

London Assembly Economy Committee - 9 November 2023**Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1**

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): To our main item of business, which is a discussion with our invited guests on free school meals (FSM) in London. The item will be split into two panels. Joining us at City Hall for the first panel are Barbara Crowther, who is the Campaign Coordinator for Sustain; Daniel Kebede, who is the General Secretary of the National Education Union (NEU); and Dr Katharine Vincent, the Director of Reconnect London. Could I also pass on the apologies of Councillor Jasmine Ali, the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Refugees, at Southwark Council, who is unable to attend this morning.

Thank you to the three of you for being here this morning. I will start with the first question and it is to the three of you. What are the main health and educational financial benefits for children of receiving FSM? Katharine, I wonder if you could start.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Thank you, Chair. I will start by saying that FSM has significant and wide-ranging benefits for young Londoners and their families. They help ensure that all children can flourish and thrive, regardless of the circumstances in which they or their families are living. They also have long-lasting benefits into adulthood in relation to educational outcomes as well as social, financial, and health benefits, both for individuals and for wider society. FSM are particularly important for children living in poverty and we know that child poverty has risen in London in recent years and that it has grown further since the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the attainment gap between children experiencing disadvantage and their peers has been growing and is now at its highest for over a decade. Without funding for FSM, this attainment gap would almost certainly be even greater and schools would be struggling even more than they are at present to support children who are experiencing adverse financial circumstances.

Across the country, around 30 per cent of children are living in poverty. That includes 1.3 million primary school children and 1 million children under the age of four. Increases in child poverty are reflected in the increasing numbers of pupils who are eligible for FSM and the pupil premium. The pupil premium eligibility has risen from just over 1.2 million children in 2011/12 to over 2 million or one in four pupils nationally in 2022.

Furthermore, we know that low-income families often experience a higher inflation rate than higher-income households and that this has been the case over the last two years because the recent rise in inflation has been driven by increased prices of essentials like energy and food. Therefore, for many lower-income households, the cost of preparing a hot, healthy, nutritious evening meal is extremely difficult, particularly for families with several young children, making provision of FSM even more important.

We know that some groups are more likely than others to experience poverty and therefore particularly benefit from the provision of FSM. That includes several groups that are overrepresented in London and are also among the key groups who often underachieve at school. Therefore, 49per cent of children in single-parent families are living in poverty; 46per cent of children from Black and minority ethnic groups; and 47per cent of children in families with three or more children.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are also significantly more likely to be living in poverty than those without additional needs. FSM are particularly important for those children. In Tower Hamlets, for example, 56per cent of children are living in poverty after housing costs, but this rises to over 80per cent in the borough's special schools, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), and other alternative provision settings.

In London, there are particular issues, which exacerbate the situation for low-income families, which I know the Committee has heard about in previous evidence sessions. Families in London are more likely than those elsewhere to be affected by the two-child limit and the benefit cap as well as the freeze in local housing allowance and the high costs of childcare and travel. This makes funding for FSM even more important for London families who are facing adverse socioeconomic circumstances.

Research, including by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has explored in detail how children affected by poverty are more likely to experience overcrowding, poor living conditions, homelessness, food insecurity, poor nutrition, fuel poverty, social exclusion, and mental health difficulties. They also often face the challenge of not being able to fully participate in school life because, for example, they cannot afford new school uniform, take part in charity events, or pay for school trips.

Research carried out by Teacher Tapp for Fair Share in September 2023, showed that 26per cent of teachers were giving food to children to avoid them going hungry. In this context, funding for FSM is not a luxury, but a necessity. It alleviates the financial burden on families, freeing up crucial funds for other basic living expenses and making it more likely that children will be able to succeed in school. Because, fundamentally, we know that children cannot learn if they are hungry.

Therefore, providing FSM --

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Katharine, I am really sorry, you have covered an awful lot, thank you very much. I am going to ask both Barbara and Daniel, if there is nothing more that you want to add to that, I have two very specific questions for you both. Is there anything you would like to add?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): I have some evidence of benefits that might be worth drawing to your attention. Just to add to what Katharine is saying, there have been evaluations of delivery of FSM. One study indicates that there is a £10 saving per child per week to families; a potential £34.50 saving for a household with one parent, one child; or up to £69 a week for a family with two parents and two eligible children. It is significant when we know how pressurised family budgets are. We know that can often then result in the family then freeing up budget to buy better-quality food, therefore better school food can lead to better-quality food at home. We also have talked to one school where the parents are saying they are signing their children up for exercise classes, therefore there is an overall health benefit.

We know that FSM reduces stigma when provided on a universal basis. That does not necessarily occur when you only provide a targeted basis. It shows how it reduces pressures of anxiety, depression, for children who worry about what is happening home and bring those worries into school, as well as the effects of stigma, embarrassment, and shame, if they are singled out, for example on school trips. It might be controlled very well when they are in school, but then once there are these peripheral activities, there is extra registration that singles them out.

The University of Essex has produced a study showing that there is, in the four London boroughs that have been doing universal school meals for quite some time, that there has been a reduction in the trends on obesity prevalence of around 9.3per cent among reception-aged children and 5.6per cent among year-6

children. Then, as Katharine said, we have evidence of learning and attainment. Not particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) evidence of increased attendance, but that is because there is not very much research in the UK around that. There is evidence of that occurring in other countries.

But we do know that the original pilots that the Government conducted, where they did pilots in Hull and Newham of universal entitlement versus targeted increased entitlement in Wolverhampton, in the universal schools there was an increase of between four and eight weeks attainment in maths and English. That did not occur in the targeted attainment boroughs. Therefore, that is just a few additional points to add.

Marina Ahmad AM: Thank you very much. Daniel, did you want to add anything?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): No.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): OK, thank you. The next question is, what are the advantages and disadvantages of universal free school meals (UFSM) as opposed to targeted provision? Barbara, I know you have answered some of that, therefore I wonder, Daniel, if we could start with you.

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Yes, absolutely. Just as a starting point, I would like to absolutely commend Mayor [of London, Sadiq] Khan and the London Assembly for a really ambitious approach here. It is something that should be absolutely celebrated. Before being elected, I was a teacher and I have taught in the northeast of England and I have taught in Stockwell and have seen first-hand the impact and benefits of FSM provision and am really a huge supporter of its universalism. As we have already heard, it can lead to an increased level in attainment. But one thing that I will say is that child poverty generally leads to an entire wastage of human creativity. We lose doctors, we lose architects, and it is down to essentially a political choice, therefore I really do commend you all for taking that on.

Children who use foodbanks or in families who use foodbanks can tend to get lower grades by half a grade on average. But to focus on that universalism and the benefits, every child has access to a nutritious lunch, eating together is a social experience in which children will try new foods. But of course it impacts on every child during the day having that healthy lunch. It improves their mood, their attention, and of course it improves their learning outcomes.

