

Interim Report: Qualitative Evaluation of “York Hungry Minds” Universal Free School Meals Pilot

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Acronyms/Abbreviation	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6
Policy Background	7
Previous studies of Free School Meals (FSM) initiatives	9
Qualitative Research Findings: Key Themes	11
Findings: Affordability	11
Rising insecurity as a key context	11
Taking pressure off parents	12
Reaching children affected by food insecurity	13
Findings: Rights and Equalities	15
Poverty	15
Universalism and Need	15
Universalism and Stigma	16
Findings: Educational Rights	18
Attendance and Punctuality	18
Behaviour	20
Pupil School Readiness/Readiness to Learn	21
Attainment	22
Findings: Health and Well-being	24
Healthiness, Choice and Quality of Food	24
Physical Health Impacts and Relationship with Food	25
Social Environment of Children’s Engagement with Food	26
Wellbeing, Happiness and Mental Health	26
Findings: Environment and Communities	29
Environment	29
School preparedness	29
School preparedness and staff	30
Other impacts on families	31
The school reflecting the community	31
Findings: Other Policy Design Issues	33
Concerns moving forward	33
Funding and sustainability	33
Interim Conclusions	35
References	38
Appendix	40

Acronyms/Abbreviation

BMI	- Body Mass Index
CPAG	- Child Poverty Action Group
CYC	- City of York Council
DLA	- Disability Living Allowance
EAL	- English as an Additional Language
YCF	- York Community Fund
FSM	- Free School Meals
PIP	- Personal Independence Payment
USFM	- Universal Free School Meals

Schools referred to as:

Burton Green Primary School - Burton Green
Westfield Community Primary School - Westfield

Executive Summary

This interim report provides an update on findings to date from our evaluation of the Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) pilot at two primary schools in York, Westfield Primary for lunches and Burton Green for breakfasts, launched by the City of York Council (CYC) in 2024. The UFSM pilot places universality at its core, aiming to reach all children in poverty while reducing stigma and barriers to accessing free school meals (FSM). This model of universality and its impact is evaluated throughout the report. Our evaluation follows the Council's four core commitments: affordability, human rights and equalities, health and the environment.

Key findings

Affordability:

Rising insecurity, due to multiple challenges, such as the cost-of-living crisis and economic insecurity, place financial constraints on families. Both pilot schools were chosen because they are located in the two of the most deprived wards in the City of York. The UFSM has reached children who are affected by food insecurity. Staff at both schools highlighted how children could arrive at school hungry, and/or lack adequate pack-ups. The UFSM pilot has alleviated some financial pressures, namely in enabling families to reorganise their family budgets and allocate their finances differently.

Human Rights and Equalities:

Social inequality and poverty significantly impact pupils' experiences, with staff expressing concerns about hunger among pupils. Universalism is a route to ensuring all children have access to adequate meals, with both parents and staff acknowledging the need for sufficient food for every child. While some parents willingly pay for meals, universalism helps eliminate stigma related to FSM, preventing children from feeling different and alleviating the pressure on parents seeking support.

Overall, there are improved educational outcomes, particularly through enhanced school readiness (in the sense of readiness to

begin school on a daily basis), wellbeing and attendance and punctuality. This is particularly notable in Burton Green with the breakfast offering being shown to ease the morning routine for families. Although the pilot has been short thus far in duration, staff note improvements in the pupils' focus and energy levels. Hunger-related distractions have been minimised, also making their play and socialising calmer and more enjoyable.

Health:

Parents and staff observed that children enjoyed a variety of healthy meals, and parents valued the regular menus, which assisted them in meal planning and ensured their children would like the options available. Although it is still early in the pilot to assess physical health impacts, both schools are optimistic about the long-term benefits. Pupils are exposed to different types of food and engage in social interactions during mealtimes, happily entering the dining halls to eat with their classmates. Additionally, the dining environment offers a safe space for children to converse with adults outside of the usual school routine.

Environment:

The pilot has shown that pupils often finish their meals, with schools actively engaging in community efforts to minimise waste; however, some children may still waste foods like vegetables.

Other Findings:

The UFSM implementation was challenged by limited planning time. Press announcements prior to communications from schools led to confusion among some parents. Staff generally reported positive perceptions about the pilot, although negative online commentary existed. The pilot's success depended on staff commitment and collaboration with catering providers to meet increased demand. Interviewees expressed concerns about the scheme's sustainability and funding, particularly in light of food insecurity for children. This prompted calls for long-term viability and support.

Introduction

In 2024, the City of York Council (CYC) is piloting Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) at two York primary schools: Westfield Primary Community School (Westfield), offering lunches, and Burton Green Primary School (Burton Green), offering breakfasts. The key purpose of this interim report is to provide an overview of findings to date in our evaluation of the USFM pilot at both schools.

The Council's ultimate goal is to provide all primary school children with one free school meal per day. This universality is central to the UFSM pilot, aiming to deliver added value compared to other meal provision approaches by reducing the stigma associated with accessing free school meals and tackling educational inequalities arising from food insecurity. The UFSM pilot is supported by c. £100,000 of Council funding, with further support aimed to be secured through donations to the York Community Fund (YCF) to extend the pilot's duration.

Our evaluation focuses on key aspects of the universal offer: reaching children in poverty, reducing stigma and tackling educational inequalities. It also focuses on pilot design, roll-out and processes to inform both longevity of the pilot, and lessons to expand the UFSM pilot beyond the two schools. This evaluation is guided by the Council's four core commitments around health, environment, affordability and human rights and equalities.

The pilot commenced in January 2024. Fieldwork for evaluation research began in June 2024, 6 months after its start. We completed interviews with 11 members of staff at Westfield, 10 members of staff at Burton Green, 6 parents or guardians of pupils attending Westfield and 7 parents or guardians of pupils attending Burton Green. We completed our interviews with staff and parents (n34) in August 2024. Following our interviews, we created a coding framework by which to analyse the interview transcripts (see appendix). This enabled a thematic analysis and a clear evaluation of the pilot based on the key indicators identified by the Council. We also highlighted key themes that staff and parents or

guardians identified throughout the interviews. Ethical approval to complete this research was granted by the University of York.

In addition to the interviews conducted, initial plans to conduct participatory research with the pupils was planned. However, difficulties completing this component within the timeframe curtailed this. Our intention is to complete this component at a later date, meaning the current report offers an interim report on our findings to date.

Overall, our evaluation highlights the pilot's effectiveness in both reaching children in poverty and in fulfilling many of the Council's core commitments. While it may be too early to comment on educational attainment as a result of USFM, school staff and parents reflect on pupils' happiness to go to school, improved attendance and the wider impact the UFSM pilot has on family life. Interviews conducted provide valuable insights into the pilot's impact, inform future decisions and can guide potential expansion efforts.

The report continues as follows: We begin by examining the policy background of UFSM within the local context, followed by a brief review of key studies that have informed our research design and evaluation. Our findings are then presented through the Council's four core commitments. We first reflect on affordability, including analysis of rising insecurity and pressure on parents. Next, we consider human rights and equalities, reflecting on universalism and educational rights. We then address health—both physical and mental—before evaluating the environmental aspects. Finally, we complete our analysis reflecting on the practicalities of the pilot and offer key recommendations.

Policy Background

The City of York Council launched the UFSM pilot in the two schools of Westfield and Burton Green, Westfield receiving lunches, Burton Green receiving breakfast. The pilot, also known as “York Hungry Minds” has the key aim to provide all children of primary school age with one free school meal a day. The two schools in the pilot are part of a 1-year pilot phase of the initiative.

Nationally, all children are eligible to receive free school meals in reception, year 1 and 2 through the Universal Infant Free School Meals scheme. Children in year 3 and above are only eligible for FSMs if their parents or guardians meet the eligibility criteria, generally dependent on family income thresholds and/or the household being in receipt of key means-tested social security benefits. In contrast, the York pilot adopts a universal model, making all children in the pilot schools eligible. Nationally, the new government elected in July 2024 has promised free breakfast clubs in all primary schools. This provides impetus for not only proceeding with the pilot but in reflecting on the evaluation as an opportunity to examine key learnings that could facilitate a broader implementation of UFSM across York.

The Pilot Schools

Westfield is local authority maintained and is the largest primary school in the city. It is in the ward with the highest level of children living in low-income households, with lowest level of life expectancy and has high levels of childhood obesity. The educational outcomes and school attendance are considerably lower in Westfield than the York and national averages. Burton Green is an academy school, part of the Hope Sentamu Learning Trust, and has a higher percentage of pupils with means tested FSM than Westfield.

The two pilot sites were also chosen on the basis differences in the two schools would allow for comparison and valuable learnings for any future city-wide scale up of the UFSM pilot. Following review of potential pilot sites, the Council view was that Westfield was the school most prepared and equipped to be included within the pilot. The school has meals

provided by the North Yorkshire Council Catering Service and would need minimal adjustments to deliver the pilot. The school already has a dedicated dining hall but would need some additional staffing and equipment. Overall, it was expected that the school would require minimum adjustments. In contrast, Burton Green was judged less prepared for the pilot and was the smallest potential pilot school. Their meals are provided by an external catering company.

Beyond the differences between the pilot schools, lessons can also be learned from evaluating the breakfast offering compared to the lunchtime offering. The Council anticipated similar benefits from both healthy breakfasts and lunches in schools. Both meals were expected to enhance cognitive function (memory, attention, reaction time, and executive function), improve academic performance and school achievement, boost attendance, and support better weight management. Additionally, the Council hoped that a balanced lunchtime meal could help prevent negative health effects.

Wider Programme Design Issues

While the Council funded the initial delivery of the UFSM pilot with c. £100,000, additional funding would be raised through the York Community Fund (YCF). The YCF was set up as a new vehicle to raise funding for priority city work including UFSM pilot, and in partnership with a community foundation. It aims to raise money via donations, including businesses in the city with Corporate Social Responsibility commitments.

The Council identified several potential risks related to the UFSM pilot funding model. These included concerns about the risks of there being insufficient funds to sustain the pilot in the short and medium term, limited flexibility if donors specify how funds must be used, the costs of reverting to traditional payment systems if the pilot fails, and the possibility that the UFSM funding campaign could grow too quickly for the York Community Fund (YCF) to manage. A potential challenge for the UFSM pilot is that CYC lacks an in-house school catering service. Catering is managed directly by schools and multi-academy trusts through contracts. To advance the pilot, consultation

with these catering providers was essential. Of the city's primary schools, 46 use contracted services, while 6 have in-house provision, with most trusts relying on a single supplier for their meals.

Key Target Policy Outcomes

The UFSM pilot aims to achieve six key policy outcomes. Universality is a key aspect of the pilot for several important reasons. First, it is intended to **reduce the stigma** associated with receiving free school meals. In means-tested programmes, some parents may be discouraged from applying due to stigma. Universality also ensures that **children currently excluded** from the national free school meals scheme—particularly those with the immigration condition 'no recourse to public funds'—can access meals. The broader aim is to **reach all children living in poverty**. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) estimates that 900,000 children in poverty do not qualify for free meals due to the narrow eligibility criteria (CPAG, 2024). While this research lacks quantitative data on each pupil's poverty status or legal situation, universality remains central to addressing these gaps.

