

**London Assembly Economy Committee - 9 November 2023****Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2**

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** OK, thank you for joining us for the second part of today's Economy Committee meeting and welcome back, everyone. We will now move on to our second panel on FSM in London. We are joined by our panellists: Joanne McCartney, who is the Deputy Mayor for Children and Families; Emma Pawson, Head of Health and Programme Director for FSM at the Greater London Authority; and Richard Watts, Deputy Chief of Staff for the Greater London Authority. If we could start with our first question, Assembly Member Bokhari?

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Thank you, Chair, and this is for anyone on the panel. Why did the Mayor take the decision to provide UFSM to all primary schoolchildren, rather than targeting provision at all children, including secondary schools, on lower incomes?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Shall I answer that? Two reasons. Firstly, there is an overwhelmingly strong evidence base for universal primary FSM. You will be aware and you may have gone into it in the last session that we are not the first people to do this, although we are the first people to roll this out at the scale that we have rolled it out. This goes back to Labour Government-funded pilots in Newham and Durham. As I recall - and, Emma [Pawson], correct me if I am wrong - they also looked at the evidence base around extending eligibility but not making it universal. They found overwhelmingly the benefits from a universal approach outweighed the approach of extending eligibility but not making it universal. Therefore, there is an academic evidence base around universality that is very strong.

Given the time period with which we had to roll this out, there is also a very strong administrative argument for universality. If you are doing this, you still have to count pupils, eligible under the national rules, for pupil premium purposes. It would be catastrophic to not do that, so you need to a means test whatever you do. To then have to do another separate new London-wide means test, there is not the same level of national support and policymaking support for what would be extremely administratively burdensome for schools. Therefore, the joy of universality is that once you have done the necessary national bureaucracy that everyone has to do, then everyone gets it and it is easy. From our point of view, it was better to spend money on food provision than introducing yet another separate, new means testing programme and that is why we made the decision we did.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Yes.

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** Yes. Can I also add to that? That research also shows that the earlier you can intervene with children, the better. We do know from the research that the benefits from UFSM carries on with the child throughout their school life and into adulthood in terms of better health but also better educational attainment as well. Putting it at the younger age group was a good idea, too.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Great. We have been hearing from the previous panel about some of the challenges and one of the challenges that you just mentioned, pupil premium and schools not wanting to lose out on that because of the need for parents to apply themselves. One of the things that they kept on talking about was the automatic enrolment scheme and that was something that maybe the Mayor could have considered. Was

that considered and what was the decision-making process? Was it the challenges? Was it the difficulties in getting that to happen?

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** I will let Richard [Watts] go first because Richard was one of the council leaders that initially introduced UFSM in a borough. This is something that has got to be done at a borough level, working with their schools because they know those boroughs best. One of the things we have done throughout this process is to take advice from the boroughs that already have it in, including those boroughs that have a model of universal registration of all parents. We have been sharing that good evidence in webinars and with our formal meetings, as well as producing resources that illustrate those models. For example, [the London Borough of] Lewisham has now trialled an auto enrolment system and it has identified an extra 500 families through the data it already has in its own systems. It has informed parents that it will apply on their behalf unless parents opt out and it believes it will get approximately £1.2 million extra in pupil premium in this next year so that they do have benefits, yes.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Yes, we were hearing that from the schools, but can we focus on the automatic enrolment, if you can tell me about that?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Certainly. As Joanne says, ultimately it is a borough decision about how they wish to approach that. The strong advice we gave to boroughs was to run an auto enrolment system and we arranged training and webinars from boroughs like Islington, who have previously run that kind of system. As Joanne set out, it found quite a lot of children who were entitled to FSM but were previously not claiming them and that upped pupil premium income, as opposed to it dropping off. Ultimately, it was for boroughs to run that. It is important both from an administrative point of view and a devolution point of view that boroughs needed to adapt their own systems to implement this within their own school setting. Therefore, it was for boroughs --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** If it was a national Government approach, they would still have to do it in that way, do you think?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** If it is a national Government approach, the Government can just change the rules because it has access to the UC database so it could do it differently. We do not have that data and boroughs do not have that data, so they have to do the approach that they do, but auto enrolment is clearly our recommendation to boroughs about the best way to implement this.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** When we initially did the engagement with boroughs around that approach being part of the grant principles, there was a mixed reaction so we felt it was not appropriate to mandate it. It is not something we would mandate for a borough. We did reach out to national Government. I think it is something it has looked at and has not adopted as a more national approach and that is interesting in itself. Since we have been doing this, as Joanne has just mentioned, some of the boroughs that have been doing this and looking at ways in which they can do auto enrolment have started to see massive success. We have heard one example. We have had another example of a borough who has found another 600 families who are now eligible for FSM, who did not know that they were. Therefore, just going through this process, we are getting more and more boroughs come on board. We have just run one of our webinars again and we will be running another one in the next couple of weeks to share that good practice and, as we go over this year, I expect more and more boroughs will adopt it as a policy.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Thank you. Before we move on to the next question, panellists, could I ask you to move your microphones closer to you, please? Thank you. Assembly Member Garrett?

