

LONDON BOROUGH OF WALTHAM FOREST

Meeting / Date	SCHOOLS FORUM 12 February 2014	Agenda Item	7
Report Title	The Introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals from September 2014		
Decision/ Discussion/ Information	For Information and Discussion		
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Appendices	Appendix A: School Food Plan – summary and actions for headteachers Appendix B: Letter to Headteachers		

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 On 18 December 2013, Nick Clegg the Deputy Prime Minister announced that from September 2014 every child in reception, years 1 and 2 in state-funded schools would be able to sit down to a free school lunch, saving parents who currently pay for a school lunch over £400 a year per child. An additional 1.55m infants would benefit.
- 1.2 This report provides detailed information on the claimed educational benefits arising from this initiative and the impact that it may have in Waltham Forest. It draws upon information published by the DfE, published articles and information received from Linda Woods, Head of Catering Services within the Families Directorate.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Schools Forum notes:
 - 2.1.1 The Government proposals and rationale for the introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals from September 2014.
 - 2.1.2 Action being taken by the Local Authority and by Waltham Forest Catering to ensure that primary schools are ready to meet their legal commitment to provide free school meals to reception, year 1 and year 2 pupils from September 2014.

3. REASON

- 3.1 The introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals from September 2014 may have significant education benefits as well as financial implications for

primary schools and Academies in Waltham Forest. Therefore the Local Authority is informing Schools Forum on the proposals and seeking the views from schools and Academies on how all stakeholders can work closely together to ensure that there is a positive outcome.

4. BACKGROUND

The education argument from the Government

4.1 The evidence presented by the Government in support of Universal Infant Free School Meals includes:

- Pupils receiving healthy school meals were found to be on average 2 months ahead of their peers elsewhere.
- The universal entitlement pilot in three local authorities (one of which was Newham) led to around a 2 percentage point increase in children reaching target levels in maths and English at Key Stage 1; while at Key Stage 2 the impact on achievement was a 4 percentage point increase for English and 5.5 percentage points for maths.
- Academic improvements were most marked among children from less affluent families.
- There was a 26 percentage point increase in the number of children eating vegetables at lunch and an 18 percentage point drop in those eating crisps
- Schools also reported improved behaviour and atmosphere as a result of all pupils (and an increasing number of teachers) eating together every day.

4.2 Greater depth on the benefits arising from the initiative are set out in the School Food Plan (www.schoolfoodplan.com/universal-free-school-meals) which is largely written for headteachers. It was published in July 2013 and the Government have adopted many of the action points set out in the Plan. The full plan is 149 pages long but the introduction and action points for headteachers at the beginning is attached as **Appendix A** to this report.

Details of the Initiative

4.3 On 23 January 2014, Michael Gove and David Laws wrote to all Local Authority Directors of Children's Services and to Headteachers with infant pupils giving more information about the initiative. The letter sent to headteachers (but not governors) is attached as **Appendix B**. The key points again are:

- Over **£1 billion** in revenue funding available over the next two years.
- Capital funding of **£150m** (announced first in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement) to enable all schools and Academies to expand their kitchens and dining facilities where needed. Each Local Authority will decide how best to target its share of the funding which is based on the number of infant

pupils they have. The portion for Academies will be delivered through the Academies Capital Maintenance Fund.

- Legislation through the Children and Families Bill will place a legal duty on primary schools to offer free meals to reception, year 1 and year 2 pupils from September 2014 and will also enable the initiative to be extended to additional year groups in the future.
- Existing entitlements to free school meals for disadvantaged pupils in nursery classes and at key stages 2-4 will continue as now.
- Revenue funding will be allocated to schools on a flat rate of £2.30 per meal taken, based on actual take-up by newly eligible infant pupils which will be measured in the Schools Census from next year (e.g. October 2014).
- For smaller schools it is recognised that they face particular challenges and therefore transitional funding totalling £22.5m will be provided for 2014-15. (School Food Plan defines these as those serving fewer than 100 school meals a day and therefore rarely break even because of high fixed costs.)
- Funding will be paid in arrears. (Mechanism for this is not yet clear).