In addition, there is an expectation that the pilot will **improve educational outcomes** by improving children's nutritional intake, potentially reducing socio-economic gaps in attainment by increasing the nutrition of lower-income pupils' meals. Additionally, it aims to **improve children's health** by addressing poor nutrition, which can lead to obesity, respiratory diseases, and mental health issues, with UFSM providing healthier meals for all. Finally, it was hoped that UFSM might **create local jobs and promote community wealth** by supporting local, sustainable food production and employment in meal preparation, benefiting from the scale and stability of a universal scheme.

Looking across these key target policy outcomes, the Council felt a successful UFSM scheme would achieve gains in relation to each of the Council's four core commitments:

- a. *Health* – contributing to improved diets for school children;
- b. *Environment* –reducing food waste;

c. *Affordability* –ensuring access to a good quality meal regardless of income;

d. *Human Rights and Equalities* –supporting right to education and reducing inequalities

These key target policy outcomes will structure findings presented in this report.

Previous studies of Free School Meals (FSM) initiatives

The pilot has been informed by previous studies on the introduction of free school meals (FSMs) from across the UK. These studies vary from pilots of universal free school meals initiatives (UFSMs), pilots whereby FSM eligibility is expanded to include families on a wider range of lower incomes, research on school meal provision more generally, and evaluative studies of the impact of infant UFSM policies in different locations. These studies, most frequently relating to primary educational settings, address the common theme of FSM provision and its implications for a number of factors including impacts upon children's education, food, financial implications for families, take up, stigma and adjustments made by schools, among many other factors.

Existing research provides a strong foundation of evidence for the positive impact of FSMs upon children's education. Cribb et al's (2023) study of policy options for FSMs cites a strong body of existing evidence as to the benefits of FSMs to educational attainment. Similarly, a Department for Education report (Kitchen et al, 2012) compares a UFSM pilot in primary schools with another that widened the range of eligibility criteria for FSMs in primary and secondary schools; a key finding from this report included a significant positive impact upon educational attainment in the UFSM primary school pilot, which was not observed in the pilot whereby eligibility for FSMs was only widened, suggesting a role for universality in enabling improved attainment. Other studies highlight broader indicators of educational impact of UFSM, such as teachers' observations of improved concentration among pupils (Sellen and Huda et al, 2018).

The quality of food is addressed by a number of existing reports, as well as assessments of the introduction of FSM pilots upon food and health outcomes. Day et al (2015) cite the introduction of food meal standards as having a significant impact upon improving the quality of school meals, and also note a high variability

in perceptions of school meals among different schools. This may suggest different pupils in different schools have varying perceptions on the healthiness and quality of food, which may be influenced by what children eat at home and their age, on food preferences. One study cites a perception that food quality is better in primary schools than secondary schools (Sahota et al, 2013) and an NHS Health Scotland report on the implementation of UFSMs for Primary 1 to 3 children in Scotland found that parents held positive views on the nutritional content of meals (Ford et al, 2015). While some reports found little evidence of the (U)FSM pilots upon diets, such as improved Body Mass Index (BMI) or children eating a wider variety of foods (see Kitchen et al, 2012), other studies have found evidence to the contrary. Sellen and Huda et al's (2018) research found improvements in the quality of food offered as a result of the introduction of the UFSM policy, as well as more balanced meals and greater healthy eating awareness among pupils. Furthermore, Spence et al (2020) assessed the dietary impact of UFSMs among pupils using repeated surveys, finding that children have a reduced sugar intake as a result of this policy.

The financial implications of (U)FSM policies upon families are less explored within existing research. However, some studies do address such factors including the impacts of FSM policies upon household budgets. Restrictive eligibility criteria of FSMs is highlighted by Patrick et al (2021), whereby families considered as low-income did not qualify for FSMs under the present system of means-testing. Ford et al's (2015) report for NHS Health Scotland points to a similar observation, noticing the welcome financial benefit of the infant UFSM policy among families who had been previously ineligible for FSMs. Cribb et al (2023) note that access to FSMs has the impact of reducing families' grocery bills, usually by less than the value of the meals themselves, therefore indicating that the policy enables families to increase either the quality or quantity of food purchases in their usual household grocery shopping. In response to a contrasting concern of the perception that higher income families would benefit from UFSM policies, Jessiman et al's (2023) study of UFSMs in London secondary schools found that such concerns were not as prevalent as the

perception that UFSMs were effective in addressing the issue of food insecurity more widely.

The universal nature of UFSMs, unlike targeted FSM schemes, has been key in analysing take-up and addressing stigma. While recent efforts, such as electronic payment systems in secondary schools, have aimed to reduce the visibility of students receiving FSMs, research indicates that forms of stigmatisation can still persist. Patrick et al (2021) highlight how children notice who receives payment letters for school meals, contributing to the stigma for those who do not. Sahota et al's (2013) study also highlights the impact of stigma - amongst other issues such as bureaucracy, having English as an additional language (EAL) and low literacy rates - as a barrier to encouraging eligible parents to sign up for FSM in a means-tested system. Additionally Ford et al (2015) and Sellen and Huda et al (2018) demonstrate that parents reported a removal of stigma under UFSM initiatives. Sellen and Huda et al (2018) and Kitchen et al (2012) report that UFSM initiatives lead to higher take-up of FSMs, both among those previously ineligible and, crucially, also among those previously eligible, suggesting a role for UFSM policies in reducing stigma of claiming FSMs.

There is a significantly lesser-developed literature surrounding the role of universal school breakfast club initiatives, in comparison to the range of studies on universal free school lunches. Harvey-Golding et al (2015) note that research examining free school breakfasts is relatively underdeveloped. Despite this, Kleinman et al's (2002) study indicates improved academic performance in children accessing a universal free school breakfast programme. Furthermore, Mauer et al's (2022) research in Norway highlighted the popularity among children of eating breakfast with friends. Gibson-Moore et al's (2023) review of existing literature highlights the role of breakfasts in addressing morning hunger, indicating broadly positive impacts upon diet quality, weight and school outcomes. They nevertheless also note some inconsistencies in the literature, and some methodological limitations of studies, suggesting the need for further research.

Studies drawing upon previous pilots also point to crucial processes of adjustment adopted by

schools as well as some of the challenges faced in the interim while UFSM policies were introduced. Concerns from parents over pupils' waiting times, long queues and having sufficient time to play outside during their lunch breaks (Ford et al, 2015), appear alongside concerns for the need for many schools to upgrade kitchen facilities and dining environments in order to cope with the capacity implications of UFSM policies. Importantly, other studies address practical implications for schools receiving crucial pupil premium funding (Sellen and Huda et al, 2018) which are presently tied to the means-tested approach to claiming FSMs.

In short, existing studies have highlighted a range of impacts of (U)FSM policies, with largely positive impacts despite some challenges for children, families and schools. There is strong evidence of UFSM's positive impact upon educational outcomes, albeit with a more underdeveloped literature in relation to universal free school breakfasts. Previous research also shows that the persistence of stigma associated with accessing FSMs targeted by family income means universality has advantages in ensuring access to school meals. Furthermore, previous studies indicate the positive impact of UFSM initiatives on families' budgets, in addition to many examples of positive health impacts of UFSM provision, albeit alongside variable assessments of the quality of school meals nationally. Studies suggest factors such as ensuring schools are prepared for the delivery of UFSM policies also play an important role and are crucial to the effective implementation of these policies.

Qualitative Research Findings: Key Themes

The qualitative research findings are structured around the CYC's four core commitments: affordability, human rights and equalities, health and environment. Later, we discuss the preparedness of the pilot schools and their communities, drawing insights for future implementation. However, to begin, we focus on affordability, examining rising financial insecurity, pressures on parents, and efforts to reach children impacted by poverty.

Findings: Affordability

“You know, there is a lot of children here as well [and] that it's possibly their only meal a day. And so you've got to try and make it as ... as much as you possibly can, what they want”

(Westfield School Staff 4)

One of CYC's core commitments is affordability and it was hoped the UFSM pilot would contribute to this by “ensuring access to a good quality meal regardless of income”. High and rising levels of child poverty nationally were presented as a key contextual factor in the pilot's case for support – 4.2 million children (29% of all children) in poverty according to latest data when the policy was proposed – and the pilot schools were chosen on the basis they were in in the two most deprived wards in the City of York based on the most recently available data from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) at that time (2015 & 2019 data).

This backdrop of social and economic insecurity, the pressure families face because of this and the impact of food insecurity on children were key themes identified in our interviews with school staff and with parents and guardians. Many interviewees also highlighted the role the pilots, and schools more generally, had played in helping to address these pressures.

Rising insecurity as a key context

Staff from both schools acknowledged the scale of cost of living pressures and the economic insecurity affecting many families in the community.

“I would say the biggest challenges for our families and children are cost of living. There's quite a lot of poverty around here [...] the children are, in my opinion, more aware of it than they should be.”

(Burton Green School Staff 6)

Staff reflected that pupils are aware of financial difficulties in their family, putting emotional strain on top of material need.

“The cost of living crisis is huge, particularly given the area in which we serve”.

(Westfield School Staff 1)

The increasing strain is felt by all, including families with dual incomes who still struggle to make ends meet.

“That cost of living crisis. It's huge. You know, even for people who do, you know, like myself and my husband, we both work full time. But it's still a struggle, so some parents who might be single parents or only one person's working, I can't imagine how difficult it must be for them, you know”.

(Westfield School Staff 11)

Likewise, many parents acknowledged this context too:

“I know it's like, it's not even people who are not working. It doesn't matter, you can be working. Yeah. But then it's, you know, you've still got the, the bills to pay. And then when you've got a large family, obviously a lot of food to buy and it is, it's really, you know, It's a lot of pressure on finances”

(Burton Green School Parent 2)

“As I say, the area especially, um, you know, there's a lot that are struggling financially, so the, I think everyone's feeling the pinch, aren't they, with, especially with food prices”

(Westfield School Parent 6)

Some staff even highlighted the financial pressures for some families arising from

reforms to wider social security support over the past decade. Transition to Universal Credit has exacerbated financial strain for some families who did not have support for extended periods:

“They struggle [...] a lot of our families have moved across now to Universal Credit. That's not been as smooth as it has promised to be. You know, some families I know that I've helped with it have been without money for eight weeks, you know.” (Westfield School Staff 5)

Reflecting the above, staff in the two schools acknowledged cost of living challenges were driving food insecurity faced by families and some highlighted the key role schools could play in addressing this, including working with other organisations:

“Everything's gone up. We know that, you know, the children continue to need, and the amount of uniform and food that we do give out, there has definitely been an increase in demand and need for it as well” (Westfield School Staff 1)

“We do deliver food and things. I work with [local charity, national charity], so we get food in. So, on an instant, [when families say] we need something, I've got nothing, we can sort of provide a food parcel. But I also work as part of [food bank provider], so I've got, um, authority to authorise food parcels through them to needy families” (Burton Green School Staff 9)

This underscores the roles of school in not only educating but in supporting pupils and their families who face material insecurity broadly.

