

Tackling Food Insecurity in Scottish Schools: Case Studies of Strengthening Free School Meal Provision In Scotland



A Report for the Poverty and
Inequality Commission
March 2021

John H. McKendrick and Sophie Cathcart

Foreword

The World Food Programme recently published ‘The State of School Feeding World Wide 2020’. It stated, ‘Over the past ten years, a number of studies have shown that school meals combat child hunger, support children’s long-term well-being and help them to learn and thrive’.

Here in Scotland, we want our children to grow up in the best place possible. This includes ensuring that all children have their rights respected and upheld. Under Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to healthy food. It is important in a fair and equal society that all children have access to the healthy, nutritious food they need to grow, learn and play.

We know that families on low incomes can find it harder to provide the kind of healthy food that they want to for their children because of limited household budgets. This can mean having access to fewer options for buying and preparing food and facing higher costs as a result. Access to free school meals supports many families and helps unlock opportunities for children.

Despite this, not every child who is entitled to a free school meal gets one. There can be a range of reasons for this; for example, family immigration status, or families may not be aware they can qualify for free school meals, and unfortunately in some instances there can still be stigma attached to getting a free school meal.

We know that schools and their catering staff understand the importance of free school meals and are committed to working to tackle these challenges for families. The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges, and schools and catering services across Scotland have worked hard to continue to support children and families, both in the community and in schools, during this time.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission commissioned SPIRU to undertake research to identify and share good practice and learning around providing free school meals. This report describes some of the excellent practice in schools around Scotland. In the case studies, which were gathered during the pandemic and relate to practice both before and during the pandemic, we see actions to involve children and young people and understand what they want from school food, to raise awareness of free school meal entitlement, and even action to change the structure of the school day to make having a school meal more convenient. The report makes a number of recommendations for schools and authorities looking to increase their free school meal uptake.

The Commission hopes this research will be a helpful tool for schools and catering staff across Scotland as they support families to make sure every child has the healthy food they need to thrive.

Bill Scott
Chair, Poverty and Inequality
Commission

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of the Catering Leads, school management, and school-based catering staff who contributed to this report. These inputs were generously given by these professionals at a time when they were grappling with the challenges of adapting their services under COVID-19 conditions. SPIRU is also grateful to Scotland's Poverty and Inequality Commissioners and staff for offering advice on an initial draft of this report, and to Bill Scott for providing the Foreword.



Contents

	section	page
	Foreword from Bill Scott	02
	Acknowledgements	03
	Table of Contents	04
	Introduction: School Food and Food Security in Scotland	05
	Developments and Trends in Free School Meals in Scotland	07
	Promising Practice Case Studies	09
Currie Community High School in the City of Edinburgh		10
Dunblane High School in the Stirling Council area		11
Dunoon Grammar School in Argyll and Bute		12
Greenfaulds High School in North Lanarkshire		13
Halfmerke Primary School in South Lanarkshire		14
Kilmarnock Academy in East Ayrshire		15
Kirkcolm School in Dumfries and Galloway		16
Sound Primary School in the Shetland Isles		17
St Bridget's Primary School in North Ayrshire		18
Whitehill Secondary School in the City of Glasgow		19
	Conclusion and Recommendations	20
	Further Reading	22
	About the Poverty and Inequality Commission & SPIRU	23

Introduction: School Food, Food Insecurity and Child Poverty in Scotland

School Food in Scotland

For much of the year, schools are a key place in which food is consumed and food security is promoted for Scotland's children. Children are expected to attend school for 190 days each year, with all schools duty-bound to provide a free school meal to all children in Primary 1, 2 and 3, and to all children who have a parent in receipt of a qualifying benefit from Primary 4 through until the end of secondary school education. Morning break time also offers an opportunity for children to consume and/or purchase a mid-morning snack. Many schools in Scotland also offer breakfast food provision – through breakfast clubs, [breakfast carts](#), and canteen services. Other school-level initiatives are more irregular, such as distributions of fresh fruit to pupils in class or food shared among pupils having been grown in school allotments/gardens.

Food Security in Scotland

Tackling food insecurity in Scotland extends beyond the school gate, with national and local actions focused on promoting dignified solutions to end hunger and food poverty. In February 2021, the [Scottish Government asserted the importance of tackling food insecurity in Scotland](#) in a detailed response to the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food and on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. One significant catalyst for action was [Dignity: Ending Hunger Together in Scotland](#), the report of the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty that was published by the Scottish Government in 2016. One of the many significant responses to this report was the adoption of a [National Indicator to estimate the scale of food insecurity in Scotland](#). Data has been gathered since 2017, although a target criterion for change has yet to be determined. Three years of evidence suggest that almost one in ten adults in Scotland have been 'worried that they would run out of food due to lack of money or resources in the last 12 months' (9%), with 6% reporting that they 'ate less' and

4% reporting that they had actually 'ran out of food'. Almost one in three single parents in Scotland report a worry over running out of food (31%). Food insecurity is a significant problem for many families in Scotland; school food can make an important contribution to tackling this problem.

Tackling Child Poverty in Scotland

Schools also have an important role to play in tackling child poverty in Scotland. Many schools have adopted an in-school programme to tackle the hidden '[Cost of the School Day](#)', while the EIS, the main professional body representing teachers in Scotland, has received Scottish Government support to develop the [PACT programme](#) to better equip teachers to contribute to efforts to respond to the problems that poverty presents in schools. The Scottish Government is also committed to work toward [closing the 'attainment gap'](#) that is associated with poverty and deprivation. These school, Local Education Authority, and national actions should be viewed as part of a broader multi-dimensional approach to tackling child poverty in Scotland. At the end of 2017, and with support of COSLA and all political parties in Scotland, the Scottish Government [legislated to eradicate child poverty](#) in Scotland by 2030.

[Every Child, Every Chance: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Programme 2018-2022](#) identified three drivers of child poverty: (i) income from employment, (ii) cost of living, and (iii) income from social security and benefits in kind. Free school meals is identified as one of the benefits in kind that can be used to tackle child poverty, and uptake of free school meals is one of indicators that is monitored annually in the Child Poverty Measurement Framework.

The purpose of this report

This report has a tightly defined purpose. It acknowledges the wider role of free school meals in promoting food security and tackling child poverty. However, it also recognises the trend of declining rates of uptake of free school meals in Scotland. Therefore, it presents ten case studies of schools in Scotland, each of which demonstrates that local actions can have a demonstrable positive impact on raising uptake of free (and paid) school meals in Scottish schools. Beforehand, we review recent trends in school meal presentation.



Developments and Trends in Free School Meals in Scotland

School Meals in Scotland

On March 8, 2021, the [Scottish Government announced](#) its intention to deliver the phased introduction of free school meals for all primary pupils in Scotland by August 2022.

On a typical school day, almost 340,000 meals are served in Scottish schools. [Scottish Government guidance was published in February 2021](#) to advise on what was required to meet nutrition standards that were outlined in the [Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools \(Scotland\) Regulations 2020](#).

The most [current national data on school meal uptake](#) was published in the Autumn of 2020, using data from the annual school meals census in Scotland, which was conducted before the COVID-19 restrictions were imposed.

