



Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Maximising the benefits of universal primary free school meals

Roundtable summary

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The Wales Centre for Public Policy provides ministers, senior policy makers and public service leaders with authoritative independent evidence and expertise which helps them to identify effective policy responses and practical solutions to some of the biggest policy challenges facing Wales.

The Centre has worked on a wide range of policy challenges and is currently focusing in particular on developing fresh thinking about community wellbeing, the environment and net zero, and tackling inequalities.

It works in partnership with leading researchers and policy experts from around the world and draws on its work with the Welsh Government and public services to advance understanding of evidence-informed policy making and implementation. Through secondments, PhD placements and its Research Apprenticeship programme, it is equipping early career researchers to engage in policy relevant research.

The Centre is a member of the UK's What Works Network and part of the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) and connects policy makers and public service leaders in Wales with these additional sources of evidence and expertise.

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IPPO Mission



The International Public Policy Observatory aims to find, distil and share the best global evidence for policy and practice across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

It has been funded over a four-year period from 2020-2024 by the ESRC and is a collaboration between UCL, Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) at Cardiff University, University of Glasgow, Queen's University Belfast, the Evidence for Policy & Practice Information Centre (EPPI), the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), and academic news publisher The Conversation.

Established at the height of the global pandemic, the observatory was quick to produce reviews of evidence on topics such as the impact of school closures on children and young people in education for the UK Department of Education.

The team later widened its scope to explore the challenges posed by Net Zero, Covid Recovery, Place and Spatial Inequality and Socio-Economic Inequalities, and works with governments at the local, national and devolved level to help bring evidence into their policy development.

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Summary

- This report summarises findings from a roundtable event held by the Wales Centre for Public Policy and the International Public Policy Observatory in June 2024. It builds on previous work by WCPP examining the rollout of Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) in Wales.
- Participants discussed three main topics related to the broader policy implications of UPFSM:
 - How **nutritional and environmental standards** can support the success of UPFSM;
 - The effects of UPFSM on tackling **poverty, poverty stigma and disadvantage**; and
 - Potential **longer-term benefits** of UPFSM.
- Participants emphasised the importance of combining high nutritional standards with meals that are appealing to children and offer a good level of choice.
- Current arrangements were seen as frequently suboptimal, with issues including time pressures, multiple lunchtime shifts, and excessive time spent queuing.
- Capital investment and training aimed at improving school meal environments were viewed as essential for increasing the uptake of UPFSM.
- The financial benefits for parents and the potential to improve relationships where parents have been in meal debt were also highlighted.
- There is potential for UPFSM to tackle poverty stigma, although the extent and dynamics of how stigma is experienced, and by whom, remain under-researched.
- Longer-term issues include the transition from free to paid meals for older pupils and how this is managed.
- The Welsh policy and legislative framework presents opportunities for cross-cutting and coordinated interventions.
- Finally, participants highlighted the need for further research to address evidence gaps, especially regarding the views of pupils, staff, and leaders on maximising the policy's benefits. The specific characteristics of individual school environments should also be investigated further.

Introduction

The Welsh Government has committed to rolling out universal primary free school meals (UPFSM) to all primary-aged children by December 2024. To support this policy's implementation, the Welsh Government commissioned the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) to conduct research on:

- The costs faced by local authorities in rolling out UPFSM, and how these may have changed over time; and
- The wider benefits of UPFSM provision, including benefits accruing to individual learners, and the wider policy co-benefits that could arise.

WCPP has researched the costs incurred by local authorities during the rollout's initial phase (Price, 2024) and commissioned an evidence review examining the effects of universal school meal provision across various nations (James, 2024). To further explore the implications of UPFSM provision, WCPP held a roundtable in collaboration with the International Public Policy Observatory in June 2024, focusing on the policy connections and potential co-benefits of UPFSM.

Our roundtable aimed to identify areas where UPFSM could support other policy interventions or where it could support the achievement of broader government policy objectives. In times of increasing fiscal constraints, maximising the value of policy interventions is crucial to ensuring public funds are used wisely to achieve the best outcomes for the people of Wales.

The roundtable event focused on three main areas:

1. How **nutritional and environmental standards** can contribute to the success of UPFSM and how UPFSM can support pupils' health and wellbeing;
2. How UPFSM could address poverty stigma, and whether it offers further benefits in **tackling poverty and disadvantage**; and
3. **Longer-term benefits** that may accrue from UPFSM, for individual learners and government.

The event was attended by experts and stakeholders from Wales and across the UK, including academics, government officials and advisers, representatives from the wider public service, third-sector workers, and practitioners with experience in the system. Alongside reflections on the rollout in Wales, the roundtable considered

evidence from the rest of the UK, particularly similar interventions in Scotland. This summary summarises some of the key messages and reflections that emerged from the roundtable.