Taking pressure off parents

Importantly given this context, a key theme to emerge from the interviews was that the provision of UFSMs had helped take some pressure off parents and guardians. Some of those describing the role it had played in helping their own household budget underscored the significant financial constraints they face and the importance of the meals in directly alleviating some of this pressure:

“I think a lot of people are definitely feeling the same, like, a food shop, it's a big chunk of money, you know, and when you haven't got money to do it, I mean, thank goodness for food banks and for stuff like this, really, because when we have had a hard time and we have struggled financially, school has been absolutely amazing, and then the breakfast club's just been ... a godsend” (Burton Green School Parent 2)

“[It] would be a struggle if food goes up anymore or, you know. So, in terms of the school dinners pilot, that has been, it's been really helpful [...] It's a lot of, it's a lot of weight off your mind when you know that you're not having to pay for your child's school dinners and then that money can go towards food for the evening. Yeah” (Westfield School Parent 2)

Beyond budgetary constraints, it has also helped take pressure off parents in their preparations for school in the morning.

“It's made a big difference on finances. I mean, we do still buy cereal, obviously [...] but um, you know, not having to sort of panic, thinking of what they're going to have in the morning” (Burton Green School Parent 2)

Many staff in the schools shared these perceptions, saying the pilots had been well received and had taken pressure off parents:

“Certainly, from the parent perspective, it has been really positive. We haven't had any kind of negativity whatsoever from the parent perspective. Um, there have been really appreciative” (Westfield School Staff 1)

Staff also link this positive reception to the broader challenges in the area arising from financial insecurity and cost of living pressures. This was demonstrated when they reflected on the broader holistic support role that the schools play in their communities, staff being aware of the competing financial demands that parents have when it comes to providing for their children.

“[We] can really see the difference in this cost of living. [...] And I've, for quite a few it's, well, what do we do? Do we have heat? Do we have food? Do we have clothes? Um. So I think there's a massive impact, especially for the area that we're in.”

(Westfield School Staff 8)

Reaching children affected by food insecurity

There was a widespread feeling amongst staff at the schools that the pilots were playing an important role in supporting children affected by food insecurity.

It was not uncommon for staff to highlight the food insecurity faced by some children:

“we noticed children are more hungry [...] We were noticing children were just hungry at break times and they weren't bringing anything from home.”

(Westfield School Staff 2)

“we have children coming in saying that they're hungry, they've not had breakfast”

(Westfield School Staff 8)

In this context, the provision of UFSMs were often reported to have played an important role in helping to address food insecurity. Indeed, this is the case for pupils who were not having sufficient food at home either side of the school day.

“children who weren't having any breakfast are coming in and they're having a, a full meal”

(Burton Green School Staff 4)

“There's a few that, um, I've said in the past that they've not had tea. Um, so when they've come in for breakfast, they are hungry. Um, you know, a particular child comes in the other week and said, “Oh, I'm so ready for this”. Yeah. I said, oh, what did you have for tea? “Oh, we didn't have anything””

(Burton Green School Staff 7)

School staff interviewed also reflected on parents' requests for help with food and in providing meals, a finding also later analysed when reflecting on the school and wider

community. There is a trust built between the school staff and families. There is a clear need for hot meals for pupils and the UFSM pilot addresses food insecurity and ensures equitable access to meals.

“I think it's benefited us [...] I would have had lots of parents coming to me saying, you know, I ain't got any food in, at home. I need to, they want a pack up or they want this, but I can't afford it...we've got so many children who have always wanted to have the hot dinners, but [we've] never had the opportunity [to offer this].”

(Westfield School Staff 5)

Staff also reflect on the cost of food and in providing universal free school meals, the pilot levels the playing field in facilitating children from all backgrounds to participate equally in school meals. This helps to reduce food insecurity of children and in reducing stigma that may be associated with receiving FSM.

“it just puts them on a level playing field and it's there and open for them. Because school dinners are expensive. If you have got three children, and every child wants a dinner, and you can do the maths” (Westfield School Staff 1)

Some staff reported that the schools had been looking for ways to address food insecurity before the roll-out of the pilots and reported ways in which they were looking to address it beyond the scope of the UFSM offers:

“with the breakfast club coming in and having breakfast we did have quite a few that would come in and say they were hungry so we've always got bagels and fruit in the classroom so the lady who runs our breakfast club does bagels for all the classes as well”

(Burton Green School Staff 6)

“You know, we do a breakfast provision now where we give any child that needs it for breakfast. [...] We provide fruit”

(Westfield School Staff 2)

The increase in participation in receiving meals, as noted by staff, shows the immediate effect of removing barriers to accessing free school meals. The uptake demonstrates a need for

universal free school meals and emphasises how effectively the pilot reduces obstacles—whether financial, social, or logistical—that previously limited access for pupils.

“It definitely benefits from it, yeah. 100%. I mean we know that meal uptake straight away is about 60 more a day. So it's still 60 more children that are taking meals. So it's a massive benefit.”

(Westfield School Staff 2)

Findings: Rights and Equalities

Another of CYC's core commitments is 'human rights and equalities' and it was hoped the UFSM pilot would contribute to this by "supporting the right to education and reducing inequalities". In this section we consider the pilot's role in addressing wider social inequalities before turning to education related rights and inequalities in the next section.

Poverty

As noted in the previous section, many interviewees acknowledged the context of social inequalities the two schools operate in. Poverty was often mentioned directly by staff in the two schools:

"In this area? ...Yeah. I think poverty. Yeah, there's a lot of poverty. I think a lot of our children [are] living [in] homes where they're going hungry."
(Burton Green School Staff 2)

"It's poverty and that, that's been a big issue. That is the root of everything that leads on to any of the other issues that we have."
(Burton Green School Staff 4)

"I think for our children, it's poverty."
(Westfield School Staff 6)

"Poverty [is] massive in the community"
(Burton Green School Staff 9)

"I think all schools are struggling to make sure that they meet all children's needs. [It] has become more challenging. Definitely more challenging. And then here, you know, more specifically, you know, our localised challenges here, um, are around our families living in poverty and the knock on effect that that has on, you know, our adult mental health and everything that trickles down to our, you know, to our children and impacts them on a daily basis."
(Burton Green School Staff 1)

Instead of mentioning poverty directly, parents were more likely to refer to the financial pressures they were facing, or mention the financial struggles others were facing:

"I have noticed from parents and things that I do speak to when I drop her off in the morning that there is a lot more worry about the cost of everything."
(Westfield School Parent 3)

"Um, and I've seen so many people that just don't eat. Yeah. And it really does affect schooling."
(Westfield School Parent 5)

"everybody's, everybody's struggled with, uh, you know, with the pandemic and as things are going up, but, uh, rising in price"
(Westfield School Parent 4)

These differences in language aside, it was not uncommon for both staff and parents to acknowledge the UFSM schemes helped with some of these pressures:

"Like, obviously having a large family and a low income, it's, you know, it's expensive to feed everybody. Yeah. So, having that pressure taken away, um, sort of having to feed them every morning and the rush and the mayhem that that entails was just brilliant."
(Burton Green School Parent 2)

"For children that are disadvantaged, you're giving them the best start to the day, but the best start to life, aren't you? Because they're not worried about food." (Burton Green School Staff 8)

Universalism and Need

The universal principle is central to the UFSM pilot. A small number of interviewees expressed a doubt about the value of a universal approach or said they understood questions raised about the relative value of investing in a universal free school meals scheme rather than a scheme more targeted at those in greatest need. Mainly this concerned the question of whether some parents/guardians might be happy and/or able to pay for the meals their children were receiving:

“I think sometimes having a universal offer isn't necessarily the right way of doing something because if people can afford certain things, I don't think some parents would want, they're quite happy to pay still (Westfield School Staff 7)

“it's meant that, that we have saved, you know, over 10 a week. [Name of one child] was already getting free school meals. Um, so it has made a difference. But, we wouldn't have an issue with going back to paying it. So, yeah, so it's not, for us it's not a sizable difference. We're, we're lucky that we're comfortable with our budgeting and things.” (Westfield School Parent 1)

There was the very occasional view that went further than this and queried the underlying values of a redistributive model. There had been some critical views expressed online following announcement of the pilots and, reflecting on this, one staff member commented:

“I sort of understand where they're coming from because at the end of the day it's taxpayers money and I think my personal challenge sometimes is watching families play the system and to get, um, Disability Living Allowance, DLA, PIP, all of this funding, all of this money that's available by saying and wanting their child to have a diagnosis of something”. (Westfield School Staff 7)

It is important to note that the above view stands out as an outlier in the broader context of the interviews. More commonly, interviewees expressed confidence and an importance in the UFSM pilot in effectively addressing food insecurity by ensuring that all pupils had access to meals and in minimising the risk of excluding those children with a need.

“It's comforting knowing that they're getting the free school meals because it's awful thinking that kids go to school hungry and then come home hungry”. (Westfield School Parent 6)

Moreover, some interviewees expressed concern about the pilot not being universal enough, i.e. children outside of the two schools were not benefiting from the provision of

UFSM. While there was a recognition that this is a pilot, some of those interviewed also raised concerns about the need for all children to eat in order to be able to concentrate in class, irrespective of their age. This demonstrates a need for a more comprehensive approach to the UFSM pilot that is far-reaching:

“This [UFSM's] should be given for all kids. It don't matter how old they are...They need to eat.” (Burton Green School Staff 9)

“I feel really strongly that if it's going to be universal, I think it should be universal across all the way up to sort of 16. Because I feel there's, there's teenagers going into school who are also starving.” (Westfield School Parent 1)

Universalism and Stigma

Another theme that came through clearly in the interviews is that the UFSM model added value by having the potential to reduce or eliminate stigma.

Staff reflected on a change in pupil's behaviour in the dining hall and noted that pupils were likely to feel more comfortable to sit with their food knowing that they are receiving the same food and portion size as their peers. Parents had a similar reflection, particularly if their child brings in a packed lunch that is perceived as different, which can lead to exclusion or teasing. Indeed, UFSM can help to mitigate stigma by offering the same meals to every pupil.

