sandwich maker believed that the system gave pupils the opportunity to “effectively negotiate” what they wanted in their sandwiches. Initial consultations with pupils meant that those who expressed their views influenced the type of packed lunch produced. The sandwich-maker felt confident that she was responding to the children’s wishes. However the pupils felt these consultations needed to take place frequently so that changes of opinion about what they wanted to eat could be catered for, much like they would if their lunches were prepared at home;

*‘They could have a list of things you’d like in your sandwiches, and you could*

*tick off what you’d like for the next day,*

*‘Yes, they could have a chart so you’d fill in what you’d like on Monday, Tuesday*

One mother who had visited the school since the change, commented on the improved quality of the sandwiches – in her view they were now ‘good enough to eat’.

#### *Converting to a hot meal*

School 11 had converted from packed lunches to providing a hot meal. In common with many schools, the hot meal service had been withdrawn in the early nineties and all the kitchen space reallocated to other use. However a new head teacher and school governors had decided to reinstate the hot meal service, primarily to increase the percentage of pupils taking free school meals, but also because they were committed to providing a hot meal during the winter months.

After consultation with parents to assess that there would be adequate demand, an outside contractor had been found who would fulfil the requirements of the school and would cover all the capital expense necessary. The meal is cooked off site and brought into school. The only accommodation required by the contractor was a room for washing up. The servery was constructed at one end of the main hall where children eat their meal. The contractors set up the system during the summer break.

By the second term, 180 children were regularly taking the daily hot meal, a meal which conformed to the new nutritional standards. The number of free school meals rose in one term from 24 to 62, and the school achieved its principal objective of reaching its next benchmark percentage for its PANDA.

- **Schools can improve take up by providing free school meals that children and parents value**

## 5 Stigma

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Stigma is considered to be a key factor in limiting take up of free school meals. Both pupils and parents when asked to suggest reasons why people did not take up their free provision, mentioned embarrassment or fear of being teased only slightly less frequently than they talked about the quality or the lack of choice of the food. In the pupil questionnaire survey, a third of pupils identified this as an issue, with pupils on free school meals just as likely as other pupils to record this.

Parents often recalled events from their own time at school;

*'I don't like people knowing my business. I'm of the opinion that it's none of the school's business. I can remember the situation in the 80s, I'm going from my own bad experiences. Free school meals, it was the same as the National Health spectacles syndrome.'*

*'When I went to school, people used to take the micky. Parents remember that. I've a friend whose children could have free meals but she doesn't apply. She remembers that.'*

These memories coloured parents' perception of what happens in school today. Parents who are or were eligible but had not even discussed the option with their children, spoke of wanting to protect their children from being 'different or feeling that they were not like other children.

The case study schools generally felt that they were successfully addressing issues which might give rise to any pupils being stigmatised. However some were more successful than others and there were two principal areas in which discriminatory practices were common:

systems of payment for cafeteria meals, and the storage and presentation of free packed lunches.

### 5.1 Systems of payment

Schools 11,12 and 13 (all primary schools) provided only a set meal at a fixed price, so there were no problems of pupils being 'different' because of the methods of payment. The systems in these schools for collecting money were along traditional lines with children either bringing dinner money in an envelope once a week or parents sending cheques to cover longer periods. No one except office staff knew who had and who had not paid and dinner supervisors were supplied with lists of children having dinner with no identification relating to payment.

In Schools 1 –5 with cash cafeteria systems, pupils having free meals were more obvious. At School 2 and School 4, pupils having free meals received tickets each day and used these for payment at the till. At Schools 1,3 and 5, pupils gave their names to the till operators who were supplied with lists of pupils registered for free school meals. Pupils interviewed at these schools said that systems which required them to identify themselves to dinner staff, and therefore indirectly to other pupils nearby, could be embarrassing. In schools with a ticket system, pupils felt that lists would be better and in schools with lists, pupils believed that a ticket system would be less embarrassing.