But the cost-of-living crisis has been really profound on families. In 2022 we saw families, on average, being £800 a year poorer, 4 million children in food poverty, essentially going hungry. One argument for UFSM that is not made enough, I do not think - is around the economic benefits more broadly to the economy. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) have done some research. For every pound that is spent on UFSM, the economy gets £1.71 in return. We do need to look at this provision as an economic investment in the future of the country.

Marina Ahmad AM: Thank you very much. We have heard some people say that UFSM would be like a reverse Robin Hood tax, taking from the poor to give to the rich. I wonder if anybody would like to comment on that. Barbara?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Thank you and just to endorse what Daniel was saying about how we commend this activity. Just to build on the last point that Daniel made; that economic benefit for universal approach is compared to a £1.38 for every pound, therefore it is £1.71 under universal, £1.38 under a targeted approach, relating to Universal Credit (UC). Therefore, there is a wider economic benefit.

What we also do see is there are improvements in classroom cohesion, classroom behaviour, therefore you do see attainment benefits. It helps teachers get back to teaching because teachers are not having to deal with all of these additional requirements for support and the effects of children being hungry, lack of attention, tiredness, and poor behaviour in the classroom. There has been a really interesting study in Sweden by [Petter] Lundborg that has shown that children exposed to their universal school meals programme, the average across every child was a lifetime increase in earnings of around 3per cent. For children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, it was 6per cent. Therefore, basically, the programme has lifted all children's potential, but it has disproportionately lifted children from disadvantaged backgrounds and closed that gap.

I wanted to just say that there is a really good rapid evidence review that has been produced by Bremner & Co, *Impact on Urban Health*, that is available that looks across all of this evidence and I recommend that the Committee does take that documentation, which we can supply, and it has now been published as well. So I will pass to Katharine.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Thank you, Barbara. Thank you, Chair. I absolutely agree with the points that have been made so far. In addition, it is important to talk about why we are having the conversation about universality. That is partly because it is widely agreed that we need to broaden the current eligibility criteria for FSM. Research by *Impact on Urban Health* again suggests that up to a third of children in the UK living in poverty do not meet current eligibility criteria. Therefore, there are quite a lot of children living in poverty and living in low-income families who currently are not getting FSM. That is partly because the threshold for eligibility has been frozen since 2018 while inflation and wages have been rising.

It is also important to mention the alternatives to universal provision compared with the current system. One alternative would be to provide FSM to all families in receipt of UC. That would mean that an additional 1.7 million children across the country whose families are eligible for UC, 69per cent of that group, would become eligible for FSM. That will cost about £1 billion a year compared with £2.5 billion, which it would cost to make UFSM available to everybody across the country. Therefore, there is a significant cost saving there. Of course one thing that would do would make sure that families up to an annual household income of about £55,000 could all know that when their children went to school they were always going to get a hot, healthy, and nutritious meal.

One of the things that would do for families, it would take away the worry, take away the stress, take away that knowledge that, if you earn a little bit more money, you might stop being eligible. If your circumstances change, you may no longer get that benefit. Therefore, I think that the idea of increasing eligibility to encompass all families who receive UC could be an alternative if universality was felt not to be affordable. One reason that seems sensible is because it uses an existing mechanism for means testing. One of the things we do not want to do is introduce any new mechanisms for that because we know that they are expensive and also that they can lead to families falling through the gaps in the net.

Marina Ahmad AM: Thank you very much. We have touched on the issue of stigma, you have all said the word "stigma". What I would like to ask you is, is there a stigma associated with receiving means-tested FSM and, if so, could you give examples of how this is experienced by children and the evidence of it? Does the universal provision of FSM help to alleviate stigma? Barbara, if you could start please?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Thank you. Obviously, schools go to great extent to try to avoid children in receipt of FSM being singled out. In many schools they try to manage it incredibly well. Obviously there are occasions when schools need to bring forward children in receipt of FSM in order to send additional information home to parents and things like that, therefore it is quite hard to avoid.

Particularly, the stigma, the evidence around secondary schools is particularly strong because the FSM grant is on the card, quite often that relates to the meal of the day, children cannot always buy everything that is on the menu, and therefore it starts to become very apparent who is buying what, therefore that can show in that way. What we do know is around 11 per cent of eligible children are not taking up their entitlement and that is to do with families not wanting their children to be identified in school as well as the form-filling exercises.

Therefore, another solution that we are currently advocating is the automated enrolment, automatic enrolment for FSM and also ensuring that is happening on pupil premium and there is some really interesting work happening. It started in Sheffield and Yorkshire and now several London boroughs are looking at automating entitlement and what they have realised is there are missing millions in school budgets as a result of the loss of pupil premium from families not signing up for their entitlement.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Daniel.

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Yes. Means testing brings its own costs and its own bureaucratic burdens to the school system, therefore I would really warn against that. On the broader point around packed lunches and those sorts of things, even the middle classes are not doing a good job, 2 per cent of packed lunches meet nutritional requirements. Therefore, there is something really beneficial to the universalism here. A very important point is around the stigma. Stigma is well documented, even when schools are doing their best to minimise that, children very much deserve the right to live in dignity. Of course, there is a stigma that comes with poverty beyond just being in receipt of FSM. Providing that universalism will enable families to have greater financial security to minimise that stigma. There were protests in Newham, the parents protesting in Newham when the UFSM were being withdrawn. It is something that all parents appreciate when they have access to them.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Bokhari, you had a question.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you so much, Chair. I want to touch on the stigma and shame element. We did a previous Committee meeting on foodbanks and that was very much the emphasis that we got when we were talking to particular groups there. The one particular group that I want to focus on is the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. There was a lot of stigma and shame discussed about that community when they were approaching foodbanks and that is definitely the case here for children as well. Interestingly, it is quite a high percentage of children from that community that are on FSM. Can you tell me a little bit about why that might be the case?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): We all need to focus particularly on racial and ethnic disparities in education. There has been lots of good work going on. However, data suggests in every regard Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children are struggling the most in terms of education and we need to focus resources to support that community particularly, I believe. There is a great stigma associated with poverty and if you are a community that is more likely to access foodbanks then you are more likely to experience that stigma. That is something that we all must do much more to work on.

But it is not just those in absolute poverty that are experiencing great deals of stigma also. Much of our member feedback currently is also around families who are just about managing. Those families who are not eligible for FSM, who are struggling day-to-day with the cost of living. Our feedback from our members at the moment is that those are experiencing high levels of stigma also.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Might I just add one point?

Hina Bokhari AM: Sorry, yes.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Another group that we have been particularly concerned about are children from households with no recourse to public funds. Obviously through a universal approach all children on the roll are automatically entitled. I was visiting a school in Wandsworth in Battersea where, although the Government has temporarily extended that entitlement, it had taken two administrative staff about three weeks working every single day, several hours a day, to try to get those two children in their school through the system. That is another kind of way we can make sure that we are not just singling out individuals who are already very vulnerable.

