

LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: ALL
REPORT TITLE: Cabinet Adviser Report on Child Hunger and Expanding Free School Meals	
REPORT OF: Cabinet Adviser on Child Hunger and Expanding Free School Meals	
FOR SUBMISSION TO: Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee	DATE: 13 March 2024
<p>SUMMARY OF REPORT:</p> <p>The Cabinet Adviser on Child Hunger and Expanding Free School Meals here provides the Committee with their report, including recommendations, for discussion.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to information: No documents that are required to be listed were used in the preparation of this report.</p> <p>Contact Officer: Nathan Koskella, Cabinet Officer, The Cabinet Office Camden Council, 5 Pancras Square, London N1C 4AG Nathan.Koskella@camden.gov.uk</p>	
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS:</p> <p>The Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Note and comment on the report, including recommendations. (ii) Note the proposal to bring a Cabinet Report as a response to the recommendations made by the Cabinet Adviser within the next year. 	

Sharon Hardwick

Signed by:

Councillor Sharon Hardwick, Cabinet Adviser on Child Hunger and Expanding Free School Meals

Date: 28 February 2024

Section 1: Background to the Report

- 1.1. The Leader of the Council appointed four Cabinet Advisers for municipal year 2023-2024 to provide evidence-based recommendations and policy-making support to the Cabinet.
- 1.2. The Cabinet Advisers are appointed by the Leader, in conjunction with the wider Cabinet, to engage, research, and develop recommendations in a particular policy area, working with one or more Cabinet Members, other Councillors, groups across Camden and the wider community.
- 1.3. These posts are non-executive roles and do not sit as part of the Cabinet. While they do not have decision-making powers and are limited to collaboration and recommendations, the Leader and Cabinet have committed to thoughtful consideration of their findings and recommendations.
- 1.4. Cabinet Advisers present their findings in a report to Scrutiny in its policy and oversight function to provide an opportunity for discussion of their findings. Following this, this report will go to Cabinet, alongside a report outlining a response, including feedback gained from scrutiny, from the relevant Cabinet member. This will allow Cabinet to consider the report, the views of Scrutiny and the Cabinet member together and formally decide whether to accept the recommendations.
- 1.5. Cllr Sharon Hardwick was appointed to the role with a brief on Child Hunger and Expanding Free School Meals.

Section 2: Purpose of the Report

- 2.1. I, Cllr Hardwick, set out to explore how Camden Council can better serve Camden secondary school pupils and families through the wider uptake of free school meals (FSM).
- 2.2. I will be looking at how Camden can improve the take-up for secondary school free school meals and continue to mobilise efforts to take on child hunger across the borough.
- 2.3. Camden has already expanded investment in breakfast clubs, provided vouchers to tackle holiday hunger and is now piloting an extension of access to free school meals for secondary school children in three Camden secondary schools.
- 2.4. As someone who benefitted from free school meals, I want to examine how we can make this a whole school and community effort to improve nutrition and sustainability alongside tackling hunger. I also look below at how we can improve take-up for secondary school free school meals to challenge child hunger.

- 2.5. The Camden Food Mission identifies that food security is a foundation of children's and young people's flourishing lives. This report aims to look at the barriers to this mission through the provision of free school meals (FSM) for eligible children and young people and address the quantifiers for that eligibility.
- 2.6. I would like to thank all the officers and teaching and pastoral staff who have imparted their knowledge and learnings throughout this advisory role—Camden has such passionate and dedicated teams.