Schools which used tickets gave these out each day, often at break time. School 4 had tried giving out a whole week's tickets at one time but had discontinued the practice, except for the sixth form, because of problems with lost or mislaid tickets. Although tickets were anonymous in that pupils did not have to make

themselves known at the till but just gave in the ticket, pupils found the process embarrassing, as was queuing to get the ticket in the first place. One mother described her daughters feeling:

*'People are embarrassed but they don't need to be at primary school, because no one knows. There's no need to be embarrassed, they all go in with their peers. But at secondary school, other children do know, they get these tickets and you can get more bothered as you get older. My daughter, who has now left school, she didn't like queuing up to get a ticket, but my son has no problems. He says 'There are lots of people having it.' But queuing for the ticket at break bothers him, because he likes to play football then.'*

Tickets have the disadvantage (or perhaps advantage) that they can be sold to other pupils and there was evidence in some schools of a steady trade in tickets.

*'People sell their tickets. They prefer to go up the field and have a smoke, buy some sweets.'* [Year 9]

*'I've done it a couple of times. You can sell them for a £1.'*  
*[Why did you do that?]*  
*'When I've wanted the money for something else, to buy a birthday card or something.'* [Year 9]

Alternatively, the list system has the advantage that pupils do not have to queue twice, (once for tickets and again for the meal) and there are no tickets to sell. (Not all opportunities for creativity are lost however and pupils reported impersonating absent friends or going through the system twice using different tills.)

For some, the process of having to give their names was humiliating. Some till staff got to know which pupils were on free meals so that there was no need to give names, whilst others,

because of the high number of pupils on free meals or a turnover of till staff did not, so that pupils had to give names every time.

*A. 'It's embarrassing, cos you have to stand there and get your name ticked off. The dinner ladies still don't know me after two years'*

*B. 'They could be more discreet. They just sit there and say 'Name please' and just tick it off and everyone's looking.'*

*C. 'It would be better if they know who you was, so that you could just walk by, rather than standing there waiting for them to tick the list.'* [Year 9 group]

One group of pupils observed how this was difficult for people to get used to, especially when they were new to the system.

*A. 'You can see that some people are really nervous when they go to get it.'*

*B. 'Especially in Year 7, you can see them they say 'Free school meals' and they are nervous.'* [Year 10]

*'My friend has free school meals and he didn't eat for the first two weeks of term here. And then his brother had to take him and make him.'* [Year 8]

Smart card systems are becoming increasingly popular as a means of eliminating the need for lists or tickets. School 6 and School 7 had recently introduced these systems, having been required to do so by their LEA. Administrative staff from both schools considered that the system worked well and was an improvement. Not only were pupils who had free school meals less conspicuous but there were additional benefits that cafeteria staff did not have to handle money. Opportunities for stealing, loss of dinner money and bullying were reduced. At School 6 the percentage registered for free school meals was 33% and at School 7, 8%. Both schools believed this to be an accurate reflection of eligibility. In neither school, however, had the percentage of pupils applying

for free school meals immediately increased with the introduction of the anonymous swipe cards.

One pupil, not on free school meals, explained how the system worked;

*'There's this machine we use. You swipe your card and put money in, and then you press this button and the money's on your card.'*

Pupils with free school meals had their cards credited with the daily free meal allowance each day after 11.30 a.m., to prevent spending of lunch money at break time. Any money left unspent was not carried over to the following day, although additional money could be charged to cards if pupils wished to supplement the free provision.

Although the cards were popular with most, a few, non free school meal pupils pointed out the drawbacks for them. They had to queue twice - once to charge the card and once to get the dinner. Lost cards cost £2 to replace and this acted as a disincentive to use the cafeteria since, once cards were lost, they did not always bother to replace them and so could not buy a school meal.

However, all the pupils interviewed agreed that the system disguised those receiving free school meals.