Hina Bokhari AM: I would like to come in on that point of the automatic enrolment. The Minister for Schools has come back to the Economy Committee about this and says that there is complex data systems, legal implications to such a change. What would your response be to that? Because the implications that you were referring to, on balance the challenges compared to the benefits of automatic enrolment could mean differences for the education of these children? Do you want to come in on that, Barbara?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): I am not the expert on automated enrolment, but I do know that it is something that a lot of the London boroughs are looking at in detail. One of the ways that it is being currently approached is through an opt-out process rather than an opt-in process with parents. That has resulted in Lewisham has managed to recoup about £1.2 million of pupil premium. Obviously, this is one of the complications that we do have in the school meal system is that FSM entitlement is used as this proxy for disadvantage. We are already managing that on a national basis on UFSM. Therefore, there are other ways to make sure we can connect data systems and the information around welfare and benefits into our local councils so that schools can access pupil premium, which is their entitlement, while rolling out a universal school meals system. But I am not an expert on the logistics I am afraid.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you. Just my last point and this is linked to the stigma and the issues of claiming FSM, 14per cent of eligible children have not claimed. Is that because of stigma? Is it perhaps even particular ethnic groups that are not taking it on for particular cultural reasons?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): There are barriers that communities can face, language barriers being one of them. There is a real issue, the nature of the economy and society at the moment, it means that families' financial situations can change very quickly and unless you are up to scratch with all your knowledge on eligibility around anything you can access, it can cause a real problem. Autoenrollment does alleviate some of that problem for families and is, I think, something that we should really be looking towards. Not just ensuring that young people have access to the FSM that they are entitled to, but also that schools are able to access the pupil premium funding that they are in turn entitled to.

It is important to remember that last year the majority of young people who went hungry were those who were not in receipt of FSM for whatever reason but living in poverty. Therefore, 57per cent of children who missed a meal last year were not accessing FSM at the time, and that is something autoenrollment can help alleviate.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Boff.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): I just wondered which schools in London are reinforcing that stigma.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): I am going to be brave enough to answer that question by saying that I know that London schools and schools across the country have done a huge amount to reduce stigma and a huge amount to make sure that all children receive the benefits for which they are eligible and that they minimise any potential negative consequences of that. The feedback that we have been receiving from headteachers within our network, albeit anecdotal at this stage, is that the current policy is helping to bring children together in school and having benefits even though they have already done a lot to reduce stigma. For example, they are finding that children who previously did not eat at lunch time are eating now because everyone is eating and everyone is sitting down and their friends are eating, and therefore they are taking part.

They are also finding that they can monitor more closely vulnerable children and what they are eating. One head teacher mentioned a child who is on a Child in Need Plan who they know has issues with access to healthy food at home. They know that she does not always have a healthy meal at home in the evening. But now food is available at school, they can make sure that she is having that one meal a day at school and --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you very much for that anecdotal evidence but I just want names of schools.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): I know the --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): I want to give them some stigma. Which ones are they?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): One particular example of something that is quite difficult for schools, when I was a head teacher in east London, one of the things that was mentioned to us was that we needed to make sure that children who were eligible for FSM had access to the carry-over amounts every day. Therefore, if a child receiving FSM receives that kind of nominal amount, £2.41 or £2.65 a day, if they are absent or if they do not have a meal that day, one thing I had not previously realised as head teacher is that the catering system would automatically then take that balance down to zero the next day. Therefore, we were then able to start to create a system whereby it was fairer for those children because the money could be rolled over and they could then have access to it later.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): I am looking at stigma here, I am not looking for back office calculations, things which teachers rightly conceal from other pupils and rightly keep confidential, I am talking about school names. Where does this happen in London? I have never heard of it happen anywhere in London. It did when I was a boy and people used to have a ticket and it was considered divisive and they got rid of that system decades ago. I just have never heard of a school where this is apparent. I would love to get a name because, if you are going to justify on the basis of stigma, which is a big part of the impact assessment, then you have to show where that stigma happens.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Assembly Member Boff, I absolutely applaud your vendetta against the schools that are doing this and we have discussed it a number of times but --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): There is no point in having a vendetta if you have nobody to pursue.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): -- one of the issues that we have looked at, at the last meeting that we had, the panel is there and our panellists here are making it very clear that stigma now is far more subtle. We have had an example of the type of food that can be bought. My understanding is that, while the ticket system and things like that are gone --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Chair, I am not going to get the name of a school out of this, am I?

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): No, and you keep asking for names of schools and you do not get one.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): I am not going to get one because I kind of think they do not exist. Therefore, do you not think that there is also a stigma to being auto-enrolled?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): No. I do not think there is a stigma to being auto-enrolled and just to take on some of your points on stigma more generally. When you have a child come to class, arrive in school tired and hungry, it is very difficult to hide that from the rest of the class. When you have a child who needs some seconds wrapping up to take home, it is very difficult to hide that. Stigma does not come because schools are not doing a good enough job to try to mitigate it or minimise it, because they absolutely are. Every teacher I know prioritises young people and wants them to live in dignity. The fact is poverty creates its own stigma. That is what UFSM mitigates against.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Can I just challenge you on that? Absolutely we should be addressing poverty. But we are going to have a situation where children are still coming to school undernourished and tired from families that do not qualify for FSM, do not receive UC, who are not on the face of it poor, but they just have pretty neglectful parents. Now, I would have thought that is a role for the teachers and the school authorities to identify those children as individuals rather than as a mass, would you not say that it is best that we identify pupils for their individual needs rather than as a group?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): There is a problem, because children in receipt of UC, from families in receipt of the UC, are not automatically able to access FSM. If you have a parent in work, for example, you may not be able to access FSM. The state of the economy, as we have seen over the last 18 months, has created unmanageable levels of poverty for many people and many of them, the majority of them, have parents in work, three-quarters in fact. Stigma is created from that poverty and schools do everything they can to mitigate against it.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): I absolutely agree with you that schools and teachers have a role in identifying when children are arriving and there are clearly issues at home. I am a governor of a primary school and in our safeguarding reports we get chapter and verse on measures the school is taking to address when children are turning up with torn clothing, when children are turning up clearly not having had breakfast, etc. Therefore, FSM I agree with you there is a role there. However, we have created a system here that is stigmatising by means-testing children in what is meant to be an education free at the point of use and treating our food and the nutritional safety net in the middle of the day where children are required to be, by law, treating that nutritional safety net as something to be means-tested in a public service, which we do not do in hospitals for anybody of any background economically and we do not do it even in our prisons with sometimes very wealthy fraudsters, we do not means-test them, we feed them regardless. Therefore, we are means-testing children in a public service in a way that we do not means-test other parts of our society. There are other countries around the world, Sweden, Finland, eight United States (US) states now, as of September [2023], India, Brazil, Estonia, Portugal, have all moved away from this and increasingly we are seeing, across the world now, a shift towards saying good nutrition equals good learning. The universal system is the only one capable of making that school lunch experience a completely non-divisive experience.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you very much for that. Thank you for those round of questions. It still does not stop me from believing that this Snark is a Boojum.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you very much, Assembly Member Boff. Just for smoother running of future Committee meetings, I do not think you are going to get the name of the school. We have established in various Committee meetings that stigma is a much more subtle issue these days than an issue of tickets. Thank you. Moving on to Assembly Member Hirani.