**Neil Garratt AM:** Hi, morning. On the decision, a question I put to the previous panel was about lunch versus breakfast and there seems to be evidence that lunch helps and evidence that breakfast helps. You went down the lunch route. Did you review the alternative of breakfast or did you weigh that up or was it just too complicated or too difficult or not on the menu, as it were? Sorry.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Very good. We did look at it. The reason we went for lunch was, again, because there was very strong evidence of its effectiveness, which is not to say that breakfasts are not effective. We really welcome where that is being rolled out. However, what you have with school lunches is an existing infrastructure. There are already kitchens and many of these meals are being served, they are being served at pace and there is an ability for schools to cope with that. Most school breakfast clubs are significantly smaller and therefore, you are having to do a much bigger administrative burden on schools to shift a breakfast club from typically 30 kids to, like, 250 for lunches where you are already getting larger numbers of schools going through. Conscious of the administrative burden on schools in a very difficult period, we took the view - and the feedback reflects this - that lunches would have been a significantly easier programme to administer. That is not to say that where breakfast clubs exist they are not of value; we really welcome them.

**Neil Garratt AM:** Yes, understood. On that point about infrastructure for lunches, one of the discussions that we had earlier as well was about effectively you pay the revenue costs of the extra lunch, the marginal cost if you like of the extra lunch. Then there are certain tipping points where you need extra capital in terms of maybe tables, chairs, cutlery and crockery. Then you can get to certain tipping points. Maybe their room is not big enough and you have to significantly rethink the way that they did the lunch shift and we heard earlier about how that is a challenge in some schools. How did you address that challenge, what support did you give to schools and have you had feedback? Some schools have struggled with that. Are they now all beyond the struggling phase?

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** Yes, I will come to Emma in a second, but there is a difference between primary and secondary. Primary schools have to seat all children anyway, so they have already got very sophisticated systems for getting children in at different times. It is at a military operation in effect to get them all in and then out. I do not think that there has been that same issue that there would have been if it was perhaps in secondary schools. Initially, issues were --

**Neil Garratt AM:** We did hear earlier that it is an issue. For example, dispensing hot meals is different. If you are doing packed lunches, you could do that in a classroom; if you are doing hot meals, you have to do that somewhere near the canteen. That does increase the number of kids going through that bit.

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** Yes, but generally in most primary schools children do tend to eat together, although they might have separate packed lunch tables as opposed to school dinner tables. Very early on, we were getting quite a lot of concern about exactly those things, but boroughs and schools have just got on with it and have adapted what they already have. Zack [Polanski AM] and I went on a Cost of Living Working Group [visit] to a school where they had done exactly that. They have just adapted what they already have and they have not had any issues at all. Emma, I do not know if you want to add?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Thank you, Joanne. I would add to that that at the start we were getting concerns coming through, but that has not really been seen in fruition. When we looked at the five boroughs in London who already were offering UFSM and heard from them, they tackled most of these problems in very, very creative

ways. We then shared that with the other boroughs so they could learn from that, which they found really helpful.

The other thing which I would flag is that the formula that we have used for funding is very flexible and there is surplus in there, partly because we used 2022 census data. That means that when we look at 2023, unfortunately - and it is unfortunately - there are more children who are now living in poverty and therefore eligible for Government funding. We took an agreement in the GLA that we would keep the higher point and therefore boroughs have more money than children. We also funded them at a 90 percent uptake rate, we expect that there will be a gradual uptake to get to that point and in some schools they may not quite reach that and therefore, again, there is extra flexibility in the funding. We have been as supportive and as flexible as possible. We also have a contingency pot if there any schools that are having extreme problems, but we have not seen that come through to us yet.

**Neil Garratt AM:** The answer I got earlier was that the cost of the extra infrastructure, the extra capacity, would fall automatically on schools, but there was some funding from the GLA that might cover it. The potential there is that it is sort of a white elephant gift in the sense that you get the gift and then there is a cost that you have to pay yourself to go with it. You are confident that you have not imposed a burden like that on schools?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** We have a number of touchpoints throughout the year to talk to Headteachers because there are so many of them. If there are voices that we are not hearing, then we will hear those at several points throughout the year. We have been also having regular engagement with boroughs, so we have been around all of the boroughs and spoken to them to see how things are going. We have not heard anything come up. There are one or two boroughs who have invested - they have been fantastic - in their kitchens, but they are because of longstanding issues that they have, not because of something that we have created.

**Neil Garratt AM:** You are confident you have not put a cost burden on to schools?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** At the moment, that is not the evidence that we have heard.

**Neil Garratt AM:** OK.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** The money goes to boroughs though, not to schools, and our agreement sits with the boroughs. If the boroughs are not --

**Neil Garratt AM:** Understood, OK.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** -- doing the contracting with their schools, that is something that -- our relationship in terms of contracting and funding is with the boroughs.

**Neil Garratt AM:** OK, yes, so there is a potential wrinkle in terms of you are funding the boroughs and then if the boroughs are not dealing with it. Is it then the boroughs who are dealing with these practical issues with schools? OK, but you are confident that to whatever extent there was a problem, it has been dealt with by schools and boroughs?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** First things first, this was a big policy shift and we and the Mayor would like to thank London's school community for the way it has responded so positively to all of this. London's schools have done an incredible job of work and enormous thanks and credit are due to them for that.