*'People used to just walk past the counter and say their name and not pay, and that's why they changed it, so now no-one knows if you don't pay.'*

Parents too were aware of the advantage of anonymity that the cards provided and felt reassured that their children would no longer be marked out as taking free meals;

*'They're worried that they will be teased, though now they've got the card*

*no-one knows. Who knows who has free meals and who doesn't.'*

*'I think I would now, the other children don't know, because they've got this*

- **Non-discriminatory payment systems help reduce embarrassment and stigma**

## 5.2 The problem of packed lunches

Schools recognised that free packed lunches could raise discrimination issues. Free packed lunches were generally delivered to School 8 and School 9 each morning. Distinctively packaged, they were identifiable by all pupils, even in School 8 where only a handful of children ever took the free meal. The delivered meals were either kept in the fridge or in a cool box provided by the supplier until the distribution at lunchtime. Similarly School 10 producing its own in-house packed lunches was obliged to keep the provided sandwiches at the correct temperature. This practise contrasted with the treatment of packed lunches brought from home which were usually stored in their individual lunchboxes in a corner of the classroom.

Two mothers who had not applied for free meals for their children, despite their eligibility, raised their concerns about the high profile of the free packed lunches in their distinctive bags. They both felt that their children would feel different and that they might be subject to stigmatisation. As one said, had there been a hot meal system in the school *which would not have distinguished* who was having free school meals, then she would have taken up the entitlement.

One primary school had attempted to address the issue of the distinctive packaging by encouraging all pupils to bring their own lunchbox to school. Those receiving free school meals left their boxes by the school office where

the delivered meal was repacked in each child's own box in time for the midday break. The school was aware that leaving their boxes in a special place distinguishes children, but believed that as the supplied lunches had to be kept cool until lunchtime, they could not resolve the issue in a less discriminating way. However several parents who were interviewed were unhappy with the practice and had not taken up the free meal.

*'I didn't want them feeling different, because they are dished out from the office. It was my pride, I'm not having any of that.'*

The only resolution to this problem is probably that all packed lunches, whether from home or a commercial supplier, should be stored each morning in suitable refrigeration or cool boxes. One parent governor who was not herself eligible suggested that it might be better for schools with only a few children registered for the free packed lunch to abandon the whole process and give parents the financial equivalent to provide their own packed lunches for their children.

*'It's unlikely we'd ever apply, even if we could. It's a bit obvious, especially at the primary school. Not very many children take them but everyone knows, So-and-So gets their lunch from the office. Where there are so few, would it be better to give a cash allowance so that parents could provide their own sandwiches?'*

One LEA had adopted that policy in the past, to address the problem of providing small numbers of meals to isolated rural schools. However as the legislation clearly states that a meal must be provided and a cash payment cannot be made in lieu of a meal, the LEA had returned to providing the packed lunches.

- **Schools need to make free packed meals less readily identifiable**

### 5.3 Being different

Although many schools continue to operate systems that do mark out pupils taking free school meals, the study suggested that the consequences of this discrimination may vary. In the survey, pupils at Schools 1-5 (with discriminatory payment systems) are just as likely as those at Schools 6-7 (with cashless systems) to suggest stigma as a reason for pupils not taking free meals. (The cashless systems had only recently been introduced in Schools 6-7 and pupils may have been thinking more widely than current experience in their own school.) The interview data suggest that at schools with higher proportions registered and taking their free meal, embarrassment or stigma was not identified by pupils as a reason for not taking the meal. However, in some, but not all, schools where only a few pupils were registered, pupils admitted that there were problems. From pupils' own accounts, there appears to be security in numbers.