Comments on the proposals for Universal Infant Free School Meals

4.4 There have been significant comments expressed about this particular initiative. These are just a few of them:

- That there is an opportunity cost in that it diverts funding which could have been allocated to increasing resources in the classroom and therefore directly contributing to raising pupil performance.
- That it will increase administrative costs in recording additional school meals and the number of mid-day assistants employed by schools.
- It will require the recruitment and training of school meals staff and the purchase of additional equipment at additional cost to schools.
- How certain can schools be that parents will want their children to receive a free school meal (and save money) rather than continue to provide a packed lunch.
- Evidence from the three pilot local authorities suggested that there was also an increase in other pupils in the school taking school meals.
- That there may be cash flow problems for schools in providing additional meals ahead of receiving additional funding from the Government.
- Some schools in the pilot local authorities have seen a drop-off in the take up of eligibility of free school meals as a consequence of this initiative and this has had some impact on eligibility of pupils for Pupil Premium and resultant funding for schools. The Government says in its letter to

headteachers that it encourages them to make sure that “your School Census return is accurate so that you receive your full allowance”. However, it also goes on to say that “we are considering their experience (local authorities providing free school meals to their primary pupils) and will set out our proposals in due course”.

- That the capital allocation is totally inadequate to meet deficiencies in kitchen and dining provision in many schools and the fact that some schools have no kitchens at all.
- That the agreed figure of £2.30 is the 2011-12 mean cost of production in England which means that for some schools and local authorities where costs are above this level, schools will have to subsidise these actual costs at the expense of other provision
- That there may not be sufficient new providers out there to respond to increased demand for school meals and that some existing contractors may cherry pick the more profitable schools.

Implications for Waltham Forest

- 4.6 Waltham Forest has received a total of **£0.621m** of capital funding of which **£0.086m** is for matched funding for voluntary aided schools. Schools have been asked to apply for additional funding and the Local Authority will determine where the funding will make the biggest difference. A programme of kitchen upgrades is already underway since the current SLA with Waltham Forest Catering enables 50% of any surplus made to be used to match fund equipment and kitchen improvements. The Local Authority has a good understanding of where further upgrades need to be made to ensure that kitchens and dining facilities in our primary schools are equipped to meet the increased demand from September 2014.
- 4.7 In Waltham Forest the biggest contractor for school meals is Waltham Forest Catering. However, a number of primary and secondary schools and Academies either provide their own catering service or buy it in from an external caterer. At the moment, Waltham Forest Catering is asking schools to sign a new four year service level agreement from April 2014 by 31 January 2014. The SLA provides a break clause which enables school or WFC to give at least 6 months' notice to end the SLA within the four year period.
- 4.8 In this report it is not possible to comment upon contractual arrangements which schools may have with other contractors; however it is possible to comment on how WFC will respond to the introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals.
- 4.9 In Waltham Forest current take up of primary school meals is 59% against 43% nationally. Twenty five percent of primary aged pupils are currently eligible for free school meals, so there is some scope for further increasing the take-up of infant school meals.

- 4.10 For 2013-14 WFC charges to maintained primary schools and Academies is within the agreed funding for UFSM's of £2.30 (excluding VAT payable by Academies). The Governing Body set the price charged for a school meal; most primary schools and Academies still charge parents £2 or under for a meal and the highest appears to be £2.20.
- 4.11 Thus there is an element of subsidy in some schools which would no longer have to be met if infant meals were free and funded at £2.30 by the Government. However, WFC has yet to set its rates for 2014-15 (these are usually reviewed in February each year) but they are not expected to differ significantly from those for 2013-14.
- 4.12 WFC is able to keep its charging rates relatively low compared with other contractors because of the economies of scale arising from the higher than national average take up of primary meals and the fact that it still provides a service for the majority of schools in Waltham Forest.
- 4.13 On the issue of the Government paying schools in arrears on actual take up of meals, this is mitigated in Waltham Forest by the fact that WFC invoices schools termly in arrears based on the number of meals served. Therefore, assuming that schools administration on recording meals is accurate and current, the possible cash flow impact on schools should be eased.
- 4.14 WFC will work with schools through the School Meals Consultation Group on which headteachers are represented to share emerging advice and guidance on issues such as lunch-time provision, queuing times and meal supervision.

5 CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Universal Infant Free School Meals is being implemented by the Government based on recommendations within the School Food Plan report. There has been no consultation with schools other than through the pilot projects. The Local Authority is using Schools Forum as a vehicle for raising discussion with schools and Academies on their views about this initiative and how the Local Authority can work with schools to ensure it has a positive outcome for pupil progress whilst addressing the financial and administrative challenges that it brings.