Although school meal provision is substantial, around one-half of children in Scotland do not present for a school dinner on a typical school day (50.9% did not have a school meal on the census day in 2020). Of note:

- School meals are typically consumed by three-quarters of children in Primary 1-3 (72%), two thirds of children in Special Schools (69.8%), and around two-fifths of pupils in Primary 4-7 (43.7%) and Secondary school (39.6%).
- The proportion of children presenting for school meals in secondary schools and special schools has remained broadly constant in recent years.
- The proportion of children in primary schools who are presenting for school meals has fallen in each of the last four years (from 62.9% in 2016 to 55.6% in 2020).

In sharp contrast to these national trends, there are many examples of schools across Scotland that are either maintaining or increasing the number and proportion of their pupils who are presenting for school meals.

Free School Meals in Scotland

The [Scottish Government acknowledges that free school meals are a benefit in kind that is an integral part of a wider programme of action, which aims to eradicate child poverty in Scotland](#). Free school meals have been available to all children in Primary 1-3 from January 2015, with Glasgow City Council exercising its right to extend universal free provision to Primary 4 pupils from August 2018. Otherwise, children are eligible for free school meals if they register their entitlement on account of their family receiving Universal Credit, Income Support, income-based Job Seeker's Allowance, income-based Employment and Support Allowance, or support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Entitlement also follows if Child Tax Credit is received and income earned falls below pre-defined income thresholds.

Over 260,000 children in Scotland are registered for free school meals (38.1% of Scotland's school-aged children), with almost 185,000 free school meals served on a typical school day (66.5% of those registered). Of note:

- The majority of pupils who are registered for free school meals are in Primary 1-3 (63.7% of all pupils entitled to free school meals in 2020).
- Beyond the universal entitlement/registration in Primary 1-3, one-fifth of children in Primary 4-7 (19.9%), one in every seven pupils in secondary school (15.6%) and three quarters of pupils in special schools (73.7%) are registered for free school meals.
- Around three quarters of registered pupils typically present for their free school meal in primary school (72% in Primary 1-3, and 74.7% in Primary 4-7) and special schools (78.2%), compared to less than three fifths of registered pupils in secondary schools (56.7%).
- The proportion of pupils registered for free school meals who typically consume a free school meal has fallen in each of the last four years for

Tackling Food Insecurity in Scottish Schools

secondary school pupils (from 63.2% in 2016 to 56.7% in 2020) and upper primary pupils (from 78.5% in 2016 to 72.6% in 2020). No trend is discernible for special schools, while the reduction in uptake among children in lower primary (from 81% of pupils in Primary 1-3 in 2016 to 73.5% in 2019) was reversed in 2020 (rising to 74.7% of pupils).

In sharp contrast to these national trends, there are many examples of schools across Scotland that are either maintaining or increasing the number and proportion of their pupils who are presenting for free school meals.

- In 2020 and then again at the start of 2021, much effort was invested by school catering services across Scotland to sustain free school meal provision during 'lockdown'.
- In school year 2020/21, much innovation has been shown by Catering and Education services across Scotland as they sought to safely manage meal provision in schools.
- The importance of school food – and its equivalent beyond term-time – has been highlighted by the [Scottish Government funding provision outside term-time up to March 2021 to children who are entitled to free school meals during term-time](#).

Investing in Free School Meals in Scotland

A wide range of stakeholders have an interest in school meals in Scotland, including anti-poverty organisations, health promoting bodies, food production and distribution companies, educational professionals and catering professionals.

Notwithstanding negative trends, there have been many developments that have strengthened Scotland's commitment to school meals in recent years:

- In January 2015, following a campaign led by CPAG Scotland, the Scottish Government introduced universal provision of school meals for all children in Primary 1-3.
- From August 2018, Glasgow City Council extended universal provision to Primary 4 pupils and stated the aspiration to extend this in stages to all primary school pupils in the city.

Is it Working? Uptake of Free School Meals in Scotland

School meals are making an important contribution to tackling child food poverty in Scotland. However, they are not being consumed on a typical day by a substantial number of children, with some evidence of fewer children presenting for school meals in recent years. On the other hand, it is likely that more of Scotland's children will now be entitled to free school meals as a result of household income falling during the pandemic. A national conversation is required to strengthen the contribution of school meals to promoting healthy living and tackling poverty in Scotland. For now, this report showcases some of the promising practice across Scotland that is bolstering uptake of free (and paid) school meals.



Promising Practice Case Studies

Over the following pages, we share ten examples of local work that is successfully encouraging the uptake of school meals in Scotland. Examples are drawn across the length and breadth of Scotland (quite literally, from the Shetland Isles to Dumfries and Galloway). Experiences from secondary and primary schools feature in this report, as do examples from small and large schools, and those in large cities, remote rural areas and all manner of places between these extremes.

This good practice has been shared by educational and catering professionals. It does not represent all of the innovative and effective work that is being delivered. Rather, it gives a flavour of what is working in contemporary Scotland.

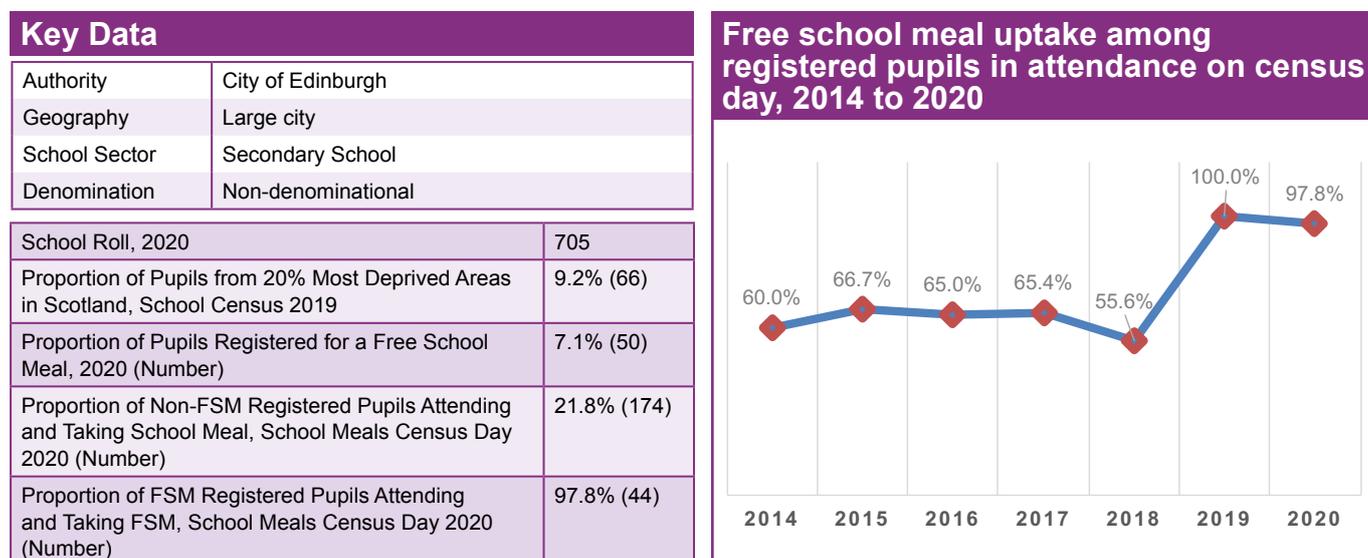
It is also significant that these case studies include schools serving communities in which many of its children are entitled to free school meals, and schools serving communities in which very few of its children are entitled to free school meals (such as Dunblane High School in this collection). Improving uptake of school meals – and free school meals – should be a concern for all schools in Scotland.