*'I know someone in Year 5, he doesn't have school meals because he's too embarrassed because hardly anyone has them.'* [Year 4]

*'There's three other people in my form and I'm fine with it. At the end of the day, you get your food. That's the main'* [Year 9]

Such views were echoed in parents' accounts;

*'There's no problem with stigma, as there are a lot of single mothers in the area.'*

*'Stigma? No, there's that many people on benefits now.'*

At School 9, where over 11% of pupils took the free packed lunch, none of the pupils interviewed mentioned embarrassment or stigma as being a problem. The school made no attempt to disguise the free packed meals in

*ask. It saves hassle to pay for it  
yourself.'*

For older pupils, there were more issues around what people thought rather than what they actually said. Both parents and pupils described worries and feelings about being perceived as 'lower' or inferior;

*'My daughter, she says 'I feel guilty even though other girls get it. The people's faces in the canteen, the way they look at you.' It doesn't put her off. I say to her 'You're entitled.'*

*'And they don't want to seem lower, like lower than their friends. Like people will think that they are really poor and that.'* [Year 7]

*'People just think that if you're on free school meals you're going to be a one-sock person, they think that you're not very nice and that your parents just can't be bothered to get a job or somethink. But that's not the case in most situations.'* [Year 7]

*'Some of my friends, they think like, they have a bad life, not life, that taking a ticket means you have a bad home life and they sort of try to be like everyone else and they don't have it.'* [Year 8]

This was not a universal feeling. During interviews with pupils having their home made packed lunches in schools offering hot meals, pupils commented that they would like to have the hot meal but their family could not afford it, particularly where there were other children in the family. They had enquired about free meals and had been disappointed not to be eligible. One boy, at a school where eligibility was high, said he would like to have free school meals if he could as;

*'All my friend tell me how nice it is.'*

Several pupils from both secondary and primary schools suggested that if free school meals were more widely available then there would be fewer problems around stigma and people feeling different.

*'I think if they do it, they should do it for nearly all the school because*

*otherwise people feel that they are different.'* [Year 9]

*'I think the school should try to include everyone, because they do it for people who are single parented but they don't do it for people who have two parents who both work who are poor. It's like if they both work they will have enough money and stuff like that.'* [Year 6]

As issues around teasing and stigma were more often voiced in schools where registered eligibility was low, widening eligibility for more pupils to have free meals might reduce these problems and improve take up by all. In the interviews, parents on Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) commented that they could not afford for their children to have school meals everyday. Although WFTC includes a notional element in lieu of free school meals, parents were not always aware of that. They commented that moving from Income Support to WFTC had meant that their children now took packed lunches. One mother of a primary pupil, previously having free school meals, believed a hot meal would be better for her son at midday, rather than waiting until she arrived home from work to prepare one.

*'As a working parent, it would be a benefit for him and for me to have a hot meal in school. It's late by the time I get home to cook. If he had a lunchtime meal and came home to have a snack, it would be better'.*

*'I'm worse off now on family credit. They say you'll be better off, but before I didn't have to pay towards the rent or Council Tax or school meals. You can earn £57, but when you work it out, you're working for almost nothing.'*

- **Problems of embarrassment and stigma which attach to free school meals might reduce if more pupils took up their entitlement.**

## 6 Conclusions and recommendations

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This short exploratory study reveals substantial evidence of parents and pupils not taking up their entitlement to free school meals. Schools often fail to tackle the problem of poor take up in the mistaken belief that low take up reflects parents reticence to apply because of pride and concerns about stigma. Whilst this may be true for some parents who fear that their child will be marked out as different at school, for many the overwhelming reasons relate to the quality of the meal offered and a lack of information about how the free meals system works.

The study has highlighted the diversity of meal provision, whether free or paid, which is currently on offer to pupils. The evidence within this report raises questions of how compulsory nutritional standards for school meals will impact on the school cafeteria, and more importantly, on pupils. In addition to the introduction of the new standards, there is a recommendation that a two course meal should be available for pupils on free school meals. If school meals are to play a role in promoting good health and addressing social disadvantage, then perhaps now is the time for substantive study, in terms of scale and scope, to identify successful strategies and models of good practice for the take up of healthy balanced meals by all school pupils.

This research suggests that schools can successfully improve take up by addressing discriminatory practices and by providing quality meals which parents and pupils will want to take. However, there is currently little incentive for schools to increase take up of free meals. If take up is to improve, then the ways by which schools could be motivated to adopt good practices need to be explored and implemented.