Nutritional and environmental standards

The evidence synthesis conducted for WCPP strongly indicates that the success of UPFSM in enhancing learner outcomes is closely linked to the nutritional value and the content of the meals offered (James, 2024). Consequently, the first topic discussed at the roundtable was how nutritional standards could support the success of UPFSM, and whether any environmental changes would be needed compared to current arrangements.

The Welsh Government's existing guidance on healthy eating in schools is now a decade old (Welsh Government, 2014) and is set to be reviewed. Roundtable participants emphasised the importance of robust nutritional standards for school meals, particularly in the broader context of children's overall food intake, including outside school, and challenges such as obesity and mineral deficiencies. Research suggests that childhood obesity levels are higher in Wales compared to the rest of the UK, and poor diet is common among children and young people (Public Health Wales, 2024). Evidence from Scotland shows a similar picture, with children and young people in the most deprived areas being less likely to report good or excellent health, less likely to eat fruit and vegetables at least once a day, and more likely to consume chips or fried potatoes at least once a day (Scottish Government, 2023).

The introduction of UPFSM offers an opportunity to embed nutritious meals into pupils' lives, allowing them to try new foods and recipes that they may not have access to at home, without financial cost. Participants highlighted the importance of setting high standards, even when this could lead to challenging choices, in achieving these outcomes.

UPFSM was also recognised as important in helping pupils feel ready to learn. Evidence from Scotland suggests that pupils value eating with friends and having a nutritious meal in the middle of the day. A major survey of secondary pupils found that liking the food and sitting with friends were the most common reasons for choosing school meals (McKendrick, 2022). In another survey, 97% of young people reported that food was very or quite important for feeling ready to learn (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, 2024).

The positive impact of UPFSM extends to parents, with participants reflecting on lower stress levels for parents and a calmer home environment due to not needing to prepare packed lunches, as well as financial savings. School meal costs were

identified as the most significant expense for families, along with uniforms, so savings in this area were helpful. Research among Scottish pupils found that 89% cited food as one of the most important school costs if unaffordable (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, 2024).¹

However, challenges remain, such as portion sizes, which participants felt were often too small, particularly for older children, and ensuring that meals were appealing to a range of children and offered appropriate choice. Research discussed at the roundtable suggested that older pupils of secondary age in particular felt increasingly constrained in being able to choose their meals, especially if availability is limited, resulting in some pupils not getting their first choice. Meals sometimes fail to appeal to children and can lead to pupils choosing the same meal every day. Efforts should be made to ensure that menus are varied and appealing, and ongoing work in many catering teams should continue to be supported.

Participants also stressed that while nutritional content is essential, UPFSM should be seen as one step in promoting healthy dietary choices rather than a solution to broader social issues around food.

There was consensus that current lunchtime arrangements are sub-optimal and that school dining environments could be improved. In many schools, pupils currently attend lunch in shifts, with experiences from outside of Wales suggesting that some pupils have as little as 10 minutes to sit down and eat lunches. This contributes to a feeling of being rushed, and can be experienced negatively particularly if pupils are also spending a long time queuing to be served lunches. This issue was attributed to inadequate dining facilities and limited lunchtime serving and preparation staff, which should be prioritised for improvement.

It was suggested that challenges related to the food environment could be best addressed in a collaborative manner, including catering staff and young people. This was additionally important because the environment varies from school to school, which is not easily captured by data and research. The Food and Fun programme was raised as a good example of where pupils can try different foods in a more relaxed setting, potentially encouraging them to choose new or different foods options in future school meals (Welsh Local Government Association, n.d.). Staff could also be trained further to focus on the nutritional content of meals in preparation and teachers could be supported in encouraging young people to make healthy choices.

¹ This compares to 91% who felt uniform was among the most important costs.

While capital funding has already been in place to support schools to make the transition to UPFSM, participants felt that additional funds should prioritise addressing the issues discussed, particularly long queues and short lunch shifts. Improved facilities and dining environments will help support high uptake levels and improved nutrition for pupils, although it is important to be clear that increased capital spend on facilities will also require additional revenue spend on staff if it is to be successful.

Participants did not discuss broader environmental concerns, such as the food being prepared or localised supply chains, although these will form part of the UFSM programme. In a later discussion, participants did discuss food waste, with some suggesting that the implementation of a pre-order system was reducing food waste even within the context of the UPFSM offer.

