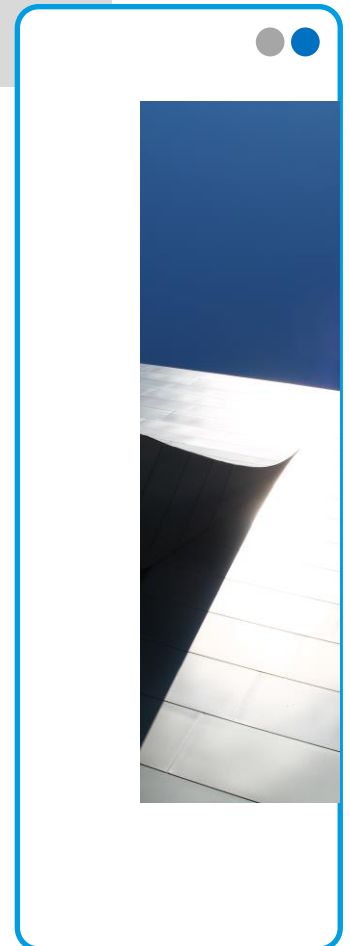


Independent evaluation of Southwark Council's project to expand the statutory entitlement to free meals at secondary schools through passported means testing in 2023-24



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## In a nutshell

In 2023-24, Southwark Council funded meals for some pupils in secondary schools. These pupils' households were in receipt of Universal Credit, and not eligible for the Government's meals.

The Council targeted the project at households with high levels of unmet need. Targeted households experienced food insecurity twice as much as their equivalents elsewhere in the UK.

Offering meals can help to reduce need. However, it cannot lift pupils out of food insecurity. Success should be measured based on relative improvements, while knowing that some will continue to have food insecurity.

Taking up three meals per week could be equivalent to a saving of £330 per year. Because this saving goes to a poorer, rather than a richer household, it could represent a distributional impact nearly three times higher.

The Council chose to supplement quantity with quality, and so stressed the requirement to serve healthy meals with nutritious value. Despite the Council's efforts, this requirement was not generally met.

The implementation of the project resulted in serious issues which might cancel out the value for money achieved through targeting the right households. We recommend ensuring that:

- those receiving meals are indeed eligible, and those whose applications were turned down were indeed not eligible;
- those truly eligible, who missed any free meal from 1 September 2023 due to errors or delays, are compensated;
- schools give project participants meals that are worth roughly the same across the borough, both in terms of money, and nutrition;
- schools claiming higher reimbursements than they are entitled to, pay the extra back to the Council.

The Council may face judicial reviews. Addressing the issues highlighted may help achieve greater outcomes in the future.

For more details, please read the fuller summary, and our 26 recommendations, from the next page.



## 0 Executive summary

### 0.1 Southwark's project starts where the Government's free school meals end.

- 0.1.1 Southwark Council ('the Council') decided to fund meals for some secondary school pupils in 2023-24 ('the project').
- 0.1.2 To be eligible, the pupils' households needed to be in receipt of the Universal Credit welfare benefit. They also needed to earn more than £7,400 per year, which is the upper threshold used by the Government for its statutory free school meals, and less than £16,000. Those with No Recourse to Public Funds were also eligible.
- 0.1.3 Aldaba ('we') were commissioned through public tendering by the Council to undertake an independent evaluation of the project.

### 0.2 In putting the project in place, the Council reacted quickly to the circumstances.

- 0.2.1 This applies to both the cost-of-living crisis, and the Mayor of London's decision to fund some types of free school meals which the Council had already been funding through its Public Health grant for a decade.
- 0.2.2 When the Mayor decided to provide funding for universal free meals at primary schools, the Council swiftly decided to use the resulting saving in its Public Health grant to fund some free meals at secondary schools.

### 0.3 The Council targeted the project at households experiencing high levels of unmet need.

- 0.3.1 It can be safely expected that households in receipt of Universal Credit experience food insecurity by 10 to 20 per cent more than the average household, and by 10 to 20 per cent less than those entitled to statutory free school meals.
- 0.3.2 However, in Southwark, project participant households experience food insecurity as much as those statutory eligible for free school meals, even though statutory eligible households have in principle lower means than participating households.
- 0.3.3 Moreover, both groups experience food insecurity by much more, possibly by more than double, than the equivalent groups nationally.

### 0.4 The project provides a critical public service, but it cannot succeed at guaranteeing food security.

- 0.4.1 Some taxpayers would say that just one child exposed to food insecurity could be considered as a case meriting intervention from public services, and worth eradicating. That is why the project may be considered to fulfil a fundamental social responsibility.
- 0.4.2 However, evidence suggests that taking up free school meals cannot reverse the factors which appear to be responsible for food insecurity. Project participants may take up meals, and yet continue to experience food insecurity due to challenging financial or family circumstances, no matter how well the project is implemented.
- 0.4.3 As a result, success should be measured based on relative improvements, rather than critical success factors of the type 'number of pupils lifted out of food insecurity'.

**0.5 Embracing an outcome-oriented approach, the Council made the choice to supplement quantity with quality in the meals offered to pupils.**

0.5.1 If project participants took up three meals per week, this could be a saving of around £330 per year. Since participant households were on low incomes, this saving would represent much more relative to the same saving being experienced by better off households. The distributional impact of the saving would be approximately £950.

0.5.2 In addition to being free of charge, the meals were also expected to have a nutritious value. Through the project, the Council aimed to reinforce the Government's requirement for schools to meet school food standards.

0.5.3 In practice, participant households continued to pay for some food purchases, over and above the meals funded through the project.

0.5.4 This could be equivalent to £1 extra for each £1 funded through the project. In contrast, statutory eligible households could fund 50 pence extra for each £1 funded. There is a risk that the project contributed to overeating, with some of the extra items purchased being perceived as unhealthy.

**0.6 The project's potential to achieve a positive change for its target population was hampered by the lack of a theory of change, and a business case.**

0.6.1 The former lack means that there was no detailed and documented explanation of the link between funding and outcomes to guide the implementation of the project.

0.6.2 The latter means that there was no staged approach to governing the accountabilities associated with the design and subsequent implementation of the project.

0.6.3 The Council set no key performance indicators to measure improvements over the baseline situation prior to the project.

**0.7 Possibly as a result of not having a theory of change, or a business case, the Council was overoptimistic in designing the project, and so key project outcomes were missed in practice.**

0.7.1 The budgeting process for the project was adequate. The Council clearly made available sufficient funding for schools to serve what is typically described as a hot meal to project participants.

0.7.2 Project participants chose to take up meals compliant with the Council's quality requirements between two and three days in a five-day week. Their take-up levels changed from one month to the next. Similar groups elsewhere in the country could take up free meals nearly five days, quite regularly.

0.7.3 Based on the available evidence, we concluded that project participants lived in food-insecure households both before, and after participating in the project. This is because taking up free meals, even five days a week, cannot reverse other factors such as limited household income, or complex family circumstances.

0.7.4 In addition to food security, the Council's ambition was also for schools to prepare hot meals that better complied with the Government's school food standards, and for project participants to eat those meals. This combination of choices made by schools, and pupils should result in higher food security, and healthier nutrition, according to the Council's expectations.

0.7.5 The Council put in place some initiatives to influence the schools' choice to prepare healthy meal bundles that complied with the standards. We deemed these initiatives insufficient to bring about a meaningful change in food quality, and therefore in healthier nutrition. An audit undertaken by the Council found that schools' compliance with the project's quality requirements was 69 per cent.

0.7.6 We could not find evidence to attribute to the project any improvements in the pupils' willingness to take up healthy meal bundles, and reduce unhealthy eating.

0.7.7 This was compounded by the fact that the parents we interviewed described household diets which were consistent with food insecurity, and showed limited awareness that children's preferences, and overall household diets, could be improved.

**0.8 The Council chose the type of funding allocation which possibly represents best value for taxpayers' money, although this came with additional risks to schools.**

0.8.1 The funding allocation choice was to reimburse schools for healthy meal bundles actually taken up by project participants, rather than based on numbers of project participants or estimates of take-up.

0.8.2 There was an unbalanced distribution of risks in the way in which the Council designed the project. Schools took on the risks associated with data protection; accuracy in the project eligibility checks; and serving meals which might not be taken up, and therefore not reimbursed back to them by the Council.

0.8.3 Nonetheless, the Council remains accountable for the success of the entirety of the project, as recipient of the Public Health grant, which ultimately funds the project.

**0.9 The good work by the Council did not suffice to avoid serious issues which require urgent action.**

0.9.1 The Council's one-to-one support to schools was generally perceived as positive. However, we identified serious issues in the implementation of the project. Critically, there were limitations in the internal challenge, and effective direction provided by the Council's governance structure during project implementation. See paragraphs 3.6.7 and 3.6.16.

0.9.2 The identified issues might cancel out the value for money achieved through targeting the households in most need, and reimbursing schools for actual take-up; and include:

- It is unclear whether the households of project participants actually met the eligibility criteria. The collaboration between the Council and the schools was likely to result in large errors, in terms of both approving, and turning down applications.
- Partly as a result of this, it is unclear whether the number of project participants as at May 2024 was indeed between 900 and 950, as estimated.
- Schools launched the project gradually between September 2023 and February 2024, with some households experiencing outcomes several months before others within the same borough.
- Due to technical issues, a few project participants started to access free school meals several months after their applications had been approved, whereas other participants within the same schools had started to access them shortly after having their applications approved.
- The free meal allowances available to project participants ranged from £2.30 to £2.90 per day, with some schools allowing its use for any food item at any time, and others restricting it to healthy meal bundles, or other types of meals, just at lunchtime.
- Project participants within the same school may also have very different allowances.
- The reimbursement claims submitted by schools to the Council contained irregularities which meet the definition of financial mismanagement.

0.9.3 These issues amount to unequal treatment in the implementation of the project, with some schools and participant households benefiting from the project to an extent they shouldn't, and some others failing to participate, and as result failing to experience outcomes to the extent they should. The Council might be vulnerable to facing qualified audit opinions, and judicial reviews.