### 6.1 Selling free school meals

The study suggests that schools and benefits agencies do not always inform parents about their entitlement to free school meals. Some parents 'fall through the system' and remain unaware that the provision is available for their children. Even parents who do know that they are eligible are put off from applying because they do not know how the system works or how free school meals operate in their child's school.

- Schools, LEAs and Benefit Offices need to ensure that parents are aware of their eligibility. Regular reminders are needed from schools to ensure that if parents' circumstances change, they are aware of their entitlement and how to make an application.
- Schools need to reassure parents about how free school meals are organised in the school. Parents need to know that their children will not be identified as different, and that they will still have the flexibility to alter their arrangements on a day-to-day basis if they wish.
- Schools need to 'sell' the free school meal option to parents. They should let parents see what is on offer as a free meal and stress the value, nutritionally and financially. This is more likely to be successful if the meal is also attractive to a majority of children who pay.
- Schools may need to work harder when only a minority of pupils qualify for free lunch, because there is less likely to be a 'grapevine' of information.

### 6.2 Making the registration process easy

As all parents on the qualifying benefits are entitled to free meals for their school age children, agencies should be working together with the LEA to develop direct systems of registration and confirmation of continued eligibility. Meantime, access to the registration process should be as widely publicised as possible.

- Parents should be able to complete the registration process either at school, a central office or by post, whichever is the best option for them.
- Parents should be able to confirm their continuing eligibility at the school, at the central office or by post so that children do not have to go without a meal.
- Registration for free school meals should be directly available for parents on the required benefits without further form-filling.
- Free school meals should be provided as soon as parents make the application.

### 6.3 Providing a quality meal in congenial surroundings

Often the choices available in school, particularly in secondary school cafeterias, are unsuitable, with unhealthy options and a restricted and repetitive range of food. Overcrowded dining rooms and long queues deter pupils from taking their meal in school, especially if their friends bring a packed lunch from home and eat elsewhere. Schools that only offer a packed lunch are unlikely to maximise take up.

- Schools can improve take up by providing meals that children and parents value. If the outside caterer's

meal is unsatisfactory, schools should explore producing a cooked meal or packed lunches in school to improve quality.

- Schools should check regularly that meal ticket value keeps pace with cafeteria prices and purchases a full meal.
- The value of the meal ticket should permit pupils to make healthy choices. Healthy food should be available for all pupils, not just those who arrive at the cafeteria first.
- School should monitor that the range of food offered provides sufficient choice and variety for free school meals pupils who follow restricted diets.
- Having a free school meal should not prevent pupils from eating with their friends who bring packed lunch from home. If dining space does not permit those taking hot meals to sit with packed lunch pupils, cafeterias should provide the equivalent of a packed meal which pupils can take out to eat with friends.
- Schools need to establish systems for checking if pupils take the meals they are registered for and if they are not, sensitively and without pressurising pupils, find out the reason.

### 6.4 Addressing discriminatory practices

Even schools which believe they are providing fair and non-discriminatory arrangements for free school meals, continue to operate systems which make pupils on free school meals readily identifiable. Whilst there may be no overt teasing, name calling or bullying in the school, pupils sensitive about receiving free provision may prefer not to take up their entitlement if they think others are aware that they do.

## Conclusions and recommendations

- Schools with cafeteria systems should where possible introduce cashless systems such as smart cards to help eliminate identification at the tills.
- Schools with low eligibility for free meals and providing only packed lunches should reduce the high profile of the free meals by encouraging pupils to bring their own lunchboxes for the free meal and storing all packed meals together.
- Schools need to be vigilant to discourage teasing and name calling of pupils on free school meals especially where take up is low and free school meal pupils more isolated.

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## Appendix 1: The case study schools.

Thirteen schools were selected for the case studies in seven LEAs. In five LEAs, both a secondary and a feeder middle or primary school were selected for inclusion.