Second, this was a one-off early intervention and costing is not a precise science. You are right to say, Assembly Member Garrett, that there is a risk that if you try to penny pinch and just look at the precise marginal extra cost to a school and cost it on that basis, you are at risk of unintended consequences of missing extra costs that schools face. We have effectively as a one-year policy intervention overfunded boroughs deliberately in order to give some margin in the system to manage low costs like a bit of cutlery here, a bit of crockery there. Clearly, we are reliant on boroughs - and this is right, in my view - to do that implementation with their schools. They have that relationship with their schools already and it is not for the GLA to try to usurp the borough relationship with schools, using this policy as a mechanism to do that. It is a sign of maturity in the London government system that cross-party, cross-borough universally a very professional job has been done by boroughs of implementing this and enormous thanks are due to all boroughs for their work on that.

We have designed it to show flexibility and to have some spare cash in the system deliberately in order to smooth implementation. We are determined - and the Mayor has already said this - that no school should be out of pocket from all of this. Therefore, we are paying at 90 percent, but we have designed into the system that in the event that any school or any borough gets more than 90 percent take-up, there is a way of claiming back some of those expenses towards the end of the year. However, I have to say that in itself was designed to be a deliberately generous estimate of take-up. To pick a borough I happen to know well, when Islington did it, uptake was averaging around 85 percent when this policy had matured.

**Neil Garratt AM:** OK, my final question. We were speaking earlier about the funds you were just referring to, a £5 million pot. You tell me. I got the sense that it was money that could be applied for in order to help cover those costs. What has the take-up on that £5 million been? Has it been oversubscribed, undersubscribed?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** We have used the information that has come out of our Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) as our starting point. Within there, we identified that there is a higher cost associated with certain meals, whether that it is SEND or Jewish kosher food. We have paid that out or that will be going out in the borough's grant claim, I think in April. That has already been allocated. As I say, we are going around the boroughs and --

**Neil Garratt AM:** Sorry, is that one of the things from that extra money?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Yes.

**Neil Garratt AM:** OK, that extra £5 million is covering things like that. Understood.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** We have also had a recent unfortunate instance where we have got an influx of pupils because of extreme circumstances in the world where we are making sure that that is covered as well through this fund. We have been round, as I mentioned before, all boroughs, doing check-instructions and nothing has come up

at the moment, but we have kept it open. We have six-weekly check-ins with them and, as and when things come up, absolutely we will be considering that on a case-by-case basis.

**Neil Garratt AM:** Of the £5 million, roughly how much of that is allocated, spent, left over?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Currently, at the moment for the SEND pupils' costs, the kosher food and the influx of pupils, about a third of it so far is allocated at this point.

**Neil Garratt AM:** OK. Oh, I see, in that case I have misunderstood. I do apologise. The sense I got earlier was that the £5 million was available, let us say, for schools that needed extra tables or something and did not have the capacity. It is not for that; it is for where there are certain special sorts of meal that cost more than the standard amount?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** It is for any extreme circumstance that may inhibit a child being able to access that, whether that was through something that was identified in the EqIA or, as we go round, if something is happening with a school where they are struggling. We have not had that come up yet in any of our round of engagements and we have been doing a lot of engagement with schools, with Headteachers, with boroughs.

**Neil Garratt AM:** OK, thank you very much. Thanks, everyone. Thanks, Chair.

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

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** The £5 million contingency is in two tranches. There is £905,000 for supporting individuals and then there is £4,095,000 to support schools. However, that is over a two-year period and that £905,000 for supporting individuals disappears in 2024/25, but the amount of money for supporting schools carries on until the following year. Why is that?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Shall I answer? The money to support individuals from that has been where we have identified through the EqIA groups of people who, for primarily religious reasons, feel excluded from the State school system. Primarily, the Charedi Jewish community particularly has been identified in Haringey and Barnet in north London where we decided we needed to do something --

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** And Hackney.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** -- to support that community separately through the --

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** Do not forget the Charedi's in Hackney. They will be very upset.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Sorry, forgive me. Hackney as well, in fact primarily in Hackney where we needed to do something separate to support that community and ensure some degree of equality outside of the school system. That is a one-year programme for this financial year. The reason it runs between two GLA financial years in schools is because we are funding it for this academic year, which does not unfortunately align to the GLA's financial year. That is why it runs over two GLA financial years.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** That is the £4 million goes over two years.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Yes, because the funding is aligned to the academic year, not the financial year.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** OK, thank you.

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

**Zack Polanski AM:** Thank you very much, Chair, and good morning, panel. If I can start with you, Deputy Mayor, what feedback have you received from schools and parents on the delivery of the Programme since the start of the school year and have they identified any challenges and, if so, what have you done about this?

