Local authority approaches to improving school food in London

School Food Matters
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Introduction

Many local authorities across England are driving significant improvements in school food. This report aims to highlight some of the diverse and innovative approaches currently being taken by local authorities in London. It features case studies based on interviews with key individuals involved in school food within their councils. Included are the approaches taken by five London local authorities: Ealing, Islington, Newham, Southwark, and Tower Hamlets.

This work has been commissioned by Hillingdon Council, as part of their 2024-25 review of primary school food in the borough.

School Food Provision in London

Free School Meals offer widespread benefits including: reducing health inequalities, improving children and young people's mood and behaviour, increasing attendance and attainment as well helping families to save money.[1]

In England, all children in Reception to Year 2 at government-funded schools receive Free School Meals. From Year 3 onwards, eligibility is based on parental income. However, in September 2023, London Mayor Sadiq Khan introduced Free School Meals for all primary School children in London, which has been extended following his 2024 re-election. An evaluation of this initiative found strong support from students, families and schools.[2] In addition, data collected from 259 schools found that take-up has been high, with an average of 89% across the 2023/24 academic year.[2]

Across London, the role that local authorities play in school food provision varies. Many local authorities are working to improve the quality of school food by supporting schools and caterers to comply with the school food standards, which have been mandatory since 2015. These standards aim to ensure that school meals promote healthy eating habits while providing the energy and nutrition children and young people need throughout the school day.[3] The case studies in this report provide examples of how some local authorities in London are ensuring that schools and caterers are meeting (and sometimes exceeding) these standards.

Several local authorities are also exploring the auto-enrolment of children eligible for Free School Meals using benefits data. Auto-enrolment is gaining traction after it was found that an estimated 470,000 children living in the most deprived households are missing out on their statutory right to a daily hot nutritious free school meal.[4] There are several complex reasons why children that are eligible aren't being enrolled, including physical barriers as well as perceived barriers such as stigma and shame. Auto-enrolment has been shown as a way to remove physical barriers such as the complexity of the sign-up forms, language barriers and

lack of awareness of the eligibility criteria. In addition, schools benefit from receiving the extra Pupil Premium Funding for all eligible students, which is £1,455 per student.[4]

While many school food experts (including School Food Matters) are advocating for the central government to take responsibility for auto-enrolment, the case studies in this report highlight examples of how local authorities are pursuing implementation independently of national support. For more information, take a look at the Fix Our Food Programme, which is supporting local authorities with this approach.[5]

A whole-school approach to food

A whole-school approach to food is recommended by the School Food Plan[6] and the World Health Organisation[7] as a way to improve children and young people's health and wellbeing. This approach looks not just at the food served and the dining experience in schools, but also leadership, school culture, food education, equity/dignity, engagement and sustainability.

Local authorities are playing an increasingly active role in supporting schools to adopt a whole-school approach to food. This includes providing various initiatives and programmes, such as expanding Universal Free School Meals, implementing auto-enrolment systems, training for school staff and offering a range of food education programmes for children and their families. The case studies in this report highlight innovative and effective approaches that local authorities in London are taking to support schools with this approach.

Improving School Food: London Borough of Ealing Case Study

Ealing's school food journey

Ealing started to focus on improving school food to address the high obesity rates, health inequalities and food poverty in the Borough. The Borough's Public Health team identified these challenges through its Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), which emphasised the need for a more joined-up approach.

The journey began with most schools adopting packed lunch and water-only policies. Building on this, Ealing introduced whole-school food policies and has been supporting schools to work with their catering teams to improve menus.

> *"So, one thing we have now is that pretty much all schools have a packed lunch policy. So that was the first step and then from that we encouraged schools to have a water only policy. Our survey results show that we have about 80% of schools with a water only and a packed lunch policy. And then the next push was for schools to have a whole school food policy. So, looking at not just what they're having at lunch, but all school food. Which includes working with the caterers. So how can we make the food that we provide in schools healthier?"*
>
> Nicole McGregor, Senior Health Improvement Nutritionist at Ealing Council.