**Table A 1 Case Study Schools**

LEA	School	Type	Total pupils	% registered for free meals	
A	1	Secondary	1200	4	Rural town school. Lists at till for free school meals.
B	2	Secondary	1400	13	Large town school with ticket system for free school meals. School run cafeteria
C	3	Secondary	1000	13	Small town with lists at till for free school meals.
D	4	Secondary	1100	9	Suburban school with ticket system. 5% of pupils EAL
E	5	Secondary	1150	26	City secondary with cafeteria. Lists for free school meals. LEA operated cafeteria
F	6	Secondary	900	33	City school with cashless cafeteria
F	7	Secondary	800	6	City school with cashless cafeteria
A	8	Primary	150	3	Rural school with packed lunches only
B	9	Middle	600	11	Large town. Packed lunches only
C	10	Middle	222	9	Small town school producing in house free packed lunches
D	11	Primary	450	14	Suburban primary. Hot meal brought in
E	12	Primary	201	36	City school, hot meal cooked on the premises
G	13	Primary	185	55	Inner city school with over 50% EAL. Hot meal brought in

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire survey and interviews with pupils

Questionnaires were completed by 474 pupils attending the seven secondary case study schools. These questionnaires provided data on daily lunchtime arrangements, such as how many pupils regularly used the school cafeteria and how much was usually spent there at lunchtime. It also asked pupils the reasons why pupils might not take up free meals and what aspects of their school encouraged or discouraged the take up of free meals.

**Table A.2.1 Questionnaire survey pupils by school and school year**

Year	School							total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
7	18				12	20		50
8		22	14	22	20	24		102
9	1	21	39			27	27	115
10	22	11	29	25		24	29	140
11		11		27		18		56
12/13			3					3
Year not recorded	5		1		1	1		8
Total	46	65	86	74	33	114	56	474

### Interviews with pupils

Interviews were conducted to collect the view and experiences of pupils. They covered similar issues to the survey questionnaire but in particular provided the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding around the issues limiting the take up of free meals.

**Table A 2. 2 Pupils interviewed in secondary and primary middle schools**

Pupils interviewed in	Secondary	Primary/middle
Formal groups	168	43
Informal groups	27	58
Individual telephone	13	
Total	208	111

There were three types of interviews, formal groups, informal groups and individual interviews by telephone

- **Formal groups.** Some schools were able to provide the option for the researchers to have small groups of pupils from 2-3 to 6 in size to discuss the school meals provided and the specific issue of free school meals. At one school, two whole classes were given over to the researcher so that opportunities for small group discussions were limited.
- **Informal groups over the lunch period.** Researchers spoke to pupils over lunch at the same time as observing cafeteria and dining room practises.

- ***Individual interviews by telephone.*** The questionnaires completed by secondary pupils provided the option to complete a section for those who were happy to speak to a researcher again.

## Appendix 3: Parent interviews

The case study schools forwarded letters to a sample of parents, explaining the aims of the study and inviting parents to contact the research team. Initially, 100 letters were sent out at each school but because of the low response, this was increased to 200 in secondary schools and 150 in each primary /middle school. Respondents were contacted by telephone for a short semi structured interview. At the end of each successful interview, parents were asked if they could put the researchers in touch with other parents and this snowball technique provided a further opportunity to access parents.

As it was necessary to obtain parental consent to speak to pupils who had volunteered for telephone interviews, some additional parents were interviewed at that time.

A total of 51 parents, mainly mothers (only one father) provided an interview. Because of the snowball technique and as there were often children in the family attending schools not included in the case study, parents sometimes raised issues which related to other schools.

**Table A. 3 Parents interviewed by eligibility for free school meals**

Parents' entitlement to free school meals	
Currently eligible	
All children taking free school meals	19
Some taking free school meals	1
None taking free school meals	2
Eligible in the past but not now	
Took free school meals	5
Did not take free school meals	9
Never eligible to free school meals	15
Total parents	51