

## Greater London Authority Universal Primary Free School Meals Policy Theory of Change

In February 2023 the Mayor of London announced £130 million of emergency funding to help families with the cost of living by extending access to free school meals to all key stage two children in London state schools for the academic year 2023/24.

Impact on Urban Health commissioned Bremner Consulting to develop a Theory of Change that could build consensus to:

- Guide evaluation priorities
- Help ensure evaluation builds on the current evidence-base for universal free school meals
- Support coordination of evaluation projects
- Support generation of relevant and actionable insights for priority audiences

To develop the ToC we undertook two strands of work simultaneously. First, we worked with an independent academic team, led by Professor Juliana Cohen in the Harvard School of Public Health and Gabriella McLoughlin at Temple University College of Public Health. They updated a recent systematic review of literature examining the relationship between universal free school meals and overall meal participation; diet quality; child food insecurity; school attendance; academic performance; BMI; and school meal finances. The review examined evidence from the UK and OECD countries and identified research gaps and recommendations for future research. A rapid review of the wider qualitative literature on school food in the UK and US was also conducted to identify key themes and considerations.

Second, we undertook interviews and workshops with stakeholders to identify evaluation needs and priorities. Stakeholders included: the GLA, evaluation commissioners (IOUH and Education Endowment Foundation), London boroughs, and academic teams and NGOs with an interest in school food.

The Theory of Change is presented around four priority impact areas:

1. mitigating the impacts of the cost of living crisis
2. child and family mental health and wellbeing
3. child and family physical health
4. attainment

It is anticipated that achieving impact across these four areas will narrow inequalities for children and their families, and equity of outcomes should form a specific focus of evaluations. Critical to understanding the consequences of the policy therefore, will be a measurement approach that captures diversity of experience and strength of effect by different socio-economic and demographic groups, household characteristics and geographic locations.

Additionally, potential impacts for the local economy and environmental sustainability are identified. These six impact areas are brought together in a single Theory of Change which outlines the complexity of the relationships between different elements of input, output, outcome and impact. It is suggested that as the policy is currently for one year only, impact is less likely to be observed within that timescale, but inferences can be drawn of progress towards impact by measurement of outcomes.

Assumptions and conditions for impact, risks and barriers and enablers underpinning the Theory of Change have also been outlined. These focus on implementation of the policy. In addition two positive unintended consequences have been identified: the extension of FSM into secondary schools in pre-existing universal boroughs and the potential creation of incentives to work for families currently in receipt of means-tested free school meals.