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** OK. We have dealt with a lot of the challenges. The challenges we perhaps would have expected have not really arisen, but it has gone remarkably well and the feedback has been extremely positive. Emma can talk a little bit more. We set up a programme, a partnership group, with boroughs and they are extremely keen and enthused about this Programme and that enthusiasm has increased as the Programme has gone on. What we are doing, building into this year, is regular insight work with different groups, with headteachers, with parents and with children for example. We should have the first formal insights next month, which we can happily share with the Committee. Obviously, we have done visits to schools. I went with you to one where we have talked to headteachers, catering staff, parents and pupils, and it has been overwhelmingly positive. Emma, I do not know if you want to say anything extra about some of the insight work and the feedback you have been getting.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Thanks, Joanne. Bear with me, I am just going to read a couple of lines from a letter that we have had from a parent, which gives you a flavour of just some of the things that we are getting in to the team. This says,

*"Dear Mayor Khan, I couldn't believe when the school let me know that the meals are for free. I'm a recent single mother of two. I live with my elderly mother, but I'm also a paediatric nurse, and I'm trying to improve my life by doing study. It has been a huge struggle. You cannot believe how my life has improved since I do not have to prepare the meals for the children. Not only does it save me time, but it saves me money. Thank you for your kindness, for you and your team."*

We have had so many of those come through to us. As we have been going around in the insights work with the boroughs and as we have been talking to headteachers, the overwhelming response has been phenomenally positive. I have never worked on a policy where it has been adopted by all boroughs across London. We have heard from all schools are doing this. We have only one school that has slight logistical issues at the moment. But the fact we have over 1,900 primary schools now doing this in such a short space of time, I think, is testament to itself.

As Joanne has just said, we are making sure that we have a lot of work going through our monitoring and evaluation throughout the year, and regular touch points insights work going on. Some of it will be independent to make sure that we are hearing from people the experience that they are having throughout the year. If necessary, we will adopt and adapt as we go.

**Zack Polanski AM:** Thank you. Just to echo, when I went to visit with Joanne, just how pleased the teachers, parents and students were with the food. They had some niggly problems, but I am sure those are being resolved. Overwhelmingly, the narrative was that this had been a really good thing. Could I ask you

about specific dietary requirements, particularly – I suppose I will stick with you, Emma – for religious needs or specifically dietary requirements, and how you have approached that?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Thank you. It is something that we did look at very carefully, and that was also one of the reasons why we commissioned the EqlA, which was published quite early on in the policy development cycle. Within there, it did identify that there was a higher cost as I mentioned before with kosher food, and therefore we took the policy decision to top that up. We have topped up state-funded Jewish schools 85 pence, so they are funded above the other rate that we have paid other schools.

Within the EqlA, we did a lot of engagement with faith groups, with faith schools to look at whether this would meet their needs. We did follow national Government policy around national food standards, and we took the decision not to do anything bespoke because that would be extremely confusing for people and we did not have time. Everything that is done by schools and by boroughs is in line with the national Government standards for school food. We also spoke to a range of other faith leaders to make sure that this was meeting dietary requirements, and that was the feedback that we got that it was. Halal is always catered for by schools if there is need. Vegetarian and vegan is always part of a main offer as well.

**Zack Polanski AM:** Thank you. Finally, I may have mentioned this before, but I have been working with an organisation I am meeting with called ProVeg who are looking particularly at healthy plant-based foods within schools. They have worked with over 5,000 schools across England and Wales, and their argument is that this lowers chronic health disease, lowers bills, and lowers climate budget. I put them in touch with your team. I am just wondering if you could give us any update on if there has been any progress.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** I can find out if we have done work with them. We have been running webinars to look at the sustainability angle, which brings in the vegan and vegetarian options. As I mentioned, all of our policy is in line the national Government food standards, and that is where we have talked to boroughs about doing it. We are meeting the organisation that you just mentioned, we are meeting them soon, so that is in the diary. Thank you so much for connecting us as well. I know that Assembly Member Boff has mentioned vegan foods to us before.

We are running a good practice session with the Food Board in the next four weeks, I think, where we are also sharing more and more good practice, and we are bringing in organisations as you just mentioned and looking at where we can share resources. A lot of that is also on our Resource Hub, so boroughs and schools can access that if they cannot get to one of our webinars or meetings as well.

**Zack Polanski AM:** Thank you. I know something ProVeg often talk about – and it is something I talk about a lot too – is that this is slightly different to vegan because vegan comes with a set of moral choices. I am vegan myself, but actually plant-based food has nothing necessarily to do with those choices, just to do with healthy options that happen to be vegan, but it is not about veganism. However, I can see you nodding.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Yes, noted. The thing I would say is that we took a very deliberate decision at the beginning of this that it was going to be a big enough administrative job to the education system in London to get this out full stop, so we were not going to add extra criteria. In the complex devolution settlement there is around education, while we are funding this, schools have individual responsibility for their catering contracts and stuff like that. They will sometimes, but not universally, offer a central catering contract that schools can choose to buy into if they wish, but individual school governors – of which I am one, and I know other people will be here as well – have the ultimate legal responsibility for



ensuring each school meets Government's nutritional criteria. There were no nutritional criteria for academies because they are exempt from that under academy freedoms, so called.

We deliberately chose to not do anything that added to the criteria that we are doing. We have deliberately not chosen to intervene on the nature of this food that is served, given the complexities of doing this and the cost of doing that already. So, wholly understanding the points everyone wishes to make around this as an issue, we have taken the call that to date, while this remains a one-year programme, it is beyond our responsibility to start questioning the nature of the food that is served beyond ensuring everyone hits their legal requirements.