Section 3: My Priorities and Experience

- 3.1. Food poverty is poverty.
- 3.2. I have prepared this report with the lived experience of someone who benefitted from free school meals. There are a number of issues related to poverty that correlate with child hunger and also negatively affect our young people such as the affordability of school clothing, fuel poverty, hygiene and sanitary poverty.
- 3.3. Experience poverty is another hidden issue: poverty equals insecurity and even the announcement of school trips can induce anxiety in a child from a poor background. While I will not explicitly be looking into the wider impact of poverty, these issues should be borne in mind when we are designing the free school meal application paperwork so that children and families can be supported where there is need even if they do not hit the formal FSM threshold.
- 3.4. The additional help I received from my local authority, as a child, was invaluable—from hot, nutritious meals to the generosity of a head teacher quietly replacing a worn-out school uniform and reassuring my mother that there was no cost to be levied.
- 3.5. As a council we similarly have the power to help our young people lead rewarding lives, and food is the very foundation of this.
- 3.6. Camden's Food Mission is working toward 2030, where the aim is that everyone in Camden eats a healthy, nutritious, and sustainable meal every day, with good quality, affordable food that is good for them and the planet.
- 3.7. Eating a healthy, nutritious meal supports pupils with their learning and has been shown to improve behaviour and academic achievements. A well-fed student is more likely to be engaged and focused in class. Hungry children struggle to concentrate and learn, which can lead to lower educational outcomes. By offering free school meals, we can enhance the educational opportunities and outcomes of our young Camdenites and take one more worry away from parents and carers.

No Child Left Behind

3.8. In the **We Make Camden: State of the Borough report of 2023**, we state that:

- Camden is a borough where every child has the best start in life
- Camden actively tackles injustice and inequality, creating safe, strong, and open communities where everyone can contribute
- Camden communities support good health, wellbeing, and connection for everyone so that they can start well, live well and age well

We can only deliver these outcomes by tackling poverty and child hunger to not only give every child the best start in life, but an equal start. The report further notes the impact of poverty on some of our families where ‘the cost-of-living crisis means too many families in Camden are living from one pay cheque to the next. Growing up in poverty impacts on every aspect of a child’s life. A safe, supportive, and encouraging environment is essential for children’s development.’ See <https://www.wemakecamden.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/State-of-Borough-report-web.pdf>.

3.9. Since 2018, Camden’s free school meal (FSM) eligibility rate has increased dramatically, rising from 25% of pupils to 41% of pupils in 2021/22. Pupil eligibility in other London boroughs has also increased in this period, but by a smaller rate than that seen in Camden. Camden’s 2021/22 free school meal eligibility rate is the second highest in Inner London behind only Islington (42.6%), above the Inner London average of 33% and substantially above the average London eligibility rate of 11%.

3.10. Eligibility for FSM has been rising amongst all children in Camden, regardless of ethnicity. Black children in Camden have consistently had the highest eligibility rate compared with other ethnic groups and in 2021/22 over half of black children in Camden were eligible for free school meals.

Section 4: Who is eligible for free school meals?

4.1. The Living Wage Foundation has calculated that a Londoner should be earning £13.15 to be considered to be earning the London Living Wage. This takes into consideration the higher expenses of living and working in this city. Based on a 35-hour-per-week contract, this equates to a salary of £23,933 with the UK Living Wage (ex-London) at £21,840. This is the suggested wage of an individual and does not take into account any family or caring responsibilities. See <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Living-Wage-briefing-note.pdf>.

4.2. Eligibility for access to free school meals is set by the Government and for entitlement, applicants need to meet certain criteria in order to be accepted. These guidelines are taken from the Department of Education guidance, “Free school meals:

- Free school meals are available to pupils in receipt of, or whose parents are in receipt of one or more of the following benefits:
 - Universal Credit (provided you have an annual net earned income of no more than £7,400, as assessed by earnings from up to three of your most recent assessment periods)
 - Income Support
 - Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
 - Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
 - Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
 - The guarantee element of Pension Credit
 - Child Tax Credit (provided you're not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
 - If you receive Working Tax Credit you will not be entitled to free school meals unless you have: stopped work in the last 4 weeks or reduced your hours to less than 16 hours in the last 4 weeks

(From "Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools", February 2023. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63d92829d3bf7f251e968cd/b/Free_school_meals.pdf)