“They're sitting in the dining hall longer, because I guess some children maybe felt a little bit uncomfortable that they just had a really small pack up against somebody that's paying for a meal and getting a nice meal.” (Westfield School Staff 5)

“And sometimes people get teased for the stuff they get put in packs. I remember. [Really?] Yeah. I remember, for example, was it one day in November last year, she's got a thermos and I sent her in with soup and the bread roll. And a couple of her classmates teased her for bringing in soup.”
(Westfield School Parent 3)

The USFM pilot also reduces stigma for parents and guardians in obtaining free school meals for their children:

“It's great that it's universal because a lot of people, um, they don't have to perhaps feel the stigma that's around having to claim free school meals...in terms of making a level playing field, I think it takes a lot of stigma away from people. Yeah. I mean, that's a positive.”
(Burton Green School Parent 4)

“It's great.. nobody's penalised, nobody's sort of, there's, there's, it's everybody across the board, so you're not segregating anybody and saying, oh, they're free school meals, and I think that helps, I really do think that helps as well”
(Westfield School Parent 5)

“I think it's really difficult to quantify the impact of something like this. Not just on our, on our children, but on our kind of wider community [...] I think for some of our parents, that kind of takes away some worry and concern and maybe a little bit of shame that you know we're struggling to feed our children but this is on offer so I actually don't have to go to school and they've not had breakfast because I don't have any food [...] it's really difficult to actually find parents who are willing to say that but we know that that's there. We know that that's the case for lots of our families”.
(Burton Green School Staff 1)

Despite a strong feeling amongst all interviewees that the concept of universalism had great value in reducing or eliminating stigma, there was an awareness that only two schools who reside in the most deprived areas of the city had been chosen for the pilot and that this in of itself may have stigmatising impacts. Rolling out the pilot more widely in the city will go some way in reducing the stigma that the

schools felt the community faced in being ‘put under the spotlight’.

“And this pilot is, you know, predominantly there to help children. Not just in our school, but eventually across the city...I think for other people reading those [negative online comments on press articles], I think, you know, the bias of that I was quite surprised at because I don't think many of our families would read or necessarily comment on the press in the same way ... and there will be many, who will read it and who will see it on social media and stuff as well”
(Westfield School Staff 1)

“It's always difficult, isn't it, that kind of media, um, commentary about the place that you work in. And the community that you really care about...Do you want to advertise that actually we're a needy community and, you know, we want this support and we want this help. But you also, um, you want to celebrate what's positive about the area as well. And I think it's always making sure that, [being] mindful of having a balance”
(Burton Green School Staff 1)

Relating to the above, careful media communication is needed to ensure the provision does not inadvertently stigmatise families and communities further. School staff described occasions in which this did occur and the need for this to be carefully managed.

As discussed later on in the report, there were also some concerns that the funding model could be perceived as a ‘charity model’, and this may inadvertently increase stigma attached to receiving the USFM and willingness to engage. As mentioned above, it also creates a difference between those schools who are selected to be a part of the pilot and those who are not.

Findings: Educational Rights

“Improve educational outcomes” was a sub-section of the broader theme of human rights that the UFSM policy aims to address, and this formed a central theme of the interviews with parents and staff. We divide this section into four key parts: Attendance, Behaviour, Pupil School Readiness and Attainment. As this report explores, while each sub-theme addresses a distinct benefit of the UFSM policy, these themes are intrinsically linked to each other under the broader theme of educational rights. This can be viewed in the accounts of staff whose understandings of these concepts show strong overlaps between attendance and attainment, between school readiness and attainment, between attainment and behaviour, among many examples.

Overall, this section explores how the UFSM initiatives have positive implications for educational rights, and the different ways that this is observed across the universal free school breakfasts and universal free school lunches. This is particularly important where it is expected that in the post-Covid context, there are increased inequalities and educational gaps (Gready et al, 2021). The COVID19 pandemic dramatically impacted on the experiences of education for children with pre-existing inequalities being critical to understanding the short, medium and long term impacts, including suggestions of significant variations according to factors such as socio-economic background and SEND (see Blundell, R et al. 2021) which are particularly important to the context of the schools taking part in the UFSM pilot.

Attendance and Punctuality

The view that access to a UFSM provision has a positive impact on overall attendance of children at school, as well as their punctuality in the morning, was found in both schools, and interviewees made reference to children feeling a greater sense of looking forward to going to school. However, staff and parents at the pilot breakfast club at Burton Green highlighted this to a greater extent:

"It's making a massive difference...The children are wanting to get out of bed and come to school, which historically hasn't been the case. So yeah, I do, I do think it's really beneficial"
(Burton Green School Staff 7)

As referred to in the above quotation, it is notable that the time of day where the UFSM initiative takes place at Burton Green School seems to play a distinctive role in encouraging improved attendance at the school. This is observed in two ways at the school (1) improved overall attendance and (2) reduced lateness.

"It's had an enormous positive effect on attendance. Yeah, the families that, you know, we struggle to get the children in on time or in regularly enough. It's had a massive impact."
(Burton Green School Staff 1)

This positive assessment of the impact of the UFSM breakfast club upon children's attendance was one shared by staff and parents alike at Burton Green School. Parents' experiences explored not only the children's greater enthusiasm for getting into school on a morning, but also an overlap with it simplifying family morning routines which are often described as stressful, which is also addressed in a later section of this report in relation to other impacts on families.

"They're never late now, do you know what I mean? So whereas before it might have been that we got held up at home doing breakfast, doing this, doing that. They're there early anyway now, so it's just, it's nice for them to be there early and it's like, they don't have that stress of being late either."
(Burton Green School Parent 2)

Any policy impacts upon attendance are of particular importance in a context whereby school attendance is observed to have fallen significantly since the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent school lockdowns over this period. This is viewed by many to have had impacts upon lower school attendance.

"The things that we've really found from COVID are attendance. So, I know that's national. So attendance rates have really dropped. I think through COVID it became more of an option to come and attendance is harder for us... we have our pastoral lead, she starts phone calls from eight o'clock, phoning families, are you up, are you ready"
(Burton Green School Staff 8)

In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attendance, Gready et al. (2021) highlighted that the achievement gap between disadvantaged pupils in York (those eligible for FSM in the past six years) was not only above the national average but also widening. This gap is likely exacerbated by challenges related to homeschooling and remote learning, particularly for students with limited access to study space or IT resources, leading to lower levels of engagement.

Challenges of remote learning and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are contrasted with different accounts of parents and staff at Burton Green of stories of individual children and families of multiple siblings whose overall attendance has increased dramatically since the introduction of the UFSM breakfast club. These accounts point to clear evidence of improvements to attendance across the school:

"It's just amazing. We did the attendance awards in class in assembly this morning and it goes on forever [...] postcards out for 100 percent, 98 percent, and assembly went on forever. I've got jobs to do coming, but it just kept going and going and going. So that proves how, how good it is."
(Burton Green School Staff 1)

As many parents and staff that we spoke to at Burton Green explored and celebrated the positive impact of the universal free breakfast initiative on attendance, many participants in this research began to make links between the impact of improved attendance and children's education more broadly. While parents' focus was upon impacts on the morning routines, school staff that we spoke to explored the links between improved attendance and attainment, both via ensuring that children do not miss crucial lesson time at the start of the day, and also through a reduction in lateness upon pupils' school readiness/readiness to learn as

they experience an improved learning experience when they are not rushing for being late to school.

"It's been amazing. Like my attendance has gone up massively...it wasn't sort of that the children weren't coming to school, but I had quite a big cohort in my class that were late all the time, um, and that means that they've missed their learning at the start of the day"
(Burton Green School Staff 6)

"It's massive. I think for attendance it's massively improved. I mean there's a girl now that comes in every day on time, which before it was phone calls... She almost skips in."
(Burton Green School Staff 5)

At the other UFSM initiative, staff at Westfield School also expressed that attendance had improved as a result of the universal free school lunches initiative. One parent also expressed how their child seemed more willing to attend school since the pilot began, linking also to the theme of reduction in stigma, in this case arising from the embarrassment of not being able to provide a meal for their children:

"If we take that away now, those children that would look forward to coming to school because they know they're going to get a meal, you know, the attendance, our attendance has gone up. [It has] vastly improved since every child has been able to have a hot meal. Previously, some families just wouldn't send the children because they would be embarrassed by not being able to provide a meal for them. So I think it's that. I think it's look at the bigger picture and the impact it has on the whole family, not just the individual child."
(Westfield School Staff 5)

"I don't know whether it's a coincidence, but since the beginning of the year when it started, he seems to be less upset about going to school because we did have tears nearly every morning going to school at one point."
(Westfield School Parent 6)

Staff suggested that increased attendance is also likely due to the scheme reaching children in poverty, reflecting that there are multifaceted challenges in the areas, but ensuring that pupils'

basic needs are met helps bolster pupil attendance.

“But definitely this area is deprived, but I think a lot of schools do struggle with funding and making sure that the children have everything that they need and attendance as well at the same time. That's a big thing and we can only do so much to get them into school, so having things like that breakfast club....It's so amazing to see so many of them in on a morning. It's really good”.

(Burton Green School Staff 3)

While we should not underestimate the impact of the pilot at Westfield School upon attendance, it is notable that the theme of improved attendance and punctuality was clearer at Burton Green's UFSM breakfast club initiative. As improving attendance is an expectation of the local authority at both pilot schools, it is notable that this is observed to a much larger degree at Burton Green school breakfast club. The time of day where the initiative took place seems to go some way to explaining this, with teachers' accounts at Burton Green indicating that the breakfast club served as a way to prevent lateness to school, as well as a motivator to be there in the morning. We next explore the impact of the UFSM policy on the behaviour of children across both initiatives.

Behaviour

Staff at both schools described the impact of the policy upon behaviour, in both cases noticing strong improvements overall. Linking strongly to the theme of wellbeing and mental health, which is addressed in a later section of this report, we see how the free provision of meals, either at breakfast or lunch, promotes behaviour improvements across different contexts.

Some staff at Westfield School describe a context where behaviour had been a challenge in the school, with one staff responding when asked about the biggest challenges in their role:

“Probably behaviour...I've really enjoyed it, but I think a lot of it is around the challenges I've found is with behaviour and how to deal with children's behaviour”

(Westfield School Staff 9)

The improvements noticed in children's behaviour since the introduction of the UFSM pilot cite the impact of school lunches replacing packed lunches for many children. In many cases, staff state that these packed lunches had been inadequate, high in sugar content and/or generally unhealthy. Staff state that the move towards school lunches has led to behavioural improvements as a result:

“Because they're not bringing pack ups, it's that sugar is a huge difference. So you're seeing children having their lunch, coming outside, playing lovely, enjoying the afternoons. Whereas before you can really see those who had quite a lot of sugar in their pack ups would come out, they'd be wild, come into class, they'd drop. And you know, it's really surprising. I didn't notice it until we did it”

(Westfield School Staff 11)

As this member of staff makes reference to, eating healthier food not only assists positive behaviour via lower sugar consumption, but also via the benefits of healthy lunches to play in the playground. As they reflect further, this is observed through fewer arguments amongst the children and a calmer classroom environment:

“Because they're playing nice on the playground so they're not bringing bicker and fall outs into the classroom. Therefore we're able to come into the classroom quite calmly and just crack on. And they're not still upset or angry or fussing too much in the afternoons. Sometimes those arguments might have gone on for the whole afternoon.”

(Westfield School Staff 11)

Furthermore, staff at Westfield School make clear references to the reduction in afternoon hunger following the introduction of the UFSM pilot.

“I do think it's been a positive impact I think sometimes the children in an afternoon before they're a bit... you know, restless and I think now they've got full tummies.”

(Westfield School Staff 6)

“They [were] still hungry by half past one, two o'clock. So that's when their behaviours are starting to do the peaks and troughs. We don't see an awful lot of that anymore, which is really nice. And the kids are coming out, you know, after eating, you can tell.”