Krupesh Hirani AM: Thank you, Chair. I am going to start with a question to Barbara. What has been the impact of UFSM delivered by the London boroughs?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Do you mean the London boroughs that were doing this ahead of the Mayor [of London]'s initiative?

Krupesh Hirani AM: Yes. We were due to have a speaker from one of the boroughs that had it previously, but if you have any experiences from the ones that had it existing before the universal programmes was rolled out by the Mayor.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Obviously, there has been some work looking at how, over the years that they have been delivering universal school meals, I mentioned the evidence around obesity prevalence. In Newham, for example, they are anchoring 60 jobs at London Living Wage through their universal school meals programme. Since the Mayor announced his initiative, they have looked to reinvest some of their money, therefore most of those boroughs are topping up the £2.65, in Newham they are topping it up to £3, in Southwark they are topping it up to £2.90. I believe that in Islington it was previously well below the £2.65 and now they are meeting the £2.65 as a result of this.

Westminster, as well as implementing the Mayor of London offer and increasing the per-meal price to £3 per meal, they also have introduced a free lunch offer for targeted two, three, and four-year-olds in nurseries and are maintaining those settings. They are also expanding a free lunch offer for children in key stage 3 resident in Westminster as well. I do not believe they would be able to continue that once the Mayor's funding, they would have to then revert their funding back to their core primary school offer, therefore that is an extended one-year pilot.

Tower Hamlets, as has been published, have introduced a universal secondary school meal offer. That was made available to every school in the borough. Not every school felt able to take it up fully in one term, because it is quite a major scale-up, but there has been a fairly impressive take-up in the first half-term in the schools that have taken up that offer.

In Newham as well they are putting resource into topping up to £3 to ensure the full costs of sustainable healthy food and [London] Living Wage, therefore they have associated it with a healthy meal bundle and the Food for Life programme, to make sure they get good-quality London Living Wage, the London Government Procurement Standards are being met, as well as maintaining a £3.9 million investment in their holiday meals programme with holiday vouchers for all eligible children.

Those are just some of the things that I am aware of. In Southwark they are expanding to all pupils in receipt of UC, including those children with no recourse to public funds who are not currently eligible for FSM and that includes 6th form, year 12, and year 13.

Krupesh Hirani AM: I am glad you mentioned funding as an issue as well because, certainly in one of my boroughs, projections are showing that there is a medium-term reduction expected in primary school places needed. Are you factoring that in terms of future projections of what this policy would cost? I imagine that would mean a massive cost reduction of what this policy delivers at the moment.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): I believe that the studies that have been conducted have also looked at the population trends. I am not sure what has been done in London. Every projection, you need to look at what might happen around the costs of delivery, the costs of food itself, fuel, transport, staffing, as well as the numbers, the projected numbers, the quality of food and whether we are trying to align the procurement of food also with good sustainability standards. Therefore, the per-meal rate nationally is well below what the Local Authority Catering Association (LACA) believes should have been the case. It had not been increased for many years. It has just gone up from £2.41 to £2.53, which is still below what the Mayor is funding. LACA believes it should sit around £2.87. That is particularly challenging for small schools, therefore we do know that there are schools in London who are struggling to meet the £2.65 meal cost at the moment. Some boroughs are topping that up and some boroughs are not.

Krupesh Hirani AM: Moving to the Mayor [of London]'s universal programme for all of London, I am going to start with Daniel on questioning for that, what have been the experiences of schools so far in implementing the Mayor [of London]'s UFSM programme in London?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Our members have been absolutely celebrating this as a policy and providing excellent feedback to us as a union on its rollout. We have to bear in mind, when we are talking about teachers and support staff, we survey them regularly and number one, top of their concerns, beyond their own pay and workload, is child poverty. The FSM provision rollout was welcomed with open arms broadly by the profession. We are very grateful for the collaborative approach from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the profession on this rollout. There has been open dialogue that has been really welcome. But one thing that we are all keen to establish is that this is something that lasts beyond one year and has that long-term funding commitment.

Krupesh Hirani AM: I will move to Dr Vincent for the next one, do you have any information on the impact of the programme on parents and children?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): It is too early to say because we do not yet have the evaluations that I know will be taking place later this year, which will give us a much better insight into the impacts. However, what schools are saying to us is that the scheme is very welcomed by children and families in their school because many of them are facing very difficult financial circumstances and that parents have very much welcomed the opportunity to take up that offer of a free lunch; that many have taken that up and that many more children are now receiving that hot, cooked meal every day.

Schools have also talked about those children for whom it has been particularly beneficial. One head gave an example of a child with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) and with autism who is now able to supplement their packed lunch that they bring in from home, which contains quite a restricted range of items, with the items that are available in that free lunch at school to encourage them to expand their repertoire. Therefore, headteachers are certainly talking about noticing benefits for children and families but, as I say, it is too early to have a full evidence base for that.

Krupesh Hirani AM: Thank you. Just on that, I would like to say that I did take the opportunity to visit a primary school in my constituency where this is being rolled out, Kilburn Park School in Brent, and we did manage to speak to parents at the school as well. I met a single mother who has two children at the school and the difference that it has made for someone in her situation who was ineligible for FSM in the past. The difference that it has made is the difference between not providing a hot meal, providing a packed lunch on occasions, and picking and choosing what days to pay for a meal for children and just the logistical difference it has made not having to worry about packing a packed lunch or preparing a packed lunch for two kids in the

morning and having that stress and relief off her mind has made a world of difference, just one example that I have cited from my constituency. I would encourage others to also visit schools and ask the questions about the impact that it is having because I have found it an eye-opening experience for myself, thank you.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Moving on to Assembly Member Garratt.

Neil Garratt AM: Morning. I was just thinking about practicalities. There is a revenue cost, a marginal revenue cost for each extra meal, but then obviously there is a capital infrastructure element of perhaps when you get to a certain tipping point to provide x-extra meals it becomes challenging within the existing facilities. I just wondered whether schools had run into problems with that. I do not know whether that is something you have looked at, Katharine, where schools have run into either a capacity constraint with the kitchen or the dining room or facilities of that sort.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Yes, thank you for the question. Again, it is relatively early days to talk about the impact of this on schools, but the anecdotal evidence that we have gathered so far suggests that many of the anticipated infrastructure challenges were successfully overcome by schools and academy trusts and that they had a lot of support from the GLA in relation to overcoming those. Therefore, I think that is an example of how those barriers were anticipated and they were successfully overcome.