## 0.10 Recommendations for the Council

0.10.1 **Overall recommendation.** We recommend that the Council consider a bold choice between:

- delivering the project directly, with minimal or no involvement from schools, with a view of avoiding further implementation issues, for example, by allocating healthy grocery vouchers to properly eligibility-checked households; and
- continuing the delivery approach adopted to date, but being realistic about the outcomes that the Council can, and cannot achieve, for example, by deprioritising food quality outcomes, in favour of take-up of some sort of meal, not necessarily healthy meal bundles.

0.10.2 Whatever course of action is taken, it is imperative that the Council takes measures. To be functional, the project requires some urgent actions. To thrive, the project needs some adjustments to its design, and possibly a larger spending envelope.

0.10.3 We make the recommendations listed below. The focus of the recommendations is on practical actions likely to have positive effects going forward, if the approach adopted in year 1 is maintained. At the time of writing, we are confident that the recommendations are outstanding, or only partially addressed by the Council.

### 0.11 Recommendations for the Council: governance

0.11.1 **Recommendation 1:** To produce a business case. See paragraph 3.6.7.

0.11.2 **Recommendation 2:** To analyse unit costs to assess whether the £2.90 reimbursement per meal, or any future variation of it:

- suffices to cover the true cost of the meals, or
- must be cross-subsidised through other school funding sources; and
- enables an uplift in relation to
  - inflation,
  - healthier food that complies with school food standards better, compared to the baseline prior to the project,
  - London Living Wage, and
  - school admin costs to implement the project. See paragraph 2.8.9.

0.11.3 **Recommendation 3:** To review the membership of the Steering Group, including conflicts of interest, and make documented decisions regarding those having, or pursuing procurement contracts with the Council. See paragraphs 3.6.7 and 3.6.16.



0.11.4 **Recommendation 4:** To develop a project monitoring framework. See paragraph 3.6.13. This framework should include an understanding of the level of take-up that can trigger higher food security, and healthier nutrition outcomes; and forecasts of take-up over the lifetime of the project. See paragraphs 2.15.10 and 4.6 for indications of national, and current Southwark levels of take-up.<sup>1</sup>

0.11.5 **Recommendation 5:** To undertake some bottom-up resource planning for the Council team, including the number of roles, and types of skillsets required for the successful implementation of the project. This should also include the meetings and preparatory activities in relation to the Steering Group. See paragraph 2.9.2.

## 0.12 Recommendations for the Council: project design

0.12.1 **Recommendation 6:** To consider instances where breakfasts, and morning breaks could meet the requirements of the project, and adapt the Conditions of Grants accordingly. See paragraph 3.7.10.

0.12.2 **Recommendation 7:** In collaboration with the overarching programme, to introduce new initiatives to improve food quality, and compliance with school food standards. One of these initiatives should be framed within the aim of helping schools achieve better catering sourcing and procurement. Note this recommendation may require extra spending.

0.12.3 **Recommendation 8:** In collaboration with the overarching programme, to introduce new initiatives to influence pupil choices positively: towards healthy meal bundles, and away from unhealthy food. Note this recommendation is for direct work with individual pupils and parents, rather than catering staff, to raise awareness of the benefits of healthy eating. This direct work with pupils and parents may be framed within wider initiatives to improve food culture, and food environments. This recommendation may also result in fewer unhealthy purchases at school canteens. It may require extra spending. See paragraphs 4.3.15 and 4.5.4.

## 0.13 Recommendations for the Council: project implementation

0.13.1 **Recommendation 9:** To raise awareness of the project outcomes among schools, for example by including them in the Conditions of Grant, and Guidance documents, and running engagement sessions. See paragraph 3.7.6.

0.13.2 **Recommendation 10:** To explain how the £2.90 reimbursement, or any future variation of it, relates to the aspects listed below. This should be as part of the Conditions of Grant, and Guidance documents, and engagement sessions with schools. See paragraph 3.7.11.

- daily allowances for project participants, and the compliant use that can be given to the allowance, including in terms of healthy meal bundles, and restriction to lunchtime;
- allowances and rules for statutory eligible pupils; and
- prices of healthy meal bundles paid by non-eligible pupils.

0.13.3 **Recommendation 11:** To clarify, and stress that the £2.90 reimbursement, or any future variation of it, is for actual take-up, as opposed to eligibility or other counts, as part of the Conditions of Grants, Guidance, and invoicing reports.

0.13.4 **Recommendation 12:** To supplement the current one-to-one support with wider engagements involving all or a number of schools, to avoid repetition, and ensure efficiency. See paragraph 3.13.2.

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<sup>1</sup> See also 'Early recommendations from the evaluation of the meal expansion project' by Aldaba Limited (12/12/2023, unpublished)

0.13.5 **Recommendation 13:** To foster a culture of collaboration and co-creation between the Council and the schools. The constraints and preferences of each of the parties should be acknowledged and reflected on the project processes. Once a change is collectively agreed, this should become known to everyone involved, and included in the Guidance document. See paragraph 3.16.2.

0.13.6 **Recommendation 14:** To encourage schools to consult pupils and parents, particularly in relation to taking up healthy meal bundles, and reducing unhealthy eating. This may include ways for parents to help their children overcome barriers to take-up, such as discussing the menus in advance; reflecting on likes and dislikes; and communicating why making some effort to eat more of certain types of food, and less of others, may result in health benefits, and household savings. See paragraph 3.16.4, and 4.23.9.

#### 0.14 **Recommendations for the Council: accountability of schools**

0.14.1 **Recommendation 15:** To increase the accountability of schools by making more explicit the responsibilities of the headteacher, and the principal, in addition to, but not replacing, those of the school business manager, or equivalent role.

0.14.2 **Recommendation 16:** To introduce penalties for breach of the Conditions of Grant. See paragraph 2.8.18. The other recommendations on eligibility checks, and till system checks; and the healthy-meal-bundle audits should be instrumental in informing penalty decisions. A point-based system, whereby actions are only taken when a certain number of points is reached, might be relevant.

#### 0.15 **Recommendations for the Council: support to project implementation by schools**

0.15.1 **Recommendation 17:** To undertake some bottom-up resource planning for the school administrative teams, including the amount of staff hours required for the initial, and continuous implementation of the project. To allocate new admin funding to schools accordingly.

0.15.2 **Recommendation 18:** To encourage schools to update the information on their websites to clarify the difference between statutory, and project eligibility. See paragraph 3.11.6.

0.15.3 **Recommendation 19:** To support schools to run advertising campaigns within their schools. The Council should also consider to run its own advertising campaigns. Note campaigns may trigger genuine, but also bogus applications which schools would need to process. See paragraph 3.12.4.

0.15.4 **Recommendation 20:** To run eligibility checks again for all applicants, and project participants in the 2023-24 school year. To identify in advance a course of action to redress inaccuracies, and instances of unequal treatment, including those pupils where schools said:

- ‘not eligible for project’, but in fact they were; in these cases, a remedial action could be to compensate their families for a whole year’s worth of unduly missed meals; and
- ‘eligible’, but in fact they were not, either because they were already in receipt of statutory free school meals, or their household income was not between £7,400 and £16,000; remedial actions should consider the unequal treatment this involves in relation to those families in the same situation who paid meals out of their own pocket; and include recouping any unnecessary payments which might have been made to schools. See paragraph 3.7.12.

0.15.5 **Recommendation 21:** Linked to the previous recommendation, to consider making available automated eligibility checks, possibly through a third-party provider. Automated checks should apply to existing and prospective project participants. This should help rectify the identified errors in the application forms currently used. It may also help address the current unbalanced risk-sharing arrangement between the Council and the schools. See paragraphs 3.11.2 and 3.11.11.

0.15.6 **Recommendation 22:** To decide, and communicate to schools as part of the Conditions of Grant, how long a positive eligibility check is valid for; and how changes in household circumstances should be monitored, including what to do if a participant household stops meeting the eligibility criteria.

- 0.15.7 **Recommendation 23:** To check whether till systems are updated as required by the Conditions of Grant, including whether restricting allowance use just for healthy meal bundles at lunchtime is possible. See paragraph 3.14.3.
- 0.15.8 **Recommendation 24:** To validate and challenge the invoicing reports from schools. To establish the actual, correct number of project participants. See paragraphs 3.15.5 and 4.1.2.
- 0.15.9 **Recommendation 25:** To compensate households for any missed meal between 1 September 2023, and the date when the project was launched in their particular school. At the time of writing, the Council was considering reimbursements through vouchers to be cashed in at post offices.
- 0.15.10 **Recommendation 26:** To check whether school canteens can cope with the volumes of demand, and assess the extent to which any pressures might be due to the project. This should be based on data for the actual implementation of the project, rather than estimates produced before the project was implemented. See paragraph 3.14.3.

## 0.16 Key findings

0.16.1 To further understand the executive summary, we next provide the key findings from the evaluation. The Council was sighted on early drafts of this report. The Council's comments were taken into consideration.

### 0.17 Key findings on project design

0.17.1 The project was not supported by a theory of change, which involves challenges for implementation and outcome realisation.

0.17.2 We produced a summary theory of change only for the purpose of guiding our evaluation of the project.

0.17.3 The Council reviewed our summary theory of change and signed off eight expected outcomes, which are listed at the end of this executive summary.

0.17.4 Partly through spillover effects, the project might contribute to outcomes experienced by three groups of pupils:

- those participating in the project ('intervention group' or 'project participants');
- those statutory eligible ('main comparator group' or 'the statutory eligible'); and
- those non-eligible for free school meals ('secondary comparator group' or 'those non-entitled').

0.17.5 Whilst affected by limitations, the modelling undertaken by the Council analysts to arrive at the £1m spending estimate for 2023-24 provided a good basis to inform decision-making.

0.17.6 The design of the project could have benefited from additional analyses, for example estimates of the true unit cost of a meal.

0.17.7 From the design stage, there were limitations in the capacity and ability of the project to successfully undertake the activities required to achieve outputs and realise outcomes.

0.17.8 It is not possible to isolate a direct link between the project funding, and the quality of the funded meals, as opposed to the rest of the food served at school canteens.