Background details about each school are provided, before a short summary of the innovative work is outlined. Each case study concludes with three learning points for others to consider. For each case study, we also plot recent trends in the uptake of free school meals among those pupils registered and in attendance on the survey day.



Currie Community High School

Positive step-change in the uptake of free school meals



Pupil involvement has been the key to increasing uptake of school meals at Currie Community High School in recent years. This extends beyond pupils selecting menus, with the reach of their involvement extending to the whole process of school meals production.

Beforehand, the school found that pupils were being drawn to external food chains, dampening pupils' interest in the school meals service. This was particularly evident among first year pupils, even those who had consumed school meals regularly in their primary schools. The novelty of being able to have access to local fast-food facilities had much appeal to this year group. Therefore, younger pupils were prioritised when selecting pupils to get involved in the journey of school meals production. Currie Community High also fostered parental involvement: parents are regularly invited to themed nights at the school to try the food on offer.

Education is the key to success. [Food for Life](#) is of central importance. Local suppliers, such as [Anderson Fruit and Veg](#), often bring stands to the dining hall and talk to the children about the origins of their food. This Food for Life work is linked to work on eco-awareness (as exemplified by the school's [Green Flag awards](#)). Currie capitalised on the passion and interest the children showed for environmental issues, focusing on the eco-friendly credentials on buying fresh and local food (which school meals provide). A Food for Life pupil group has been formed in the school, which regularly works together with the pupil Eco-group. Staff have a pupil-led vehicle to communicate their messages and news, with these groups both being receptive to staff initiatives. There are plans to extend the focus of this work to involve children in planting their own vegetables, which would later be used in the kitchen to make soup, which would be served to their peers.

More generally across the city, although COVID-19 has presented significant challenges, it has also resulted in potential gains for the school meals service. The distribution of pre-packed food boxes seems to have encouraged children to try 'different' foods. The receipt of a whole meal, which is known to provide balanced fare and which is delivered to each individual child, seems to have encouraged pupils to consume it, enhancing their diet and reducing waste.

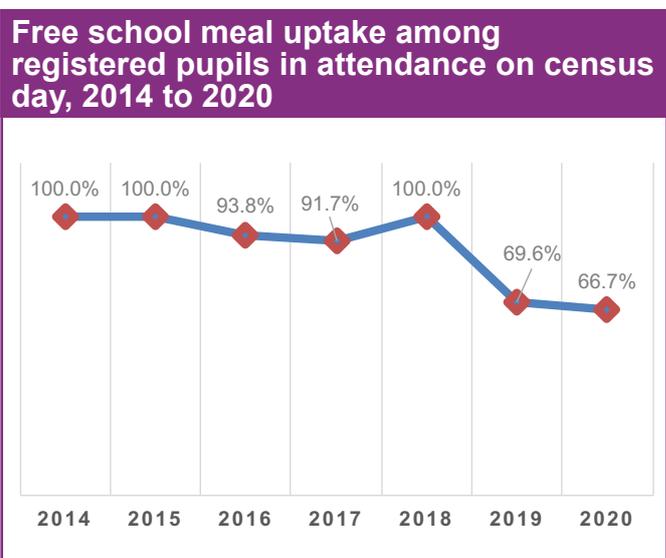
Key Learning Points

- Linking school meals provision with the school's pre-existing eco-awareness work capitalised on pupils' interest in environmental issues.
- Involving pupils and educating them on the whole process of school food production has heightened awareness of the quality of school meals and the wider benefits of school meals.
- Focusing largely on first year pupils enabled the work to address the issues at the point when children were being lost to the school meals service.

Dunblane High School

Working collaboratively and engaging stakeholders

Key Data	
Authority	Stirling Council
Geography	Accessible Small Town
School Sector	Secondary School
Denomination	Non-denominational
School Roll, 2020	971
Proportion of Pupils from 20% Most Deprived Areas in Scotland, School Census 2019	1.0% (10)
Proportion of Pupils Registered for a Free School Meal, 2020 (Number)	1.5% (15)
Proportion of Non-FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking School Meal, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	43.2% (375)
Proportion of FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking FSM, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	66.7% (8)



Dunblane High School serves a largely affluent community, with a relatively low number of pupils entitled to free school meals. Currently in charge of catering at this school is Maryellen, who after quickly moving up the ranks from an Assistant Cook in Dunblane Primary School, initially felt inexperienced in the role of Supervisor. From the outset, and with the support and encouragement of her Facilities Management Area Manager, she invested time building relationships with different groups within the school and with its Parent Council. She also spent time with two more experienced local Supervisors, who were known to be providing exemplary services in their own schools. Returns from this work beyond the kitchen were quickly accrued, as Catering staff morale increased, relationships with pupils improved, and overall levels of school meal uptake began to increase. The very small number of pupils who register for free school meals in Dunblane High School mean that these trend data are less robust (reported in the chart above), and can be skewed by individual circumstance on school meals census day.

Challenges had to be overcome. For example, the configuration of the dining hall was generating long queues and led to some concerns over health and safety. School staff and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) worked together with Facilities Management to tackle the problem. Following changes to the layout, queue times have been monitored to ensure that pupils wait no more than 10-15 minutes and that all health and safety guidelines are followed. The PTA continues to meet with Facilities Management staff in the school to monitor this issue and maintain high standards.

This ethic of teamwork and mutual support meant that when COVID-19 presented, workable solutions to the obvious and inevitable challenges were easier to find. New equipment was installed in the kitchen, and separation barriers were added to the new seating and tables in the dining hall. Although space is tight and at a premium, the positive attitude of all staff, working together to support each other, has been maintained, allowing for necessary changes to be made with very little impact on the service and provision of school meals in the school.

Key Learning Points

- Committing time to building relationships with school staff and pupils early was key to success.
- Learning from more experienced professionals in the area was encouraged.
- Collaboration and communication between catering staff, education staff and parent groups has enhanced service provision.

Dunoon Grammar School

Unity of staff and parents sustaining success

Key Data	
Authority	Argyll and Bute
Geography	Very Remote Small Town
School Sector	Secondary School
Denomination	Non-denominational
School Roll, 2020	682
Proportion of Pupils from 20% Most Deprived Areas in Scotland, School Census 2019	Data not available
Proportion of Pupils Registered for a Free School Meal, 2020 (Number)	17.7% (121)
Proportion of Non-FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking School Meal, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	88.2% (458)
Proportion of FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking FSM, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	83.2% (84)

Free school meal uptake among registered pupils in attendance on census day, 2014 to 2020

Year	Uptake (%)
2014	100.0%
2015	80.7%
2016	98.9%
2017	100.0%
2018	88.1%
2019	95.0%
2020	83.2%

Dunoon Grammar is the school in Argyll and Bute that generates the highest income from catering. The school meals service at the school has benefitted from the support and interventions of its head teacher, David Mitchell. Several years ago, he identified a problem with low uptake of school meals and consulted with staff and parent groups to explore ways to overcome this. Together, they agreed, introduced and enforced a school rule that S1 and S2 pupils would not be permitted to leave the school premises at lunchtime. Although this new rule was initially met with some opposition, through time it has become an accepted part of school operations and culture. With the continued support of all parties, and as pupils have become accustomed to school meals - realising that this was food and a dining experience that they could enjoy – school meals uptake has increased, with high levels of uptake being sustained in S3 and beyond.