- 4.3. Food insecurity is driven by families not having enough money to meet their needs each month. Access to FSM for a family is gauged at a very low income for London residents. This leaves some of our residents in a vulnerable and borderline situation where they potentially earn more than the guidelines allow for but are up to £7,500 adrift of earning the London Living Wage, or £5,650 away from the UK Living Wage—these are cited as the very minimum that is seen as a liveable salary.
- 4.4. In the meantime, since 2021 the cost of household essentials such as food and energy bills, has risen sharply. These cost increases affect low-income households disproportionately. Camden has worked to address this with the Cost-of-Living Crisis Fund supporting residents with funding and advice.
- 4.5. In Camden, almost one in three children live in poverty. Access to free school meals saves families around £1000 per year for each child. Eligible children and young people can also receive school holiday food provision thanks to investment by the Mayor of London and Camden. Hunger does not stop just because the school term has ended.
- 4.6. **Pupil premium:** For every child who is eligible for a free school meal, a school receives extra funding, known as pupil premium. It is a means to address the current underlying inequalities between children eligible for free school meals (FSM) and their peers by ensuring that funding to tackle disadvantage reaches the pupils who need it most.
- 4.7. **What food provision does Camden offer FSM eligible children and young people?** Camden provides free breakfasts across schools. All schools provide free places for pupils on FSM (as a minimum) with extended free

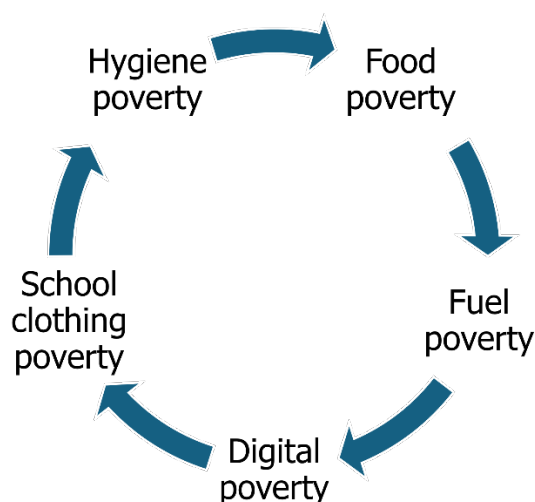
breakfast provision to the vast majority of schools.

- 4.8. Camden has invested significantly in seeking to reduce child hunger and family food insecurity when schools are closed. Over the past 18 months Camden has distributed over £2.5m in food vouchers for children and families over the school holiday periods and by rolling out its Investment in the Holiday Activity and Food Programme.

Section 5: Schools Workshop – Crisis Support in Schools

- 5.1. I attended this crisis support workshop—along with pastoral leads from a number of schools across Camden and the Camden team working on child hunger—to look at the work the council is doing to try and support schools and families during the cost-of-living crisis, and to share feedback, experiences, and ideas.
- 5.2. During our discussions we looked at poverty and deprivation across the borough including the provision of free school meals and the issue of child hunger.
- 5.3. Food poverty is poverty which impacts on all aspects of a child and their family's life. By signposting families to apply for free school meals and pupil premium we can help that family navigate crucial support. We agreed that where there is poverty in one area, it will also be present in other areas directly impacting a child's life.
- 5.4. The graph below illustrates that poverty cycle. Only by intervening to break the cycle can we honour our Camden promise that no child is left behind.

Effect of poverty on children and young people



- 5.5. The correlation of need for the FSM pupil is all of the above issues with the addition of events such as access to school trips, book ownership and access

to a device. These are for another paper, but these issues are intrinsically wrapped up in the cycle of need (and anxiety) and importantly, equality.