**Zack Polanski AM:** You have set me off slightly. It is like you have put 50 pence in the metre. The Mayor talks about lots of things around the 2030 net zero target, and often they are not entirely in his power and it is about that leadership. There are things, particularly around procurement, that are in his power, and I have often had those conversations, and most of the time I would say he accepts those arguments. Surely, if UFSM is to be extended, this is an example where the Mayor in hitting his net-zero targets can show leadership by encouraging or at least nudging schools to make more appropriate choices for meeting net zero, while co-designing those with communities for healthy food.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I wholly accept your point around nudging schools, and I think that is exactly why we are doing those training seminars and that kind of awareness-raising, so I think that point is wholly accepted. I am sure we will come to the question of whether this policy is extended or not; I can pre-empt that by saying we do not yet know if it is financially possible for the GLA to do that. In a more sane world where every local and regional government had a multi-year spending settlement to give us more predictability, we would then have a multi-year view that allows us to go down that more, with more clarity.

**Zack Polanski AM:** Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

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

**Anne Clarke AM:** Thank you, Chair. Emma, you have partly answered this incidentally, but I am just wondering, what steps have you taken to ensure that schools do not lose out on pupil premium funding as a result of this programme?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** We have been doing a lot of work. It was one of the things during our engagement with boroughs and with schoolteachers that they were concerned about. I will give you some examples of things we have been doing. We have held a number of good practice webinars where we have shared with them what auto-enrolment means in practice, where the boroughs are who have done it, what their experience was, and how they did it, so the process that they went through. We are taking a very close eye. We are monitoring the pupil premium data that the Department for Education (DfE) produce. We do not think until December's data cut that we will be able to see the impact of the work that we have been doing with the boroughs.

We have seen, as I mentioned, where it has worked, the number of families - I was quite shocked actually by the number of families who have been identified through that process - who were eligible for Government and funding that did not know they were. We have also done letters directly to parents. In there, we have highlighted the need, "If you are eligible, please keep registering". We have translated all our materials into different languages to make sure there is no language barrier for people not understanding that as well. So as much as we can, we have been really empowering boroughs, explaining how they can do it, and looking at how we can encourage them to do this as well.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I think it is worth saying in all of this, there are two fundamental problems with the national eligibility system on FSM that we are trying to address. Number one is that because FSM is an out-of-work benefit, effectively, there are many, many families under the poverty line or close to the poverty line who do not qualify for it. The second is that there are many families who do qualify who for whatever reason - fear of official forms, language issues, whatever it is - choose not to claim. There was a significant problem with the national policy. It is not a criticism of this Government; it was not changed under Governments of previous parties either. But that is one of the policy reasons why we thought this was a priority for limited public money in this very difficult set of economic circumstances for people.

**Anne Clarke AM:** Finally from me, when the Mayoral Decision was published, it said that the EqIA will be published in July 2023. Why was there a delay into the publication of the EqIA?

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** The EqIA was published early in the summer, yes.

**Anne Clarke AM:** OK. Well, the question must be -- sorry about that. Thank you.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Are we talking about the Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Yes, the EqIA is different from the IIA.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Thank you, Richard. OK. Assembly Member Boff.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** I have a few questions on the evidence base in the IIA. One is the most trivial, really, and perhaps you should address it. According to this, on the EqIA it says that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and more (LGBTQ+) parents or guardians are more likely to be economically constrained than heterosexual parents. Where did you get that from? Where did the pink pound disappear to?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** The EqIA was done by an independent organisation called Arup. We took their evidence, and that is what was in the EqIA.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** I will address it to Arup. OK. We talked about stigma. You said that those schools which already have UFSM have programmes for completing forms in relation to the pupil's premium. How are their tactics for improving the take-up of people premium being shared amongst the boroughs, because that was one of the objectives in the IIA?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** I can repeat what I have answered before, if that is helpful. We have done a number of --

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** I am sorry. Did I miss it? I apologise if I missed it. But you are convening a group and that is active at the moment. That is all I needed to know.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Yes. We have run a number of webinars which are available, as recorded, etc.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** Webinars, right. So that is pupil premium; there are others as well. I am sorry about this. You talked about convening the boroughs and schools to encourage more sustainable transport and delivery strategies. Has that been done?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** We have a joint session which is being organised with the London Food Board team. That is being planned for the next couple of weeks. I do not have the date in front of me but it is --

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** You have it. It is underway.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Yes.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** That is all. One of the things that was identified was the potential for increased waste, and that the Food Group should convene and share good practice. Has that been done?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** I can double check if that is part of the criteria, but that is what we have planned into this session that is happening. We also have an independent evaluation going on that will look at what the IIA findings showed us, to be able to monitor that as we go. It is a little bit of an unknown for us at the moment. That is what we have asked our independent evaluation to look at.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** Yes. It is definitely in there saying that you should convene that and share good practice on that. But you are not sure if it is underway?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** I do not know if it is part of the agenda for the next joint session with the Food Board, but we have also got another six months to do this as this policy continues into the next financial year, so it will not end until September [2024].

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** OK.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** We have only been running a couple of months.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** Yes, but you need to catch the data on --

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Shall we write to you with clarification on this?

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** I think that is a good idea, yes. Thank you.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Thank you. Could we just go back to these two different assessments? We are just really unclear about the answer here. Could you just explain? The IIA and the EqIA: what dates were they both published, please?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** The EqIA was published on 20 July [2023]. The IIA was published this week, on the web. It was available and we were using the findings earlier than that, but it went on the web. For a number of reasons to do with copyright checking it and legal people checking it as well, there was a slight delay.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** OK. That was meant to be published in July, is that correct?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** The EqIA was, and we were on track and we did do that.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** No, the IIA. That was supposed to be published in July, is that correct? No. Great. Thanks very much. Thank you for clearing that up. Assembly Member Bokhari.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Thanks, Chair. I want to talk about the evaluation of the programme. Can I just say, Emma, when you were asked to do this you must have been in a bit of shock: one year to implement this in the entirety of London with every single school, and I know how different every school is in different boroughs. I have to commend you because you are a bit of a wonder woman for managing to do this. I would like the Committee to recognise how difficult this was and what a challenge it must have been for you.