However, success alone is not attributed to restricting pupil mobility. The fare on offer and service provided by Catering staff has to meet student demands and needs. Pupils are consulted through focus groups to share their opinions with the catering staff, and as a result, concept packages such as ‘Taco Tuesday’ and ‘Fish and Chip Friday’, have been introduced. In response to student demand, the school is currently working to improve its offering to pupils seeking Vegan options.

Success can bring its own challenges. Hot meals became so popular (serving 150+ a day) that long queues began to form in the dining hall. However, solutions were quickly found. The school introduced an ordering system through which pupils can pre-select their hot meal at morning break, collecting it from a separate place and quickly moving queue at lunchtime. An outdoor catering van is also used to serve pupils in the school grounds, which disperses pupils across campus at lunchtime and reduces queues.

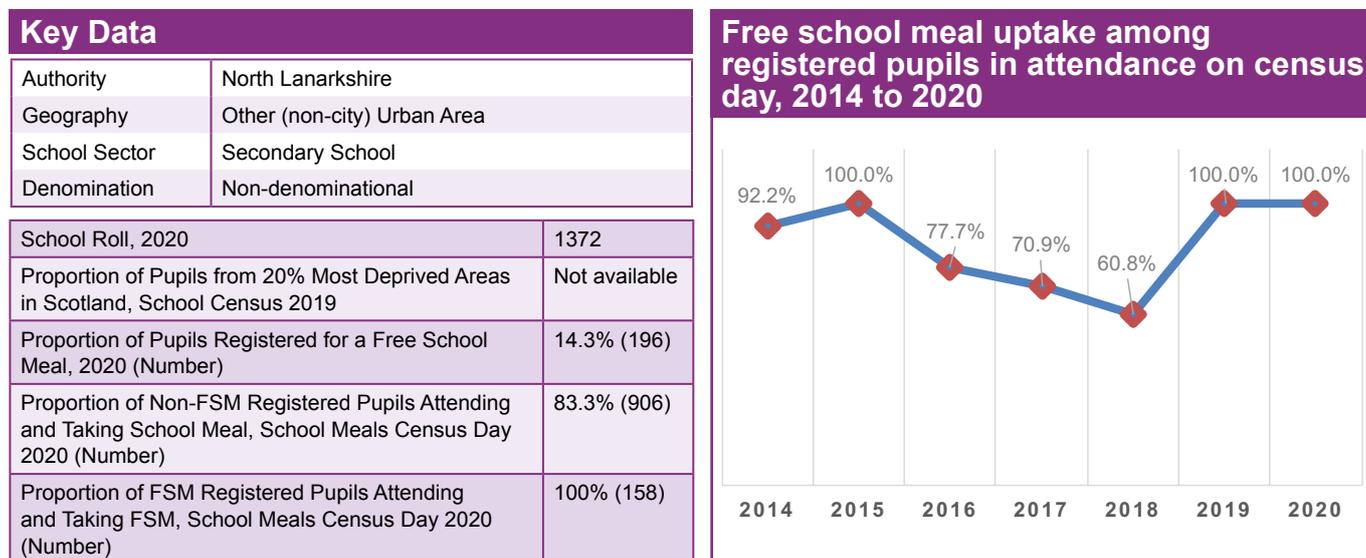
It is testament to the way in which the school meals service operates in Dunoon Grammar that the challenges of COVID-19, have impacted little on school meal uptake. In order to minimising crowding, staggered lunchtimes have been introduced for different year groups. The school has observed that this timetable change has contributed positively to the school day and is likely to be maintained beyond pandemic times.

Key Learning Points

- Strong leadership can lead to transformation. The unity of parent groups and staff eases the introduction of new practice.
- Preventing S1 and S2 pupils from leaving school grounds at lunchtime increases school meal uptake.
- Maintaining a responsive school meals service – one which listens to pupils and adapts quickly to challenge and change – is key to maintaining success.

Greenfaulds High School

Reversing downward trends in Free School Meal uptake



When John Dow began his post as Head of Catering at Greenfaulds High School in 2018, uptake of school meals (both free and paying) was low and uptake rates were falling. An initial appraisal led to the conclusions that this was largely down to the quality and variety of the food being served. For example, the same ten sandwich options were presented every day. Furthermore, little attention was being paid to what sold well and what did not - or in other words, what the pupils actually wanted. Cheap pre-made sauces were being bulk bought and reheated daily. Convenience was being prioritised over quality and pupil preference.

With the objective of improving the quality and value for money of school meals, the new local Catering Lead took an active role in upskilling his catering staff by teaching them how to make sauces and dishes from scratch, using fresh and local ingredients. Time was also invested in developing a relationship with pupils to find out what they actually wanted. These two actions - finding out what would appeal to the pupils, and training staff to enable them to deliver a higher standard of fare – provided the basis for improving the service, enabling it to compete with the external food chains that the pupils were easily drawn to.

‘Chef’s Specials’ are regularly presented, which have been planned in accordance with the wishes of the pupils and made from scratch. Themed days are held, which help sustain the interest of the children in school meals provision. Plans are afoot to introduce a deli-bar in an attempt to compete with commercial equivalents outside the school, which might be viewed as offering more expensive food that is less healthy. Today, both fee-paying and free school meal uptake is strong throughout the school year.

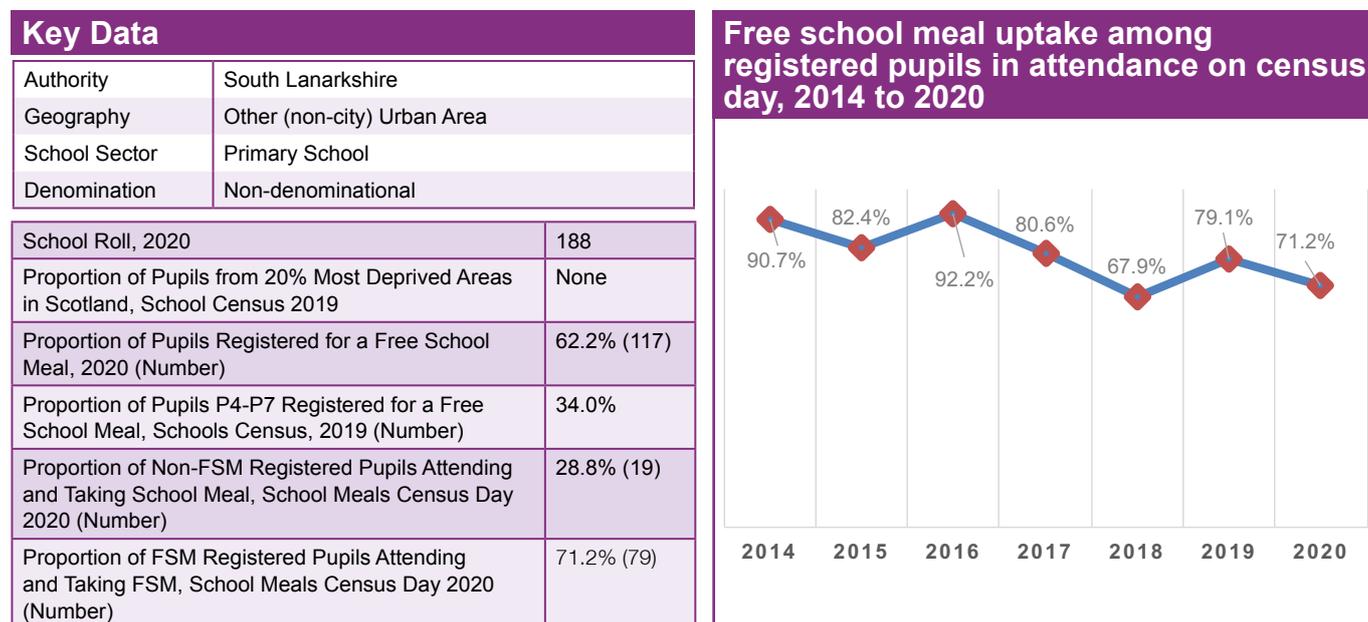
However, although free school meal uptake has remained constant in times of COVID-19, the school has experienced a sharp decline in patronage among fee paying pupils. Many more pupils have brought packed lunches to school. This may be an attempt by parents to save money in challenging times. Although this presents a challenge going forward, it is one that the school is alert to and seeks to address.