Section 6: Camden’s Test and Learn Pilot

- 6.1. Camden is making great strides in its approach to addressing hunger in secondary schools and is currently supporting children and families across the borough with the introduction of a ‘test and learn’ pilot programme that is being piloted in three of the borough’s secondary schools.
- 6.2. This innovative approach will enable the maximisation of the opportunities during the school day to address hunger and build a better understanding of those families who are on the fringes of FSM eligibility and to potentially extend the offer for a trial period in the future.
- 6.3. Camden Test and Learn sees teams from Camden Learning, Health and Wellbeing and the Strategy and Design teams working collaboratively to address hunger in secondary schools. The project aims are to understand the issues schools and families experience with the free school meal offer, and to develop and test solutions in three Camden secondary schools. Three project objectives have been identified:
- Maximise applications to FSMs by ensuring that all families that are eligible are encouraged to, and have the necessary support to apply.
 - Maximise the uptake of FSMs at Camden secondary schools.
 - Understand the needs of and provide support to those families that are not eligible for the national FSM scheme, but still experience food insecurity
- 6.4. The table below outlines the current number of children who take up free school meals, the number of children who do not quite qualify but would if the uplift were to be implemented, and the total number of children across our Camden secondary schools in 2023:

School	Count of current FSM-eligible pupils	Count of not FSM eligible but 'Potentially Eligible' pupils	Possible maximised FSM-eligible - assuming all 'possibly eligible' make successful applications	Total, number of all pupils in Camden secondary schools (2023)
Acland Burghley	374	50	424	1163
Camden School for Girls	208	50	258	1047
Hampstead	522	140	662	1319

Haverstock	584	124	708	982
La Sainte Union	241	86	327	817
Maria Fidelis	404	120	524	832
Parliament Hill	424	77	501	1249
Regent High	666	143	809	1079
UCL Academy	432	145	577	1171
William Ellis	336	80	416	904
TOTAL	4191	1015	5206	10563

- 6.5. The project started in April 2023. Research has been undertaken with a range of stakeholders. The project team have conducted interviews and workshops with a diverse group of parents, young people, community partners, and other local authorities.
- 6.6. An external research organisation that specialises in working with underrepresented audiences, Word on the Curb, has completed observations and workshops with young people in two partnering Camden secondary schools – Regent High and Haverstock - to understand issues with FSM uptake. The team have also visited an additional 3 secondary schools (Parliament Hill, Hampstead, and William Ellis) to gather a broader picture. Initial findings from focus groups, lunchtime observations and 1:1 conversations suggest that, whilst relevant, stigma associated with being on free school meals did not appear to be a significant barrier to uptake of FSM.
- 6.7. Research participants did however focus on improving food taste and quality, and the physical environments in school where lunch is eaten. While some of the issues affecting uptake of FSM seem common across schools, other issues were much more school-specific such as the small size of canteen resulting in long queues, or different lunchtime schedules affecting eating habits.
- 6.8. **Word on the Curb feedback:** By talking directly to our young people and school staff, Word on the Curb gained valuable insights into barriers to FSM uptake. Here is some of the feedback that came back from their research:
- 6.9. **Awareness of the FSM offer:** “The kids don’t know what it is [the ‘meal deal’ offer]. It’s on a tiny sign in the canteen and no one can see it. A lot of kids don’t know they can get a dessert with the meal deal, so they’re missing out... I’m always on lunch duty and last term I had put it outside so that when the kids are queuing up, they can have a look before they get into the busy canteen, but I was told it had to go back inside the canteen...” (Lunchtime Duty Staff, Regent High)
- 6.10. **On cultural and religious needs, and on taste:** “It’s a bit unfair for some kids due to their religion if there aren’t enough food options for them. Some of my friends can’t eat meat in this school because it’s not halal... so they just don’t eat.” (Student, Haverstock)

“I’d like to change the flavour and add some spice because the meals are so bland and there’s not much seasoning.” (Student, Regent High)

- 6.11. **On portion size:** “I don’t think they give big enough portions... one day they’ll give you a good amount, the next day they’ll give you barely anything. Sometimes I eat lunch and I’m still hungry.” (Student, Haverstock)

“It’s shocking sometimes how small the portion sizes are, I don’t think it’s filling enough for a growing child...” (Pastoral Staff, Haverstock)

“I’d like to change the flavour and add some spice because the meals are so bland and there’s not much seasoning.” (Student, Regent High)

- 6.12. **On autonomy and feedback:** “It would be good to give feedback on school meals because the school removes things that we like without letting us know.” Student, Haverstock. Students don’t feel that they have a voice in decisions around school meals. They want a platform to provide regular formal feedback and the chance to shape school meal choices.