Tackling poverty and disadvantage

One commonly-held view is that UPFSM is particularly effective in addressing the stigmatisation felt by pupils who have received, or have purposely avoided taking up, eligibility-based free school meals (eFSM). WCPP research on poverty stigma uses a definition from the Scottish Parliament, understanding poverty stigma as a type of stigmatisation that devalues people and communities because they live in poverty or because they access services designed for low-income families (Morgan et al., 2024). Workshops conducted by WCPP suggest that schools are seen as sites of poverty stigma, particularly in relation to eFSM (Morgan, 2024). Academic literature and research also suggests this to be the case, noting that both children and parents are affected: some parents in Wales prefer accessing out-of-area food banks rather than applying for eFSM (Morgan et al., 2024). However, stigmatisation can operate in different ways, including through the way that teacher expectations of pupils can be lower for those on eFSM and through public exposure of those who were in school dinner debt, an issue previously highlighted in a school in Wrexham (Williams and Berrell, 2024; Together Creating Communities, 2024).

Although evidence collected by WCPP suggests that this stigma is present to some degree, participants were divided on the extent of this stigma and exactly who experiences it. Some with first-hand experience suggested that the move towards cashless catering has taken some of the stigma, as pupils should, under this system, no longer be directly aware of who is on eFSM and who pays for their meals. Other participants felt that school meal-related stigma is more of an issue in secondary schools, which are not covered by the UPFSM policy, while any issues in primary schools can generally be handled sensitively by teachers. Evidence from Scotland highlights secondary pupils' particular concerns over the embarrassment and stigma associated with taking FSM (Child Poverty Action Group Scotland, 2024). There was also evidence from England suggesting that uptake did not markedly increase when eFSM transitioned to universal infant free school meals, indicating that stigma levels may have been low to begin with or that stigma persisted even with a universal offer.

However, this perception was challenged by other participants, who highlighted that eFSM pupils may have lower amounts on their charge cards, making it harder for them to pay for snacks or other food during the day. However, this may be more of an issue in secondary rather than primary schools as primary schools do not use charge cards. Others wondered whether the stigma was experienced by pupils, or whether to some degree it was led by parents (perhaps recalling their own

experiences where eFSM pupils were more clearly segregated) who are unaware that there are now more protections in place. Addressing parents' perceptions might therefore be an important focus for increasing take-up. The fear of stigma can itself be a kind of poverty stigma, as WCPP research indicates (Morgan et al., 2024).

The language used for the offer was also discussed, with one participant suggesting that the use of the word 'free' could itself be perceived as stigmatising. They suggested that a better approach might be to incorporate meal provision as a normal part of the school day.

School meal debt was also raised as an ongoing issue for parents from lower-income backgrounds. The presence of debt can be stigmatising and can strain relationships between families and schools; one participant even likened this to viewing schools as 'debt collectors'. UPFSM policies do not automatically erase historic debt, and where universal free school meals have been rolled out, there has not been a consistent approach due to varying catering and subcontracting arrangements across the UK. Some local authorities in Wales have amnestied historic debt at various points, but it is likely that some parents, while no longer paying for meals for their children, still owe money from when these meals were paid for. Wiping out historic debt would be a one-off financial commitment but could remove a significant source of stigmatisation, particularly as being in debt can often be associated with shame.

Another reflection on poverty and stigmatisation was whether the experience of UPFSM might make eFSM in secondary schools less stigmatising. This is speculative at this stage, but if there is evidence that the universal roll-out increased eFSM uptake among eligible families at the secondary level, it would indicate a reduced effect of stigmatisation.

Finally, participants recognised that tackling poverty stigma requires time, capacity, and energy from teachers and others within the school system, but that the results could be very valuable. While there may be concerns about causing stigma, these concerns themselves could drive the design and development of better, fairer policies.

Longer-term benefits

Our final discussion reflected on the longer-term benefits that might accrue from UPFSM provision, for individual learners, for government, and in terms of intersections with other policy areas. Participants raised several points. The first concerned the benefits of UPFSM provision compared to other interventions, particularly the provision of breakfast in schools, which was felt to be a competitor policy by some. There was a sense that UPFSM may not be seen as the best use of resources if you are focused on one or two specific outcomes. However, it is in the holistic effects of universal provision that the benefits can best be identified. Even evaluations of universal provision tend to focus on specific outcomes such as obesity. Although these evaluations show UPFSM is cost-effective by that metric, they do not capture the more holistic potential outcomes of the policy. Some effects may be longer-term, such as in future earning potential or life outcomes.

Other participants suggested that the discussion should not be framed in oppositional terms, such as promoting either universal breakfasts or UPFSM. Instead, the case should be made for nourishing children throughout the school day, including both breakfast and lunch, to promote good educational and health outcomes.