Key Learning Points

- Upskilling catering staff to enable them to prepare higher quality, fresher homemade meals proved to be hugely effective.
- Building relationships with the pupils and actively seeking to find out what they wanted was key to success.
- Attempting to emulate local fast-food chains - in terms of both food style and service layout - has improved the ability to compete.

Halfmerke Primary School

Large hike in uptake of all school meals



Uptake of school meals in Halfmerke Primary School has increased over the last five years. Although not evident in the point-in-time data of the annual school meals census, monitoring of data over the whole school year identifies a 12% increase in free school meal uptake, and a 10% increase in uptake among fee paying pupils. The largest increases in uptake were between 2019-2020, in which increases of 26% and 23% were observed respectively.

Joyce Goodwin, the Menu Development Officer for the school, attributes this success to positive promotion, and the emphasis that is placed on highlighting school meals as the ‘healthy choice’. Pupil involvement has been actively encouraged, and many initiatives have been introduced including: working with the Pupil Council; delivering healthy eating talks and presentations to the children; organising hands-on activities at breakfast time to encourage healthy eating; and introducing themed days linked to the curriculum in which fun and attractive ‘Go Fresh’ characters often make an appearance. Teachers are well informed, enabling them to promote the service. The importance of education staff being aware of the importance of the school meals service is acknowledged across the wider council. For example, on joining South Lanarkshire as new teachers, probationers are given a presentation to inform them of the workings and benefits of school meal provision.

Parents are also instrumental in increasing school meal uptake. The school strives to strengthen the link between eating at school and at eating home. For example, recipes for the most popular school meal dishes are given to parents, enabling them to make these meals at home. The service also promotes its work through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

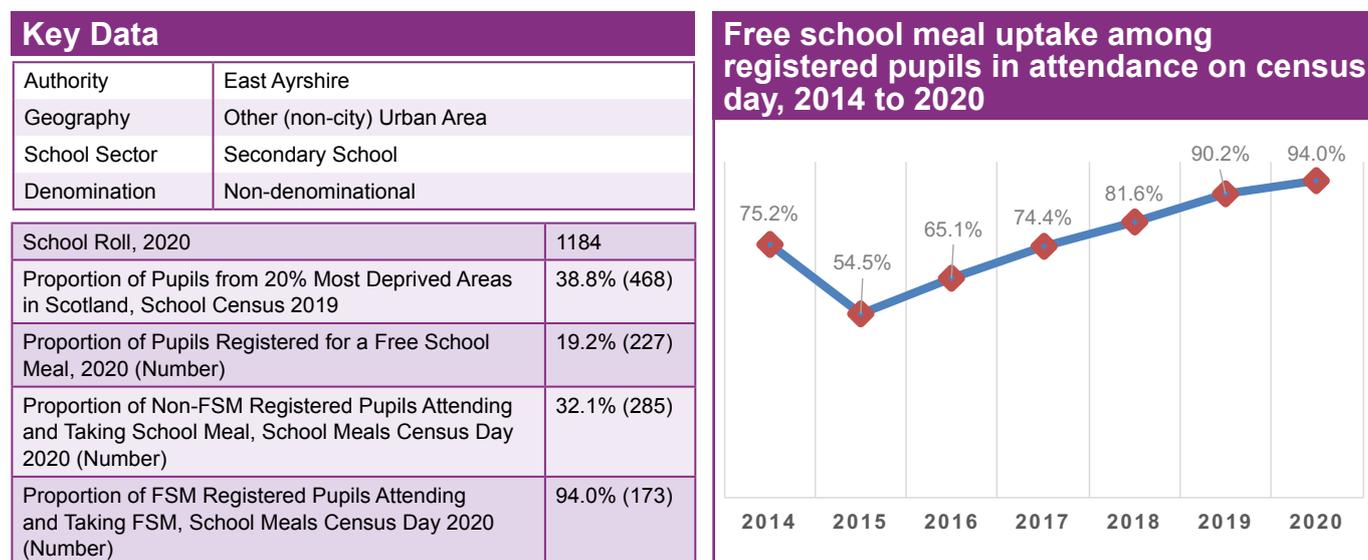
During the COVID-19 pandemic, Halfmerke Primary School served as a ‘hub’ school for pupils of parents working in emergency services. Significantly, there has been a significant increase in school meal uptake in the current year. Thanks to strong foundations, developed through time, the school has been able to continue to serve both hot and cold meals during the current school year.

Key Learning Points

- Ensuring pupils are well informed on the importance of healthy eating and fully engaged in the work of the school meals service helps sustain success.
- Educating teachers on school meals at the start of their careers establishes the importance of school catering for the wider education service.
- Strengthening the link between eating at home and eating in schools reinforces the value of school food among parents and pupils.

Kilmarnock Academy

Five years of sustained increases in Free School Meal uptake



Across East Ayrshire Council, there has been a marked increase in the uptake school meals over the last five years, both for fee paying pupils and those entitled to free school meals. Mark Hunter, Facilities Manager for the Council, attributes this to concerted efforts to enhance the service in their secondary schools - in particular, Kilmarnock Academy. Meals promotion, continuous menu development and service improvement have become much bigger priorities for this school in recent years. Other initiatives such as theme days, 'grab and go' services, the creation of alternative kiosks, and a pre-ordering service have also improved the performance of the school meal service in this school.

Also of note was the work carried out in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. From the very beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, East Ayrshire Council adapted their meal services very quickly to ensure that all pupils could still be served. An online form was developed over the weekend directly preceding the onset of the first national lockdown which collated the details of families who would require support over the period. This quickly grew to the point where the council was providing over 30,000 meals every week (both pre-made dishes and packed lunches), which were delivered by both council workers and volunteers to the families' doorsteps.

Services have been maintained, with food parcels continuing to be delivered to pupils entitled to free school meals during school holidays. Furthermore, provision is in place to support all pupils who may be required to self-isolate during term time, with weekly food parcels to be delivered for the duration of their isolation.