Section 7: Visit to a Camden secondary school

- 7.1. I visited one of Camden’s secondary schools with Camden officers from Public Health, Education and the Strategy and Design teams who are working together on the Test and Learn project.
- 7.2. This was a fact-finding mission where we met the head teacher, pastoral staff and Caterlink staff. It was an opportunity to see for ourselves the two physical environments where school meals are served, to make observations on the service itself and watch pupil take up of school meals during the school lunch hour.
- 7.3. We had an in-depth discussion on hunger, food provision both pre-school and at lunchtime and food education in the school. We also observed a class of boys and girls (70/30 split) taking part in a cookery class where they were preparing and cooking a curry and rice from scratch and learning about nutrition.
- 7.4. There are 1,163 children at this school of which 374 are eligible for FSM. This would rise to 424 if an extended offer beyond national FSM was implemented.

Food service operation

- 7.5. **Breakfast:** The school breakfast club is open to everyone. The school provides bagels to all. The head teacher is aware that some pupils may well have had breakfast at home and then come in and have another one but wants to run the breakfast as a universal offer to ensure that all pupils start the day with food inside them.

- 7.6. **Lunch:** There are two ways that pupils access their lunch. They have the option of a Grab and Go lighter lunch or the more traditional canteen setting where food is plated, and pupils sit at tables communally to eat a cooked meal.
- 7.7. **Menu:** Grab and Go has a sandwich offer with a home-made biscuit or a piece of fruit for £2.65. The canteen has a wide selection of main courses or a more informal option which would be something like a panini or a baked potato. The £2.65 FSM allowance gives a pupil access to a 'Meal Deal' hot main, a side dish and a dessert, which could be a piece of fruit.
- 7.8. In terms of teaching the pupils about seasonality and food provenance there are colourful and informative posters displayed in the canteen and in the Grab and Go areas. I think it is useful to detail some of these as it demonstrates that the school and the food provider (Caterlink) see the importance of sharing this information. It is a smart way to highlight the food that is on offer in terms of nutrition and healthy choices as well as to educate the children on its provenance, sustainability, and ethical procurement - in line with our Food Mission. The posters included:
- Bananas** – detailing important nutritional information as well as explaining the concept of Fairtrade and how the fruit conforms to certain social, economic and environmental standards
- Butternut squash** – again nutritional information, signposting that it is a seasonal vegetable and then an interesting trivia fact about the Guinness Book of Records largest recorded butternut squash (960 kg).
- Harvest Festival** poster – “A celebration of the harvest and food grown on the land in the UK. As the days get colder and shorter, it's time to fuel up – comfort foods, hearty foods, foods that are good for the soul.
- 7.9. It struck me that in an urban school population where children are not exposed to food growing in their daily lives this puts their food into context. Additionally, where the harvest festival information speaks about 'comfort food' it is through the lens of fresh products, reinforcing a healthy approach and healthy choices to eating.
- 7.10. **Pupils with additional needs:** this secondary school has 80-90 pupils with additional needs at any one time, some with exceptional needs. The school schedules students with additional needs to access the hall before the rest of the school so that they are able to navigate their choices and dine in a quieter and less populated hall. This is a great innovation as other schools have reported that it can be difficult to get these pupils to take up their school meal.
- 7.11. **Accessing the meal:** The system to a point is very smooth. All pupils regardless of how they pay for their meal use a fingerprint or a code to access the serving counter. The signage could be confusing for younger transitioning children (Year 11s) on FSM. FSM recipients could be identified as they are limited to the meal deal with their allowance.