The evaluation that we obviously need to see of this is really important. At what stage do you think that you will be able to publish those findings and when will the final evaluation be published?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Thank you for the acknowledgment. I would also say that it was a massive team effort and we could not have done it if the boroughs did not get behind us and schools.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Lots of sleepless nights, I am sure.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** There were, yes, but thank you.

The monitoring and evaluation has a number of workstreams in it. We have independent evaluation going on that has been funded by the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) and also by Impact on Urban Health, to make sure that we do have independent evaluation, not just an internal one.

We also have insights which will be taken throughout the year. We will be getting the first take of that in December [2023]. We are getting really rich insights from the actual experience of parents, teachers and local boroughs as well. As I have mentioned, we are also doing six-weekly check-ins with boroughs to find out their experience of this. We have insights into the impact and we have insights into how it was done, so the actual process evaluation will be underway as well.

We also have PwC. You heard in the previous panel one of the quotes from that, which said for every pound invested the economy gets £1.71 returned. We are working with them - it has been funded by an external partner - to update that because we think that is out of date and it does not reflect the work that we have been doing in London.

We have a whole series of workstreams. The longer-term evaluation cannot be done within a year so that will not be ready until next year, but these insights will be ready throughout the year as we go.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** As part of that evaluation, I am also quite interested in how it has been advertised as well. The GLA delivered leaflets to 175,000 families telling them about the FSM scheme. Was there a particular way of those families being targeted? What was the thinking behind that?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** It went to parents who could be identified. There is a clear rationale for public money on communications on all of this, which is exactly what we discussed earlier, which is continuing to ask people to register for pupil premium. Clearly, the GLA can only communicate where there is a clear public benefit to that communication. Because we had a clear policy ask to both make people aware of this policy for family budgeting purposes but also because we had an ask of families around pupil premium, that is where the comms plan around this came from.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Where are the costs in this? I would like to know how it was decided, the cost of the implementation of the scheme itself and the cost of advertising it on public transport, Tubes, every school sending emails out to parents, and the leaflets that I have just mentioned. Will this be evaluated and will this be open and transparent so that we will be able to see all of the figures for that as well?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Yes, I am sure we will. I do not have a figure off the top of my head, forgive me, for the total comms cost for all of this but it is a tiny fraction.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Is it separate to the FSM budget?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** No, it is all part of the same budget.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** It is all the same.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Yes, it all comes in the overall budget that was --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** The FSM budget includes the comms budget?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Yes, because the comms is integral to the delivery of the policy.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** My concern is this. Was it really necessary to have that amount of advertising, considering that schools were going to be implementing it anyway and you had the support of all the schools to do it? Advertising it has caused concern for a lot of parents who have talked to me, and we heard from the previous panel about cynicism about it being just for one year, pre-election year. There is lots of support for this scheme, quite rightly, but having that part of the budget committed to advertising risks a very serious risk where the Mayor of London is using this budget to promote a political campaign pre-election. Using FSM in this way has caused a lot of parents concern and cynicism, not just from myself but lots. Lots of people are very concerned about it.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I have to say we have not had any feedback to that extent. If you can point to any, then we would be happy to address it with those individuals.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** It was mentioned in the previous panel, the cynicism towards this.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** As I say, that is really not a --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** There is one year to this approach.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I will come on to that and then we will come on to the advertising point, because they are two separate.

As we have discussed already, the reason why there was a one-year approach is that is the time period that we had confidence we could guarantee the funding of it. It would be appalling and we would be rightly criticised if we put this forward as a multi-year policy when we could only be confident of one year's funding, in a world in which all local and regional government bodies are currently only getting one-year funding settlements. That is unfortunately the world we are in. We did advertise it very clearly --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** I want to go back to the advertising of this.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** You did ask about one year. On the advertising, as I say, there is a very clear public policy rationale for publicising this policy, and it falls into two things. First, families - particularly on tight incomes, which too many families are at the moment - will be making budgeting decisions around school meal costs where they need to be aware of this policy. If they are not aware of this policy and they just turn up to school on the first day --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** I think that is ridiculous because every parent knew it was going to be happening. We got lots of emails from our school teachers and headteachers about it. To have even more money invested, which could have been going back to schools, into advertising is a bit of a waste.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Do you not think they knew because of the advertising?

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Also, there are many other things that the Mayor of London could have been promoting that would have been far more useful, for example, the Cost of Living Hub, which a lot of groups have said to us has really struggled. There are advice centres and charities who are having to do their own promotion of the Cost of Living Hub. Would that not have been a better way of using resources, to advertise that instead of the FSM approach? What we have here is a political decision that was made, using FSM in this way. It is a concern for me that we should not be using this approach in such a political way pre-election.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Well, it is not for me to comment on. I am a politically restricted officer of the Authority. It is not for me to comment on the politics of it.