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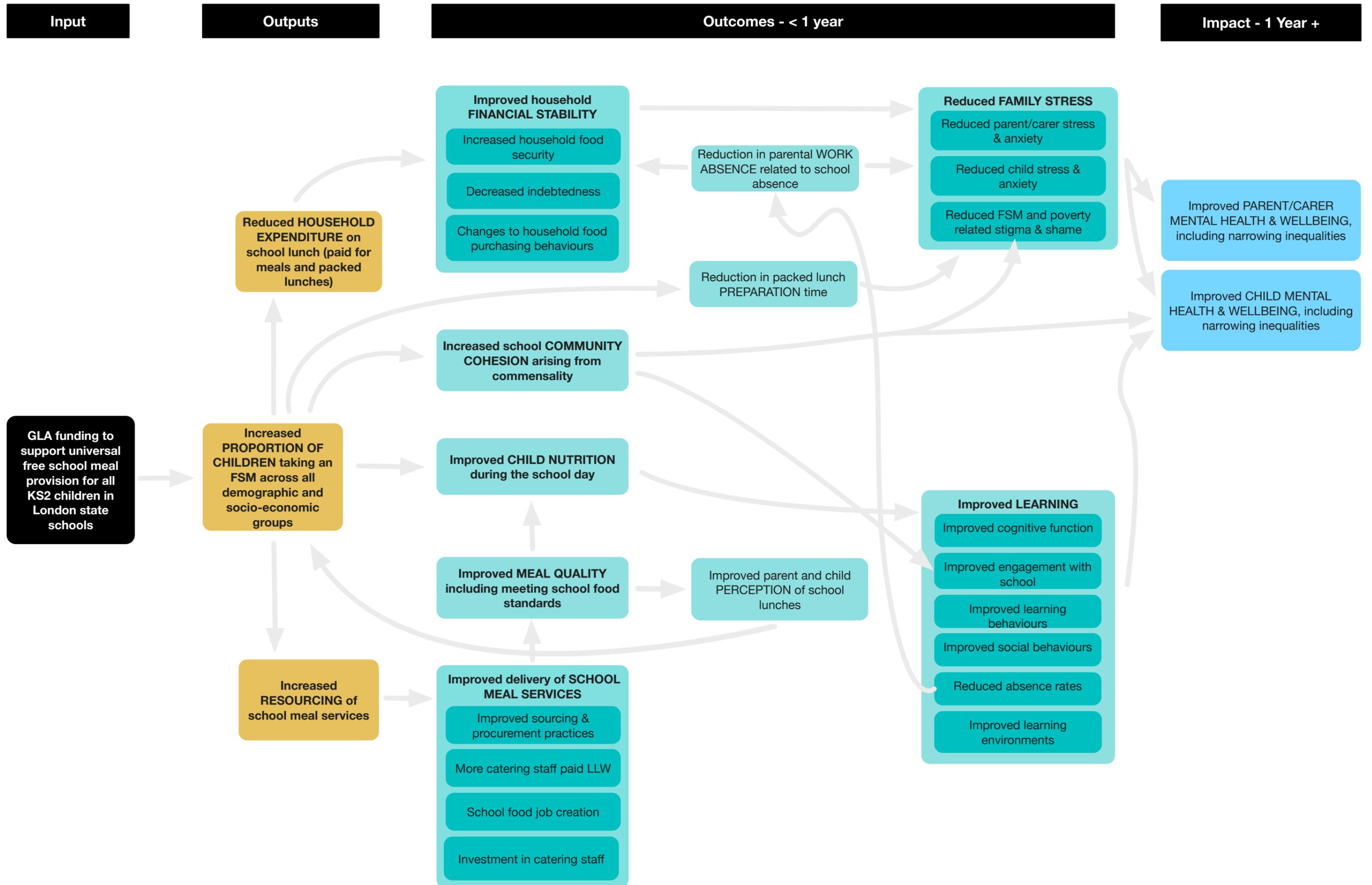
Contact: [info@bremnerco.com](mailto:info@bremnerco.com)