In 2021, the council launched Sugar Smart Ealing, inspired by the national Sugar Smart campaign. Schools participate in activities to achieve awards, helping to promote healthier choices among students.

Who leads?

These initiatives are led by a nutritionist within the Health Improvement Team, part of the Ealing Learning Partnership. The team supports schools with PSHE, Relationships, Health and Sex Education, nutrition, exercise, Eco-Schools, safeguarding and mental health, alongside broader education goals.

Collaboration with other council teams has been essential. The Health Improvement Team works closely with various other teams such as the Active Travel Team and Public Health Team to ensure a joined-up approach. For example, during Ealing's Oral Health roadshow events, they include stalls to showcase work on school food initiatives. The Eco-Schools programme, Recycling Team, Climate Change and Waste Team also contribute, ensuring environmental and health objectives are integrated. Additionally, the team works with catering companies and the council's contracts team, which oversees the free primary school meal initiative. While this

initiative operates separately, the collaboration strengthens overall efforts to improve school food and health outcomes.

Innovation

Ealing's approach is innovative due to its creative and practical strategies that resonate with schools and families. The Health Champions programme encourages students to make healthier choices by rewarding healthy lunches, fostering a sense of achievement and fun. The buy-back service provides schools with two or four tailored activity days per year, which can include workshops, assemblies, training and displays. This model generates income for the council while allowing schools to choose activities that meet their specific needs.

Parent engagement has been a standout feature. Workshops such as 'make a packed lunch for a pound' teach parents to prepare affordable, healthy meals for their children. By focusing on cooking (that weaves in nutrition messages) rather than nutrition lectures, the sessions avoid stigmatising obesity and instead celebrate practical skills. These workshops have been well-received and have strengthened relationships between schools and families. Catering teams are also supported to introduce menu improvements, such as replacing desserts with fruit and implementing meat-free days, further embedding healthier habits within schools.

What works well

Collaboration across council teams and external partners has been a cornerstone of Ealing's success. Understanding the services available and aligning them with school food initiatives has strengthened the programme. External partners often bring unexpected opportunities that enhance the overall offer. Tailoring support to schools has also been vital, with accessible resources like short videos on implementing packed lunch policies helping schools to engage easily.

> *"Really, understanding what other services are available, what other teams are doing so you can strengthen what you can offer. Or you can offer more just by understanding what services you can signpost schools to. So, I think really having a good awareness about all the different services available that are free or have grants. That's important."*
>
> Nicole McGregor, Senior Health Improvement Nutritionist at Ealing Council.

Recognition and incentives have kept schools motivated. Schools are encouraged to take part in awards, points schemes, and an annual conference and award ceremony. Linking school food initiatives to statutory requirements, such as the Department for Education's mandate for climate action plans, has also been effective. The Eco-Schools programme has also provided a valuable avenue for engaging schools in food and health policies.

Challenges and lessons learned

Parent engagement has been particularly successful when sessions are framed in a way that removes stigma. Marketing these workshops as cooking sessions rather than nutrition classes has made them more appealing and better attended. These experiences underline the importance of thoughtful messaging and incremental change.

Financial constraints remain a significant challenge. Some schools struggle to afford the buy-back service, making it essential to offer free support alongside paid services. Resistance to change in schools, such as reluctance to give up cake sales, is another barrier. However, starting with small, achievable goals has proven effective in building momentum and fostering acceptance.

Improving School Food: London Borough of Islington Case Study

Islington's school food journey

Islington's journey to improving school food began with a recognition of the importance of food in supporting children's health, wellbeing, and academic success. Since the establishment of the Healthy Schools Programme within the Education Team in 1999, the council has focused on integrating healthy eating into its broader goals of supporting children and families. The council's initiatives aim to ensure that food education and healthy food provision remain central to the school day.