In some schools, nonetheless, capacity has been an issue. One head teacher talked to us about how it has been financially challenging because they have had to pay out from their budget for extra hot serving stations, kitchen equipment, crockery, utensils, and cutlery, which sounds relatively low level, but if every school in London is having to do that then that cost obviously adds up. Another head mentioned that they have had to recruit more midday meal supervisors, which again is an extra cost and difficult to recruit to at the present time when it is harder to recruit to those kind of relatively low-paid roles.

One head of a large all-through school talked about how, because of the sheer volume of children now taking lunch, they are having to run lunch time between 11.30am and 2pm so that the school is very busy and they have had to put quite a lot of procedures into place, you can imagine, including extra duties for senior staff in order to manage that. Therefore, there have been some logistical and capacity challenges but a lot of those have been overcome.

Neil Garratt AM: Sorry, you said it was early days, but presumably all the things that happen day one, therefore literally the first day is when all those things come, even before that obviously because a well-planned school is going to notice 50per cent more covers - I suppose if you were a restaurant you would call it - that you have to get through.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): That is right. Therefore, when the policy was announced earlier this year, there was a lot of work that happened in a relatively short amount of time to make sure that the capacity was in place. Therefore, schools were set up to deliver to what was anticipated to be a significant increase in uptake. I know that there have been reports from local authorities of uptake increasing but that has not always been as much as people thought. Therefore, one of the things that schools are saying to us is that they are still getting the message out there but at the moment their uptake may have gone from 75 to 80per cent or from 80 to 85 per cent . They are still working on trying to, for example, persuade families that it would be better for them to have their child take a hot meal at school, rather than bringing in a packed lunch because some families are still saying that that is their preference. Schools are still working on that and anticipating potentially more increased capacity over time.

Neil Garratt AM: OK, so by and large that was a challenge, but that has largely been overcome. Are there places where that is still a problem? What are the big challenges that are harder to overcome or are proving more persistent?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): One of the challenges is that logistical one of having more children that need to get through the lunch hall in a certain amount of time at a time when teachers and school leaders are very busy in other regards. There has been an extra pressure on staff to undertake extra duties to manage the school building during that time and to make sure that that all runs smoothly, but as they always do, schools have made that work.

Neil Garratt AM: Was there support from the GLA for that, financial or logistical advice, sharing best practice, that sort of thing?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): There was some sharing of good practice and the GLA made a website available with resources for schools and examples of good practice in that regard. I know that it also has a £5 million fund to support extraordinary costs such as, for example, in special schools where it might be that there is an extra cost to providing school lunches. To the support that children need while they are eating lunch, it has provided financial support to schools as well in that regard.

Neil Garratt AM: Daniel, were you indicating that you wanted to say something on that point as well?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Yes. Broadly on the challenges, we are in regular contact with members. I am sure there will be some logistical challenges in schools in London somewhere; it has not been a primary source of feedback. We have had some feedback around difficulty around managing queues, getting more young people through the lunch hall; that is true. Also, some of these logistical challenges will be ironed out should there be that long-term funding commitment, I believe. It is not only an issue around those sorts of logistical challenges. I have taught in schools where the catering is done in-house because they have the necessary facilities. I have taught in schools where they do not, the food has to be brought in in polystyrene and it gets all sweaty and does not look all that good. Should there be that long-term funding commitment, schools can make those then necessarily long-term logistical commitments to ensure that children have access to not only FSM but really high quality FSM. Believe me, if you have a good chef and the necessary facilities, FSM can be exceptionally good.

Neil Garratt AM: There are still some where there are problems, you think, but longer-term funding would help with those problems?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): That is right, yes. It just gives schools the ability to plan.

Neil Garratt AM: OK.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): There is a degree of scepticism that comes in when you are talking about a one-year programme, about how much you then take out of a school budget to invest in a more permanent upgrade of kitchens if the Programme is going to be withdrawn. In my school, my Headteacher reported a little bit of scepticism from parents about enrolling their children in the Scheme because it is only a one-year Programme. When the Government brought in universal infant FSM, there was a £150 million investment in the logistics and the infrastructure. That meant there had been an upgrade of quite a lot of primary school kitchen facilities, which made the focus on primary a good place to be with this policy. That is ten years old, there is a need for more equipment and that is experienced right across the country. One

of the things that we are doing is talking across other local authorities in the rest of the country about what they can do to help support their schools to maintain adequate facilities in preparation for any further national policy developments.

Neil Garratt AM: If there are capital costs as a result - whether it is cutlery, crockery, extra tables or chairs, extra kitchen equipment, that sort of thing - there is a scaling up in terms of cost. That cost automatically falls on the schools, but it may be that they could apply for some money from the GLA to cover that. That is where that stands? Sorry, Katharine, you are nodding. That is the state of play there?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Yes, that is right.

Neil Garratt AM: OK. Is the funding provided by the Mayor overall adequate, you think?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): I can answer that from the perspective of Headteachers and trust Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) that we have spoken to and say that they certainly welcomed the fact that the rate was set at £2.65 a meal. That then potentially influenced the decision to move the national rate to £2.53 from where it had previously been, £2.41. As Barbara [Crowther] has mentioned, there are boroughs already topping up to £3.00 a meal and there are many who feel that that is a more realistic place for the cost to sit. If the per meal rate had increased in line with the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) since 2014, it would currently be at £2.87 so even the £2.65 leaves a shortfall. Therefore, it has been the case that schools - and academy trusts to some extent - have been having to subsidise this, while nonetheless appreciating that the funding rate they are receiving from the Mayor is higher than the national rate.

Neil Garratt AM: OK. That is the revenue side and on the capital side you mentioned the £5 million fund. Is that adequate? I do not know if some, all or more than all of that has been bid for.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): I do not know the answer to that, I am afraid.

Neil Garratt AM: Our next panel can probably answer that question for us.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Yes, I will leave that to them.

Neil Garratt AM: OK, thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Clarke, before we go on to you - and, sorry, Assembly Member Boff - could I ask the panel, just a context? What effect have Government cuts to local authority funding for schools had on the implementation of this? Daniel, would you like to start?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Broadly, feedback we have been getting is very similar around the funding that has been made available from the Local Government Association (LGA) and so on to support the FSM rollout in London. It has been very good. Ideally, we would like to see that funding commitment to be from Government over the long term. There is a more broader problem around capital investment, the cuts to local authorities and the school estate that has manifested a huge problem across education, not just in terms of school kitchens. There is much more to do from Government in that regard, but I do not think that should be any barrier to what we are currently doing around FSM.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Boff, you had a question.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Very quickly. You said some boroughs are paying £3.00 per meal. Perhaps you could share with us at some point which boroughs those are. It would be interesting to see that. Thank you.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Moving on, Assembly Member Clarke?

