
Waltham Forest Town Hall, Fellowship Square, Forest Road, London E17 4JF

Date: 19th April 2023

To all Headteachers of primary aged pupils,

Re: Universal Primary Free School Meals - Initial Letter to Headteachers

Welcome back and I hope you were able to get a well deserved break over the Easter period. As you will be aware, the Mayor of London has pledged that every London primary school pupil will be able to get a free school meal in the next academic year.

While we wait for final details from the Mayor's Office (which we are expecting before the end of next week), I wanted to update you on some of the work that has been done in preparation of further information being received, what we currently know and don't know on the grant and other arrangements which will be required to deliver the project.

A small number of LAs in London already undertake a similar policy and we have been liaising with some of them to understand the risks and issues they have experienced. One thing they highlighted to us was the fact they experienced an increased uptake of meals across all primary year groups when they pursued a similar policy. This included an increased uptake of those already able to obtain a free meal via Universal Infant Free Schools Meals (UIFSM) funding. This will obviously have potential consequences for schools and their catering providers, around the possible need for extra staffing, refreshing equipment and space/capacity implications.

For further details, [please see the attached frequently asked questions \(FAQs\)](#) at the bottom of this letter, which we will update when more information is available.

We do not underestimate the scale of work involved for all schools and their catering providers given there are currently less than 13 schools week left before the policy will be delivered at the start of September. We will be in contact next week (in anticipation of receiving final / further details on the funding and any conditions attached to it) with more detailed communications. In the meantime, thank you in anticipation of engaging with the programme to ensure our children benefit from the offer being provided by the Mayor.

If you have any questions, please contact our Project Manager
andy.ruane@walthamforest.gov.uk.

Best regards,

Lauren M. Ovenden

Lauren Ovenden
Corporate Director of Education

Frequently Asked Questions - Universal Primary Free School Meals (18 April)

What are the changes and which pupils are affected?

The Mayor is to provide funding to London Boroughs to offer free school meals (FSM) to all primary aged children for the next academic year (starting September) who aren't currently eligible.

Currently, all children in Reception, Y1 and Y2 are offered a FSM nationally via the Universal Infant FSM (UIFSM) policy with funding going direct to schools from the DfE. Pupils in Y3-Y6 eligible for a FSM are also currently paid for by the DfE.

Therefore the Mayor's policy and funding will focus on pupils in Y3-Y6 who aren't currently eligible for a FSM. We currently estimate this cohort to be 9,422 pupils in Waltham Forest based on the latest census data from schools. For information, there are currently 23,521 primary aged pupils in Waltham Forest schools.

When are the changes to take affect?

The start of the next academic year in September. There are less than 13 full school weeks before the policy is to be delivered.

How much is the funding?

The latest information we have from the Mayor's Office is as follows:

*"In line with the LACA (Local Authority Caterers Association) recommendation, which considers the rising cost of food, we are exploring circa **£2.65 per meal**".*

At the moment we do not know what is and isn't included in this figure – i.e. includes set-up and implementation costs etc, or whether it will actually be the confirmed final figure.

What substantial information is the Council waiting to receive from the Mayor's Office?

The information we are currently waiting final confirmation on includes:

- Final confirmation of the school meal price (£2.65 expected)
- What does the school meal price include – just the meal price or set-up and other costs?
- If just the meal price, are there any implementation, infrastructure or set-up costs available? If so what?
- How will the funding be distributed – to LA or direct to schools?
- On what basis will the funding be allocated – i.e. 100% of those deemed eligible to the new funding or some other arrangement (and if so what?)?
- Will there be any kind of clawback or reimbursement arrangement based on actual numbers taking a meal?
- What is the exit strategy for the policy if only for one year?
- What are the monitoring and governance arrangements overall?

What learning do we have from LAs that have undertaken similar policies?

Some experienced an increased uptake of meals across all primary year groups when they pursued a similar policy. This included an increased uptake of those

already able to obtain a free meal via Universal Infant Free Schools Meals (UIFSM) funding.

For example, Tower Hamlets and Newham both have evidence showing that take-up across all primary pupils from their schemes are considerably higher than UIFSM and FSM eligibility take-up. Current take-up across all primary pupils for a free meal is in the 80% - 85% range in these two LAs.

What are the potential implications for catering providers (including schools who employ their own staff)?

This will obviously have potential consequences for schools and their catering providers, around the potential need for extra staffing, refreshing equipment and space/capacity implications.

Taking the Council's provider (WF Catering) as an example, should take-up rise to 80%-85% in primary schools as indicated in Tower Hamlets and Newham above, the total number of meals WF Catering would need to provide will increase by 30%-40% on a daily basis.

An increase of this magnitude would obviously have a range of operational issues not just for WF Catering, but for schools and other meal providers. WF Catering is currently actively recruiting to roles.

What work have the Council undertaken in advance of final details?

We have initiated the Universal Primary FSM Project Team is to provide strategic and operational governance of the whole project to ensure schools and service providers are able to provide a free school meal to all primary children who take up the offer from September 2023.

It is meeting every week to ensure progress is on track, agreed actions undertaken and all risks and issues are robustly considered and managed. It will take updates and information from relevant officers, services (internal and external) as well as schools, ensuring the project is considering all necessary evidence, with the goal of ensuring the provision of FSM for all primary pupils is in place from Sept 2023, while ensuring VFM.

It has been tasked with developing solutions to a range of considerations, including:

- Recruitment of staff
- Equipment needs
- Cost
- School operational issues and physical capacity
- Catering provider implications and issues
- Implications of how funding will be provided – e.g. via school, via LA etc

Who should I contact if I want further information?

If you have any questions, please contact our Project Manager andy.ruane@walthamforest.gov.uk.