The council oversees a school meal catering contract that covers most primary schools, some secondary schools, and half of SEND schools. The contract requires compliance with standards that go beyond the school food standards to address additional priorities like reducing sugar, incorporating plant-based proteins, and considering the carbon footprint of meals. For example, this includes providing 50% meat meals such as spaghetti bolognese that features a mix of mince and lentils.

> *"We've just gone through the tendering process, so I've written food specifications which go over and beyond the School Food Standards. It's really interesting when we're looking at the tendering process that the providers often don't know what the School Food Standards are; when they do the tender, the menus do not meet the standards. And it's really quite shocking, so we always check the menus."*
>
> Marjon Willers, specialist dietitian for schools and early years, Families for Life lead, Health and Wellbeing Team Islington Council

Who leads?

The Health and Wellbeing Team, which includes Healthy Schools Team and Healthy Early Years Team (awarding Bronze, Silver, and Gold Healthy Schools), Healthy Eating Team, School Sport and Physical Activity Team, and Mental Health and Resilience programme, leads the initiatives alongside the Public Health Team. This ensures schools are consistently informed and engaged. Collaboration extends to the Food Strategy Team and Integrated Bright Start Services for services working with families with children under five years.

Recent partnerships include Environmental Health, whose inspectors review menus at schools not using the local authority catering contract. These reports are then used to engage schools and encourage them to ensure they meet the statutory standards for school lunches.

Innovation

The council takes a variety of approaches to improve school food holistically. Programmes like Families for Life bring parents and children together for sensory food education and cooking sessions, including specialised programmes for families of children with autistic traits.

Another key innovation lies in the council's proactive approach to tendering and procurement. By setting food specifications that exceed national standards, the council ensures higher nutritional quality, sustainability, and creativity in meal preparation. This includes integrating plant-based proteins, prioritising vegetarian options, and requiring the use of nutrient-dense ingredients like seeds. Such measures actively promote healthier dietary patterns while addressing environmental concerns.

The council also uses tools such as the Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire as well as the Health Needs Ranking system to identify priority schools based on indicators such as free school meals entitlement, obesity levels, dental caries and exclusion rates. This ensures support reaches the schools that need it most, rather than focusing only on already-engaged schools with often lower needs.

What works well

School visits, lunchtime observations and training sessions — including sensory food education for staff and parents — have been key to success. A long-standing presence in schools has fostered trust and set clear expectations around health and wellbeing. Half-termly newsletters provide updates, resources and training opportunities, ensuring schools remain engaged and informed.

The council's focus on reducing sugar and enhancing meal composition has yielded healthier menus. Menu changes, like prioritising vegetarian options, have been well-received and effective in promoting healthier choices.

> *"They have to work on changing the menu around, so they have the vegetarian option at the top and the meat option below. And we've got requirements around adding more seeds into the meals as well. We know nuts and sesame seeds are difficult, but we use sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, but also chia and linseed. So, we've got a requirement about a caterer having to use those on a weekly basis."*

Marjon Willers, specialist dietitian for schools and early years, Families for Life lead, Health and Wellbeing Team

Challenges and lessons learned

One challenge has been ensuring consistent messaging to families. The council has addressed this by standardising all communications, from leaflets to training materials, through to their 'Small Steps for Big Change' resources. This aims to reduce the confusion around health messaging that families often face.

With numerous initiatives available, there can be a lack of urgency among schools to participate. The council is working to streamline its offerings and restructure programmes to ensure greater impact.

Improving School Food: London Borough of Newham Case Study

Newham's school food journey

In 2009 Newham was selected for a Universal Free School Meal Pilot in which all primary school children were offered a free school meal.[8] The 2009 pilot was successful, and the council then committed to using local money to continue the scheme, known as 'Eat for Free'. Since 2023 the scheme has been funded by the Mayor of London.