Anne Clarke AM: Thank you, Chair, and I will skip right on to question 13. In terms of schools, are they managing with that amount to cater for children with special dietary needs and those meals because they need kosher or halal meals but also because they may have special educational needs?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): I can answer by saying that I know that that £5 million pot of money that the GLA has made available across London is there partly to ensure that those additional costs are met. The two particular areas where it is aware that there are additional costs are in relation to children in special schools and children with special educational needs and in relation to particular dietary requirements, including the high cost of kosher food compared with non-kosher food. I know that it is using some of that money to support schools with that.

Anne Clarke AM: I was wondering if you could come in on this. I represent Barnet and Camden, so I am lucky to serve London's largest Jewish community. When the FSM Programme was announced, it was the Jewish schools who immediately got in touch. I was aware of the high cost of kosher meals, but what I had not realised until that point was the difference is currently being made up by schools for the lower years for the amount they get per meal from Government. They are making that up and it is a significant shortfall. I am wondering what we could do as the GLA to push the Government and inspire the Government to realise that it needs to do an impact assessment on kosher meals but also on meals for children with additional needs.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): It is a really good point. I think automatically the meal rate for kosher meals has been adjusted in light of the feedback that was received. There is no London weighting involved and there is no special meals price involved in the way school food is currently managed and funded. That is why we, alongside about 30 organisations in the School Food Review [Working] Group, are asking the Government to conduct a little bit more of a root and branch review that looks at the triple pillars. That is the quality of food being put on the plate, making sure it is adequate, it is culturally appropriate and it is sustainable. There are little pots of money coming from all sorts of places, so the funding system is very complex for schools to administer and manage. That is quality and funding and then there is the access issue and the fact that the threshold for benefit-entitled FSM is sitting at £7,400 before benefits. It has not changed since 2018 when it was introduced and, prior to that, it was being rolled out under UC with no threshold. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said there is a cliff edge so there is a disincentive to work because you could then lose FSM entitlement down the line. We are really wanting to look at that bigger review and perhaps things like special meals and culturally appropriate food could form part of that.

Anne Clarke AM: OK, thank you.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you, Assembly Member Clarke. Assembly Member Bokhari?

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you. I am going to touch on pupil premium that I think everyone has mentioned already. I was a primary schoolteacher when pupil premium came in under the coalition Government and it made a massive difference. It completely changed our approach in terms of helping children who had never been to a theatre before or were missing out on extra educational support, so it has made a massive difference. I know that there has been a discussion about the risk of that being lost because of the funding as a result of

the Mayor's Programme. Could you tell us a little bit about how the schools are making sure that that does not happen?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): I know [Dr] Katharine [Vincent] will have a lot to say on this. The GLA did a special webinar for schools and local authorities on pupil premium. There is experience from universal infant FSM and from what the four London boroughs had been doing, who were already doing universal school meals, to make sure pupil premium enrolment was remaining high. In Hammersmith and Fulham, when they did a pilot in two secondary schools - one special school, one mainstream secondary school - they had to then adopt a different process for getting parents to register for pupil premium. They incorporated it into a broader information-gathering exercise with parents, which resulted in an increase in pupil premium. There is some evidence that if we start to handle pupil premium and registration for pupil premium differently, it could lead to --

Hina Bokhari AM: Does it impact on the workload though on the staff?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): It does, and the automated enrolment pilots are very time-intensive and resource-intensive. Again, that is why we are trying to use that work that is going on on the ground, the piloting of this, to try to push for a more integrated system of linking pupil premium to benefits and indicators of disadvantage so that schools can automatically access that funding. I will let Katharine pick up more detail.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Thank you. I would definitely agree that there is concern amongst both primary schools and secondary schools about the potential loss of pupil premium funding. Secondary heads are quite worried about this because if parents are not incentivised to apply for FSM while their children are at primary school, then it could be the case that they enter secondary school and there is a big drop. That worry is understandable, given that about 30 percent of Headteachers reported a drop in pupil premium funding in 2014 after the introduction of universal infant FSM. It is a legitimate concern. Also, we know that about 11 percent of children were eligible for FSM but not receiving it before this policy was introduced and that that gap is greater in some places than in others. In London, that gap is smaller than in lots of other places and that is a testament to the huge amount of work that London schools have done to make sure that families are aware of this benefit, that they are signed up for it and that they do fill in the form. I know that schools and the GLA have worked incredibly hard to avoid a drop in pupil premium enrolments this year. One of the things they have done is to look at those boroughs who were already offering universal primary FSM - Newham, Tower Hamlets, Islington and others - to learn from their good practice. Islington was one example that they looked at because they had been particularly successful in making sure that there was not a drop.

We do not know yet. We do not have the data yet to know how pupil premium enrolment across London might be affected by this Scheme. To be honest, there is some emerging data, but even when that comes through it will be really hard to identify cause and effect. That is also affected by the transitional protections that are currently in place, which mean that if a child was eligible for FSM in 2018, they will remain eligible until the end of their current phase of education. There may be children now who are receiving that and therefore would not show up, even if there was --

Hina Bokhari AM: The emphasis is on the parent to apply.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Yes.

Hina Bokhari AM: Is that the reason why there is this discrepancy between primary and secondary? Is that an issue there? Primary schools are quite used to communicating with their parents and getting things to happen and in secondary schools this is a new thing for them, is it not? Is that the reason why there is a difference there?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Primary schools see children first and so they do the role around making sure that parents are aware of this, that they apply and that they know about it. Then when they enter secondary school, many families have already gone through that process and they are already in the system. Secondary schools are concerned that if that is no longer taking place, it could have a negative impact on them, particularly with pupil premium eligibility because it is about the “Ever 6” measure. If a family’s circumstances change, it may mean that they lose out if they had not applied while they were at primary school, if that makes sense.

There is a real case here, coming back to auto enrolment and it would be hugely beneficial for schools, for parents and for children. I know it is complex, but if it were possible for the Government to use the data that it already holds to simply make schools’ funding settlements reflect the proportion of children whose families are eligible for that benefit and put that into the school’s funding, it removes then an element of stigma. You are not identifying individual children, just simply making sure that schools get within their funding the amount they need. It removes the need for parents to apply via the local authority or the academy trust. It removes the need for schools to do the huge amount of work they do chasing that and it removes the burden on those home school and family school support workers who do so much of this incredible work to support families. There would be one less thing for them to do so auto enrolment could have huge benefits there.

Hina Bokhari AM: Daniel, you have probably heard from your members about the challenges that they are having to deal with in this particular aspect. Do you think the Government does have a greater role here in making that change, particularly on the enrolment that everyone has been talking about?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Absolutely. One piece of feedback that we are getting from our membership at the moment is that the time and workload aspect is growing in this regard. One way to ensure that schools do recoup pupil premium funding is that commitment to a long-term investment in the Programme and the rollout, with appropriate mechanisms for auto enrolment established.