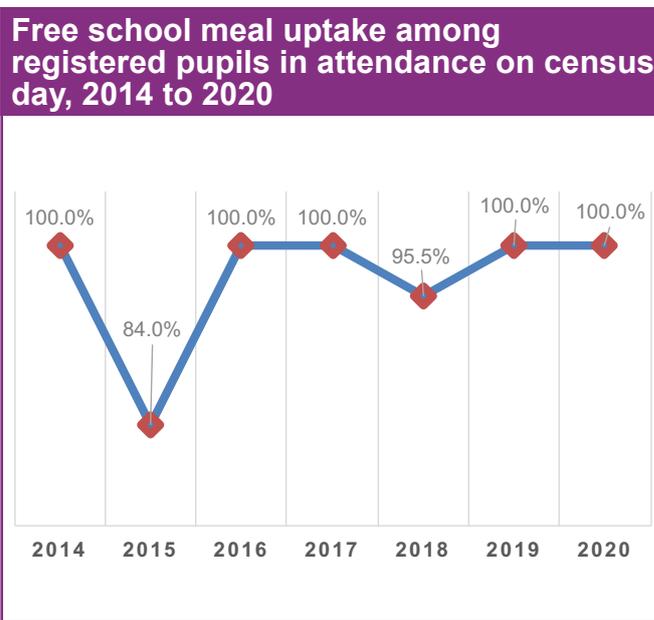
Key Learning Points

- Sustained efforts to improve school meal services in secondary schools within East Ayrshire has led to trend-busting increases in school meal uptake.
- No single intervention is sufficient to transform the school meals service. A range of innovations – underpinned by a belief in the value of school meals – is required to effect change through time.
- A fast and pro-active response to the challenges presented during the COVID-19 pandemic has ensured that pupils continued to be served with excellent service during this challenging period.

Kirkcolm School

Sustaining high levels of Free School Meal Uptake

Key Data	
Authority	Dumfries & Galloway
Geography	Accessible rural area
School Sector	Primary School
Denomination	Non-denominational
School Roll, 2020	35
Proportion of Pupils from 20% Most Deprived Areas in Scotland, School Census 2019	Less than five
Proportion of Pupils Registered for a Free School Meal, 2020 (Number)	48.6% (17)
Proportion of Pupils P4-P7 Registered for a Free School Meal, Schools Census, 2019 (Number)	Less than five
Proportion of Non-FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking School Meal, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	88.9% (16)
Proportion of FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking FSM, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	100% (17)



Dumfries and Galloway Council (D&G) has taken a proactive and hands-on approach over the last five years to the challenges faced in delivering school meals. It now ranks among the best performing authorities in Scotland.

D&G recognises the importance of listening to each school’s Catering Manager. A working group of school Catering Managers has been established, providing a mechanism for specific issues in schools to be communicated to the overarching Facilities Manager. All Catering Managers also attend an annual training day where good practice can be shared and promoted.

The importance of pupil voice is also acknowledged, particularly in secondary schools. Pupils are regularly involved in the planning of school meals provision. An example of this is D&G’s ‘Globetrotters’ initiative, in which pupils are involved in choosing meals inspired by different countries of the world. With adherence to government legislation being maintained throughout, this provides one way of ensuring that the service can deliver what children want, while delivering healthy fare.

D&G has also developed its own branding of school food provision in a way that still allows for local variation in meals provision, heightening the likelihood of the service suiting the particular needs of each school. Theme days are also widely used. ‘DG’, the D&G school meal mascot, is particularly effective in supporting the development of the service in primary schools. The service is being promoted through fun and pupil-focused interventions.

The success of this work is clearly evident in Kirkcolm Primary School. It is known that the local Catering Manager knows every pupil on a personal level, and proactively caters for special diets and preferences. She also ensures that every child’s needs are met through a pre-ordering system. The effectiveness of a proactive and individualised service across D&G is evident in these COVID-19 times, as, despite the challenges that presented, D&G reported an increase in school meals uptake. This collective gain was achieved through local actions, with bespoke action plans being devised for each individual school by the local Catering Manager and Head Teacher.

Key Learning Points

- Enabling and empowering local Catering Leads has resulted in improved performance for the service as a whole.
- D&G’s own unique brand and approach allows for local variation, while adhering to national requirements and promoting an authority-wide culture of improvement.
- Fun and positivity are central to the promotion of the service among pupils, with the D&G mascot and themed days meeting the needs of primary and secondary school pupils.

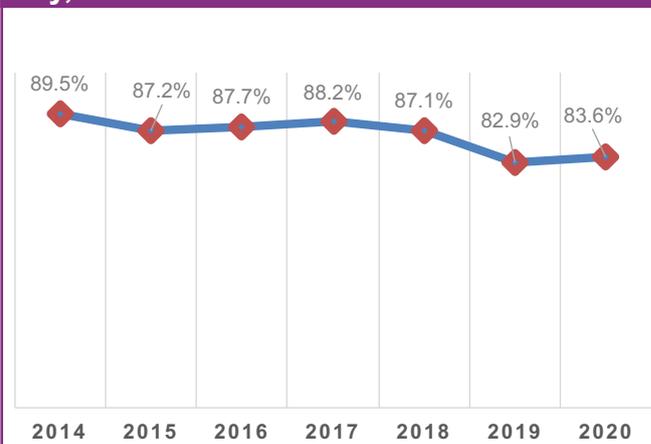
Sound Primary School

Encouraging improvement through the Anchor Early Action Project

Key Data

Authority	Shetland Isles
Geography	Very Remote Small Town
School Sector	Primary School
Denomination	Non-denominational
School Roll, 2020	243
Proportion of Pupils from 20% Most Deprived Areas in Scotland, School Census 2019	None
Proportion of Pupils Registered for a Free School Meal, 2020 (Number)	51.9% (126)
Proportion of Pupils P4-P7 Registered for a Free School Meal, Schools Census, 2019 (Number)	35.6%
Proportion of Non-FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking School Meal, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	34.2% (38)
Proportion of FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking FSM, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	83.6% (102)

Free school meal uptake among registered pupils in attendance on census day, 2014 to 2020



Free school meals uptake is very high in the Shetland Isles. The year-long [Anchor Early Action project](#), based in Sound Primary, was the main driver for change across the Authority. Funded by the Big Lottery, and delivered with the full support of the Council, this improved families access to support, using the school as a point of contact.

Prior to the project, several problems were thought to be hampering the uptake of free school meals among eligible families. One of the biggest of problems was the negative stigma attached to claiming free school meals; parents were too ashamed to admit that help was required and were choosing to struggle on instead of claiming that to which they were entitled. Many families were not even aware that their children were entitled to free school meals. Furthermore, a myth perpetuated that claiming free school meals would disqualify entitlement to other family benefits such as Universal Credit. Teachers did not know enough about the benefit system to be able to advise the parents otherwise.

The Project was established the aim of increasing the number of families applying for free school meals. Raising awareness was key to its success; most importantly, doing so in a way that did not shame or patronise families. Teachers, who were trusted by parents and in regular contact with them, were educated on benefits, which allowed them to challenge misconceptions and to signpost parents to specialised support. Project workers maintained a high profile in the school and regularly spoke about free school meals. Families now had a familiar face to approach to ask for help, rather than face the daunting prospect of an impersonal online application. Taboos surrounding free school meals were challenged.

The project strengthened the wider community of which Sound Primary was part, by bringing together home, school and council services. The school was developing as a wider community asset, rather than a distinct environment separate from, and unrelated to, the challenges faced in the wider community. When COVID-19 presented, these foundations and local intelligence were used to ensure that food parcels were delivered to those in need in the wider community.