A question was raised regarding the experiences of areas where universal provision is more established, specifically in transitioning pupils from free to paid meals. Participants suggested that experience from Scotland reflects that this can be a financial shock for parents and can be experienced negatively by young people. There is also the issue of parents with multiple children, some of whom may qualify for free meals while others do not, and the implications of this for meal provision within the family. There was a suggestion from Scotland that this can cause debates within families, and survey data shows that pupils themselves feel the loss of universal provision upon moving into P6 (equivalent to Year 5 in Wales) to be unfair (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, 2024).

The potential for more local procurement of goods and services was raised, questioning whether UPFSM could lead to an increase in the amount of locally-sourced food used by schools. Some participants felt that this had been a missed opportunity in other nations, including within Scotland's Good Food Nation initiative,

particularly as local procurement may increase local economic resilience, employment and community wealth.²

Other potential benefits discussed included reducing the pressure on school staff time, particularly if they have been fundraising to support children ineligible for FSM but who are nonetheless vulnerable, in addition to reducing the pressures on parents.

Participants also discussed fully ensuring that pupils can try new foods through the UPFSM offer, particularly foods that could promote healthier dietary choices at home. The thinking is that if pupils are exposed to a broader range of foods, they will discover new meals they enjoy, but in a low-risk manner, as the meals are provided free of charge. This could help facilitate choice, particularly for families who may not want to take financial risks on trying new foods that may not be enjoyed.³ However, this will need to be managed carefully given the messaging earlier around ensuring that children can have meals that are appealing. Without this, there is a risk they may default to less nutritious meals or repeat the same meals daily.

In terms of broader policy interactions, participants highlighted the range of policy instruments already existing in Wales that UPFSM could align with, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and healthy eating and healthy weight strategies. While these mechanisms are in place, it was felt that having a single point of focus across government to tie these together with policy decisions such as UPFSM would be beneficial, creating a coherent narrative and mission that connects different areas. This would allow for more coordinated and successful efforts.

The discussion also turned to evidence gaps and opportunities for further research. It was noted that many unknowns remain in the research evidence and in the wider rollout, some of which are important for the success of the policy. For instance, understanding behaviours in secondary schools could highlight the best approaches to ensure good nutritional standards within an appealing mealtime offer, particularly given the prevalence of 'grab and go' breaktime foods. It is also important to understand the views of pupils and teachers at school level in Wales, particularly as the policy will succeed or fail based on its implementation within schools. This, in turn, is contingent upon the school environment in which meals are provided and

² The Good Food Nation Plan is an overarching framework for food-related policies and initiatives in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2024).

³ A related study, referred to in the roundtable, suggests that exposure to healthier foods can influence bodyweight (measured by BMI) and food purchasing decisions among parents, although food preferences for children were not affected by exposure (Belot et al., 2024). A participant suggested that this shows that food choice can be influenced in this way and healthier outcomes achieved by low-risk exposure.

eaten. Efforts to understand these views and the reasons behind them would help address some of the issues raised during the roundtable and will be important in maximising buy-in for the policy. The reasons behind decisions regarding the length and timing of break times and the impact of special diets on provision were also highlighted as evidence gaps that could be productively filled.⁴ Some of these gaps already have evidence, but it is usually limited to individual school level, and little has been done to collate them beyond that so far.

⁴ There were suggestions that break times were reduced to tackle behavioural issues, but others suggested longer rest periods could mitigate against these issues by providing more downtime for pupils.

Conclusion

Our roundtable event highlighted key issues and opportunities associated with the rollout of UPFSM in Wales. The discussion revealed a shared belief that UPFSM could have significant positive impacts across policy areas and identified some key barriers to implementation experienced in Wales, Scotland and beyond. Participants were encouraged to hear that the UPFSM policy will be formally evaluated, allowing lessons to be learned and improvements made as implementation progresses. Some key reflections from the discussion included:

- The importance of combining high nutritional standards with meals that are appealing to children, offering opportunities to try new foods without appearing too exotic or out of the ordinary;
- The potential of UPFSM to bring health and financial benefits to children and families, particularly the most disadvantaged, including reducing stress at home and improving readiness to learn at school;
- The need to consider the social dynamics of meal provision and consumption, including the potential benefits of longer lunchtimes and modifying food service environments to reduce queuing and allow more sitting time, while recognising the capital investment implications;
- The potential for UPFSM to tackle stigma, although the degree to which this is the case and the dynamics of how stigma is experienced, and by whom, are at present unknown;
- The case for supporting cross-cutting government, perhaps through a central co-ordinating function within the Welsh Government. This could help support the interaction between UPFSM and other policy areas such as healthy eating and tackling poverty and poverty stigma; and
- The need for further research to address evidence gaps, particularly regarding the views of pupils, staff and leaders on how to maximise the policy's potential benefits.

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