In 2019, Newham began to think about how the Eat for Free grant could have additional impact on the nutrition, quality, sustainability and community wealth building aspects of school food. Grant conditions and principles were developed through a process of co-production with members of the public health team, education directorate and school leaders.[9] Newham is now also working on free school meal auto-enrolment to support food security for more children and young people across the borough.

Who leads?

The Public Health Food Strategy Team, established in 2019, work alongside schools in Newham to co-produce the grant conditions and principles that ensure all schools to take a whole school approach to food. They include: paying the London Living Wage, offering the LGPS pension scheme, and actively encouraging the uptake of school meals, targeting above 90%.[10] Since 2023, the Food Strategy Team has played a key role in supporting schools to adhere to these conditions and principles. In addition, the team collaborates closely with the Education Team, who have built strong, lasting relationships with schools.

Newham is also one of the few remaining Councils in London with its own in-house local authority school caterer. Juniper Ventures are used by around two thirds of primary schools in the Eat for Free scheme. The presence of a local authority caterer has helped to shape the ambitious ask made by the grant conditions and principles as well as seeing the Council able to be a partner in work such as the London Circular Procurement Commitment.

Innovation

The co-produced grant conditions and principles that involve all Eat for Free schools, and importantly all caterers, provide an innovative and effective approach to improving school food. They ensure that the allocated funds are used appropriately to benefit both the schools and the wider community. The conditions help guarantee that money is spent in line with the Council's broader objectives around a community wealth building local economy, climate action and children's health. The principles help to keep food high on the agenda in schools,

continuing to improve children's health, fostering accountability and supporting schools as they work to achieve high standards in food provision in partnership with their caterers.

> *"This grant is managed by Councils and can only be spent in one way as outlined by The Mayor of London. All Councils have the opportunity to use the grant as a catalyst to work with schools to improve every aspect of both school meals across the school day. As you would with any local government grant to be spent locally you can engage your key stakeholders and work together to shape your school food system"*
>
> Andy Gold, Head of Food Strategy, Public Health at Newham Council

Alongside Eat for Free, the Public Health team lead a variety of other dynamic work in school food, including work in secondary schools. The 'We are food secure 11-19 project'[11] is working to understand and improve food security for young people in Newham by working closely with secondary schools and the youth sector whilst Edible SuDS Planters for Schools[12], a programme supported by the Public Realm Team, supports flood resilience and introduces children to sustainable food sources.

Jenny Martin, Public Health's lead on Whole School Approaches to Food at Newham Council supports schools to embed a positive and nourishing food culture into the heart of the school community. Jenny works with both primary and secondary schools, supporting them to engage the whole school community in eating and learning about good food.

> *"So, looking at food very holistically... food growing, food education, food policies, staff using education as an opportunity to develop food literate young people, making lunchtime and food an integral part of the day and weaving it throughout school life. A lot of co-production with children and young people as well, making sure they're really and genuinely involved in the process through student council sessions and assemblies."*
>
> Jenny Martin, Assistant Public Health Strategist at Newham Council

What works well

Since 2019, stakeholder engagement and strong partnerships have been pivotal in transforming the grant into something more ambitious and impactful. The team recognised early on that the ambition was there in schools, but often found capacity was a challenge. The team has achieved significant success by replicating effective initiatives from schools within the Borough to support others. Toolkits and support have become a central part of the grant's impact.

Newham has succeeded by working closely with other council teams and external organisations, aligning goals and increasing capacity. The strong partnership between the Food Strategy and the Education Team has been crucial. The Education Teams guidance on working with schools and their established and expertly managed communication channels have been key to bringing the work along quickly and maximising stakeholder engagement. They have also actively engaged with existing initiatives in the Borough and across London to maximise impact.

Challenges and lessons learned

The Food Strategy Team at Newham highlighted the current challenges around council funding, which is reflected across the country. Since implementing the grant conditions and principles for school food, they have seen significant returns on investment and encouraged other councils to adopt the same approach.