Key Learning Points

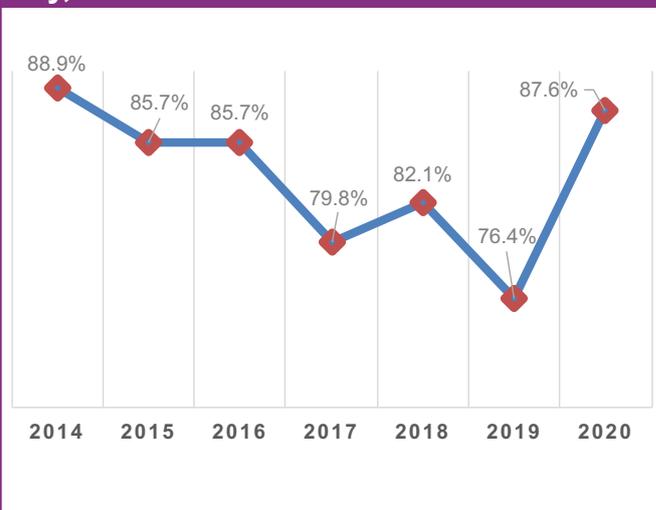
- Educating teachers on free school meal eligibility and clarifying that receipt did not compromise entitlement to other benefits, enabled them to support parents and challenge misconceptions.
- Speaking more openly about free school meals lessened the negative stigma associated with it.
- Parents are more likely to register for free school meals if they have personal help to assist them through the registration process.

St Bridget's Primary School

Champion of school meal provision in North Ayrshire

Key Data	
Authority	North Ayrshire
Geography	Accessible Small Town
School Sector	Primary School
Denomination	Roman Catholic
School Roll, 2020	210
Proportion of Pupils from 20% Most Deprived Areas in Scotland, School Census 2019	13.4% (139)
Proportion of Pupils Registered for a Free School Meal, 2020 (Number)	60.5% (127)
Proportion of Pupils P4-P7 Registered for a Free School Meal, Schools Census, 2019 (Number)	35.6%
Proportion of Non-FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking School Meal, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	53.8% (43)
Proportion of FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking FSM, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	87.6% (106)

Free school meal uptake among registered pupils in attendance on census day, 2014 to 2020



St Bridget's Primary School has a level of school meal uptake that is consistently above the average in North Ayrshire. The main driver behind this continued success is the association that the school has made between school meals and their [Zero Waste campaign](#) (developed in partnership with Zero Waste Scotland). This is achieved in two ways.

First, the children are taught that minimising food waste is good for the environment. They are encouraged to eat all their food at school dinners as an action to reduce food waste. Second, they are taught that eating quality food in the right proportion is healthy. 'Full tummies' (again achieved by cleaning plates) leads to 'happy bodies' and 'satisfied brains'. It is continually reinforced that eating nutritious meals, such as that provided through school meals, will lead to better learning in the classroom, and better wellbeing on the whole.

As well as being heavily endorsed through the school day, this initiative is widely promoted on Twitter, to engage parents and the wider community. Photographs of the pupils proudly showcasing their clean plates comprise the content of many school 'tweets'. The school actively engages external partners through this work, such as [Forth Environment Link](#), [Ayrshire Food Network](#), [Learning for Sustainability Scotland](#), [Eco-Schools Scotland](#), and, of course, [Zero Waste Scotland](#).

Key Learning Points

- Associating school meals with environmental sustainability has fostered interest among pupils and staff.
- Social media platforms (Twitter) can be used to sustain interest and to foster links with the wider community and interest groups.
- Very specific, tangible and child-oriented environmental actions can be identified, which support uptake of school meals.

Whitehill Secondary School

Five years of steadily increasing uptake of Free School Meals

Key Data

Authority	City of Glasgow
Geography	Large city
School Sector	Secondary School
Denomination	Non-denominational
School Roll, 2020	481
Proportion of Pupils from 20% Most Deprived Areas in Scotland, School Census 2019	71.0% (338)
Proportion of Pupils Registered for a Free School Meal, 2020 (Number)	39.7% (191)
Proportion of Non-FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking School Meal, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	54.4% (149)
Proportion of FSM Registered Pupils Attending and Taking FSM, School Meals Census Day 2020 (Number)	84.6% (132)

Free school meal uptake among registered pupils in attendance on census day, 2014 to 2020



The wider environment around Whitehill Secondary School is challenging for the school meals service: positioned close to Duke Street and Alexandra Parade, the school is close to many fast-food chains, which offer enticing alternatives to pupils. Furthermore, a nearby corner shop, charges pupils a small fee for hot water to fill the Pot Noodles that they sell. However, Whitehill Secondary School has increased the number and proportion of pupils presenting for school meals – and free school meals – in recent years. It now outperforms many schools in similar situations, particularly in terms of free school meals.

A supportive and forward-thinking head teacher is addressing the challenges. For example, the timing of the school's lunch hour was put back by half an hour; this small change, which is sensitive to local conditions, has had a particularly positive impact. The pupils of a neighbouring high school also use the services of Duke Street, and before the timetable changes, there was a daily race to get to the fast food first. Changing the lunchtime at Whitehill has ensured pupils at the neighbouring school arrive first, making it less attractive for pupils at Whitehill. Through time, pupils have realised that the best option is to stay in school at lunchtime and avail themselves of the food on offer in school. One incidental benefit of more pupils using school meals is that those who present for free school meals do not feel 'left behind' as there is no longer an exodus of pupils to external providers at lunchtime.

Also contributing to the success is the inclusive culture that is being promoted across the school. For example, one of the feeder primary schools is co-located on campus. For these pupils, there is more familiarity (and thus, positive relations) between catering staff and pupils, which build up from their first year of schooling in Primary 1. Catering services are also alert to the meeting the needs of pupils. There is some continuation of the dishes served in primary schools in order to give a sense of comfort and ease to the transition to secondary school dining for S1 pupils. At a time when these pupils are facing so many other changes, this continuity seems to be welcomed and is reported to encourage use of the school meal service.

Key Learning Points

- Changing the timing of the school's lunch hours, reduced the attractiveness of visiting high-street fast-food outlets, which greatly improved school meals uptake.
- Fostering strong relationships between catering staff and pupils should be encouraged.
- Continuity of dishes offered from primary school at the Secondary School encourages pupils to use the school meals service.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

There is strong public support and policy commitment to school meals in Scotland. School meals currently provide sustenance for many children in Scotland on a daily basis. COVID-19 presented new challenges in 2020 and 2021 for those responsible for uptake of school meals, but the Scottish Government's commitment to school meals – and the extension of provision into holiday periods – strengthened at this time.

On the other hand, those working in the sector have been concerned with overall levels of uptake. The Scottish Government has identified increasing uptake of free school meals as one of its targets in the Child Poverty Delivery Plan, acknowledging the wider importance of this service to the children of Scotland.

Therefore, from both within and outside the sector, there is a desire to 'do better'. Now is the time to learn from others, adopt and adapt 'what works', and acknowledge that steps can be taken locally to strengthen the school meals service in Scotland.