0.17.9 The outcome relating to higher food quality at schools was unrealistic, and unlikely to be achieved in practice, mostly because of limitations in the way in which the project was designed.

- 0.17.10 The Council measured take-up among those statutory eligible for free school meals. This measurement is not commonly available in other local areas.
- 0.17.11 However, the Council did not measure take-up, or more generally 'canteen use', by the group of project participants, prior to introducing the project. As a result, there is a possibility that project participants had been paying for meals prior to the project becoming in place.
- 0.17.12 Where this was the case, the existing facilities had already been meeting a level of demand similar to that expected as a result of the project. Additional capital funding to meet increased demand would be unwarranted.
- 0.17.13 The numbers of statutory eligible pupils in very low, low, marginal, and high food security reflect the realised outcomes of free school meals.
- 0.17.14 The most socially meaningful, and critical transition is that from food insecurity; to food security, even if the latter involves unhealthy choices. This is because just one child exposed to food insecurity could be considered as a case meriting intervention from public services, and worth eradicating.
- 0.17.15 The Council made an appropriate decision when targeting the project at those households on Universal Credit, and not already in receipt of statutory free school meals. This group experienced a level of need which was considerable, and not met by the government's statutory services.
- 0.17.16 It can be safely expected that households in receipt of Universal Credit experience food insecurity by 10 to 20 per cent more than the average household, and by 10 to 20 per cent less than those entitled to statutory free school meals.
- 0.17.17 Food security is the result of factors which cannot be influenced through free-school-meal take-up. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the higher the take-up, the higher the food security.
- 0.17.18 Some project participants may continue to experience hunger or very low food security, and fail to experience the most critical type of project outcome, which involves a transition towards some form of food security.
- 0.17.19 Project participants may push total costs the other side of a tipping point and open opportunities for lower unit costs.

**0.18 Key findings on project implementation**

- 0.18.1 The Council complied with best practice by piloting the project before rolling it out.
- 0.18.2 The Council transferred to schools both the administrative burden and the risks associated with data protection, and accuracy issues in the decision to award entitlement to project participation.
- 0.18.3 In addition, the schools carried the risk that healthy meal bundles were prepared, and put on the counter, yet project participants chose not to eat them, and so no reimbursement was received from the Council.
- 0.18.4 The design of the project was the result of decisions which were not fully documented, or captured in a format suitable for the exercise of the Sponsor Group's responsibilities, notably those in relation to strategic direction and ultimate accountability.
- 0.18.5 The lack of a business case involves limitations in the ability to govern the project effectively.
- 0.18.6 Better monitoring information might have helped to make more timely decisions; obtain more support from other projects within the programme as events unfolded; and take corrective actions more confidently.

- 0.18.7 As recipient of the Public Health Grant, the Council remains accountable for the success of the whole project, which includes all the processes from the decision to fund the project, to the point when a healthy meal bundle is taken up by a project participant.
- 0.18.8 In comparing the Conditions of Grant, and Guidance documents; with our summary theory of change; we concluded that the essence of the links between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes was captured. Opportunities for improvement include:
- Further stressing that the allowance for project participants was just for healthy meal bundles at lunchtime.
  - Not assuming that school admin staff were in a position to distinguish genuine from fake proofs for welfare benefit entitlement. See paragraph 3.7.13.
  - Clarifying that just being eligible for the project did not trigger a reimbursement.
  - Specifying whether eligibility remained valid for a year, or until the end of the school year, and when it needed to be rechecked.
- 0.18.9 The personalised support provided by the Council’s training sessions, and particularly the flexibility and availability of the policy officers, further contributed to clarifying project requirements.
- 0.18.10 We interviewed a few of the schools which were in the process of putting the capital items in place. The feedback was overall positive.
- 0.18.11 Only one day’s worth of catering expertise was available to each school. This was expected to include: selecting and installing capital items; updates to till systems; compliance with the Department for Education’s school food standards<sup>2</sup>, and in particular the requirement for healthy meal bundles; cooking practices; kitchen management; and overall practical implementation of the project.
- 0.18.12 The need to have till information for reporting, and evaluation purposes was anticipated at the beginning of the project.
- 0.18.13 The Council provided to schools templates of introductory letters, and application forms for parents to apply for the project. In deploying these templates, schools made some technical errors. These errors affected some of the critical items to establish eligibility.
- 0.18.14 Only five school websites, out of all 25, provided some information about the project, with two including a hyperlink to the Council’s website.
- 0.18.15 Some schools reported having been able to receive, assess, and approve an application; confirm the outcome to parents; and allow the student to have their first free meal, all within 48 hours.
- 0.18.16 Through our interviews with parents, we became aware of a few instances where the application to participate in the project had been approved, but five months later the till system had not been updated yet. This meant that the parents had to continue to top up their child’s digital wallet. For an example, see paragraph 4.23.
- 0.18.17 Some schools programmed the till systems to only activate the allowance between 11 am and 2 pm. However, we could not find any example where the till systems were programmed to only allow the use of the allowance for healthy meal bundles. See paragraph 3.12.1.

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<sup>2</sup> Gov.uk, School food standards, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools>

- 0.18.18 We could not find any initiatives to encourage the take-up of healthy meal bundles. Such initiatives would have been a way of bringing the offer of healthy meal bundles closer to the actual demand for them.
- 0.18.19 Our process workshops, and staff interviews at schools demonstrated virtually no awareness that the project pursued outcomes in relation to higher food quality, and healthier nutrition.
- 0.18.20 The Council team undertook an audit of food quality, and environments. The focus was on compliance with the requirement on healthy meal bundles. The audit identified a few instances where fewer than half of the healthy-meal-bundle requirements had been met.
- 0.18.21 The audit of food quality compliance highlighted the Council's responsibility to oversee the implementation of the project. Other examples could have included:
- sample checks on the application assessments, particularly in relation to the evidence used as a basis to ensure eligibility criteria were met;
  - sample checks on till systems to assess whether the systems allowed the required type of reporting; and
  - surveys to understand whether the project was putting pressures on catering facilities and practices, such as organising services, clearing queues in time for lunch break end, and minimising waste; and if so, how those pressures could be eased.
- 0.18.22 From the perspective of taxpayers' money, allocating funding on the basis of the services actually taken up, as opposed to other types of approximations, can be considered a sign of value for money.
- 0.18.23 We analysed the invoicing reports submitted by the schools to the Council. It was concerning to observe irregular funding claims on the basis of:
- numbers of applications received, rather than meals actually taken up by those whose applications had been approved;
  - assumptions that project participants had taken up meals on absolutely all, or exactly 50 per cent of the trading days in a month; and
  - months when the project had not been launched yet.
- 0.18.24 As a result of these irregularities, some schools received up to 3 or 4 times more than what they should have.
- 0.18.25 Overall, the collaboration between the Council team and the schools could be described as fluid and pragmatic, in that a constant focus was maintained on addressing issues and progressing towards a point where the project could be launched.
- 0.18.26 The Council team reported difficulties in getting key messages acknowledged, and adhered to, by schools, such as meeting key requirements, and deadlines; and providing the correct contents for the submissions due to the Council.
- 0.18.27 Our fieldwork provided multiple examples where schools and the Council had had negative experiences when working together, mostly in relation to clarity of communication, and coordination of tasks. On occasions, there was an overall sentiment of fatigue, and even professional hostility.
- 0.18.28 These limitations were aggravated by the fact that practically no consultation, or involvement of any sort, took place with pupils.
- 0.18.29 Greater involvement and responsiveness from schools could have created greater opportunities for the project to achieve its intended outcomes.

## 0.19 Key findings on project impact

- 0.19.1 Our estimate of project participants for May 2024, when the project was at its steady state for implementation year 1, was between 900 and 950. Assuming 1.3 siblings per household, this is equivalent to 690 to 730 participating households.
- 0.19.2 We examined take-up in detail in three schools. None of the schools may be considered to be fully aligned with the project requirements.
- 0.19.3 As a result of these differences, the three schools were not directly comparable. Despite the limitations, we could draw some tentative findings:
- Project participants purchased items worth between £30 and £60 per month at school canteens.
  - Between £20 and £30's worth of these purchases was funded by the project, and broadly corresponded to healthy meal bundles.
  - Between £10 and £20's worth of project participant purchases was funded by parents. These extra purchases represented more than 40 per cent of the project-funded purchases.
  - Between 20 and 40 per cent of the extra purchases could be for less nutritious items, such as burgers and pizzas.
  - On average, project participants used their allowance to take up healthy meal bundles approximately 2.3 to 3.4 days a week.
  - Average take-up for statutory eligible pupils might be in line with this, or lower.
  - Take-up by project participants varied within the same school, with some months possibly taking up healthy meal bundles 2.3 days per week, and other months 3.4 days per week.
  - For reference, our analysis of the invoicing reports suggested an average take-up of 3.1 days per week, this is, towards the upper bound of our 2.3 – 3.4 range, although the invoicing reports did not necessarily capture just healthy meal bundles, as our range does.
  - Also for reference, the analysis of statutory free-school meal take-up, based on the Family Resource Survey, found an average take-up of 4.7, or nearly 5 days a week, at national level, although this higher take-up rate was not specific to healthy meal bundles either.
- 0.19.4 The response rates to our baseline, and follow-up food-security survey can only be considered to be low: approximately 10 per cent. See paragraphs 4.1.1 and 4.9.1.
- 0.19.5 We lack responses for the majority of the households in each group. We do not have any basis to assess the extent to which those who responded were representative of, or exceptional relative to the rest.
- 0.19.6 In the absence of better-quality evidence, project participant households in Southwark appeared to experience food security to similar levels compared to statutory eligible households.
- 0.19.7 Three quarters, or more, of both the statutory-eligible, and project-participant households might be food insecure, both before and after the project.
- 0.19.8 Both project-participant, and statutory-eligible households in Southwark could experience less food security than their equivalents at national level.