However, all I can say is that there is a very clear public policy rationale for the communications we did. I am delighted you say it worked. That clearly shows it was needed to both bring awareness about the policy but also to make sure that families are aware of the pupil premium implications for them and the need for them to fill out that form --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** Again, we have webinars doing that, so we already know that that is being --

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Not with families.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** That information has been spread really well on the pupil premiums.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** That is with schools, not with families.

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** Are you suggesting we should not have done the programme?

**Hina Bokhari AM:** No, no, no. I am saying that I am concerned about the advertising of the FSM. That is my concern.

I want to go on to the fact that it is just a year, and that has caused cynicism and that was raised by the panel previously. The NEU have also said that this is a concern, that it is only for a year. Does the Mayor have any plans to extend it, and how will that happen?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** That is a decision for the GLA Budget process, clearly. At the moment, we are stuck - as I have complained, and Assembly Member Garratt will know I have complained because he sat through me complaining about it - in this annualised budget process that we face, where we can only make decisions of this financial scale on an annualised basis. We are not in a position to know whether the GLA has the money to carry on this policy until we have received the local government finance settlement, which is commonly now around 18 or 19 December. Therefore, the Mayor will be equipped to make a decision, after we have that, about whether we can carry it on or not. It is fair to say the Mayor would like to carry this on but clearly we cannot --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** There is a big risk that it will not. Inflation rates are going up. There is a risk that it may not without Government support. I think, again, this is where we have the cynicism rising because of the fact that it is a year's approach rather than a long-term approach. Again, this has been raised by the previous panel and a previous Committee. We cannot continue to have short-term approaches when it comes to children.

We have had Education Secretary after Education Secretary after Education Secretary. There has been no consistency in education recently in our Government. Then to have another short term policy like this -- it is a brilliant thing to have UFSM. We know that. As a Liberal Democrat, I know that. That is something that I am passionate for, but I want it to work and I want it to be long-term. I do not want it to be used in a way that is actually cruel, to say, "Sorry" -- it is an Oliver Twist situation, is not it? "Please, sir, can I have more?" "No, you cannot because it was only for a year." That is not fair.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I have put forward the policy rationale for why we can only commit to a year at the time, because we simply do not have any financial ability to make commitments beyond that. It would be unlawful, in fact, for the Authority to make financial commitments beyond its ability to meet those means. If you wish to suggest an alternative approach I am genuinely all ears.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** I wish that we could have a long-term approach.

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** We agree.

**Hina Bokhari AM:** I am glad we are in agreement there.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I think we are in violent agreement about the need for a long-term approach. What I am saying is the thing we need to get that is a multiyear funding settlement for local and regional --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** I hope the Government will work with you.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Assembly Member Bokhari, could you let the panellists -- Richard was speaking when you --

**Hina Bokhari AM:** I will not interrupt.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Richard, did you want to finish?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I think we are in violent agreement, Chair. We are completely agreed about the need for as much certainty as possible. The practical thing that enables that is having confidence about the GLA's finances beyond the one-year horizon we are currently working on. That requires multiyear funding settlements and, in particular, multiyear confirmation about business rates retention requirements, which is where much of this was funded from. I am sure we going to end up discussing this further in the Budget process.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Before we go on to the two Members who wish to intervene, can I just also point out that I think the panel identified 1,100 families who were not aware of the policy? We talked about Lewisham where 500 families have been identified. Emma [Pawson] talked about 600. It is clear that there are gaps there as well. Assembly Member Boff.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** How much was in the budget for advertising?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** There was a central marketing budget, which is not part of this grant at all. There was £24,000 spent on posters that came from the central marketing budget. If you then look at what proportion that is against the grant, it is 0.02 percent.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** You are saying that £24,000 was not from this budget?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** It came from our central marketing budget.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** What proportion of the budget we have just heard was allocated to advertising?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** We have ringfenced £100,000 but we have not spent all of that yet.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** £100,000.

**Neil Garratt AM:** What is that in percentage terms?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** I know the £24,000 is 0.02 percent, for the posters.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** Yes. £100,000 is a lot of money. What are you doing to bridge the gap between those boroughs who are currently spending £3 on FSM and the £2.65 that is in the Mayor's budget?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** Interestingly, that has been seen in the boroughs that were already offering the universal offer. Therefore, because we are offsetting any cost that they would be incurring anyway as they were funding it, they have used that money to top it up.

When we set that price point we did that by looking at, across the boroughs, what they were currently paying and what they were contracted to pay in their contracts. We did not find many - there were, I think, three -



that were paying above the £2.65 rate, and that is why we set it at that rate. We took the decision to pay more than Government. After we set it, Government then increased their rate to £2.53.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** But what are those boroughs doing? Are they going to bring down the cost of their meals or what are they doing, the ones who are currently spending £3?

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** The ones who were already offering it anyway?

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** The three that you have mentioned.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** They were the universal offer anyway. Five boroughs were already offering it. We have given them extra money.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** You are transferring an amount of money that is £2.65 per head. They are spending £3 per head. Do they have to spend in addition in order to top up? I do not know how they are doing it.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** It is an interesting question.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** I hope so.