(Westfield School Staff 5)

Similarly, the prevention of morning hunger was clear in the accounts of Burton Green School staff, in relation to children's behaviour and the impact of the UFSM breakfast club.

“Because a lot of it wasn't like chosen behaviour. Some of it was pure frustration. Or not knowing what to say or who to go to. Or they're hungry but they don't want to say anything in front of their friends.”

(Burton Green School Staff 9)

In a similar way to how the provision of food overlapped with facilitating play at Westfield School, there were wider behavioural effects at Burton Green School, beyond the prevention of hunger. Staff at Burton Green School discussed the improvements to behaviour enabled via the broader social environment of the breakfast club, much like is discussed in this report in relation to mental health and wellbeing:

“But I think behaviour is massively improving just the way they enter the classroom. It's so calm and positive...I don't want to say just from a breakfast because it is amazing. But from something as small as what I think, as small as having breakfast with your friends. How the impact of the behaviour can be so massive...I wouldn't have thought that would massively correlate, but it has.”

(Burton Green School Staff 5)

Overall, references to the benefits of UFSMs on children's behaviour, across both schools indicate a clear association between food and improved behaviour, either via the direct impacts of eating more (or improved quality) food, or via the social impacts of the UFSM initiatives on playtime or socialising before the

beginning of the school day. As the Burton Green School teachers quoted above indicate, improved behaviour also has strong overlaps with the idea of children's readiness for the school day, a theme this report will next explore.

Pupil School Readiness/Readiness to Learn

Children's school readiness, referring to a readiness to start school on a daily basis, is a strong theme emerging from our interviews at Burton Green School with parents, and especially with members of staff. That this was observed only at the UFSM breakfast club initiative speaks to the time of day that the initiative takes place, and the ways in which the initiative helps in setting up children for the school day.

“School readiness, that's what we see. I think that's what I would say is the biggest [impact], that school readiness”

(Burton Green School Staff 4)

“Instead of rocking up late for school because, X, Y, and Z's happened, or they haven't had a good breakfast, they are actually, they're 100 percent ready to face the day alongside their peers.”

(Burton Green School Parent 2)

In a similar way to what is described in this report in relation to improved health and wellbeing, and also in relation to behaviour, staff describe how children benefit in terms of their readiness for the school day via benefiting from the social space of the breakfast club. This includes spending time with their peers, and having the opportunity to socialise and play, as well as the interactions with adults. Greater opportunities for adults to learn about what is happening in children's home lives also enables staff to support them better if needed. Staff highlight the importance of providing this informal space to talk with the pupils about any concerns they have. This social space provides a different opportunity for communication beyond the formal and routine structure of the day. This underscores the function of the school in providing a social and secure environment. This contributes towards their preparedness for the day.

“The daily routine in school can be so bang, bang, bang. You come in, you do this, you do this, you do this, that they don't actually have a second to say to you, this happened at my house last night. And if, you know, often the police will let you know about something like that. But if it was their neighbours [and they] haven't been directly involved, we won't know and it's an opportunity to just talk about those things and then get them the support that they need”
(Burton Green School Staff 2)

Furthermore, and with overlap with the theme of improved attendance, teaching staff at Burton Green School indicate that children being ready for the school day has strong implications for their learning and attainment:

“What it also means is that our children are already in school.. for the start of the day. So actually that, it has a really big impact on their learning... on the start of the day and how the rest of the day flows because they're, they're calm, they're in the right mindset, they're kind of, you know, into school ethos, um, and they're into their classes for their morning activities and they're, and they work, you know, they're engaged and they're working straight away.”
(Burton Green School Staff 1)

“Seeing them ready for the day. Um, in terms of attainment, definitely for those who were struggling to be in school... they've definitely made progress, I would say, in their learning because they're in school.”
(Burton Green School Staff 3)

These themes, linking the UFSM breakfast club initiative with improved school readiness and subsequently broader themes such as wellbeing and attainment demonstrate multiple overlaps in themes between the UFSM initiatives and educational rights. The final sub-theme of attainment draws upon the links we have begun to address between UFSM initiatives and the educational attainment of pupils.

Attainment

Echoing previous studies on UFSM initiatives, our interviews pointed to a link between UFSM initiatives and improved educational outcomes.

While this has been partially addressed through exploration of themes of school readiness, wellbeing and attendance, the impacts of UFSM policies upon children's educational attainment merits further exploration. While some parents and staff we spoke to noted the relatively short amount of time since the introduction of the UFSM pilots, it is nevertheless notable that both staff and parents across both UFSM sites indicated improvements to children's educational attainment since the beginning of the initiative.

“It is improving their education. We're getting good educational results. Um, I'd hate it to end for them.”
(Burton Green School Staff 8)

“I've seen so many people that just don't eat. Yeah. And it really does affect schooling...And it has helped us. You can have packed lunches at some point, but I just think it's better at least, you know, everybody's got a hot meal in their tummy.”
(Westfield School Parent 5)

Beyond statements that UFSM initiatives improve attainment, accounts of parents and staff point to many of the processes by which they observe this, including via improving concentration, energy and alertness of pupils, and the removal of any distractions that hunger might have caused prior to the pilot.

“It isn't just the being fed, it is the being fed because that obviously, then you can concentrate and learn”
(Burton Green School Staff 8)

“Well, if we know that the children can have a hot meal and that they can access a well balanced nutritional meal... you can see that the children are engaged in an afternoon.”
(Westfield School Staff 6)

“When you're halfway through a phonics lesson and they say, I'm hungry, when is it at lunch? It just ruins the flow of the learning, but there's none of that, so they're all completely focused on what, what they're doing, what they're being taught.”
(Burton Green School Staff 4)

While some parents of children at Burton Green School and Westfield School were unable to

reflect upon the impact of the UFSM initiatives upon their children's attainment, with many commenting that they were unable to see the results upon learning within the classroom, there were a number of parents who had noticed improvements in their children's learning and outcomes:

"It keeps [my child] focused especially, we've noticed a, quite a big difference. Because sometimes they drop in the afternoon, and they're sort of a bit, a bit of a lull really.... I really do think it's helped...I do think it's, there has been a change with him, definitely"
(Westfield School Parent 5)

In one case, a parent of a child at Burton Green School indicated that their child had struggled with focus in particular, explaining that this had improved since the beginning of the UFSM initiative:

"[name of child] especially because she struggles a bit more with them kind of things... I think her focus, their attitude has improved towards school massively. "
(Burton Green School Parent 4)

As this report has outlined, there is significant overlap between UFSM initiatives promoting calmness, as well as readiness for the school day, via the social environment of the UFSM initiative, with consequences for children's learning and attainment. While there is evidence of benefits to the social environment at Westfield School (as outlined in relation to health and wellbeing), observations directly linking calmness and pupils' school readiness with academic outcomes were predominantly at Burton Green School.

"There were a few children... that were struggling. I think it's a transition from not going from chaos [of a morning routine] to the classroom. I think they're coming in and they've got probably half an hour before in the classroom and behaviour has improved hugely, and academically."
(Burton Green School Staff 8)

Similarly, it was only at Burton Green School that links were made among accounts of the interviewees about the link between UFSM and children's attainment via improved attendance and reduced lateness. This was especially

crucial for children who were not meeting educational attainment targets, or for children 'on the cusp' of meeting them:

"we have the one little boy who goes every single day, ...now that he's in early enough to do kind of all of those morning jobs and has a prolonged amount of time in the classroom after he's been there...so he's not quite where he needs to be but he's so close you can see the improvements and he will be where he needs to be um so that's made a massive massive impact with him um there's a lot of those kind of cuspy children kind of just on the border of not where they need to be and where they need to be, you know".
(Burton Green School Staff 4)

Our interviews with parents and staff at both schools indicate strong links between UFSMs and educational attainment, which reinforces existing studies of previous pilots which make similar observations. At Westfield School, accounts explored the link between UFSMs and concentration, energy or focus, whereas at Burton Green School breakfast club, accounts of parents and staff indicated not only improved concentration, energy and focus, but also broader links to attainment via improved pupil school readiness, the social environment of the UFSM intervention and via improved school attendance.

Data from interviews with parents and teachers at both UFSM initiatives indicated strongly that the educational rights of pupils had been strengthened as a result of the pilots. How this varied was in part due to the time of day that the initiatives took place; it was notable that Burton Green School's intervention taking place at the start of the school day meant there appeared to be greater effects upon pupils' school readiness and attendance, as well as richer accounts of how these different factors impacted upon improved attainment for children at this school.

Findings: Health and Well-being

The impact of UFSM upon the health of children involved in the pilot is wide-ranging, including impacts upon healthy eating, subsequent effects on physical health, as well as broader consequences for improved school and community knowledge-building surrounding food. Furthermore, we see accounts of the UFSM pilot upon mental health and wellbeing, as well as the broader happiness of pupils in the educational context. These health impacts are situated in a context described by school staff and parents alike of poor health among children and the communities that the schools serve, both in reference to physical and mental health. These link strongly with the policy aim of reaching all children in poverty, an added value of the universal approach:

“We’ve had so many children who for years have not had a hot meal. there would probably go home to a bag of crisps and a sausage roll. But we know now confidently that every child can have at least a hot meal when they’re with us.”
(Westfield School Staff 5)

Healthiness, Choice and Quality of Food

Parents and school staff alike had overwhelmingly positive comments on the healthy food options available in both UFSM pilot schemes which they reported to be well-received by children. They commented on the wide range of food available, as well as how most children finished their food.

“I think...the availability of the options of food and the menu, the quality of the food they get is absolutely superb”
(Westfield School Staff 1)

“They have a two week rotation of what the breakfast on offer is, and it seemed like they had a good selection”
(Burton Green School Parent 3)

“They do get the veg and they’ve got the choice of getting little bits of salad and things. And all the meals are really nice, to be fair, they all seem...there’s not many children that don’t have a clean plate at the end of lunch, so that’s good”
(Westfield School Staff 9)

It is notable that a small number of staff commented that variety could yet be further improved, noting that autonomy for schools (rather than catering providers) in setting menus would be a potential way for those working closest with the children to adapt healthy meals to their tastes as they observe them, with a view to reducing the number of packed lunches as well as food waste, as addressed in a later stage of this report.

“I’m surprised how many children still have a pack up... I believe a lot of that is down to the meal choices and the children not eating.”
(Westfield School Staff 4)

Similarly, some parents noted occasionally that some children disliked certain foods, yet this would be expected to some degree and was overwhelmingly outweighed by positive comments:

“They’re not always appreciative of some of the meals. Um, my eldest daughter will avoid the fish on a Friday”
(Westfield School Parent 2)

In the universal free school lunches pilot at Westfield Primary School, the overwhelmingly positive comments in relation to the quality of free school lunches were often contrasted with examples of unhealthy and/or insufficient packed lunches which some children in the school bring, many of which were more common prior to the pilot scheme. This led to concerns about what would happen should the UFSM pilot end.