- 0.19.9 Food security was seemingly affected by considerable levels of variability. A theme emerging from our qualitative interviews with parents was instability and unpredictability. Precarious circumstances could last just a few weeks and be followed by more prosperous ones.
- 0.19.10 To the variability in food security statuses, we need to add variability in the take-up of free school meals.
- 0.19.11 In other words, the possibility of improving food security through a project that expands access to free school meals is very limited.
- 0.19.12 Accessing free meals at school was perceived by interviewed parents mostly as a change in financial terms, but not necessarily in terms of their children's nutrition. We did not come across any instance where the parent perceived that school food was healthier, and could contribute to an overall healthier diet for their children.
- 0.19.13 One of the participating parents explained the saving resulting from the project by comparing the top-ups they made on their child's digital wallet before and during the project: 'I had to make sure I added about £50 per month, and then check in case it had run out, but now I think I added about £20 one month, or two months ago, and when I last checked there was still something left, so I can now kind of forget about it!'
- 0.19.14 Distributional impact is a method endorsed by the Government which illustrates the fact that £1 is worth more to a lower income household, than to a higher income household. If we assumed that project participants took up on average three free school meals per week, which is in line with our estimates of actual take-up, this would be a cash saving of approximately £330 per year, which would notionally represent approximately £950, once distributional impacts are considered.
- 0.19.15 Our qualitative work suggested three general themes which frame the healthier nutrition outcome:
- Skipping breakfast
  - Role of less healthy food while maintaining an overall healthy diet.
  - School canteen as mainly a source of snacks, rather than hot meals.
- 0.19.16 Some parents stressed that secondary school represents a transition in their children's attitudes towards food. Children gradually have more independence to make food purchases, both in terms of the school digital wallets, and their pocket money outside of school.
- 0.19.17 Most pupils had strong preferences towards some types of food.
- 0.19.18 A few parents stood out for their commitment to changing their children's attitudes towards free school meals. They encouraged their children to try whatever hot meal was on offer, discussed the children's impressions in the evening, and actively followed up with them next time less-liked meals were due to be served again.
- 0.19.19 A few other parents mentioned instances in the past where they had tried to change their children's preferences towards more fruit and vegetables. They reported having given up because a lot of food was going to waste.
- 0.19.20 Overall, the types of household diets described at our interviews could be classified as unhealthy, or less healthy, and in line with food insecurity. Interviewed parents showed little awareness about this. There was not sufficient recognition that children's preferences, and overall household diets, could and should be improved.
- 0.19.21 The actions put in place by the project were not enough to achieve any improvement in food quality at schools.



0.19.22 This evaluation found no evidence to support improvements in the outcome ‘better sourcing and procurement’ at school level.

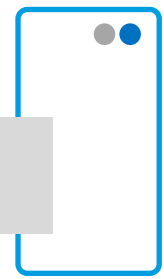
0.19.23 **Table 0.1**, below, provides a summary of the outcomes pursued by the project, and our evaluative assessment. It summarises **Table 2.4**, and **Table 5.1**, both available in the body of the report.

**Table 0.1. Summary evaluative conclusions**

Outputs and outcomes	Agent	Conclusion
<b>Output 1:</b> Healthy meal bundles made available to, and taken up by participants	Pupil	Amber
<b>Outcome 1:</b> Higher food security	Pupil	Red
<b>Outcome 2:</b> Healthier nutrition	Pupil	Red
<b>Output 2:</b> Savings to participant households	Household	Green
<b>Outcome 3:</b> Higher financial stability	Household	Amber
<b>Outcome 4:</b> Higher food security	Household	Red
<b>Output 3:</b> Meals that better comply with National Standards	School	Red
<b>Outcome 5:</b> Higher food quality	School	Red
<b>Outcome 6:</b> Better sourcing and procurement	School	Red
<b>Outcome 7:</b> Reduced school lunch shortfalls	School	Red
<b>Outcome 8:</b> Reduced admin costs	School	Red

Source: Aldaba analysis. Note: green denotes ‘positive change was evidenced’, red denotes ‘positive change was not evidenced’, and amber denotes instances in between.

0.19.24 For more details, please read the full report, which is available from the next page.



## 1 Introduction to this evaluation: Free school meals in context

### 1.1 Socioeconomic context

- 1.1.1 In 2022, inflation rose by about 8 per cent in the UK. This was the highest yearly increase in over 30 years.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the situation in historically deprived areas became particularly challenging. Southwark was one of them.
- 1.1.2 This London borough was part of the top 20 per cent, most deprived areas in England. In the case of deprivation affecting children, it was part of the top 10 per cent.<sup>4</sup> **Figure 1.1**, below, sets out the levels of deprivation in Southwark, by lower super-output area, or in other words, areas grouping together between 1,000 and 1,500 people, each.

### 1.2 Policy context

- 1.2.1 On 20 February 2023, the Mayor of London announced funding for universal free school meals in all the primary schools of the capital during the 2023-24 school year. This supplemented the national policies to fund universal free meals at Reception, and Years 1 and 2, since 2014; and means-tested free meals at later years.
- 1.2.2 The Mayor's initiative overlapped with the policy funded by Southwark Council ('the Council') to fund universal free school meals in all the primary schools of the borough. This policy had been funded through the Public Health grant received by the Council since September 2013.
- 1.2.3 To address the overlap, and largely driven by the political leadership of councillors, on 24 February 2023 Southwark Council announced the decision to fund means-tested free meals in secondary schools through some of the saving in the Public Health grant triggered by the Mayor's decision<sup>5</sup>.
- 1.2.4 In more detail, the grant received by the Council from the Greater London Authority to fund universal free primary-school meals was £3.6 million. This new funding triggered some adjustments to the use given by the Council to its Public Health grant, including:
- approximately £1 million's worth of new spending for a project on means-tested free secondary-school meals ('the project');
  - £1.5 million's worth for Holiday Food and Activity Programme; and
  - extra spending for healthier food banks, among others<sup>6</sup>.

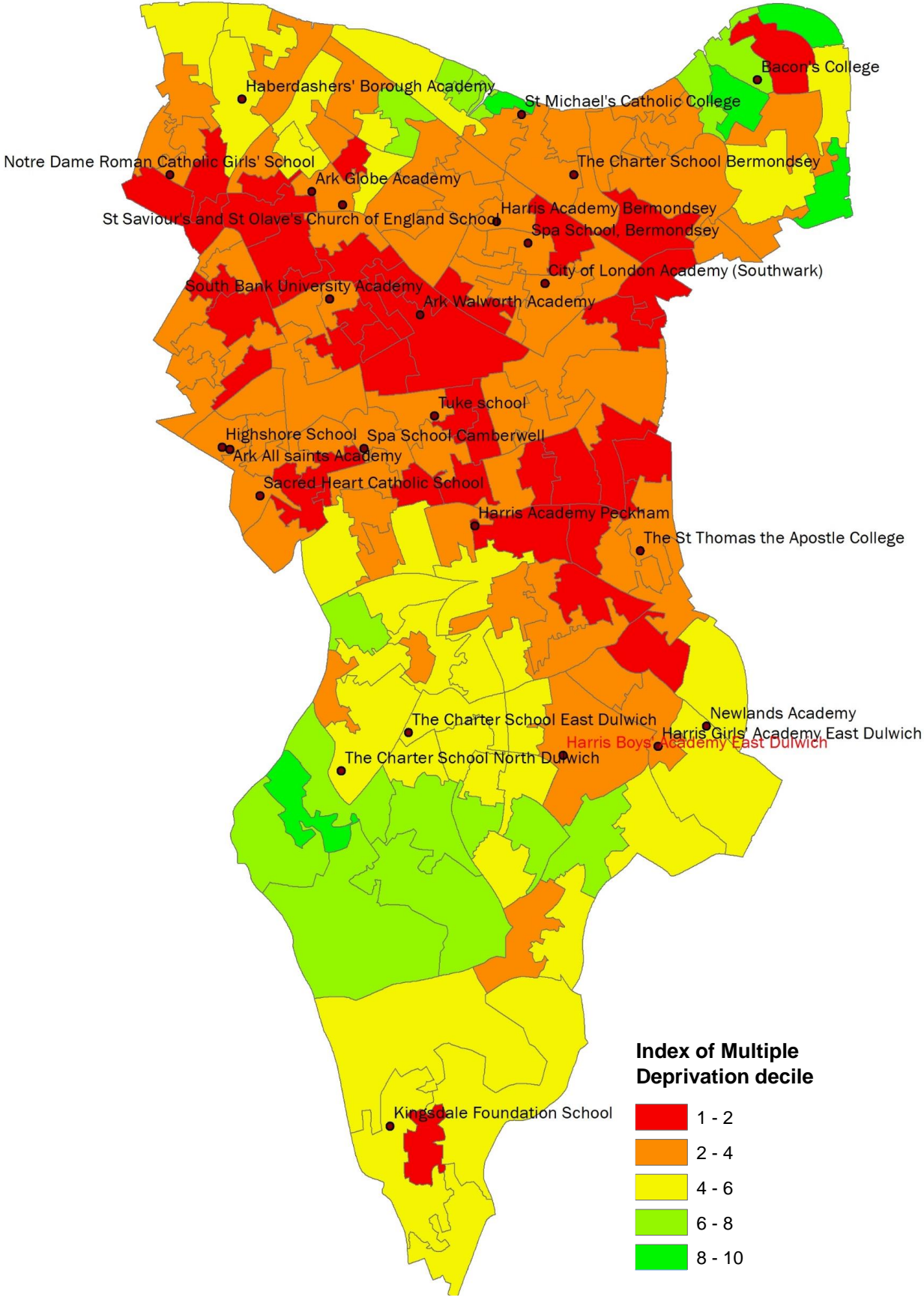
<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Index including owner occupiers' housing costs, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/january2023>

<sup>4</sup> Gov.uk, English indices of deprivation 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

<sup>5</sup> Southwark Council (2023), 'Southwark Council funds emergency free school meals in secondary schools for low-income families', available at <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/2023/feb/southwark-council-funds-emergency-free-school-meals-in-secondary-schools-for-low-income-families#:~:text=24%20February%202023,hunger%20in%20our%20secondary%20schools>.

<sup>6</sup> Southwark Council (31 May 2023), Briefing Note for Lead Member Briefing (unpublished).