> *"[Implementing grant conditions] it's a tremendous public health opportunity. It being a high return on investment opportunity and it being a chance to leverage money that is already there to get more done in your community. Get better wages paid, get private contractors to take less money out of your community and put more into good food and good wages. An opportunity for Council's to take control of their school food system. An opportunity for Council's to work closely with schools on their budget."*
>
> Andy Gold, Head of Food Strategy, Public Health at Newham Council

Every school has a unique starting point, with varying facilities, grounds, and levels of support needed from caterers. These challenges underpin the approach to the Eat for Free grant in Newham, which the team views as both exciting and rewarding. Beyond Eat for Free, the next challenge lies in secondary schools, which have distinct needs and structures, often involving private sector caterers that complicate collaboration with the council. Despite this, the whole school approaches lead has achieved significant success, from helping schools advocate for menu reviews to substantially increasing FSM registrations.

Newham is proud of its successes in school food so far. They want teachers to be attracted to the borough because of its work on food and the positive impact it has on teaching and the whole school environment. Looking ahead, Newham believe, based on their own experience, that there should be a dedicated School Food Officer in every council to drive further improvements

Improving School Food: London Borough of Southwark Case Study

Southwark's school food journey

In 2013 Southwark Council introduced Free Healthy School Meals for the whole of Key Stage 2 (years 3 –6). In 2019, also funded by the Public Health grant, the council introduced Free Healthy Meals to maintained nursery schools and school-based nursery classes too. The council recognises that filling, healthy lunches support good behaviour in academic settings and encourage children to try more varied foods.

In December 2021, Southwark embarked upon a School Meals Transformation Programme, match funded by Impact on Urban Health, which aims to 'support all nursery, primary, secondary and special school schools to improve their school meals provision in terms of nutrition and value for money.'[13] The three main goals of the programme are: consistent nutritional value, value for money and sustainability (both longevity of the school food service and environmental). The programme offers schools a wide range of support as well as 10 evidence-based interventions aimed at improving their whole school food system. The transformation programme supports the council to improve the equality of access to healthy meals at school, with all children offered an appealing, quality meal.

Who leads?

In Southwark, the work on school food is spearheaded by the Public Health and Education Teams. The Education Team has great links with schools and headteachers, and they are a key partner to help with school engagement.

> *'(The Southwark Education officers) are a really important partner in encouraging schools to engage in the School Meals Transformation Programme. We've heavily relied upon Education communication channels with schools and attended regular Education led school briefing meetings, in particular the Head Teachers Breakfast Forum. We also receive significant support from Education Advisors and the PHSE lead officer, to connect us with schools and nursery leadership teams to enable us to support and influence aspects of pupil wellbeing and nutrition.'*
>
> Gillian Boundy, Senior Public Health Programme Manager, Southwark Council

Additionally, the School Meals Transformation Programme has a steering group made up of special advisors, funders and cross-council departments, including Education, Public Health, Finance, Environmental Health, Legal and Procurement. The steering group governs the transformation programme and makes decisions about programme workstreams and funding

allocations. The steering group reports to a sponsor group which is made up of councilors (Cllr. Evelyn Akoto and Cllr. Jasmine Ali) and senior executives of the joint programme funders, Impact on Urban Health.

Innovation

One of the innovative elements of the School Meals Transformation Programme is the in-person visits to primary and secondary schools carried out by Public Health officers. During these visits, an officer spends a few hours learning about and discussing how to support the school with the issues they are facing around school food. While on site, officers will meet with the School Business Manager to discuss outsourced catering contract performance. Officers also make sure to join and sit with children and young people for a meal and hear their views on the school food service. Throughout the academic year officers aim to visit all schools, starting with the schools that appear to need the most support. The in-person visits are a great way to start conversations with schools about school food and a chance to get into those schools which have been harder to engage with.

