



Research from the University of York, School for Business and Society and the University of Sheffield, School of Psychology and Institute for Sustainable Food.

# York Hungry Minds

## Evaluating Universal Free School Meal Initiatives

Aniela Wenham, Katherine Smith, Rebecca Kerr & John Hudson, University of York  
Eloise Tann, Louise Dye & Neil Boyle, University of Sheffield

---

### Summary

- The Universities of York and Sheffield conducted an evaluation of City of York Council's (CYC) Universal Free School Meal (UFSM) pilot, which included a breakfast club at Burton Green School and a free school lunch initiative at Westfield School.
- Qualitative and quantitative data indicates a number of positive outcomes associated with the provision of UFSMs at both schools, including enhanced readiness to learn, improved pupil wellbeing, and most notably improved attendance and reduced lateness over the course of the pilot.
- The importance of universality to the success of the policy is emphasised by both qualitative and quantitative elements of the research.

---

### Recommendations for policy

For local and national policy makers:

1. The findings emphasise the importance of universality. The inclusion of all pupils, and ideally all schools within a locality, **reduces stigma** associated with accessing free school meals (FSMs) and **encourages uptake**.
2. With national trends indicating rising primary school absences since the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence from the pilot shows universal breakfast clubs **improve attendance, punctuality, and pupils' readiness to learn**.
3. Pilot schools highlight the need for **sufficient planning time** to implement UFSM, including addressing practical issues and developing **effective communication** strategies for parents and carers.
4. Policy-makers should consider the **long-term sustainability of funding models** for UFSM initiatives. **Staff and parents expressed concerns about the long-term viability of donation-based funding models**, especially in the context of food insecurity.

# York Hungry Minds: Context of the Research

In January 2024, the City of York Council (CYC) launched a UFSM pilot (also known as “York Hungry Minds”) in two York primary schools. The pilot is supported by funding from both the CYC and the York Community Funds’ Hungry Minds Appeal. It included:

- A universal free breakfast club at Burton Green Primary School, an academy school;
- A universal free school lunch initiative at Westfield Community Primary School, a local-authority maintained school.

At time of the evaluation, on a national level there is an existing Universal Infant Free School Meal scheme, however, pupils in Key Stage two are generally only eligible for FSMs if parents or carers have an annual income below £7,400 (GOV.UK, 2024). In contrast, the York pilot adopts a universal model, making all children in the pilot schools eligible. Nationally, the government elected in July 2024 promised free breakfast clubs in all primary schools.

This research briefing provides key findings that will facilitate the broader implementation of UFSM across York, but also key messages for the wider national roll-out of the programme. Our evaluation focuses on key aspects of the universal offer, guided by the Council’s four core commitments around:

- Health
- The Environment
- Affordability
- Human Rights and Equalities.

It also focuses on pilot design, rollout, and processes to inform both longevity of the pilot, and lessons to expand the UFSM pilot beyond the two schools.

## Methodology

We gathered available **quantitative anonymised data** from Burton Green School comprised of pupils’ termly attendance and lateness, end-of-year academic attainment from years 2 and 6, termly behavioural data and data on breakfast club attendance. Data from Westfield school lunch consisted of pupils’ daily lunch choice, termly academic attainment data and termly

attendance. In addition, each school provided the gender, year group and FSMs eligibility status of each pupil. Comparisons between the pupils who are eligible for FSMs, and those who are not eligible are used to demonstrate any specific impacts that the pilot programmes may have on children from more socioeconomically deprived backgrounds.

For the **qualitative analysis**, we conducted 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 interviews with staff and parents (n34) in August 2024. Additionally, we conducted 19 creative workshops, involving participatory and arts-based methods with over 100 pupils across the two schools.

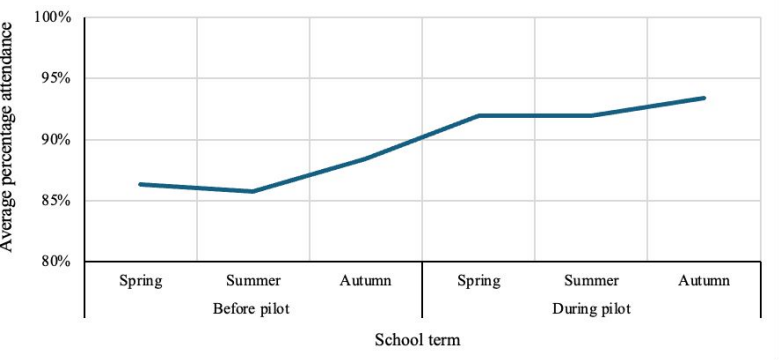
## Key Findings

The pilot demonstrated strong evidence of positive impacts over a number of key areas:

### Attendance and Punctuality

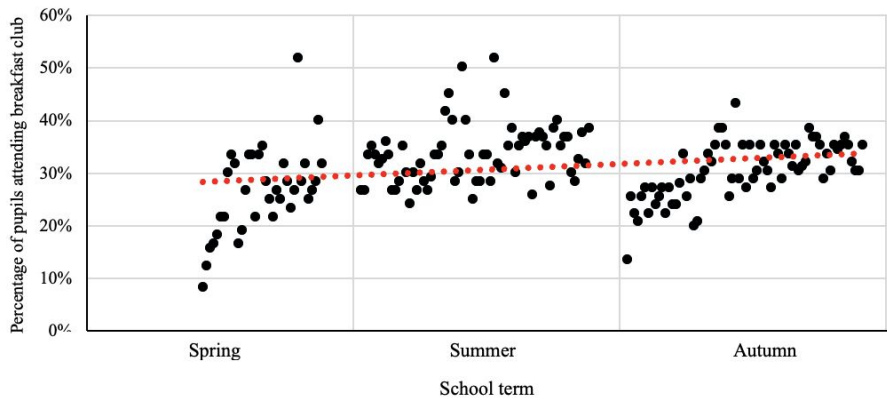
- Both schools in the pilot observed overall increases in attendance during the pilot.
- Quantitative data from Westfield School showed that attendance consistently increased over the pilot (Figure 1).
- Data from Burton Green School (Figure 2) showed that attendance consistently increased over the pilot amongst pupils eligible for FSMs (under the means-tested system) who attended breakfast club. While summer term attendance fell during the pilot (aligning with national trends), the steepest declines were among pupils not attending breakfast club.
- At Burton Green School, the breakfast club initiative reduced lateness among pupils. This trend was particularly evident among FSM-eligible pupils. These trends are also reflected in the qualitative data with staff at both schools commenting on the positive impacts of reduced lateness. Creative outputs from workshops with pupils also referred to busy morning routines, and how breakfast club meant ‘you don’t have to rush’.

Figure 1: Average Attendance at Westfield School



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

**Figure 2: Daily Breakfast Club Attendance as a Percentage of Pupils on Roll (Burton Green School)**



*"It's great ... nobody's penalised ... 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)

## Education and Readiness to Learn

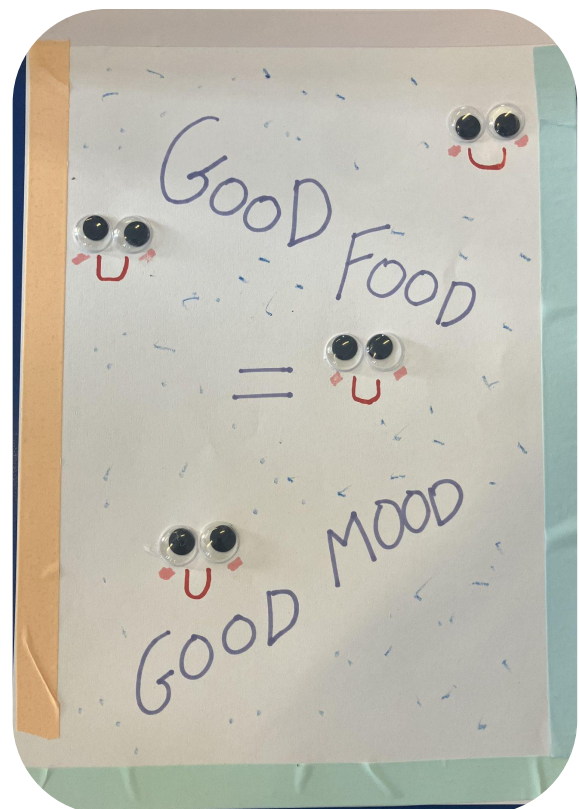
- A strong theme identified in staff interviews at Burton Green School was the impact of breakfast club attendance on pupil readiness to learn. The timing of the initiative at the beginning of the school day reduced lateness and also provided a social environment that was calming and facilitated positive interactions between children and adults that better prepared them for the school day.
- Staff at both schools described improvement in behaviour throughout the UFSM pilot. Staff noted fewer packed lunches at Westfield reduced intake of sugar and unhealthy food, with positive impacts on behaviour.
- Reduction in hunger was perceived to have a positive impact on behaviour in both schools. Staff at both schools referenced improved concentration and cognitive functioning amongst pupils. Similarly, during the creative workshops with pupils, discussions included how food gave them energy and helped them concentrate better in the classroom.