- 7.12. The headteacher is satisfied with the provider, they are responsive, and their personnel respect the children and are responsive.
- 7.13. Pupils are not currently involved in menu planning, but the school does run occasional canteen surveys.
- 7.14. FSM take up at the school is around 70%.
- 7.15. The head teacher is seconded to a Tower Hamlets school where FSM is universally provided. His opinion is that the quality of food has degenerated and would be more welcoming to that possibility at the school I visited if the kitchen and serving area were improved.
- 7.16. **The canteen environment:** There is limited space in the school canteen, and it can be a noisy room. There are other break out spaces around the school where children who Grab and go or bring in a packed lunch can sit and eat. Pupils are expected to sit down to eat their lunch and make sure they clear their tables after they have eaten. There are jugs of water on glasses on every table, so all children have access to a free drink with their meal.
- 7.17. The queuing area for the Grab and Go serving area is outdoor and open to all weathers with no protection. This could easily be remedied with a protective canopy on the surrounding fencing.
- 7.18. **Awareness of the food offer:** The signposting to the food offer was not immediately clear. There is a Meal Deal on offer in the main canteen and in the Grab and Go area. 'Meal Deal' is written in a large script, but the detail is small and at the bottom of the poster so a newer, younger pupil may not understand what their FSM allowance affords them.
- 7.19. It was not immediately obvious what and dietary options are available. Staff members had differing perceptions of students' awareness of the 'meal deal'.

Section 8: Barriers to Free School Meals Uptake

- 8.1. **Further learnings from the Crisis Support in Schools workshop:** During the workshop we had an extended discussion on how to reach families who may be unaware of additional support for their children and even if they do, how do we take away the barriers to them applying?
- 8.2. Not everyone who is eligible for free school meals has applied for them, so some families are missing out on this, additionally schools are then missing out on pupil premium funding. This can be down to issues such as families not knowing that they are eligible, not knowing about the other benefits of applying such as pupil premium and holiday vouchers or a language barrier.
- 8.3. Not everyone who would benefit from having the support of FSM can get it as they don't meet the threshold for FSM under the current national offer.

- 8.4. The discussion also revealed that there is not a consistent approach to promoting and supporting FSM across all Camden schools. The process varies school by school with some directly intervening to support families where others do not.
- 8.5. In 2023 there was a dedicated officer supporting free school meals applications, but this officer was only available during term-time. It was felt that parents and carers need access to information, ideally all year round, but especially over the summer break when children are about to transition from primary to secondary school.
- 8.6. Teaching and administrative staff from the borough's primary and secondary schools as well as attendant officers agreed that one of the chief recommendations from the workshop would be to simplify and minimise the application process both for families and for the school. Where possible a priority would be to make as much of this information and application process available in the main languages spoken in Camden.
- 8.7. Also under discussion in this session was the fact that while there does not seem to be a sense of shame about taking up FSM by our children, there may be resistance and a feeling of being stigmatised by some of the parents and carers in our communities and it is the role of Camden and the schools to work reposition this thinking.
- 8.8. Together we need to emphasise right of every Camden citizen to eat well every day with nutritious, affordable, sustainable food. Through positive reinforcement in communications from Camden and schools, we can work together to destigmatise this aspect of FSM as an act of charity and use the ethos of the Food Mission to assert that the access to healthy and nutritious food is a fundamental right for all Camden children.
- 8.9. **Lack of awareness & misconceptions** :There is anecdotal evidence that some parents and carers who can 'get by' feel that they do not want to take the assistance of free school meals from those who may need it more. This is where intervention via clearer communication by Camden and schools could promote how the access to free school meals and the pupil premium works to those families who are eligible.
- 8.10. Other barriers under discussion included:
- Support with digital access: Not all families have access to a device
 - Fear of rejection: Some families may be just on the edge of eligibility and are, or have previously been, rejected. Currently there is no follow-up from the Council to check if circumstances and eligibility have changed
 - Families may distrust the process: Some families may feel insecure about their citizenship and are suspicious of sharing their details with the school, the council or any other authority
 - Culturally appropriate menu: This is an issue with parents signing up, and with children unsure if they are able to consume some food on the menu

8.11. **Barriers from the pupils' perspective:**

- Food is not always appetising
- Food is not always a good quality
- Portion sizes can be small
- They are not aware that their food is culturally appropriate: for example, provision of halal food
- The queue for school meal is too long, so it takes too long to get the meal which means there is no time to socialise with friends

8.12. **Extending access to FSM and practical school needs:** If we are to extend access to FSM, especially if this becomes universal, there is a lot of work to be done on the serving and seating areas in the schools. We would need to audit the need and ensure that any increased FSM take-up can be accommodated. There also needs to be accommodation planned in for children with additional needs.