Figure 1.1. Index of multiple deprivation in Southwark, by decile, and location of secondary schools



Source: Aldaba analysis of gov.uk, English Indices of Deprivation 2019, and Get Information About Schools.  
 Note 1: Decile 1 is for a 10 per cent, most deprived lower super output area in the UK, not just in Southwark.

1.2.5 Pupils eligible to the project were those:

- in secondary school, including Sixth Form and College, or in other words, those in Years 7 to 13, or Key Stages 3, 4 and 5; whose households
- were not already eligible for statutory means-tested free school meals according to the Department for Education's Eligibility Checking System<sup>7</sup>; and
- were in receipt of Universal Credit, which typically means that
- their annual earned net income was above £7,400, and below £16,000; or
- those who had been recognised by the Council as Non Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).

1.2.6 In line with Public Health's emphasis on hot and nutritious meals, the grant to schools could only be used for lunch-time meals, and so excluded breakfasts, and break snacks. In addition, the meals included some guidelines from the Department for Education's school food standards.

1.2.7 The project may be referred to as:

- 'Free healthy secondary school meals'
- 'Free secondary school meal pilot'
- 'Universal Credit expansion of free school meals'
- 'Southwark Council's project to expand the statutory entitlement to free meals at secondary schools through passported means testing in 2023-24' (our preference to ensure clarity).

1.2.8 The neighbouring London borough of Tower Hamlets decided to fund universal free meals at secondary schools, also in the school year 2023-24. Households were still required to apply for the statutory free-school meals in order to comply with the requirements of the Pupil Premium grant.

### 1.3 Free school meals

1.3.1 In 2022-23, approximately 40 per cent of secondary-school pupils in Southwark were eligible for the government's statutory, means-tested free school meals. This compares with approximately 25 per cent in the whole of London, and 20 per cent in the whole of England.<sup>8</sup>

1.3.2 The choices made historically by the Department for Education in administering statutory, means-tested free school meals can inform the Council's administration of its means-tested free school meals. However, there is no requirement for both initiatives to be consistent.

1.3.3 Some key features of statutory, means-tested free school meals include:

- the eligibility checks in place on school census day are the basis for a formula-based grant to schools, which is the Pupil Premium, and covers a range of pupil needs wider than just meals;

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<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, Free School Meals: guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1133262/Free\\_school\\_meals.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133262/Free_school_meals.pdf)

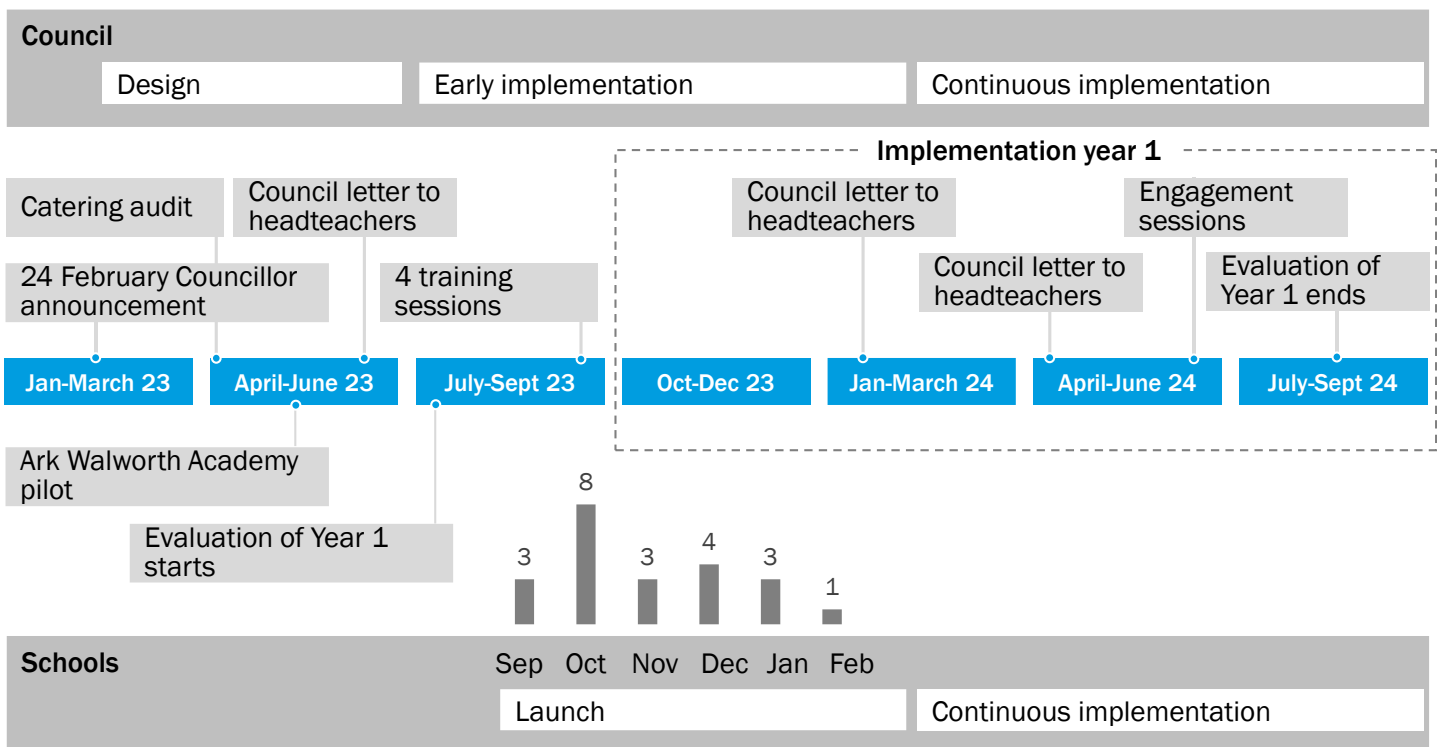
<sup>8</sup> Department for Education, Edubase, <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Downloads>, consulted in November 2023.

- certain pupils, whose eligibility was confirmed before changes to the Universal Credit thresholds in 2018, maintain their eligibility even if their households would not be eligible by current thresholds, at least until 2025; and
- schools have some flexibility to decide how the statutory, means-tested free school-meal allowance is used throughout the day at their canteens.

## 1.4 Project timeline

1.4.1 The Council incorporated the project into the Southwark School Meals System Transformation Programme, which had been in place since 2021. **Figure 1.2**, below, sets out the main project phases from the perspectives of the Council, and the schools. At the time of writing, the Council anticipated that the project would last a minimum of three years: between 2023-24 and 2025-26. The scope of this evaluation report only includes implementation year 1, which is 2023-24.

Figure 1.2: Main project phases



Source: Aldaba analysis

1.4.2 The design phase ran approximately from the Council announcement in February 2023, until the end of the project pilot undertaken at Ark Walworth Academy, in July 2023. The early implementation phase, also referred to as mobilisation phase, started in July 2023 and finished approximately in February 2024, when it could be considered that all 25 secondary schools had launched the project, including two which invited applications, but could not identify any eligible households. The continuous implementation phase could be considered to go from February, until September 2024.

## 1.5 Project evaluation

- 1.5.1 Aldaba ('we') were commissioned by the Council to undertake summative process and impact evaluations between September 2023 and September 2024. This implies that the project had already been designed when the evaluation started. The summative character of the evaluation means that the project was being implemented at the same time as it was being evaluated.<sup>9</sup>
- 1.5.2 One of the advantages of this approach was that early evaluative findings could inform improvements to the implementation of the project. One of the disadvantages was that the object of the evaluation was changing as it was being evaluated, which made it difficult to find stable reference points to draw conclusions.
- 1.5.3 Our fieldwork included:
- Expertise-, and desk-based validation of the theory of change for the project.
  - Over 20 interviews with staff from the Council, the schools, and other stakeholder organisations.
  - Twelve process workshops with schools, with seven taking place in time for the interim evaluation report in April 2024, and the rest in time for this final report in September 2024.
  - Data analysis of published information, such as the Family Resource Survey; government administrative information, such as Edubase; and school information, such as till transactions, and project-related monitoring and finances.
  - Food security survey of participating households, with baseline results being available for the interim evaluation report of April 2024, and follow-up results for the final report in September 2024. Random draws of a £100 shopping voucher per school were used as survey response incentive.
  - 16 qualitative interviews with parents and carers, with five having been completed in time for the interim report. A £20 shopping voucher per interviewee was used as a token of appreciation.
  - Interviews and focus groups with 15 pupils. A £10 book voucher per interviewee was provided as a token of appreciation.

## 1.6 Project evaluation versus project monitoring

- 1.6.1 The Council has a responsibility to monitor the project. This includes monitoring outputs, such as numbers of project participants, and meals taken up; and direct outcomes, such as healthier nutrition in connection with the food quality of the meals.
- 1.6.2 The evaluation builds on the monitoring information. It adds to it some additional information on outcomes which are less directly linked to project implementation, such as food security at household level.
- 1.6.3 Critically, the evaluation applies specialist techniques to assess project impacts. It addresses the question on whether the observed changes in outcomes may be attributed to the project, as opposed to other factors, or just chance or random variation.

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<sup>9</sup> We undertook the evaluation in line with gov.uk, The Magenta Book, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book>

## 1.7 Food security statuses

1.7.1 According to the Household Food Security Survey developed by the US Department of Agriculture<sup>10</sup>, there are four statuses in relation to food security:

- **High:** No reported indications of food access problems or limitations.
- **Marginal:** One or two reported indications: typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.
- **Low:** Report of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- **Very low:** Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

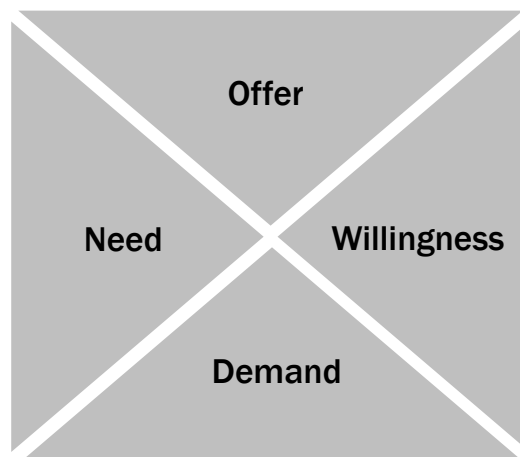
1.7.2 Very low food security may be associated with hunger. The scope of this evaluation does not include hunger because this is an individual-level feeling. We designed our fieldwork to examine food security outcomes only at household level, partly because of the ethical considerations associated with examining hunger directly with minors.