Hina Bokhari AM: Yes. That will be coming up in our next question, but that emphasis of the need for it not to be just one year has been very loud and clear. Thank you.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Polanski?

Zack Polanski AM: Thanks, Chair, and morning, panel. Daniel, I recently spoke at one of your union events and, just to amplify, unsurprisingly a lot of your members were talking about child poverty and how important those FSM have been. Assembly Member Bokhari set me up nicely to ask: in your view, could the Government change the rules so that schools could access pupil premium funding, without parents having to register for FSM?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Yes, absolutely. We need long-term commitment to a FSM programme nationally. What we have seen in London for one year, we would love to see rolled out throughout the country. There absolutely does need to be then a mechanism for auto enrolment to ensure that parents and families can access the benefits they are entitled to but also that schools can recoup valuable pupil premium money to ensure that adequate education can be provided.

Zack Polanski AM: That is loud and clear, thank you. Would you like to see UFSM introduced to primary schools as a long-term programme?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Absolutely. I cannot emphasise enough the benefits of high quality FSM for young people in terms of the social aspects that it allows children to develop. There were previous questions around young people with special educational needs having specialised food. In schools that I have worked in where there are young people who are fussy about food and do not want to try things, there is no better environment than the school lunch hall to get children trying new things, experiencing new foods. When you have high quality provision, it has a real benefit to those young people. Where you have young people who will only eat a certain type of food, they soon develop a wide repertoire. It really impacts on the learning of young people. Quite simply, hungry children cannot learn at all and to alleviate that burden and help young people improve attainment is something that we should all be aiming to do. That universalism, the removal of stigma to allow every child to experience education and live in some dignity throughout the school day, is something that we should aspire to.

Zack Polanski AM: Thank you. Finally, Daniel, if this does not continue and it drops off for whatever reason, what impact would that have on parents, schools and children if this scheme just finished?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): As I mentioned earlier, there was a FSM scheme in Newham and there was a protest from parents. All parents, I think, value FSM, they can see absolute benefit and it is great to hear about some experiences of Assembly Members going to schools and speaking to those parents. Also, there is that real economic argument that is just not made enough, I do not think. We often hear from a national Government viewing children as almost burdens and we often hear around feckless parents and workshy people and it is just wrong. Poverty is a political choice that impacts on every single one of us. If we are to see a prospering economy and a growing Britain, investing in children has to be the starting point. The fact of the matter is how rich in nutrition their daily intake of food is is a real determining factor in their outcomes over the long term.

Zack Polanski AM: Thank you. You are also making really good arguments for Universal Basic Income, but I will not go there because the Chair will throw the gavel at me. Barbara, I can see you want to come in.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): I agree with everything Daniel is saying. One of the things that I want to emphasise is those impacts that we see on physical health. They become greater the longer the child is exposed to the policy and that is very, very clear. We do believe it is the responsibility of national Government to step in. There is a postcode lottery now across the UK and we can see other councils, who do not have the resources of London, wanting to move forward. In Stockport, they are doing an enhanced entitlement project because they cannot afford universalism. I believe that what we should be looking at is a progressive roadmap. It cannot be brought in overnight. There are logistical challenges, but you could look at a phased programme. We are seeing now disparities across the UK, with Scotland and Wales rolling out universal primary [school meals] and Scotland saying that it will go further once it achieves that model. The Republic of Ireland has also committed to universal primary [school meals] and a commission to explore full universalism.

I would like to see us get rid of the term “free” in “free school meals”. They are not free. Somebody does pay for them, but they could be part of a virtuous economy that is about a really vibrant catering industry, providing good jobs. We could be linking a school meals system into support for British farmers, feeding into that system their potatoes and their carrots. There is more that we can do. Everybody agrees that schools are a place where we want children to learn about good food and if there is not good food on the plate or if there is a divisive system, then we need to address that. We have got huge potential through a different vision for

school food that is not about only giving a meal to a child if they will go hungry. It is about good food as part of good learning and good food as part of achieving and investing in that future.

Absolutely, we would love to see this Programme at least extended for another year or two if that is possible whilst we try to push for that broader policy shift, but also to give this Programme a real chance of bedding down some good nutrition and supporting families because of the cost of living. I think 23.4 percent of households with children are still living with food insecurity. Slowly, the curve is slightly changing, but it is going to be still very high in a year's time.

Zack Polanski AM: What you are saying about that holistic approach is so important and links to my final question. For a long time, I have been advocating for plant-based foods within schools and we know this reduces chronic health diseases, it reduces the climate impact and it reduces bills, too. I wrote to the Mayor last year [2022], asking him to sign a plant-based treaty and, sadly, he refused to do so because he said it was not in his power. If we are giving FSM, do you think it is something in his power to look at, working with organisations like yourself or ProVeg, who have been advocating for this in schools, for the Mayor to recommend that schools are moving towards at least plant-based as a default, whilst still offering other options?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): There needs to be a lot of work with communities because we also want families to take up school meals. What you do not want is to push a top-down policy and then families start to opt out again. That is what we need to see. We need to be aligning school food and public procurement with our broader climate ambitions, a good procurement system. Lots of London boroughs and we are also pushing for the Mayor to encourage this funding to be aligned with that green procurement programme. That could be about scaling up the amount of plant-based food, but also not scaling it up in a way that is an increase in ultra-processed vegan foods. There is something which is about making sure that also this is good, solid protein, increasing vegetables and fruit in the diet. Financially, we could be also scaling back a few of the sugary desserts that are still allowed in school food standards in order to make that better, holistic, nutritious food the core of what is the offer in our schools as well.

Zack Polanski AM: Healthy plant-based food, co-designed with communities is something we can all get behind - or me, certainly. Thank you, Chair.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Garrett?

Neil Garratt AM: Thanks. I am not sure I can get behind getting rid of sugary school puddings. Surely, that is the whole point of the setup. Anyway, on a slightly different question, looking at the bigger picture, we are looking exclusively at lunches. In the context of hunger, there is also discussion around breakfasts. In a world of finite resource, I wondered what research there is between lunches and breakfasts and the relative merits of one or the other. I am sure you are going to say, "Let us do both", which is the easy mode option. However, if there are difficult choices to make between those two, is there evidence? Do we know one way or the other which would be better or maybe equally good? Katharine?

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): I was just going to say that we do not have that evidence in this country. There is some evidence from overseas, but it is not completely clear and so more research is needed there.

Neil Garratt AM: It is not a well-researched question, OK.