Section 9: Cabinet Adviser's Recommendations

9.1. There are a number of recommendations that have come to mind while I have been writing this report. These have resulted from my own observations and experience, and from the responses of the children, parents and carers, and reflections from school personnel. Some will be easier to implement than others and some will have major budgetary implications. None of these have been costed, so they are recommended subject to viability checks.

Recommendation 1: A longer-term recommendation: in an ideal world my only recommendation would be that we **make FSM universal in Camden secondary schools**.

9.2. Access to a free school meal ensures that all children, regardless of their family's financial situation, have equal access to the same resources. This fosters a sense of social equality and prevents stigmatisation of those receiving assistance. A balanced diet is essential for the physical and cognitive development of adolescents. Free school meals guarantee that students have access to nutritious food, promoting their long-term health and well-being. This, in turn, reduces the burden on the healthcare system.

9.3. No child should go to school hungry. And universal free school meals would vastly improve the life chances of our young people in the borough.

9.4. Practically, there are a number of hurdles (which I have touched on in the report) before this could be implemented. Camden would need to implement a full audit of the services as they stand and assess how the school could implement this. For example, kitchen capacity (can the kitchen or the catering supplier provide the number of meals required?) and (Is the serving area able to accommodate the increase in take-up?)

9.5. Additionally, this would likely place a financial burden on the Borough.

Recommendation 2: Thus, my interim recommendation is to **implement the Test and Learn pilot across all our secondary schools, lifting our free school meal provision of 4,191 pupils to 5,206.**

9.6. A discretionary local offer with a higher threshold would support an additional 1,015 children with FSM, benefitting more than 50% of our secondary school children. As I have previously outlined, there are many residents in our borough who earn above the FSM eligibility threshold, but well below the London Living Wage. With a lifted offer we need to set the threshold of the Camden offer. There are existing benchmarks that could advise us, in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

9.7. In Scotland, families can apply for free school meals if they receive child tax credit or working tax credit and their income is less than £17,005. If they receive both child credit and working tax credit, then their income must be lower than £7,920 to receive free school meals. The household threshold for universal credit claimants is £660 a month.

9.8. In Northern Ireland, that threshold is £14,000 a year. Families can also claim school lunches if their child has special educational needs and requires a special diet, or if they board at a special school. See <https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/free-school-meals-everything-you-need-to-know/>

Recommendation 3: Lobby the Government for additional funding and to make a positive investment in our children. This issue is as much about food security as it is an about establishing equal opportunities for all our children and in their future health outcomes.

9.9. I note that in Finland, Estonia and Sweden, all secondary school students receive universal free school meals. Finland's guidance on the provision of free school meals is titled 'School meals in Finland: Investment in learning'. Section 31 of Finland's Basic Education Act states that 'pupils attending school must be provided with a properly organised and supervised, balanced meal free of charge every school day.' This is the level to which we should aspire and lobby for. See generally https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/school_meals_in_finland.pdf.

Quicker Wins:

Recommendation 4: Simplify and minimise the FSM application system both for families and schools.

9.10. We could do this by requiring **all** parents and guardians whose children go to school in Camden to register for the Free School Meal/Pupil Premium scheme. This allows Camden to identify not only eligible children, but those families just outside the FSM threshold who could be signposted to additional support for their children and may have food poverty related needs. Some suggestions could be:

- Application process made accessible in a selection of languages that are used by some communities in Camden. At the very minimum the process should offer a clear explanation of what is on offer. It should also flag access to support to fill in the form for those with language, literacy or additional needs
- Access to a dedicated Free School Meal support officer available all year round and especially during the summer break. This gives applicants access to expert guidance on completing the application. It also allows Camden to advise residents on other support services and will help them navigate other benefits
- Access to officers with additional languages
- Automatic 3-to-6-month follow-up to see if financial circumstances have changed for families identified as being just outside the threshold of eligibility
- Communicate and educate. Share the learnings of the positive outcomes of free school meals for children, explain the importance of the pupil premium and the positive impact it can have on the school to all parents and carers, regardless of need.
- Promote our Food Mission and emphasise that access to healthy and nutritious food is regarded as a fundamental right for all Camden children. By providing food stability our children will have the energy to develop and fly.