## 1.8 Offer versus demand; need versus willingness

1.8.1 We propose a high-level conceptual framework in **Figure 1.3**, below. The Council designed the project partly in response to a perceived increase in needs. However, those needs may not be fully met just by making meals available. More or less conscious tastes, likes, dislikes, habits, and cultural constraints, among others, also drive the decision to eat the meal, or not. We propose to generalise these factors under the concept of 'willingness'.

1.8.2 An alternative way of thinking of this dichotomy is offer versus demand. The Council and the schools may offer meals free of charge as part of the project, but this does not mean that demand will match offer. In fact, some economics schools posit that 'offer follows demand', rather than the other way around. We will use this framework as a guide for the analysis presented in this report.

Figure 1.3: High-level conceptual framework



Source: Aldaba analysis

<sup>10</sup> USDA, Economic Research Service, Food Security, available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/survey-tools/>

## 1.9 Reporting qualitative findings

1.9.1 To mitigate the risk of identification, we summarise the common themes identified through the interviews by using frequency references such as ‘all’, ‘the majority’, ‘some’, or ‘a few’. However, given the qualitative nature, and the small number of the interviews, these frequency references should be taken just as indications, rather than quantitative findings. To ensure anonymity, references to ‘a few’ may actually refer to just one instance.

1.9.2 Quotes in inverted commas do not necessarily represent ‘verbatim’, word by word passages from the interviews. This is to make the language used in this report simpler.

## 1.10 Structure of this report

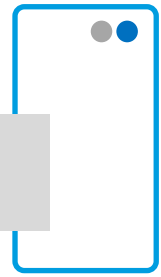
1.10.1 The remainder of this report is structured into three sections:

- **Project design.** We examine the question of ‘how should the project work?’ through a description of the theory of change. This is a plain explanation of how the Council anticipated the project working before it was implemented. Then, we assess each element of the theory of change to draw conclusions on the extent to which the project could realistically achieve its expected outcomes.
- **Project implementation.** We examine the question of ‘can the project work?’ through a description of the processes put in place to implement the project. The emphasis is on inputs and activities. In parallel to the description, we assess the extent to which the resources actually in place were consistent with the original project design, and so able to turn the theory of change into practice.
- **Project impact.** We examine the question of ‘does the project work?’ through an analysis of primary data collected from stakeholders, mostly the Council and schools; households; and pupils. The aim is to assess how outcomes may have changed as a result of the project. Where information is lacking, we provide impact scenarios which can be validated once the information becomes available.

1.10.2 It proves insightful to tackle all three aspects because just looking at one, without looking at the others, can result in partial conclusions. For example, the project design might be of very high quality, but this would not guarantee a suitable implementation. Similarly, a project which is well implemented might achieve little impact.

1.10.3 A fourth aspect which remains outside scope would be an economic evaluation. This type of evaluation mitigates against the risk that a project might achieve great impacts at a cost which is unaffordable to the public purse, or represents poor value for money. Despite not being in scope, this report will provide some insights into value for money.





### 2.1 Theory of change

- 2.1.1 It is best practice to produce a theory of change before designing and implementing a project. The aim of a theory of change is to anticipate how the inputs, such as funding, will be used to set up the service, and what changes can be expected in the lives of project participants, or in other words, the expected outcomes. Some approaches take outcomes as the basis for impacts and benefits.<sup>11</sup>
- 2.1.2 Those involved in the decision to put the project in place can produce a first version of the theory of change which can be later refined by building on expert views. It is important to draw on previous reliable evidence to ensure that the links between inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes are realistic. An example is published evaluations of similar projects. Optimism bias must be addressed.
- 2.1.3 Once refined, the theory of change must be recognised by stakeholders as a guide for project implementation. This may be referred to as the blueprint. The refined theory of change also provides a basis for the evaluation. Through data collection and analysis, the evaluation tests and attempts to validate the links between inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes.
- 2.1.4 The Council team recognised two theories of change as relevant to the project:
- Impact on Urban Health, and Bremner & Co. (2023), 'Universal Primary Free School Meals: a Rapid Evidence Review' (unpublished).
  - Laura Johnson Consultancy (2021), 'Southwark School Meal System Transformation: A Theory of Change' (unpublished).
- 2.1.5 After review, we deemed these theories of change to be unfit for purpose for the following reasons:
- The work by Impact on Urban Health was about universal provision at primary schools, including both breakfast and lunch, whereas the project was about targeted (extended means-tested) provision of free lunch at secondary schools.
  - The work by Laura Johnson was about the whole transformation programme, rather than this specific project. It had been produced before the project was designed, and therefore contained no reference to it.

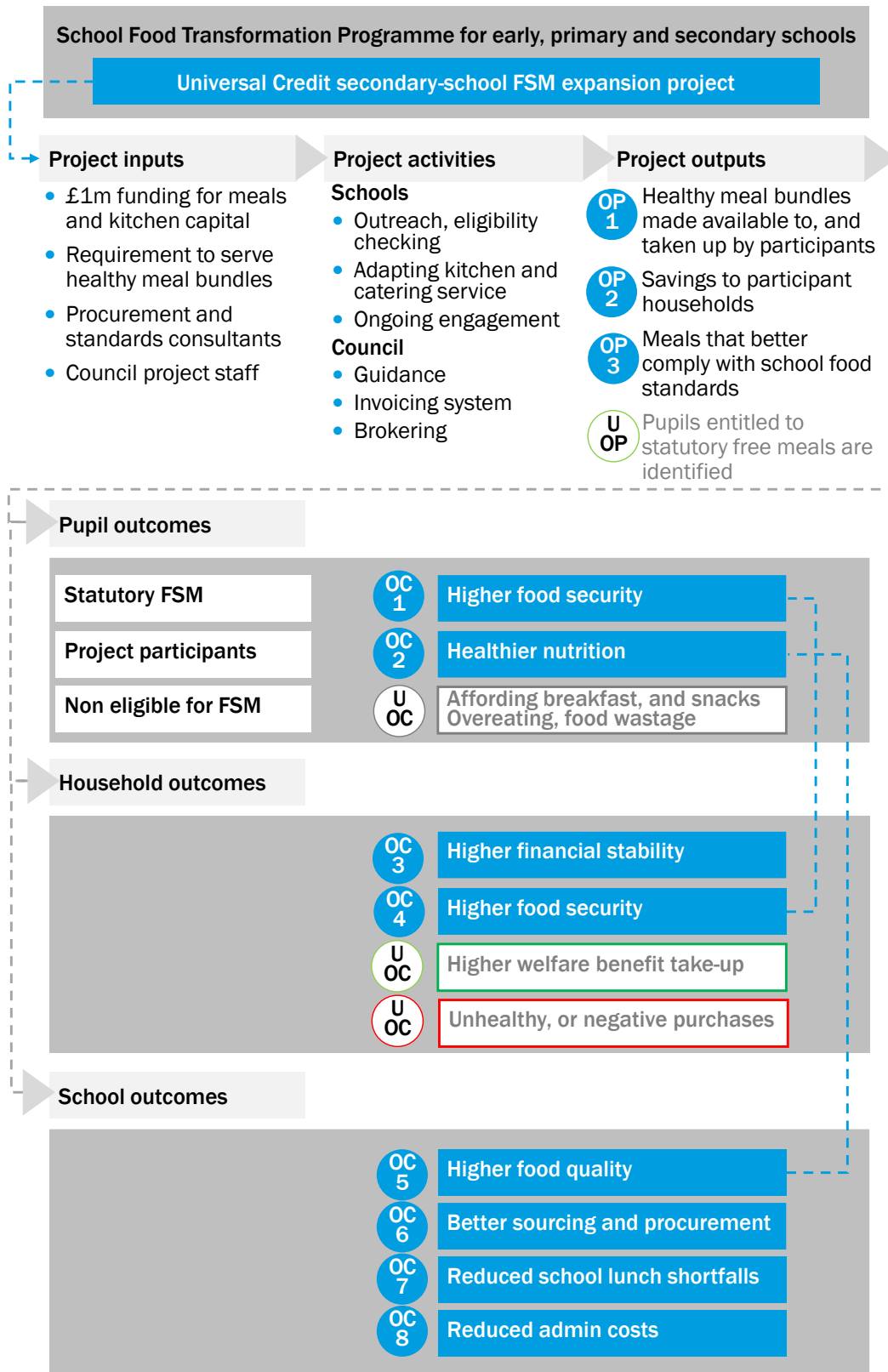
**The project was not supported by a theory of change, which involves challenges for implementation and outcome realisation.**

- 2.1.6 Based on the review of these documents, and interviews with the team responsible for the project at Southwark Council ('the Council team'), we produced a summary theory of change only for the purpose of guiding our evaluation of the Council's project. Our focus was on identifying the outcomes that could be realistically expected in the first year of implementation: 2023-24.
- 2.1.7 Our summary theory of change is set out in **Figure 2.1**, below. The Council signed it off in September 2023. The next sections provide, firstly, a detailed description, and secondly, an assessment of our summary theory of change. The priority is to assess how realistic, and reliable it may be as a guide for the evaluation.

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<sup>11</sup> Gov.uk, Project and programme management, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/project-and-programme-management>

Figure 2.1: Summary theory of change



Source: Aldaba analysis based on document review and Council staff interviews. Note 1: OP = output; UOP = unintended output; OC = outcome; UOC = unintended outcome. Note 2: dotted lines for interrelations.