> *"You get to have a good look at the lunch environment, noise levels, waste levels, how the children have food presented, how the children access service, the extent they're encouraged to eat, is there water on the table?"*
>
> Gillian Boundy, Senior Public Health Programme Manager, Southwark Council

Southwark's focus on improving food in secondary schools is also innovative. They have introduced 'Universal Credit Free School Meals' in secondaries to widen eligibility to include children and young people whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit. This approach goes beyond the government's current Free School Meals criteria, which restrict eligibility for families on Universal Credit to those with a household income of less than £7,400 per year (after tax and excluding benefits). [14] In contrast, Southwark's initiative extends eligibility based solely on receipt of Universal Credit, without imposing an income threshold.

The School Meals Transformation Programme also offers all schools a range of funded support in specific areas including Chefs in Schools training and Food Waste Management.

Southwark Council are also currently working on a School Food Procurement Framework Agreement which will be out to tender in mid-January 2025. The framework agreement will provide support for schools to be able to confidently source high quality, good value healthy food service.[15] It will also promote catering contracts which meet London's Food Purchasing Commitment[16] and Southwark Council's Sustainable Food Strategy.[17] The framework

agreement will also support the residents of the Borough by raising wages in school kitchens and championing contracts for local small-scale suppliers.

What worked well

Southwark Council's success in launching the School Meals Transformation Programme can be attributed to their strong relationships with schools, which are supported by Education Officers and dedicated School Food Officers from Public Health. By attending the School Business Manager Forum and working closely with a core team of School Business Managers, the team has gained valuable insights from key decision-makers in schools on contracting and procurement preferences, while also sharing individual school case studies and experiences. Additionally, the council has created a dedicated website to provide schools with access to stories, training opportunities, and resources, which has been widely shared with headteachers by the Education Team. Over time, this has created a snowball effect, with word-of-mouth recommendations from schools driving further engagement.

The council has also benefited from collaborating with external organisations that share similar goals. These partnerships have provided additional training opportunities for school leadership, fresh perspectives, evaluation expertise, procurement outsourcing experience and valuable expert advice to the steering group. External support has been particularly crucial in engaging with secondary schools that face more challenges and require additional catering capacity or capital works.

Challenges and lessons learned

One of the biggest challenges Southwark faces is the large number of different catering companies that work with schools. This can lead to the council having little control over school food service contracts. In addition, the disparity between the terms and conditions of the wide range of contracts in Southwark has been a challenge. There can be a big difference in the price per meal and how much staff are being paid. Over time this has had an impact on food quality and staff wellbeing and retention in some schools. The upcoming Southwark School Food Procurement Framework hopes to address these issues.

Regarding their work improving uptake of School Meals in Primary Schools, Southwark have said it's a long-term effort, that over time children become more accepting of balanced, nutritious meals.

> *"It takes a long time for children to accept new foods. The council found that when universal primary school meals were introduced in 2013, the pupils in Year 6 still wanted to bring their familiar packed lunches. However, the longer you're exposed to Free*

Healthy School Meals, the more likely you leave primary school eating it. Many of our schools now have a >91% actual meal take up rate. It's a long game, other London Boroughs must keep the faith!"

Gillian Boundy, Senior Public Health Programme Manager, Southwark Council

Improving School Food: London Borough of Tower Hamlets Case Study

Tower Hamlet's school food journey

Since 2014, all primary school children in Tower Hamlets have been entitled to free school meals through the Boroughs Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) initiative. In September 2023, this was extended to all secondary school students up to age 16, making them the first local authority to do so. This initiative was complemented with investment for secondary schools to support them to expand their school meal provision with additional equipment and resources.

Tower Hamlets also leads a programme called Fantastic Food in Schools, which supports schools in adopting a whole-school approach to food by ensuring healthy options are available throughout the school day.[18] They also operate an auto-enrolment scheme which ensures that entitled children are receiving their free school meals whilst maximising pupil premium for schools.

Who leads?

