

Primary School Free Meals

1. Background

The Children and Families Act 2014 places a legal duty on all state-funded schools in England, including academies and free schools to offer a free school lunch to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2 from September 2014. The new provision known as Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) does not affect the existing free meal provision (based on household income) which attracts the Pupil Premium.

The take up of school meals in a typical primary school will be made up of:

1. Pupils in Key Stage 1 who are entitled to free school meals under the new provision
2. Pupils in Key stage 1 and 2 who are entitled to free school meals because the parent meets the eligibility criteria set out in the Education Act 1996
3. Pupils in Key Stage 2 who pay for school meals

2. Provision

A school lunch must be provided for pupils where a meal is requested and either the pupil is eligible for free school lunches, or it would not be unreasonable for lunches to be provided. Governing bodies are able to decide the form that school lunches take, but must ensure that the lunches and other food and drink provided meets the school food standards. Although there is no requirement that lunches must be hot meals, hot lunches should be provided wherever possible to ensure that all pupils are able to eat at least one hot meal every day.

3. Capital Funding

The government recognised that specific additional capital funding was required in order to ensure that where necessary the catering facilities would be able to cope with the increased demand for meals. The details of the funding available for each authority were published in December 2013 and released to the County Council in April 2014.

4. Revenue Funding

Revenue funding for the new provision is based on a rate of £2.30 for each meal taken by pupils who have become newly eligible for a FSM as a result of the UIFSM policy. Schools are expected to continue to fund meals for pupils eligible for FSMs under the existing criteria in the same way that they have done previously. Schools were notified of their provisional full year revenue funding allocation for the 2014 to 2015 academic year in June 2014. These payments will provide funding for the first two terms of the academic year (which represents the remainder of the 2014 to 2015 financial year).

5. Implementation of UIFSM

During the period leading up to September, the County Council's catering service has worked closely with the Head of Capital, Strategy and Programme Management to manage and complete over 200 capital projects across Lancashire. The priority was to ensure that there was sufficient production and storage capacity to meet the forecast increase in demand. The range and scope of projects ranged from a complete re-build to the installation of additional cooking equipment and refrigeration. The existing kitchen capacity was used to determine priority.

Local Operations Managers worked closely with school leaders and catering teams during the summer term to ensure that the service would run smoothly. Over 200 additional staff have been recruited and staffing hours for existing personnel adjusted where necessary. The food provision has also been aligned with the new standards that will become effective in January 2015 and all schools are able to receive hot food.

6. Catering for pupils with special dietary requirements

The policy of the catering service is "to provide a school meal for all pupils including those with medical diets" and locally there is flexibility for catering supervisors to provide an additional choice where there is demand. Standard menus have been issued to cater for those pupils who require lactose and gluten free meals and there is a programme in place to ensure that the authority meets the new legislation (effective from December 13th) concerning the communication to customers of 14 known allergens.

From a catering service perspective the introduction of UIFSM will have a positive effect on primary school budgets due to the increase in volumes brought about by the higher in take up.