## 2.2 Description of the theory of change: Inputs

2.2.1 As set out in **Figure 2.1**, above, project inputs include both funding and expertise. The funding estimate at the project design stage was a total of £1 million for the school year 2023-24. This estimate included both direct payments to fund lunches served to project participants at school canteens, and capital funding for six schools which were assessed as unable to cope with the extra demand from the project.

2.2.2 The four broad categories of capital funding were the following:

- Addressing limited dining hall space.
- Additional capacity for kitchens operating already at full capacity.
- Renewing old equipment.
- Adapting lunch service timings which were already compromised.

2.2.3 Examples of items funded through the capital grant were new ovens, tray rails, heat shields, work tables, sinks, and outdoors mobile catering pods.

2.2.4 In addition, the Council made available a team of catering consultants from the company Cohesion Consulting who undertook visits to schools and engaged with catering staff to share advice on: selecting and installing capital items; updates to till systems; compliance with the Department for Education's school food standards<sup>12</sup>, and in particular the requirement for healthy meal bundles; cooking practices; kitchen management; and overall practical implementation of the project.

2.2.5 An audit undertaken in April 2023 revealed limited compliance with the school food standards<sup>13</sup>. The Council team considered that the grant could serve as a lever to improve compliance. As such, the requirement to serve healthy meal bundles which comply with some guidelines from the standards was included in the Conditions of Grant agreement signed between the schools and the Council.

2.2.6 Compliance with school food standards may be considered as a project input for evaluation purposes. The requirement to serve healthy meal bundles may be referred to as serving 'hot meals', 'meal deals' or 'healthy meal option' to differentiate these from other options, such as sandwiches, just fruit, or snacking.

## 2.3 Description of the theory of change: Activities and outputs

2.3.1 The Council team was intended to take mostly a guiding, brokering, and financial management role, whereas schools were intended to take responsibility for outreach, eligibility checking, implementation, and ongoing engagement with project participants, and their households. School activities included administrative tasks in liaison with parents and carers, and adaptation of catering services and till systems, so that the project participants' entitlement to a daily free allowance was automatically recognised when a healthy meal bundle was purchased at lunchtime.

2.3.2 If we define outputs as tangible and countable units which become in place as a direct result of project activities, these include:

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<sup>12</sup> Gov.uk, School food standards, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools>

<sup>13</sup> Cohesion Consulting (June 2023), Catering Audit: Delivering the free secondary school meals project (unpublished)

- **Output 1:** Healthy meal bundles made available to, and eaten by project participants at no cost to their households, whereas before participating in the project these pupils would have: paid for equivalent lunches at the school canteens; had an alternative lunch, such as own packed-lunch or a take-away outside the school canteen; or not had lunch at all.
- **Output 2:** Savings expressed in pounds to the participating households who no longer fund those school lunches, or their alternatives.
- **Output 3:** Meals that better comply with school food standards and are available to project participants, and the wider school community, when they visit the canteens throughout the whole school day.

2.3.3 Upon early project implementation, eligibility checks revealed instances where the applicant household was entitled to statutory free-school meals. This meant that the applicant did not become a project participant, but instead started to access statutory free meals funded by the Government, as part of the Pupil Premium grant. In turn, the Pupil Premium grant is intended to support a wide range of pupil needs, beyond the free meals provided to the newly entitled pupils.<sup>14</sup>

2.3.4 New statutory eligible pupils accessing free meals is an output which was not anticipated by the Council when the project was first designed. It is therefore a positive unintended output.

## 2.4 Description of the theory of change: Pupil outcomes and pupil groups

2.4.1 The Council team designed the project with a view of facilitating outcomes for pupils, their households, and the schools which implemented the project. In dialogue with the Council team, we prioritised eight outcomes for the evaluation of implementation year 1, which are set out in **Figure 2.1**, above.

2.4.2 Previous evidence and our expert views suggested that the eight prioritised outcomes could be realistically expected in year 1 to a larger extent than those identified, but deprioritised by us as part of our summary theory of change. This is because in year 1 practical issues may make it difficult to implement the project with fidelity relative to the theory of change. **Table 2.4**, at the end of this chapter, provides the list of deprioritised outcomes.

2.4.3 As part of a wider programme, the project was intended to contribute to programme outcomes for all pupils accessing secondary school canteens. The most relevant examples of school-wide contributions were capital funding, and efforts to improve compliance with school food standards. Both of these outcomes were intended to bring about changes for the whole community, not just project participants.

2.4.4 Within the community of secondary school pupils, those participating in the project were intended to experience project outcomes most directly. In addition, those eligible for statutory free-school meals could benefit from the project in two ways:

- Project participants newly accessing free meals could contribute to making meal take-up more popular, and so contribute to more statutory eligible pupils eating the meals they were entitled to.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gov.uk, Pupil premium: overview, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium>

<sup>15</sup> A recent literature review concluded: 'While the greatest increase in participation is often among students not previously eligible for free school meals, there are also typically increases in participation among students from low-income households who were previously eligible for free school meals'. See Impact on Urban Health, and Bremner & Co. (2023), 'Universal Primary Free School Meals: a Rapid Evidence Review' (unpublished).

- As a result, schools might face greater demand for meals, which might open opportunities to improve both compliance with school food standards, and the overall school food culture; and so, result in higher meal take-up across all pupils. This could be described as a ‘spillover effect’.

2.4.5 To summarise, this evaluation considers the three groups of pupils listed below. All three collectively make up the community of secondary-school pupils.

- those participating in the project (‘intervention group’ or ‘project participants’);
- those statutory eligible (‘main comparator group’ or ‘the statutory eligible’); and
- those non-eligible for free school meals (‘secondary comparator group’ or ‘those non-entitled’).

## 2.5 Description of the theory of change: Higher-food-security, and healthier-nutrition pupil outcomes

2.5.1 The Council’s expectation was for project participants to improve their nutrition during the school day. Healthy meal bundles compliant with school food standards were central to this.

2.5.2 In detail, the expectation was that by making healthy meal bundles available free of charge, project participants would take up those bundles. In turn, bundle take-up would result in improved nutrition relative to the situation prior to the project being put in place. Note the Council did not set a threshold above which bundle take-up could be expected to result in improved nutrition, for example ‘at least three bundles taken up per week’.

2.5.3 To inform this evaluation, we identified a series of transitions between food security statuses:

- The most fundamental transition representing a project outcome would be that from food insecurity to food security.
- Next, those in food security could experience a transition from poorer nutrition, or choices that comply poorly with the school food standards; to healthier nutrition, or choices better compliant with the standards.

2.5.4 **Figure 2.2**, below, sets out how these transitions apply to the groups of interest in this evaluation, arranged by level of need: from the relatively low need experienced by those non-eligible for any type of free school meal; to the higher need experienced by those entitled to statutory free-school meals, whose households have relatively the lowest level of income.

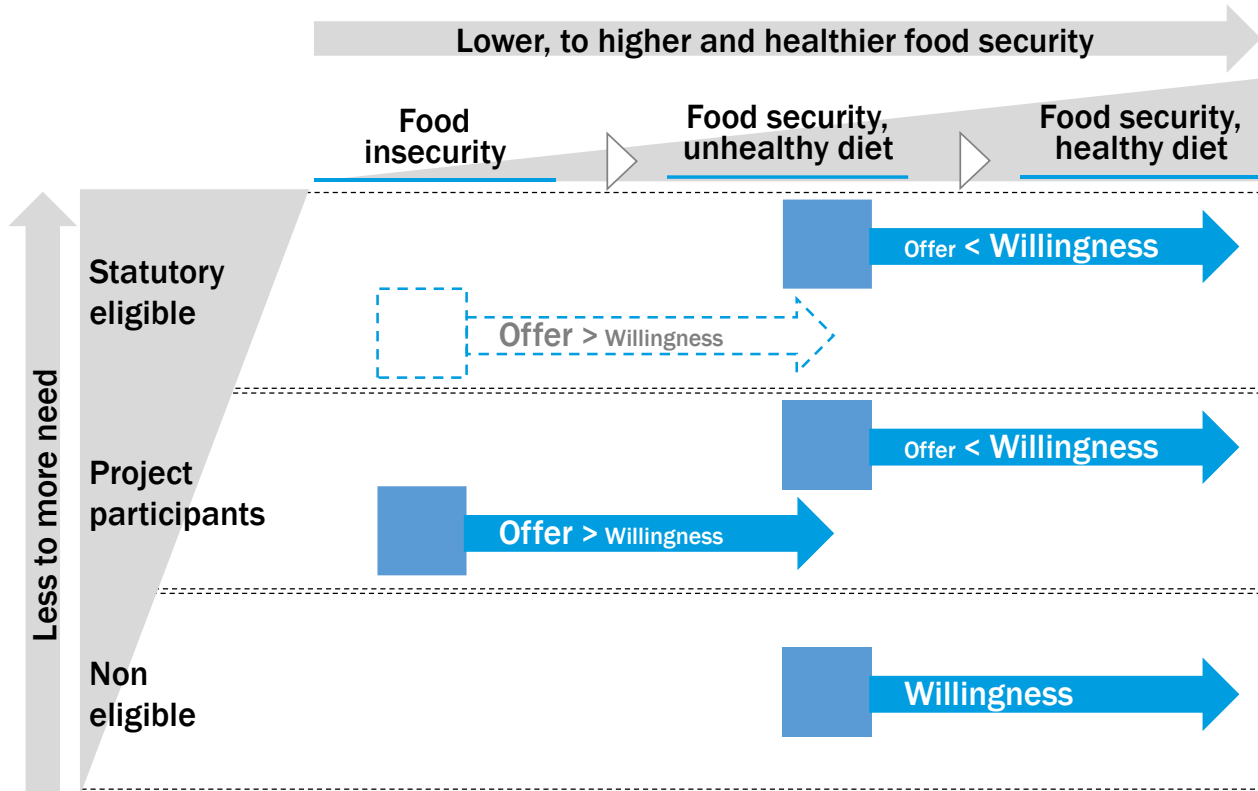
2.5.5 The figure also suggests the extent to which offering the meal free of charge might compare, as a driver of take-up, with other individual factors such as tastes, likes, dislikes, habits, and cultural constraints, which we propose to summarise as ‘willingness’. This comparison of take-up drivers is particularly relevant when pupils are confronted with menus, and lunch break timings which are necessarily limited at school canteens, as is the case with any other collective eating venue.