Dr Katharine Vincent (Director, Reconnect London): Yes, I do not know that there is comparative evidence about which is better because, like school lunches, school breakfasts have been of varying quality and nutritional value. Sometimes, there has been some quite bad practice in very sugary items that give children a bit of a sugar hit and then they slump. There is some very good evidence that a balanced, nutritious breakfast does lead to improvements in classroom performance and in attainment. Magic Breakfast and the National School Breakfast Programme have some good, strong evidence for a school breakfast. In secondary schools, we have a particular challenge where children might arrive at the very last minute in school. The children who take up the breakfast club are not always the children that you most want to take up that offer, they might arrive a little bit late and they will then be very hungry at break time. They will eat lots of not very nutritious food from the break time offer and then they will not then take up their lunch.

Yes, we do have to look across the school day and the School Food Review [Working Group] is saying, “Let us look at school food across the school day”, including before school and after school clubs. It is right that if children arrive at the start of the day without a breakfast, they are going to struggle through the day. Likewise, if they get to lunchtime and they have not had anything, then we do really need them to take up a nutritious lunch. Things like fruit and vegetable intake and protein intake are much more likely to come through a school lunch, than something that is probably going to be a bit of a ‘grab and go’ at breakfast time for children to be able to get hold of it at the point when they arrive.

Neil Garratt AM: I see. That is the issue, perhaps the understated assumption there. There is a defined quality of what may be put inside a packed lunch but certainly a cooked lunch is whereas a breakfast could be almost anything, just a croissant maybe.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Yes, or a muffin.

Neil Garratt AM: That is the issue with the research.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Magic Breakfast has a fortified bagel-type offer, which has a much more slow release of energy and is protein enriched. There are some examples of how that can be delivered very cost effectively and very simply without too many burdens on the school. I know some parties have committed to breakfast rollout as well as lunch. Ideally for us in terms of nutrition and that solid nutritional safety net in the middle of the day at school, we do feel that is the absolute number one part of the school meal system we need to crack.

Neil Garratt AM: Understood. OK. I do not know if you want to add anything to that, Daniel.

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): No, nothing.

Neil Garratt AM: Great. If not, that is me done. Thanks, Chair.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Yes?

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Will the UFSM Programme for primary pupils end the need to focus on those in particular need, the dietary requirements of those?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Yes, I do not think any one intervention --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): We will not have to bother anymore?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Absolutely not, no.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): All right, OK.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): As Katharine [Vincent] said, families in need are coming with multiple issues of deprivation. For children in my school, it is cramped living conditions and there are also things to do with ability to afford uniforms. No, it is one part of a bigger jigsaw but a really important one. With the Children's Food Campaign, we work with a wide range of public health specialists and the evidence shows that good nutrition in those early years is absolutely critical for that lifetime.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): This will solve that, will it not, in terms of nutrition?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): It will certainly make a huge impact and it will be a very significant contribution, but we would also argue that we do need to address other cash-based support and wage systems for families living in poverty. We would always argue that in terms of poverty.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Sorry, I do not understand that. You will argue for?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Poverty is multidimensional, Andrew. We do need to have cash-based systems - whether that is benefits or wage levels - to address poverty and we need to address things to do with rental costs in London. School meals are not going to solve those issues for us. What they are going to do, very clearly and very powerfully, is provide that nutritional safety net in the midst of this situation that will enable children to learn, hopefully achieve more and hopefully have a more holistic educational experience here in London. That is why we absolutely back what the Mayor is doing.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): If we are going to still have to focus on the nutritional needs of children after the implementation of UFSM, then what value is UFSM?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Immense value, as we have all been talking about. We can see its contribution to increasing fruit and vegetable uptake. We are living in an era of high levels of childhood obesity and obesity affects children of all backgrounds.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Are schools not already doing that?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Schools are doing a huge amount, but they can only do what is within their means and at the moment their means does not allow them. In London, temporarily for this year, it is allowing primary schools to do this, but schools can only do what is within their means. We need a bit of a system-wide approach to this as well.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): I have got to ask the questions. Surely those funds that are going towards subsidising the wealthier families could be better redirected in supporting those families that are having severe problems?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): The families who are particularly affected, as Daniel [Kebede] said, are the working poor, who are currently not eligible. We are seeing high levels of food insecurity happening by people and the same with food banks.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Yes, nobody is arguing that.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Characterising the people that this policy is benefiting as being “the wealthy” --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): I am not. I am not.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): -- is not correct.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Wealthy people will benefit from this policy, will they not?

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): In the way that wealthy families benefit from an education system that is free at the point of access and this is an anomaly within our education system.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): £400 a year is going to buy a good bottle of claret, is it not, for --

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Assembly Member Boff, we addressed this in the first part of this meeting and we have had evidence after pieces of evidence to show --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Yes, OK. Thank you for that.

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): I think Daniel wanted to say something.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): That is all right. I --

Barbara Crowther (Campaign Coordinator, Sustain): Daniel wanted to comment as well.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Daniel, please?

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Oddbins of Islington is going to benefit enormously.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): Sorry, Assembly Member Boff, could the panellists answer your question, please?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Assembly Member Boff, it is really important to recognise that just because a policy does not completely alleviate the burden of poverty from young people we should not take steps towards alleviating poverty from young people. The fact of the matter is - and I have worked in schools like this - one in five schools is also a food bank at the moment. Providing UFSM is not going to end the food crisis that many families have to endure and many families will still be having to access food support from outside, many accessing school-based food banks. As has been said, we need systems in place to assist with the cost and expense of school uniforms and there are some policies that would be very helpful in regard to that, ensuring that families do not have to pay for branded things that are excessive. There is lots that we can talk about, but it is a multi-faceted approach that is needed. As has been said, the majority of families who are in poverty at the moment are working. I do not think there is much any of us in this room can do about it currently. The real underlying issues are low-paid, precarious work --

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Can I just say? We are all caricaturing here. The idea that I am caricatured as saying, “Nobody should get school meals and we should sod the poor” is ridiculous. I think there is something to be done with the resources that are available to address the serious poverty that is in London and anybody who has consulted my record knows that that is the case. It is this idea of universality which implicitly has wasted costs and it has wasted resources on things that could be addressing the real root

causes of poverty in London. That is what I want an answer to. Is it worth the price? Bearing in mind that money is limited, is it worth the cost of neglecting other programmes that could come around with those resources in order to provide the kids of the wealthy with a subsidy?

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): There is a cost of means testing and there is a cost of the extra bureaucracy that that brings. It is not the socialists who are putting it forward, like PwC, that for every pound we spend you get £1.71 returned to the economy. That is what you should be listening to.

Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair): Well, there are misguided capitalists, too.

Marina Ahmad AM (Chair): OK, thank you. Asking the same question, expecting a different answer from this panel is a tough one. On that note, what I am going to do now is bring this part of the investigation today to a close. I would like to thank our panellists for your incredibly interesting answers. It was, personally as Chair, a really interesting session and [thanks to] the Committee for the questions that you have asked. Thank you very much. We will have a few minutes' break and then we will have our new panellists in place. Thank you.

Daniel Kebede (General Secretary, The National Education Union): Thank you very much.