“I know there’s one or two in, or [in my daughter’s class] who always have a packed lunch, and she’s always commenting the fact that it’s always chocolate spread sandwiches”
(Westfield School Parent 2)

“I think if it was taken away we'd see a massive difference. I think parents would be back to, you know, sending the children to school with a multi bag of crisps”
(Westfield School Staff 5)

In both pilot schemes, parents commented positively about their experiences of receiving a regular menu from the school. This assisted them with planning what the children would eat in advance, supporting with the variety of their children’s diet outside of school. This also helped them to decide whether to access the free school meal on that particular day, or whether to provide an alternative breakfast or packed lunch.

“They sent out the meal, they have a two week rotation of what the breakfast on offer is, and it seemed like they had a good selection”
(Burton Green School Parent 3)

“It just means that I know what she's having for lunch, because she likes to look through the menu, she picks what she wants before, so she knows what she's having before she goes into school, so then I don't have to worry about...is she gonna like the food that's on offer, but she's very good, she'll eat absolutely anything”
(Westfield School Parent 3)

Physical Health Impacts and Relationship with Food

While observable physical health impacts may be more likely observed across a longer period of time than those involved in the pilot to date, as well as through quantitative analysis of health data outside the scope of this study, staff across both schools reflected on the likely positive impact of the UFSM pilot upon the physical health of children in their schools. Both schools reflected a broader strategic approach to improve the physical health of students in the long term. Burton Green Primary School outlined how the UFSM pilot was part of a series of measures the school has taken to reduce obesity. Furthermore, having observed children eating a range of healthy options, staff at Westfield School reflected on the potential for embedding long term behavioural change having established healthy

eating habits among many of the children at the schools.

“It's a lot of different things, but when I started, there was a huge obesity problem here... The nurse would come and do the weights of the year sixes and it was quite scary, really ... we've invested in sports as well. So we've got a full time PE teacher and we're part of the healthy schools award”
(Burton Green School Staff 8)

“Looking at the bigger picture, if you start a child's diet off well in school... that puts them into a good pattern and a good education, a healthy relationship with food. And I think that, um, doing that early in primary school, it really does set the tone.”
(Westfield School Staff 7)

Despite the relatively short length of the pilot to date, in some cases, parent accounts surrounding the provision of healthy food did indicate observable impacts upon the physical health of their children. For one parent of a child at Westfield Primary School, the benefit of having access to a healthy free school lunch went as far as helping her child develop a healthy weight.

“I honestly think it's made some impacts, a positive impact to his learning, and his health.... he looks like he's put a little bit of weight on, he wasn't skinny, but he looks like he's put a bit of healthy weight on.”
(Westfield School Parent 6)

Similar accounts whereby parents indicate that their children are eating well all point to a crucial factor of having the ‘right’ food in terms of types and variety in combination with the right social environment to counter what is observed as ‘fussy’ or ‘picky’ eaters. Some parents and staff observe children’s overall relationship with food as improved overall. As one staff member summarised:

“I think as well, they're trying different things as well... because you know, like they're having chicken korma, and you know other foods that they probably necessarily wouldn't try at home. And if they're really fussy, we get these jacket potatoes as well, and there's paninis as well, so they can, they can choose them as well, so they've got the choice.”

(Westfield School Staff 9)

Social Environment of Children's Engagement with Food

Some parents and staff described how their children also seemed to be more willing to try new foods at school than at home.

“He won't really like trying them, but he seems to be at school, so. I think it's something that other people have said to me... Maybe they see other children having it. That might encourage them a bit.”

(Westfield School Parent 6)

“I've spoken to some parents, they're like, my child would never eat it, they're such a fussy eater, but they see their friends eating it, they are going to eat it.”

(Westfield School Staff 3)

Higher levels of exposure to different types of foods and the building of knowledge both among children and the broader community is another consequence of the UFSM pilot which was explored in our interviews with staff and parents. Parents described this as giving them new 'experiences' and in a positive light:

“I feel like it's put [my child] up for more experiences, like doing a breakfast club. Because she's never done anything like that before...Trying different foods for breakfast.”

(Burton Green School Parent 5)

“It exposes them to food that they might not try at home because there's certain things on the menu that I certainly would not cook at home because I wouldn't eat it personally. So it gives her that opportunity to try new food”

(Westfield School Parent 3)

Beyond the exploration of new foods, interviewees believe the UFSM pilots contributed to broader knowledge and skills in the community. In one example teachers expressed how more children having a hot school lunch enabled exploration of social interactions surrounding meals, as has been explored in a previous Department for Education report (Kitchen et al, 2012):

“I think the community, that's where we've seen more of a communication with our children, the dining hall. Because we really teach them that sitting down and eating is a social thing [...] the older children sometimes will come and say, I made mum and dad, we sat down last night, you know, knives and forks.”

(Westfield School Staff 5)

In other cases, staff expressed how greater exposure of children to different foods encouraged parents to build knowledge surrounding food, for example through asking catering staff to share recipes.

Wellbeing, Happiness and Mental Health

Beyond explorations of themes of healthy food and physical health in our interviews, many parents and staff made reference to the impacts of the UFSM pilots upon the happiness, wellbeing and mental health of their children. These themes ranged from notions of excitement, particularly surrounding the Breakfast Club at Burton Green Primary school, to very clear expressions of how the UFSM pilots had altered the moods and psychological regulation of the children in the school.

Staff reported a broader context within the communities they serve, as well as in wider society, of poor mental health and the challenges that schools face in supporting families with this. This context also links to the theme of affordability and the cost of living crisis, addressed earlier in this report:

“The cost of living crisis is huge, particularly given the area in which we serve, and that has hit a number of our families really hard, and I think it's changed not only people's, kind of, physical resources they've got, but kind of the way they feel and their kind of their mental health continues to be a real, um, a real challenge for us supporting the families and the children together.”

(Westfield School Staff 1)

Children are aware of the constraints at home and need additional support for their family well-being.

“We've had children that have come and said, I'm a bit worried because I know Mummy hasn't had breakfast so they want to get things for their parents as well because they know that parents are sacrificing things for them.”

(Westfield School Staff 6)

A feature of both initiatives, although most clearly the Burton Green School breakfast club, was the benefit of an increased amount of social interaction between children and staff as well as among children. These took place as children were served and sat down for a structured lunch or attended the breakfast club.

“It's not just the preparation of the meal, but also the service of. It's meant that the children are still moving through at speed. But also still benefiting from the adult interactions.”

(Westfield School Staff 1)

Adult interactions were also a factor mentioned at Burton Green School breakfast club. In this context, and as has also been outlined in its link to school readiness and educational rights, staff noted the benefits not only in terms of social interactions, but of children having the time to speak with staff about any events which might have affected their wellbeing at home. Staff mentioned that they had found out via the breakfast club of bereavements within the children's families, as well as expressing the much increased potential for safeguarding disclosures in the social environment of the breakfast club, where children feel comfortable. This reflects previous analysis of how the UFSM pilot facilitates pupil's readiness for school in a calm and social environment.

“It's a chance for teachers as well to check in with children again. And see how things are at home and, you know, it's that chance where they feel like they're open and they can talk to you about things that are going on and we can hear about things that maybe they need a bit more support with”

(Burton Green School Staff 3)

“There's a real social element of it... so we're in the hall, so the children come in, you've got 20 minutes of chatting to them. It also then leads to sometimes disclosures of things they're worried about because it's a comfortable situation”

(Burton Green School Staff 8)

“I think initially you, when you hear about it (UFSM), you think it's just about food and that, and that is really important here for our families, for our children. But actually what we've gained from it has been so much greater than just feeding our children breakfast in the morning.”

(Burton Green School Staff 1)

Beyond the benefits of checking in with children and becoming aware of concerns that may impact upon their education, staff at the school made particular reference to the idea that the social environment of the breakfast club enabled children to relax at the start of the school day, creating the conditions for young people to ‘decompress’, reflected in their pupils' mindset at school. Staff at Burton Green discuss the calmness of the breakfast environment and the positive impact this has in setting up the pupils for a day of learning after receiving nutritious food.

“They love it, so they're getting up and coming in earlier because they want to sit with their mates and they have like a decompress.”

(Burton Green School Staff 6)

This contributes to a broader idea, that the breakfast club prepares children improving their readiness for the school day. Staff expressed how attending the breakfast club enabled children to start the school day in a calm way.

“What it also means is that our children are already in school... for the start of the day... It has a really big impact on their learning... and how the rest of the day flows because they're calm, they're in the right mindset... they're into their classes for their morning activities, and they work, you know, they're engaged and they're working straight away.”

(Burton Green School Staff 1)

In a similar vein, staff and parents alike at Westfield School made reference to the psychological benefits of children having the opportunity to eat a healthy meal. These understandings of psychological benefits point especially to the role of food in mood regulation, as well as the role of food in enabling children to play better, with overall improvements for their mood.

“But food, and often the first thing that I will deal with is if a child is dysregulated or they're upset. The first thing I say, do you need a piece of fruit or do you want something to eat? And sometimes with a couple of them it's sensory, they like the texture, they don't really need it, but others, it is hunger.”

(Westfield School Staff 7)

“So I think the whole being able to have a well-rounded wellbeing with the diet and the exercise and that time where they can just be children outside has had a really positive impact.”

(Westfield School Staff 6)

“If their bellies are full, they're not thinking about something else and um, and you know they go out and they eat and they have that down time of play which is extremely important for them mentally as well.”

(Westfield School Parent 2)

The impacts of the pilots upon the health of children in both schools accessing UFSM is wide-ranging and addresses issues from obesity-reduction to the better regulation of children's moods in the school environment. Furthermore, impacts are spread beyond impacts of the food itself, to the health and wellbeing benefits of the social interactions that accompany accessing the UFSM, either with adults or with other children, with staff at both

schools noticing that socialising and play has strong benefits for the reduction of stress.

A notable difference in the way that the psychological and mental health benefits are observed occurs across the two UFSM pilots, most likely reflecting the time of day at which the children receive their meal. At Burton Green School, there are particular conceptions about the benefit of the breakfast club to children's wellbeing and the benefit of this to the beginning of the school day. At Westfield School, we note that staff reflect upon the wellbeing benefits of free school lunches upon children's play at break/lunch time. Nevertheless, both interventions share common reflections upon the psychological and mental health benefits of UFSM provision.

While health effects of policy can often be observed over longer periods, it is notable that staff and parents alike at both schools make reference to a wide range of positive physical and mental health impacts, which in combination with longer-term health strategies, indicate promising outcomes for children's health.

Findings: Environment and Communities

The environment is a key commitment for CYC, with a particular focus on reducing food waste. In this context, our analysis examines the relationship between food waste and the UFSM pilot, exploring how each influences the other. We also reflect on the schools and their preparedness for the UFSM pilot. This takes into account the material readiness of schools and their staff before providing a broader reflection of other impacts of the pilot on families. We also see a strong theme emerge on the importance of schools in their communities.

Environment

Efforts to reduce food waste were often connected to levels of need. This is evidenced through the uptake of UFSM in the schools and the fact that pupils often do not leave any food offered behind or go to waste, also demonstrated through other programmes such as the free fruit programme. We also see the schools take an active role in their communities in reducing food waste through their connections with local grocers, demonstrating the broader environment that the children's families live in.