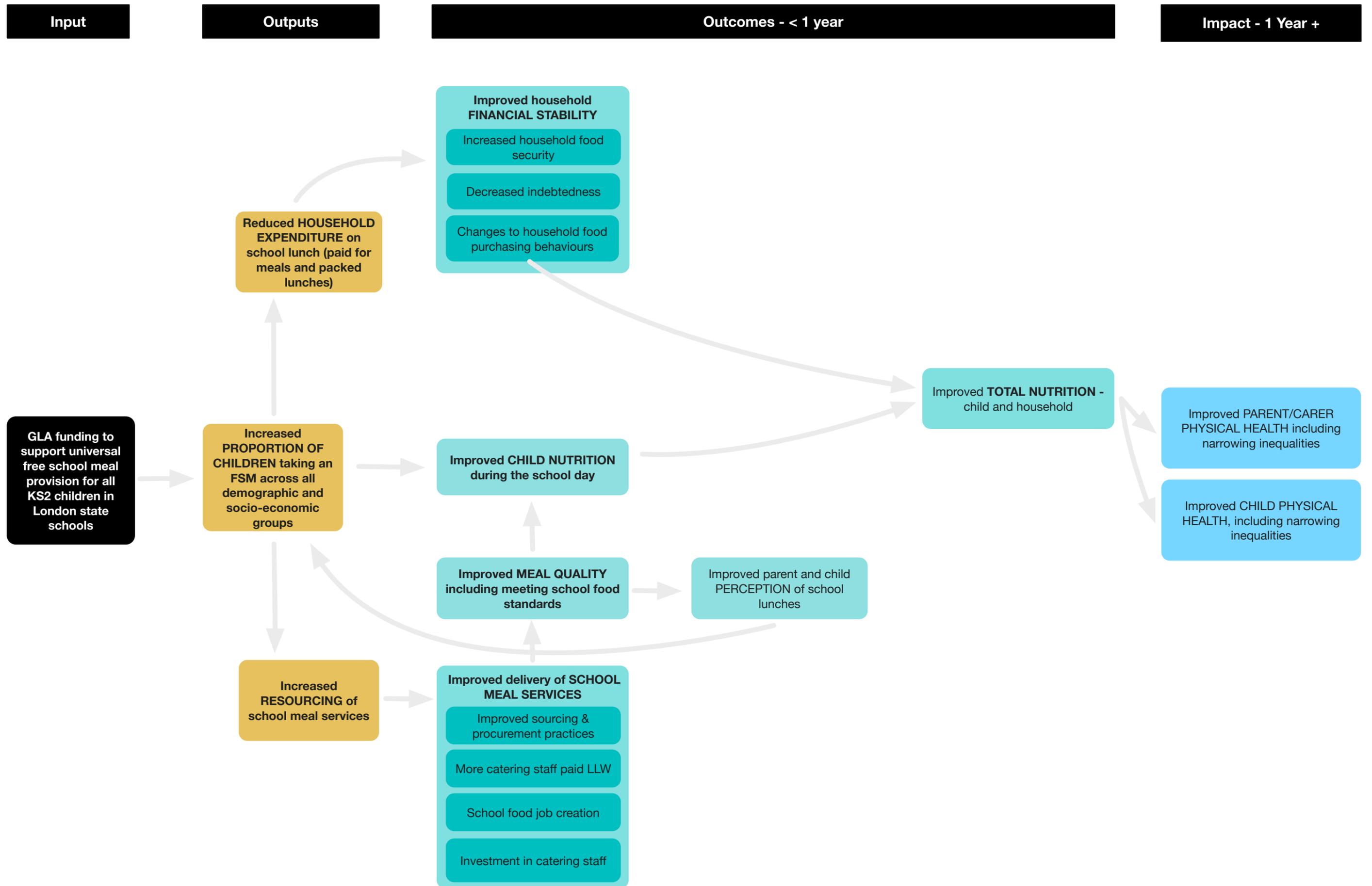


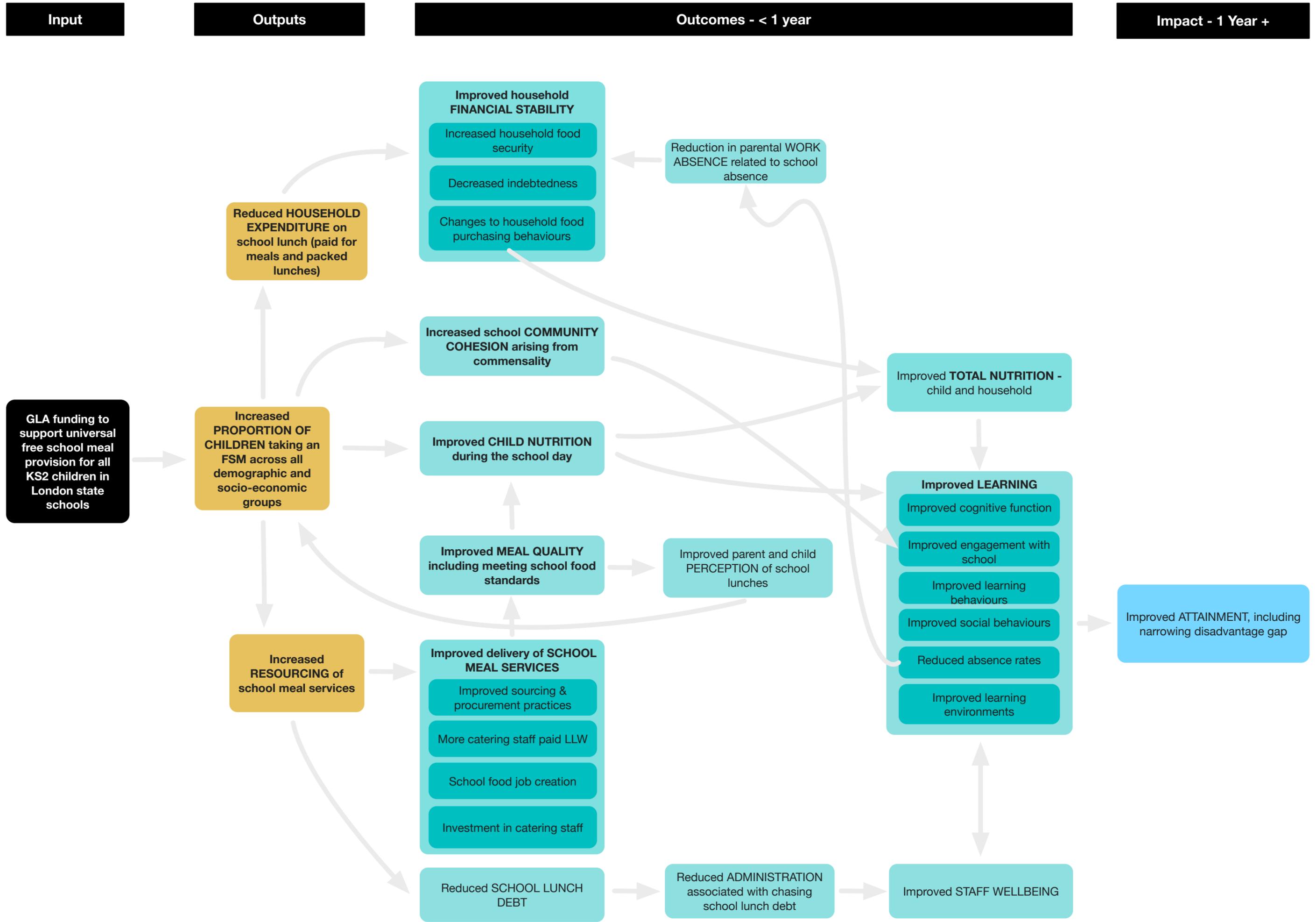
Impact  
on **Urban**  
**Health**



# Impact: Mental Health and Wellbeing







Input

Outputs

Outcomes - < 1 year

Impact - 1 Year +

GLA funding to support universal free school meal provision for all KS2 children in London state schools

Reduced HOUSEHOLD EXPENDITURE on school lunch (paid for meals and packed lunches)

Increased PROPORTION OF CHILDREN taking an FSM across all demographic and socio-economic groups

Increased RESOURCING of school meal services

Improved household FINANCIAL STABILITY  
Increased household food security  
Decreased indebtedness  
Changes to household food purchasing behaviours

Reduction in parental WORK ABSENCE related to school absence

Increased school COMMUNITY COHESION arising from commensality

Improved CHILD NUTRITION during the school day

Improved MEAL QUALITY including meeting school food standards

Improved parent and child PERCEPTION of school lunches

Improved delivery of SCHOOL MEAL SERVICES  
Improved sourcing & procurement practices  
More catering staff paid LLW  
School food job creation  
Investment in catering staff

Reduced SCHOOL LUNCH DEBT

Reduced ADMINISTRATION associated with chasing school lunch debt

Improved TOTAL NUTRITION - child and household

Improved LEARNING  
Improved cognitive function  
Improved engagement with school  
Improved learning behaviours  
Improved social behaviours  
Reduced absence rates  
Improved learning environments

Improved STAFF WELLBEING

Improved ATTAINMENT, including narrowing disadvantage gap

# Impact: Local Economy and Environmental Sustainability

## Input

## Outputs

## Outcomes - < 1 year

## Impact - 1 Year +



# Complete Theory of Change