**Emma Pawson (Head of Health and Programme Director for Free School Meals, Greater London Authority):** They are keeping it because they are contracted into it, but it is money that they were going to be paying anyway. We have given them money and asked them to offset it on to cost of living interventions.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** I am not really understanding that.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Sorry, I think --

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** They spend an amount of money on their school meals programme.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** For the small --

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** We are giving them a chunk of money for their school, which is less than the amount that they are currently spending. Are they spending up to their £3 or are they coming down to the £2.65? I am sorry, I do not understand the answers so far.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Sorry, I think we slightly misunderstood the question.

There are two answers to that question. I think there is one borough that has been cited as spending that amount of money. I think the gap on the rest, when they are contracted to, is over. Clearly, that is a central borough contract that not all schools buy into - the complexity of this is enormous - and so it is not clear that all schools in that borough, which is Westminster, I believe, will be paying that amount of money for a meal anyway.

The answer to your question is simple, which is: as we have already talked about, we are deliberately overfunding this programme by paying for more pupils per borough than are eligible for funding and by having a very high assumption of take-up, in order to deliberately to put more money into the system.

If there is a risk that a borough is being underfunded for it because they have a particularly expensive catering contract that they have chosen to sign up to, which is more than the amount, we hope that is offset by the extra that we are putting into the system because we do not want to leave any school out of pocket for this. So far, it has not been flagged to us in any borough - we have spoken to every borough already in this process and we will carry on with that as well - that any borough is leaving its schools out of pocket because of the cost of individual meals.

**Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair):** Well, Dr [Katharine] Vincent earlier in the previous panel identified that there were a number of boroughs paying £3, and I would not leave any policy to hope, to be honest.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** No, and we are not. That is why we have a contingency budget and it is why we have deliberately put extra money into the system. As I say, we have overfunded this deliberately to support boroughs. Given this is the first and we announced this at a relatively short-term basis, that is the only way to do it. Where there is an issue, we have always said we will support that from the contingency budget that we have identified. However, no issue has yet been flagged to us.

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

**Krupesh Hirani AM:** Thanks. Sorry, I am just recovering slightly from that exchange about promoting the policy. I know Assembly Member Bokhari passionately always makes the case and promotes the fact about the Liberal Democrats including and introducing this policy in Government. I am sure she shares equal passion about other Liberal Democrat policies such as the bedroom tax, the benefit cap, and also the trebling of tuition fees and smashing records in taking record amounts of funding from local services. My question to Richard, at what point do you feel you will be in a position to make a decision on whether this can continue going forward as a permanent policy?

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** I should be clear it is the Mayor's decision, not mine. However, we need two critical bits of information that are not yet available to us. Number one is confirmation of the local government spending settlement, which is traditionally now in the last week before Christmas. We hope it is earlier but that is, I think, what we have come to expect.

The second is early confirmation in borough returns from business rate and council tax returns. While it is not a perfect stab at the GLA's cut of that because we do not get that until late February, we will have - we hope before that, but almost certainly next calendar year - enough financial confidence to allow us to make a lawful decision on whether to carry this on or not, because you can only make a lawful decision on this if you are confident you can fund it.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Thank you. The final question is from Assembly Member Clarke.

**Anne Clarke AM:** Thank you. Confidence in funding brings me neatly to the next question, which is: what action has the Mayor taken to lobby the Government or work with Government to provide UFSM for primary children in London?

**Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Children and Families):** Well, it obviously formed part of his submission to the Autumn Statement last year. We have joined together with some of the organisations that

you spoke to earlier, and there is a cross-party but also extensive stakeholder body that now is lobbying very hard on this and we are part of that.

We have, also, of course, listened to our young people here at City Hall. We have, for example, our Lynk Up Crew (LUC), our primary and secondary-age children, and we have lots of organisations talking to us about that, for example, Bite Back, who are particularly involved around food insecurity. The lobbying from them has been very strong. LUC is lobbying Parliament and Government this week on the need for future funding for FSM for the long term. I have also obviously visited schools and spoken at various events, as has the Mayor, to call on the Government to put this in the central Government Budget.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Sorry, I was about to use the gavel then. I am getting a bit gavel-happy here, aren't I? We have now reached the end of our panellist questioning. I would like to thank the panel for the answers that you have given today and for being here today, and, as always, our Committee Members for the incisive and interesting questions that you have asked.

We have reached the end the session. The Committee has a few more items of business to deal with but before I do that, could I just thank you, panellists, and if you could take this back to your team, please? On behalf of London's children, thank you very much for taking forward this policy. I know how hard it has been to get it into place and the positive feedback that we have had from children and families has been incredible. Thank you and thank you to your team as well.

**Richard Watts (Mayor's Deputy Chief of Staff):** Can I thank the Committee for your thanks to Emma and her team, who have really gone above and beyond on this? It has been very new to the GLA, we have never done anything like this before and so the team worked really hard. Thank you for your recognition of that.

**Anne Clarke AM:** Before we close can I say one more thing, since we are doing thanks? Is that OK, Chair?

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Yes, of course.

**Anne Clarke AM:** Since we are thanking, I also just want to say thanks for the maturity with which not just this Committee but your team worked, particularly around having an EqIA and really looking at the need for kosher school meals, having an uplift and addressing what is the national situation, that there is that budget gap, and also for children with SEND. Thank you. I have heard nothing but positive feedback from families and particularly from schools, if I am honest, so thank you.

**Marina Ahmad AM (Chair):** Thank you, Assembly Member Clarke, for raising that. I think that really needed to be said.