“we never have any wastage, it tells you that the children are hungry ... And I don't think children would take more than one piece [of fruit] if they weren't hungry.”
(Westfield School Staff 7)

Any food that is leftover is shared with other children in the school.

“Anything that's um, ever left over, say we've got left over bagels or crumpets. I take it into nursery, because nursery aren't invited ... I go in and they, they wolf it”
(Burton Green School Staff 7)

In the instance where there may be food waste, this is often 'healthy food' like vegetables. Schools are required to provide balanced meals, including vegetables, to promote healthy eating habits. Despite parents previously reflecting on the diversity of food in school and their children(s) willingness to eat food at school, some school staff reflect that if children are not

familiar with foods, they are less likely to eat them, leading to food waste. This not only reflects a missed opportunity to improve children's diets but also highlights a disconnect between the nutritional standards set and the reality of what children are accustomed to at home.

“a lot of children that won't eat the meal that we provide for them because I think that it's possibly something that they don't eat at home so that they won't try it here ... food goes to waste because ... we've got to provide them with that vegetables ... but they're not necessarily eating it”
(Westfield School Staff 4)

School preparedness

Initially, schools did not have a lot of time to respond to the UFSM pilots. This meant that planning needed to happen quickly to ensure that there would be the appropriate provisions and communications in place to deliver the pilot. The rapid implementation placed significant pressure on school administrators to develop and execute a communication strategy at short notice. As indicated by a Westfield staff member, the announcement of the UFSM pilots in the press before final details were finalised forced schools to expedite their processes:

“it's in the press before it had been finalised or anything really. So that was a bit difficult. So we were almost forced to do it probably a bit quicker”
(Westfield School Staff 2)

While these efforts aimed to ensure parents and pupils were well-informed, the limited time available for planning meant that not all parents fully understood the details of the UFSM initiative.

“We did a letter, I think, so a letter went out, text, newsletter, to really make sure that they were aware it was happening, and then assembly speaking to the children”
(Burton Green School Staff 3)

With the use of social media, word spread about the UFSM pilots amongst the parents prior to any communications received from the school. This created a gap in understanding and expectations. Interviewees show that greater or

more coordinated communication with the schools may be beneficial as they are best placed to manage communications with the parents and pupils.

“at first I kind of thought it was only for people who were on free school meals. I didn't realise it was for everybody.”
(Burton Green School Parent 4)

“it was announced in the York Press that Westfield was going to be the school actually before the school had been told ... so there was quite a lot on Facebook of oh this is great we're going to get free school meals and I think people thought immediately they weren't going to have to pay ... that wasn't ideal ... yeah that was how we found out.”
(Westfield School Parent 1)

On the whole, staff feel that there has been generally positive public perception around the UFSM pilot in their schools.

“So, yeah, it's all been positive, there's no negativity about it at all.”
(Burton Green School Staff 6)

However, others are aware of some of the negative press the pilot has received. This is mainly in online comment sections. This has been difficult for the schools to manage and engage with. Press and online comments have also contributed towards the politicisation of the two pilot schools, with political debates featured in The York Press and similar publications.

“When we felt that it was unfairly reported in the press because it was taken out of context. I think that's been a bit difficult that the press had released quite a few things before we've even been told about them.”
(Westfield school staff 2)

Furthermore, the discrepancies between what parents were told during political canvassing—such as the possibility of contributing to a fund to support the program—and what actually materialised, as mentioned by a Westfield parent, illustrates the potential for confusion and dissatisfaction when expectations are not met. This suggests a need for clearer communication and management of public

expectations to ensure sustained support for UFSM.

“on the doorstep [when canvassed prior to local council elections] when I said ‘We don't need the free school meals, I don't mind paying for my children to have the free school meals’, they said, oh no, there'll be a way that you can put into a pot to help fund ...which doesn't appear to have been.”
(Westfield School Parent 1)

School preparedness and staff

The rapid implementation of the UFSM program was made possible by the active involvement and dedication of the staff at both schools, who willingly contributed extra time to support the pilot.

The schools needed additional kitchen resources to handle the increased demand. This required effective communication and collaboration between the schools and their catering providers. The strong working relationship between the schools and the catering teams played a key role in the successful roll-out of the UFSM pilot. This experience highlights the importance of having sufficient staff and resources in place and clearly shows that ensuring adequate staffing and coordination is crucial for the success of such programmes.

“So we had the kitchen staff, so through [catering provider], who provide our lunches, they needed to be on board, because they're having to do breakfast too ... They've been absolutely amazing as well.”
(Burton Green School Staff 8)

“I think they did have to employ a couple more people in the kitchen actually to cope with it.”
(Westfield School Staff 10)

Beyond the catering staff, the existing teaching and leadership teams in the schools also played an important role in the UFSM pilot. They were actively present in the morning at Burton Green to help run the pilot.

“There's certain members of staff that will help in the morning and take it in turns to run it. So it just seems to have flown, like, worked really nicely with us as a team. I think that's massively helped, I think, because we all work together.”

(Burton Green School Staff 3)

At Westfield, there is the same buy-in from the staff at the school. This is contextualised in the ongoing feeling that the pilot is a positive thing that can have a genuine impact on their pupils. Teaching staff also take time to talk through the different types of food that the pupils will have.

“And I think because the staff know that this is a positive thing, everyone's bought into it and just adapted where we can to make things work if we need to.”

(Westfield School Staff 6)

“in the classroom in the morning we put pictures of all the foods up. So classic was that enchiladas, that chicken enchiladas, and none of them had a clue what they were ordering. So we've started now putting pictures up every morning so the children can see what they're getting.”

(Westfield School Staff 1)

This does raise some questions around the sustainability of the pilot and in staff providing extra time to participate within the pilot.

Other impacts on families

Beyond parents' reflections on their child's change in attitude towards going to school and in being on time, parents also reflected on the pressure lifted from them as parents as a result of the UFSM pilot. The timing of the breakfasts in the morning is helpful for parents who have other commitments in the mornings such as dropping off different children, other child care and work.

“because our eldest goes to a secondary school in a completely different part of York, it's helpful that way”

(Burton Green School Parent 1)

At Westfield, where there are free school lunches, there is evidence of some routine changes for parents where there is no longer the

task of buying and preparing pre-packed lunches for their children.

“So I didn't have to think about, oh, I need to make her a pack lunch the night before as well as sorting myself out and then sorting him out to go to nursery and things. It was just like a weight off my mind.”

(Westfield School Parent 3)

The quotation below highlights the importance of considering both the direct and indirect impacts of the UFSM pilot on the community. While the primary goal is to ensure children have access to meals, the pilot also provides significant relief to financially stressed families, easing emotional and psychological burdens. This broader impact on family and community well-being is crucial to the pilot's overall success.

“I think it's really difficult to quantify the impact of something like this. Not just on our, on our children, but on our kind of wider community. Um, as I said before, for, for us and for our community, you know, there's a lot of pressure and there's a lot of stresses ... on our parents ... but to know that that's one less thing that they've got to worry about.”

(Burton Green School Staff 1)

The school reflecting the community

The schools play a large role in their communities beyond providing education. The roles of the schools reflect community needs and respond to local issues. Staff at the schools meaningfully engage with their local community and this is reflected in the training and work that they do. For example, staff at Burton Green work alongside the food banks with the knowledge of financial constraints in their pupils' family homes, while staff at Westfield support families through difficult challenges such as domestic violence and purposefully provide support for their pupils.

“I did a mental health first aid course, so I could help parents with that as well, and work with the food banks and the local area coordinators, so we've got a sort of overall picture.”

(Burton Green School Staff 9)

“A lot of my work is supporting children and families, domestic violence, alcohol, drug abuse. So it's just supporting them and knowing that they've got a safe space and a safe adult within school.”
(Westfield School Staff 5)

This holistic approach helps ensure that families receive the support they need, which in turn positively impacts the well-being of the children.

“we're really fortunate that they [parents] have got that open relationship with school ... we've had requests for things like beds and for carpets for the houses too, because they'll know that that'll make a difference as well, but equally ... if they're at a point where it's just a minor dip and there's been a change in family circumstances at home, the families are really good at kind of saying to us ... this is where I'm at, this is what I need.”
(Westfield School Staff 1)

Parents have close relationships with the schools, which deepens trust between them and the schools. This relationship enables the school to respond effectively to the communities' evolving needs, providing targeted support where it is most needed. Parents also point to the food banks that are available for families within the school.

“there's always a box in reception of foodie bits that parents are welcome to take if they need so.”
(Burton Green School Parent 3)

The role of the schools in these communities far outweigh their role solely as an education provider. They have a holistic approach to supporting children. Beyond demonstrating the extra support that is needed, it solidifies the concrete need for the pilot within the schools. This provides stability of mealtime to the children and a safe space for them to eat and be in a trusted and calm environment with adults.

Findings: Other Policy Design Issues

We also asked interviewees to reflect on the sustainability of the pilot as well as what they felt worked well and what less so. Overall, interviewees were positive, however there are some concerns around the longevity of the pilot and how it would be funded.

Concerns moving forward

Both school staff and parents highlight concerns that they have for the pilot moving forward, which centred primarily upon the funding model of the pilot and its sustainability.

School staff also highlight food insecurity when children are not in school. While children are in school, they have access to UFSM but when they are not, given the context of economic insecurity and community needs, staff are concerned that their pupils may not have nutritious meals.

“And they know. that they shouldn't have to fight for a breakfast and they can go to school and they will get fed but then we need to look at the longer term they're off school 16 weeks of the year what happens then?”
(Burton Green School Staff 9)

Funding and sustainability

The pilot was initially funded with c. £100,000 of Council funding with further plans to raise additional funds through the YCF via donations. The Council previously identified a number of risks that are associated with this model, including insufficient funding.

There are shared concerns amongst school staff and parents in the two schools around the potential discontinuation of the pilot. In previous sections analysing poverty, universalism and need, parent interviewees particularly noted the financial pressures that they are under while school staff reflected on how UFSM alleviated some of these financial pressures on parents to pay for breakfast and/or lunches.

Concerns about the longevity of the UFSM pilot, including its potential discontinuation, led to a number of worries that this may leave family planned budgets stretched.

“Once you've offered that to those families, they're going to get used to not spending their money on school dinners...If you take that away a year later, you're potentially going to end up with, you know, less children having them than they were in the beginning.”
(Westfield School Staff 2).

“And then my biggest fear, like I said, was they're not going to fund it other than for the one year. Yeah. And therefore we're right back to square one again. And, but in a worse position because the parents would have got used to the fact that they didn't have to pay the bill. It's allocating the money elsewhere, isn't it? Yeah, yeah. Be that to food, fuel or lifestyle or whatever, but yeah”
(Westfield School Staff 7)

This concern over the discontinuity of the UFSM pilot is already felt by some parents who talk about feeling anxious about having to find the extra money again for packed lunches for their children. This again reflects difficulties around the affordability of food and tight family budgets. However, it also points to emotional stress at home that puts a burden on family well-being.