## Uptake and Stigma Reduction

- The results of quantitative analysis from both schools clearly demonstrated that universal access to school meals increases uptake. At Westfield School, uptake increased during the pilot both amongst non-FSM eligible pupils and FSM eligible pupils.
- While there is no baseline data at Burton Green with the breakfast club being a new initiative, the number of pupils attending each day exceeds the national average. The high rates of attendance among KS2 non-FSM pupils, demonstrates a desire to access school meals within this group.
- Increased uptake, while a positive outcome in its own right, also suggests a reduction in stigma as a result of the pilot. There was also a strong feeling among staff and parents that the pilot's universality reduced or eliminated stigma. Similarly, creative workshops with pupils indicated that it was positive that FSMs were for everyone.
- Despite these positive impacts, staff, parents and carers had an awareness that only two schools who reside in the most deprived wards in the city had been chosen for the pilot, which in itself may have had unintentional stigmatising impacts.

## Children's Health

- There are overwhelmingly positive qualitative 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 throughout the pilot.
- Improved consumption of healthy food was also shown in the quantitative analysis of breakfast and lunch uptake (regulated by strict food standards), and the reduction in packed lunches and unhealthy alternatives to breakfast (crisps, chocolate), observed by staff.
- Staff and parents also expressed some early indications of improvements to physical and mental health. As also expressed in creative workshops with pupils, there were 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.



*Creative research output by a pupil from Westfield School*



## Impacts on Families and the 'Cost of Living Crisis'

- Interviews with staff and parents revealed that some of the pressures on families had been reduced throughout the UFSM pilot. For example, parents shared that children had a simpler morning routine and were eager to attend school in the mornings due to the availability of breakfast. Parents had extra time in the morning for other activities (like getting to work), and tasks like preparing packed lunches and shopping for food had been minimised.
- Alongside easing the time pressures many families faced, the initiatives played an important role in alleviating the financial strain of purchasing food. For families who were experiencing poverty, the UFSM provision played an important role in helping to address food insecurity. Pupils also indicated a strong awareness of financial pressures on families and several children mentioned that it was positive that the meals were free.
- Staff from both schools acknowledged the scale of cost of living pressures and the economic insecurity affecting many families in the community. Parents referred to the financial pressures they were facing, or referred the financial struggles they could see others facing.

## Communication and Sustainability

- Schools highlighted the need for better collaboration with the Council on a clear communication strategy before announcing participation in the pilot. They struggled with the short preparation time, which included creating a communication plan and addressing practical concerns, while media coverage spread rapidly. This led to confusion and inconsistent communication with parents about pilot expectations.
- The pilot also emphasised the importance of having adequate staffing, resources and coordination. Interviewees noted that staff dedicated extra time to ensure the pilot's success, with catering staff working additional hours and other school staff assisting where possible.
- Despite the resource challenges, staff felt the pilot provided a safe space for pupils, strengthening their connections with trusted adults beyond their parents/carers.
- There are concerns about the sustainability of the funding model, particularly for economically-vulnerable families who may need to adjust their budgets if changes occur. While additional funding from YCF should be sought, there are worries about the stability of charity-based funding models, which are susceptible to shifts in business or other funders' contributions.



*Creative research output by a pupil from Burton Green School*

## Further information

### Contract the researcher:

Dr Aniela Wenham

[aniela.wenham@york.ac.uk](mailto:aniela.wenham@york.ac.uk)

### Access to Reports

[Quantitative Data](#) & [Qualitative Data](#)

### Funding and support:

Wenham, Smith, Kerr & Hudson's research was supported by The University of York Cost of Living Research Group, the Research England Policy Support Fund, and the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement Research Network (Y-PERN).

Tann, Dye, & Boyle completed this work as part of the UKRI-SPF 'Transforming UK food system' programme funded H3 project (Grant No: BB/ V004719/1)