Recommendation 5: Top-up the £2.65 FSM allowance to allow pupils to purchase a snack in the morning break, or more items at lunchtime.

Recommendation 6: Make the free school meal offer clearer and more logical for pupils.

9.11. From the extensive research carried out by officers and from observing signage in the food serving area, it is not easy to understand what the free school allowance entitles a student to in a meal session.

9.12. This information needs to be clearly communicated prior to the start of the academic year especially to the families of transition Year 7s and children with additional needs. Our children should be confident to access their school meal when they start their new school. This information share could have positive

outcomes for their continuing relationship with school meals during their time at that school.

Recommendation 7: Raise the FSM eligibility criteria for secondary school pupils.

9.13. While the Mayor of London continues to fund primary school children's free school meals, we should raise the FSM eligibility criteria for secondary school pupils. This would allow more children on the threshold gain access to this support. I envisage this being operated in the same way as residents accessing the Camden Cost of Living Crisis support.

Recommendation 8: Set up a small contingency fund to cover the first few weeks of the academic year where historically there have been issues with some families' FSM allowance not being set up on Parent Pay at the start of term.

9.14. This issue can cause anxiety for both parents and children. We should build in this contingency and trust the families and children by preloading the pupil's FSM monies to avoid stigmatising pupils.

Recommendation 9: Extend the school breakfast offer to the morning break period or provide a fruit bowl, so that all children have access to a healthy snack at break time.

Recommendation 10: Recognise children and young people's agency in the process of planning school meal provision in the future, by co-creating menus with pupils alongside nutritionists and the catering provider to improve food taste, quality, portion size, and address any cultural or religious issues. The current schools catering contract lasts until April 2025 with a new catering offer to be developed on behalf of schools.

Recommendation 11: Work with voluntary organisations, community leaders, family support workers and faith leaders to reassure parents and carers who are suspicious of the free school meal/pupil premium application process so that they buy-in to the benefits for their children.

Recommendation 12: Perform a full audit/survey of school dining rooms and kitchens across the secondary school estate.

9.15. The research and evidence from pupils and school staff has identified the environment to be as much an issue as the food itself when looking at uptake. This can be a problem with space, with long queues and the physical capacity to seat those pupils wanting to access their school meal. It is also an issue that some of the young people have raised where they want to take their meal and socialise with their peers in a welcoming environment. Additionally, some children need a quieter space in less busy areas to take their meals.

- 9.16. Finally, by drawing up a detailed survey of canteens there may be some quick fixes that could be made. For example, at the secondary school I visited children queue for grab and go outside with no weather protection the simple addition of a canopy would make the experience more conducive to FSM uptake.

Medium-term Recommendation:

Recommendation 13: Educate more about food provenance and work with schools to establish area where pupils can have the experience of gardening and work on seed-to-plate initiatives. We are an inner-city borough where many children live in flats and do not have access to green space.

Section 10: Conclusion

- 10.1. The provision of free school meals for secondary school-aged children in London should not be viewed as an act of kindness; it is a strategic and humane approach to address child poverty, improve educational outcomes for Camden children, and to help nurture a healthier and more equitable society.
- 10.2. Access to free school meals and the supporting benefits that pupil premium can unlock is an important investment in the future of our borough's children, ensuring that no child is left behind due to economic hardship.

11. Finance Comments

The Director of Finance comments that decisions to invest additional resources in nutritional support for children and their families would need to be considered within the context of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy.

12. Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor

The Borough Solicitor has been consulted on this report and has no comments to add to this report.

13. Environmental Implications

This report to the Committee should contain no additional environmental implications for Camden.