“because I thought it was coming to an end in September ... I wasn't looking forward to having to put packed lunches together again and I wasn't looking forward to having to, I was worried about the extra money that it was gonna ... cost just for the pack ups.”
(Westfield School Parent 4)

The funding model and its sustainability is a top concern for all interviewed. This is a source of concern when businesses are contributing to the funding model, but they themselves can face economic downturn, undermining their ability to contribute consistently. This is further echoed in concerns that while the model is working for now, it needs greater structural support from the government to increase sustainability.

“It's quite difficult that, as a kind of a succession model, isn't it? Because, um, if, unless you've got businesses that are, you know, signing up to X number of years to support ... [businesses] come across difficult times and can't give in the way that they would like to.”

(Burton Green School Staff 1)

“the worry that they wouldn't be able to continue because if, if they just stop for whatever reason, then the funding's I mean I know it's, budgets are tight for everybody ... it would be a benefit ... [if it were] .. properly funded by the government.”

(Westfield School Staff 10)

A parent interview shows a different perspective on the importance of a government-backed, sustainable funding model that ensures long-term support. They highlight how a government-supported model could encourage universalism and play a role in reducing the stigma of receiving free school meals, whilst protecting vulnerable people. Where the funding model is set up and potentially perceived as a 'charity model', this may increase stigma attached to receiving the USFM and willingness to engage. Furthermore, it creates a difference between those schools who are selected to be a part of the pilot and those who are not.

“I can also see that for some people it might feel a little bit ... Like, they wouldn't want that charity level if they knew that's how it was working, that it should be more of a system. And I feel that ideally we would have the systems in place that as a country would be supporting our most vulnerable and allowing them to have that, that wiggle room to be able to then.”

(Westfield School Parent 1)

Interim Conclusions

In 2024, the City of York Council piloted a UFSM offer at two primary schools in York - the ultimate aim being that this provision would reach **children in poverty, reduce stigma and tackle educational inequalities**. This qualitative evaluation capturing experiences within the two schools has demonstrated strong evidence of positive impacts across a number of key areas:

Educational Outcomes

Staff at both schools provided accounts of **improved attendance and punctuality**. The Council expected both initiatives to improve attendance, and while this is the case across both schools, our interviews suggest it was experienced more clearly by staff and parents at Burton Green.

Staff at both schools described **improvements in behaviour** as a result of the UFSM pilot. Accounts note that replacing packed lunches at Westfield has reduced high sugar intakes and/or unhealthy food. There has also been a reduction in afternoon hunger at Westfield and morning hunger at Burton Green. Overall, the social environment of lunches and breakfasts was perceived to have a positive impact on behaviour.

The council hoped to develop evidence on the pilots' impact on **readiness to learn**. We note that pupils' readiness to learn in the mornings was much improved at Burton Green. This wasn't noticed to the same extent at Westfield School raising questions around the importance of the time of day that the initiative takes place. Further work could be undertaken to understand the importance of these distinctions and its relationship to improved learning and attainment outcomes.

In line with existing studies, the experiences of staff at both schools indicate **improved cognitive functioning and improved educational outcomes**. Concentration was reported to have improved in both schools, but the mechanism may differ, with attainment reported to have improved via increased attendance, reduced lateness and improved school readiness at Burton Green.

Children's Health

The Council hoped to collect evidence on **improved diets**. There are overwhelmingly positive assessments of the healthiness, choice and quality of food provided at both schools. There was also evidence of children's overall relationship and engagement with food improving as a result of the initiatives. Importantly, this also included some early indications of **improvements to physical health** as part of wider strategies to obesity reduction.

There are strong indicators of the UFSM pilot's **positive impact on wellbeing, happiness and mental health** of pupils via improved mood regulation, but also the social interactions associated with both the breakfast club and school lunches.

Both staff and parents described how the initiatives had provided **greater opportunities to socialise and play**, as well as providing important opportunities to interact with staff in a way that enabled more **holistic forms of support**. Staff referenced the importance of placing such informal interactions within the wider context of the communities that the schools serve, especially considering the additional challenges that some children and families were experiencing.

The impacts are spread beyond the role of the food itself, to the **health and wellbeing benefits** of the social interactions that accompany accessing the UFSM, with staff and parents at both schools noticing that socialising and play has strong benefits for the reduction of stress.

Across both schools, there were notable concerns raised by staff and parents regarding the positive impacts of the pilot being reversed if the provision was to end.

Environment

Both schools believed that through the introduction of the UFSM, they had noticed a **reduction in food waste**. Staff drew attention to the relationship between poverty and food waste, and that if children are hungry, they will eat food. This also included reference to the success of wider initiatives such as the

provision of free fruit at break times. In cases where there may be food waste, this tends to be healthy foods (such as vegetables) and points to the fact that children need greater education on food.

Reducing Stigma

There was a strong feeling amongst interviewees that the **concept of universalism** had great value in **reducing or eliminating stigma**. Furthermore, there was evidence that removing the stigma of FSM's associated with means testing had a **positive impact on school attendance** for some children.

Despite strong agreement in the concept of universalism having the potential to reduce or eliminate stigma, an awareness that only two schools who reside in the most deprived wards in the city had been chosen for the pilot may have had unintentional stigmatising impacts. Rolling out the pilot more widely in the city will go some way in reducing the stigma that the schools felt the community faced in being 'put under the spotlight'.

Relating to the above, **careful media communication** is needed to ensure the provision does not inadvertently stigmatise families further. School leaders described occasions in which this did occur and the need for this to be carefully managed.

There were also some concerns that the funding model could be perceived as a 'charity model', and this may inadvertently increase stigma attached to receiving the USFM and willingness to engage. As mentioned above, it also creates a difference between those schools who are selected to be a part of the pilot and those who are not.

Impacts on Families

There was evidence from interviews with staff and parents that some pressures had been lifted off families. For example, interviewees described how a greater number of **children were happier** to go to school in the morning because of the provision of breakfast, how parents had more time in the morning to do other things (e.g., get to work) and there are fewer tasks such as preparing pre-packed lunches and shopping for lunch foods/breakfast foods. This helps with **alleviating the 'time**

pressures' faced by many families as well as the **financial burdens** of buying food too.

Sustainability of the Pilot

When reflecting on feeling prepared for the launch of the pilot, schools discussed the need for greater collaboration with the Council on a **robust communication strategy** before a school is announced as taking part in the pilot. Schools struggled with the short time they were given to prepare for the launch of the pilot, including developing a communication strategy and addressing practical concerns, while media coverage was circulating at a fast pace. This meant confusion and lack of consistent communication between the school and parents on expectations of the pilot.

The pilot also highlighted the importance of having sufficient catering staff and resources in place and that adequate staffing and coordination is crucial for the success of such programmes. Interviewees described how school staff provided an additional amount of their time to be able to successfully bring the pilot to fruition and that catering staff needed to take on additional hours. Other school staff have been present in the halls with the pupils to enable effective supervision. Despite the resource implications, it is important to note how staff believed this enabled a safe space in which pupils' connections with trusted adults (beyond their parents/guardians) were strengthened.

When considering the success of initiatives such as UFSM's, it is important to note that **schools often extend beyond their role as solely an education provider**. Schools reflect the needs of the community and are central to providing key services beyond that of education. The findings from this research provided strong evidence of how schools engage with the wider provision in the community, including food banks and local charities, to provide holistic support to children and families.

There are key concerns moving forward around the longevity of the funding model and its sustainability. While additional funds should be secured through YCF, there are concerns that a charity-type model is vulnerable to changes in what businesses or other funders are willing to provide. This causes some **uncertainty**. This is

particularly challenging for more economically vulnerable families who may be used to USFM and will need to adjust their family budgets if things change.

Concluding Comments

Against the backdrop of social and economic insecurity, including the impact of food insecurity, the evaluation has shown strong evidence of the UFSM pilot reaching children impacted by poverty. Across both schools, staff and parents voiced serious concerns about the scale of the cost of living pressures and the impacts this is having on children and families.

Relating to the above, interviewees raised concerns on how the pilot provision was unable to address food insecurity for children and families as they transition from primary school to secondary school. There were also concerns surrounding food insecurity when children are not in school for longer periods of time, with particular attention drawn to the impact of school holidays.

It is within this context that we need to acknowledge the timeliness of the policy intervention due to rising cost of living pressures, but also its role in a post covid context and related evidence that this has exacerbated educational inequalities, especially those relating to socio-economic background. Findings from this evaluation strongly demonstrate how the provision of universal free school meals can play a critical role in helping to address these pressures, especially for families on a low income who are more likely to reside in some of the most deprived wards in the city.

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Appendix

Transcription of the qualitative data collected was completed using Descript – an AI software that creates a transcript using voice recognition software. Using this approach, recordings were uploaded into the transcription service. They were then transcribed and using voice recognition, the researcher creates ‘nametags’ throughout the transcripts.

Following transcription, we reviewed the core literature and the key purpose of the research to inform a coding framework. First, we used the City of York Council’s four core commitments of health, environment, affordability and human rights and equalities as codes and thereafter, indicators of the relative success of the pilot scheme. In addition, we also reflected on the purpose of the research and developed codes on community knowledge building, change and school readiness.

Key themes/categories	Subthemes/codes
Human Rights & Equalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved education attainment • Benefits into adulthood • Narrowing educational attainment gap • Reduce stigma • Reaching children in poverty
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COL • Reducing pressure on families
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obesity • Mental health
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste reduction
Community knowledge building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge on food
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of change from the school staff, this may include attendance, educational attainment, interest in food • Impact on community wealth (using local suppliers)
School readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff involvement • Preparations • Services, e.g., caterers

In addition to the coding framework developed, we adopt an abductive approach to coding the transcripts. This is most suitable as it grounds the key objective of this research to evaluate the pilot whilst allowing for the development of other (possibly unintended) consequences that the pilot may have on school staff, parents and pupils.

When analysing the transcripts, we inductively developed key themes of the school reflecting the community, other impacts of UFSM on pupils, concerns moving forward, the food and other impacts on families. These codes were generated through a thematic analytical approach. We also generated some additional subthemes for our previously developed key themes in our initial coding framework following analysis of the transcripts.

Final coding framework

Key themes/categories	Subthemes/codes
Human Rights & Equalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved education attainment • Benefits into adulthood • Narrowing educational attainment gap • Reduce stigma • Reaching children in poverty • A clear need
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COL • Reducing pressure on families
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obesity • Mental health
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste reduction
Community knowledge building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge on food
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of change from the school staff, this may include attendance, educational attainment, interest in food • Impact on community wealth (using local suppliers) • General statements about improvements
School readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff involvement • Preparations • Services, e.g., caterers • Pupils' school readiness
The school reflecting the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combating anti-social behaviour • Poverty proofing opportunities • Schools and holistic responses • Schools building strong relationships with parents
Other impacts of UFSM on pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance • Behaviour • Happiness
Concerns moving forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy food • Having the right food • Other comments on food • Children's relationship with food
Other impacts on families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning routines • Evening routines