The Public Health team launched the Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) programme for primary schools in 2014, aiming to tackle poverty and childhood obesity. In recent years, the focus has shifted to improving nutritional quality by reducing high fat, salt, and sugar in school meals. To extend UFSM to secondary schools in 2023, a Project Board was formed, which included secondary headteachers, council representatives, caterers and external consultants. The Board played a key role in planning and supporting the initiative's successful rollout.

The UFSM initiative is supported by the local authority in-house caterer, which serves most primary and some secondary schools in the Borough. The council's Cabinet Scrutiny Committee is overseeing the programme, ensuring funding is spent effectively, uptake is maximised, and food quality is high. Additionally, the 'Fantastic Food in School' programme promotes improved food standards and a whole-school approach to food by working with Contract Services, Public Health and Healthy Lives teams.

Innovation

Tower Hamlets is the first local authority in England to extend UFSMs to secondary school students. To support this initiative, the council invested £722,000 to help with upgrading school kitchen facilities, enabling the provision of nearly one million additional meals to be served in the first year alone.[19] The money was used in many ways by schools, including building pods in playgrounds to create more service points for students at lunch time and updating kitchen equipment. The Fantastic Food in Schools programme also includes several innovative

initiatives. A dessert policy, meaning schools can only offer fruit and yoghurt, is followed by an estimated 80% of primary schools. The Borough also promotes family-style service, where children share meals from the centre of the table. Additionally, the catering team hosts 'Cook-a-Thon' events where children and young people compete in teams to prepare a meal in 15 minutes, showcasing quick and nutritious meal preparation. These initiatives support both the nutritional quality and the positive social aspect of food in schools.

What works well

The UFSM in secondary schools is in its second year and recent data has shown an increase in take up.[20] Adjusting for absence, they have found that take up is at about 82%. The council is delighted with this level of take-up.

> *"The joy is seeing groups of friends all sitting together and they're making it a social time for themselves and instead of the free school meal pupils having to perhaps go in on their own to claim their free meal in a bit of an isolated sort of way, they're not on their own anymore. They're going in with their group of friends and everyone's enjoying a meal together. So that is a massive change and pupils who did pay for their meals before have said, "oh, I had to share my meal with someone who couldn't afford to pay for it" but now it is free for everyone."*
>
> Jenny Pittam, Head of Contract Catering Services, Tower Hamlets Council

Jenny also said that they had found that compliance with Government School Food Standards has also improved, with a 15% increase from January 2023 to January 2024.

The Fantastic Food in Schools programme that supports schools to adopt a whole school approach to food has seen positive results. An evaluation of the programme in Tower Hamlets showed that 'Universal free school meals and whole-school approaches to food can enable equitable cultural inclusion in diverse, urban areas like Tower Hamlets.' [19] However, this evaluation also highlighted the need for backing from educational policy and increased funding.

> *"The Fantastic Food in Schools programme is a good one because it's a joined-up approach working together with Public Health, Healthy Lives teams, schools and catering teams. We're now in our third year and the focused agenda amongst us all is to improve school food and lunch time experiences for children."*
>
> Jenny Pittam, Head of Contract Catering Services, Tower Hamlets Council

Challenges and lessons learned

The expansion of the UFSM programme into secondary schools faced initial resistance, from headteachers who were concerned about the increased number of students taking meals in a short lunch break. However, with investment made in new equipment and serving outlets, school support for the scheme grew. A key challenge was ensuring secondary school kitchens had the capacity to handle the increased meal production, which was supported by the council funding for schools.

The council also implemented grant conditions for the UFSM funding, including paying the London Living Wage to kitchen staff. Whilst compliance with these standards is still work in progress, the council is focused on ensuring these conditions are met.

> *"Where there's funding, a will, and a way you can achieve a UFSM offer. Early evaluations indicate some really positive outcomes for pupils in Tower Hamlets."*
>
> Jenny Pittam, Head of Contract Catering Services at Tower Hamlets Council

Positive partnerships, especially with the UFSM Project Team, have been invaluable in ensuring schools received the necessary support and funding to overcome the challenges of this unique initiative.

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