When the school meals service as a whole works better, its ability to deliver what Scotland requires to improve free school meal uptake is strengthened. We draw the following five conclusions from this review of promising practice:

- **Pupil involvement is the key to increasing uptake of school meals.** Examples of successful practice include: involving pupils in the whole process of school meals production; relationship building with pupils; and consulting with pupils on what they actually want, e.g. concept packages such as 'Taco Tuesday'.
- **Strong leadership yields results.** Some of the most striking changes are evident when school leaders identify the importance of school meals and work together with the wider school community to seek solutions.
- **Catering staff can be agents of change, particularly when they engage pupils and work in partnership with Education staff.** Catering staff are driving forward innovation in the kitchen and beyond. Work with education staff, teachers, pupils and parents is as important an ingredient for success, as their work to improve the quality of school food.
- **Parental involvement boosts take-up of school meals.** Examples of successful practice include: regularly inviting parents to themed food nights at the school; and providing parents with recipes for the most popular school meal dishes so they can make these meals at home.
- **Improving school meals should be the business of all schools, including those serving more affluent communities.** Some schools have a small proportion of pupils who are entitled to free school meals on account of benefit entitlement. It is every bit as important that these pupils access free school meals, compared to pupils in schools where many pupils are entitled to free school meals. All schools should be concerned to normalise school meals, and promote the uptake of free school meals in a non-stigmatising way.

Recommendations

This report has showcased some of the promising practice that is emerging across schools in Scotland. We present seven recommendations to local leaders in education and catering services.

- **Listen to what children want.** In a year when [Scotland is set to incorporate The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law](#), it seems timely to pay greater heed to what children need and want from their school meals.
- **Foster local innovation.** Each of the ten case studies in this report demonstrates that local actions can be impactful. A diverse range of interventions are reported, from education and catering staff, working in a wide range of contexts. What is common across these case studies is that when local leaders are motivated to tackle challenges, local solutions are found.
- **Re-evaluate what was off limits.** Although COVID-19 conditions have been challenging, it has presented some opportunities to consider organising school meals in ways that were previously considered impracticable or impossible. For example, Dunoon Grammar School has introduced staggered lunch hours, an issue previously considered by many Head teachers to be impracticable due to timetabling constraints.
- **Be bold, be different, be innovative.** New approaches can be impactful. An example of successful practice is the 'take-away' van in Dunoon Grammar School being strategically located to take pressure off the dining rooms and give more dining options. This innovation also has the benefit of being outdoors and replicating a 'street' dining experience.
- **Explore benchmarking.** There is considerable divergence in experience across schools in Scotland. Although it would be unhelpful to obsess over levels of uptake and 'league table positions', there is merit in schools reflecting on 'what works' in schools (within their authority and beyond) that find themselves in similar circumstances, and yet seem to report high levels of school meals uptake.
- **Commit to sharing best practice.** Learning from others contributed to the successes reported in some of the case studies (notably Dunblane High School and Kirkcolm School). The authors of this report have committed to disseminate it widely. Others with success stories and promising practice to share are encouraged to do likewise.
- **Ensure stakeholders are aware of the key role of free school meals in promoting social justice, improving health and tackling poverty.** There are many ways in which Scotland benefits from a robust school meals service. Understanding the contribution of free schools meals to Scotland's efforts to eradicate child poverty by 2030 should be used as a motivation to promote entitlement, tackle the stigma and shame that has been associated with it, and increase uptake. Administrators should also be minded to use their discretionary powers to provide for children who are living in poverty, or are on the margins of poverty, but who for whatever reason are not entitled to free school meals.

Further Reading

School Meals in Scotland

[*Annual School Meals Census*](#). Every year, Scotland undertakes a school meals census in which data is collected from every school in Scotland, and then aggregated to provide Scotland-level summaries. These data are now published as part of a School Healthy Living report. Supplementary data explore uptake in more detail and data are available for every individual school in Scotland. The report for 2020 can be accessed [here](#), and the supplementary statistics for 2020 can be accessed [here](#). Furthermore, from 2019, data on registration for free school meals in the Autumn has been collected as part of the [pupil census](#).

[*Are Pupils Being Served? A secondary review of the sector's evidence base on school meal provision at lunchtime in Scotland*](#) was published by SPIRU in 2019 on behalf of Assist FM. It presents new research, unpublished research and digests key findings from published research to better understand the contemporary landscape pertaining to school meals in Scotland.

[*School Meals in Scotland in the Autumn of 2020. A snapshot 'State of the Nation' report based on the expert opinions of Catering Leads*](#) was published by SPIRU in March 2021, as a companion to this report. Based on survey returns from every local authority in Scotland, it summarises contemporary experience, leading to four recommendations for action.

[*Free School Meal Provision During the COVID-19 Crisis*](#) is a briefing paper, published by the Poverty and Inequality Commission's Working Group on Responses to COVID-19, which made two recommendations on 'alternative food provision'.

Schools and Tackling Poverty in Scotland

[*Every Child, Every Chance: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-2022*](#) is Scotland's action plan to tackle child poverty. It was developed in response to the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, and contains many actions that are focused on schools, including a commitment to improve uptake of free school meals.

Food Insecurity in Scotland

[*Dignity: Ending Hunger Together in Scotland*](#) was published by the Scottish Government in 2016 as the Report of the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty. It delivered six core messages and made 19 recommendations, one of which led to the introduction of a [National Indicator on food insecurity](#), while another implored the Government and local authorities to prioritise investment in healthy meals at school.

The [Scottish Health Survey](#) is an annual report that includes estimates of food insecurity among adults in Scotland, providing the data for the [National Indicator on food insecurity in Scotland](#). Supplementary data tables provide more detailed descriptions of distributions, comparing by gender, family type, age, household income, health status and area deprivation.

The Global Significance of School Meals

The World Food Programme published [*The State of School Feeding Worldwide*](#) in February 2021. This report provides an analysis of school feeding in 2020, describes the impact of COVID-19 on school feeding, and presents what can be done to restore what it describes as a 'global safety net'.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission

The Poverty and Inequality Commission was established from 1 July 2019. It is an advisory non-departmental public body which provides independent advice and scrutiny to Scottish Ministers on poverty and inequality.

It has specific responsibilities in relation to child poverty. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 sets out specific requirements for the Commission in relation to child poverty. These include (i) providing advice to Ministers on Child Poverty Delivery Plans; and (ii) commenting on annual progress towards the targets and what further progress is needed to meet the targets.

However, it also has wider responsibilities in relation to tackling poverty and inequality in Scotland. The Public Services Reform (Poverty and Inequality Commission) (Scotland) Order 2018, commits the Commission to: (i) advise Scottish Ministers on any matter relating to poverty or inequality in Scotland, including the impact of policies and the use of resources in reducing poverty and inequality; (ii) monitor progress in reducing poverty and inequality in Scotland; and (iii) promote the reduction of poverty and inequality in Scotland.

The Commission responds to requests for advice from Scottish Ministers, but also develops its own work programme to scrutinise progress and to promote the importance of particular issues in reducing poverty and inequality.

www.povertyinequality.scot/

Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit

The Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU) is an interdisciplinary research group based at Glasgow Caledonian University working in partnership with the Poverty Alliance and other stakeholders to investigate and develop effective responses to poverty and inequality in Scotland and beyond. We are committed to advancing GCU's mission to promote the Common Good and the University's research aligned to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which prioritise eradicating poverty and resolve to leave no one behind.

In 2020, we reported to the Poverty and Inequality Commission on Local action to tackle food insecurity during the coronavirus crisis and, together with the Poverty Alliance, offered guidance on involving experts by experience in the Commission's work. Earlier work for the Commission includes reviewing work that listened to the voice of lived experience in Scotland.

www.gcu.ac.uk/gsbs/research/spiru/

Email: spiru@gcu.ac.uk





www.gcu.ac.uk/gsbs/research/spiru/

spiru@gcu.ac.uk