## 2.6 Description of the theory of change: Household outcomes

2.6.1 Assuming that the healthy-meal-bundle take-up outcome is realised in the first place at pupil level, the household finances outcome could be realised in two ways:

- Those households who could not afford lunches prior to participating in the project would improve their finances notionally. This means that no cash would be freed up in their case, however their child would have access to healthy meal bundles whose value could be considered as an increase to the household’s overall resources.
- Those households who had been funding lunches prior to participating in the project, whether at the school canteen or otherwise, would see some cash being freed up for other purposes, including increasing the household’s consumption level or current savings for future consumption.

Figure 2.2: Food security transitions



Source: Aldaba analysis. Note 1: Font size for 'offer' and 'willingness' denotes relative importance.

- 2.6.2 There is a chance that this outcome could produce a negative unintended outcome. The reduction in lunch expenditure might be used for the purchase and consumption of unhealthy items, or other purposes entailing negative consequences.
- 2.6.3 In addition, and again assuming that the healthy-meal-bundle take-up outcome is realised in the first place, another expected outcome was an improvement in the food security of the whole household, not just that of the project participant. This household outcome would rest on the assumption that additional spillover effects would be experienced by other members of the household. Through a combination of expenditure reductions, and positive feedback from the project participant, the whole household could place greater value on higher, and healthier food security, thus making a collective effort to achieve it.
- 2.6.4 During the fieldwork for this evaluation, we became aware of instances where the household had applied for the project; had had their project application turned down because of lack of proof of being in receipt of Universal Credit; had then applied for Universal Credit; had had it granted; and then had successfully reapplied for the project. As such, 'increased take-up of welfare benefits' can be considered a positive unintended outcome.

## 2.7 Description of the theory of change: School outcomes

- 2.7.1 Our summary theory of change considers the funding made available by the project as an input. This includes both capital funding to those schools assessed as needing it the most, and the funding for the healthy meal bundles taken up by project participants. Another input is the requirement to provide healthy meal bundles which include some guidelines from the school food standards.

2.7.2 The Council team considered that one of the outcomes resulting from these inputs would be higher food quality at canteens throughout the whole school day. This quality improvement would be measured over a baseline set in April 2023. At this baseline, compliance with school food standards at lunchtime ranged between 67 and 92 per cent, with the average being estimated at 83 per cent across all secondary schools. Compliance during morning services was slightly lower.

2.7.3 The April 2023 audit identified the following reasons for the limited compliance with school food standards:

- The frequency of processed meats in the overarching menu for the week.
- There was a lack on non-dairy based vegetarian protein in many of the menus.
- There was a lack of wholemeal in the menus.
- Oily fish other than in tuna sandwiches was virtually non-existent.
- Some schools had too much pastry in the cycle.
- Where desserts were offered, some had a lack of fruit contained within the pudding, so failing to meet the 50% minimum requirement<sup>16</sup>.

2.7.4 In our expert view, the key assumptions underpinning the link between inputs and the higher food-quality outcome are the following:

- Capital and meal take-up funding enable an upgrade from lower to higher quality. This assumption is required for the outcome to be realistic. If the funding did not enable an upgrade, it would simply meet the additional demand from project participants while maintaining the same quality level as before the project.
- The school food standards were in place before the project started, and yet compliance was limited, according to the April 2023 audit. Therefore, the assumption underpinning the project is that food quality would improve by including the reminder to provide healthy meal bundles, which in turn include guidelines from the standards, as part of the Conditions of Grants document signed between the schools and the Council. This may be referred to as a 'lever to increase compliance, and food quality'.

2.7.5 A separate project outcome was 'better sourcing and procurement practices'. The Council team's expectation was that the additional demand from project participants could result in catering practices becoming more of a priority for schools, and other stakeholders such as catering companies; and kitchen facility, and food providers. This could trigger some economies of scale, which in turn could result in improvements in food quality. Economies of scale are complex.

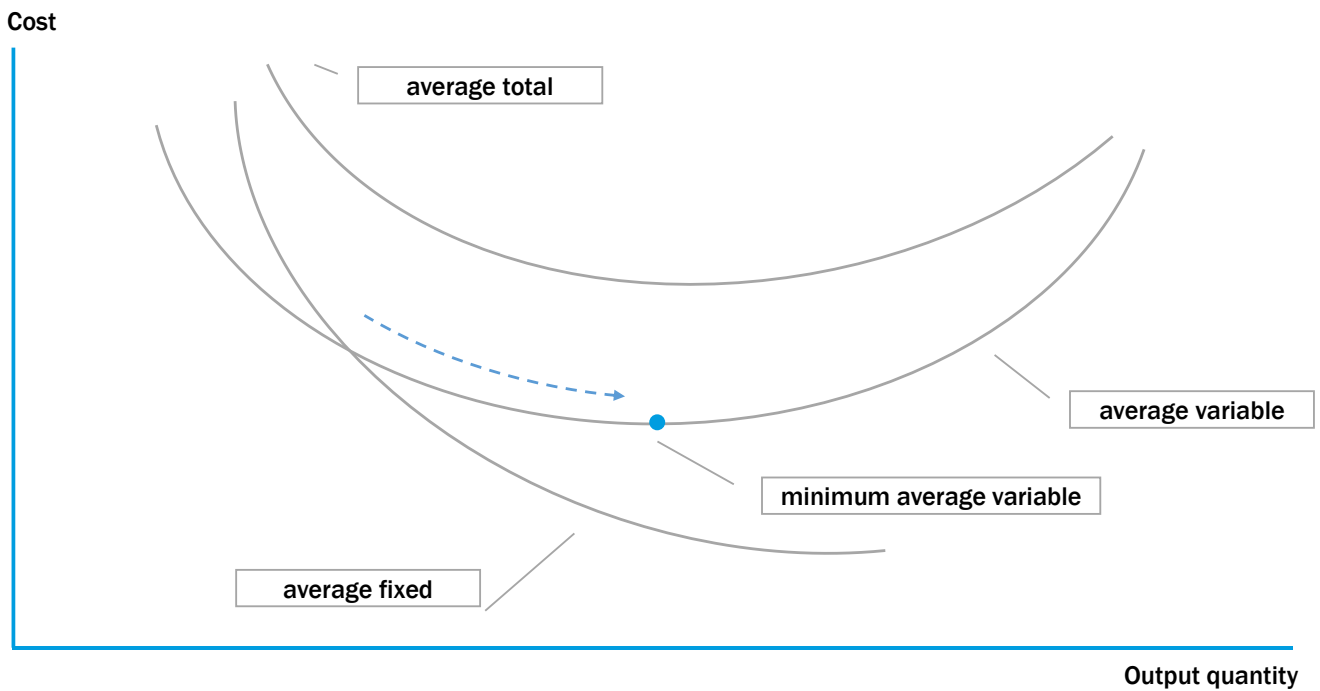
2.7.6 To deal with this complexity, we propose to focus on one of the key assumptions underpinning the 'better sourcing and procurement' outcome. In our expert view, the assumption is that project participants represent a volume of demand in each school which implies meeting certain thresholds, which in turn give access to lower average costs.

2.7.7 As shown in **Figure 2.3**, below, these thresholds may be met when fixed costs are better utilised, by sharing them across a larger number of users. The blue dotted line illustrates a journey towards the minimum cost per meal, 'or average meal cost', which could be triggered by an additional number of canteen users, such as the new project participants, represented on the horizontal axis.

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<sup>16</sup> Cohesion Consulting (June 2023), Catering Audit: Delivering the free secondary school meals project (unpublished), p. 15.

Figure 2.3: Relationship between total, variable, and fixed costs, per unit



Source: Aldaba analysis

- 2.7.8 In commercial terms, economies of scale typically translate into lower costs per unit when an additional batch is purchased. For example, a catering service may offer a certain unit cost for the first batch of 100 meals per day, whereas the unit cost is reduced for an additional 50 meals, which results in a lower unit cost for the totality of 150 meals. A similar logic may apply to purchasing ingredients, or hiring extra staff, at those schools which have in-house catering services.
- 2.7.9 The outcome on improved sourcing and procurement practices included aspects beyond lower costs. The Council team’s ambition was also for healthier food to be more central to procurement practices. Some of the barriers to healthier menus could be overcome at the contract negotiation stage through greater bargaining power, which in turn could be the result of higher canteen user numbers.
- 2.7.10 A separate school outcome was ‘reduced school lunch shortfalls’. Pupils who are not entitled to free school meals, and whose digital wallets have insufficient money, are typically allowed to have their meals. Schools then contact parents and ask them to meet the shortfall.
- 2.7.11 The Council team assumed that some of the project participants had been in this situation in the past, and would become less likely to be so as a result of the project. This in turn would mean that schools would need to carry a lower level of meal-related financial shortfalls. Unlike debt, these shortfalls do not attract any interest payable by either parents or schools.
- 2.7.12 Related to shortfalls, another outcome expected by the Council team was to contribute to reducing the administrative costs associated with chasing parents, and managing meal payment shortfalls.
- 2.7.13 It is worth noting that the Council made no additional funding available to schools for the administrative implementation of the project as a whole. The Council team thought of the flexibility in the project launch dates as a compensation for not offering any administration funding. The assumption here was that timescale flexibility would allow administrative teams to launch the project at times where administrative resources would have otherwise been underutilised, also referred to as ‘down times’.



## 2.8 Assessment of the theory of change: Inputs

- 2.8.1 Now that we have completed the description of our summary theory of change, the aim of the following sections is to assess it. More specifically, we aim to assess the extent to which it is realistic and in line with reliable evidence. A later chapter will verify the links identified as part of the theory of change through the analysis of data collected directly from project participants, schools, and other stakeholders.
- 2.8.2 The £1 million budget for 2023-24 was estimated through some modelling undertaken by Council analysts. Based on data from the Department for Work and Pensions, the Council knew that approximately 15,465 people aged up to 19 were part of households in receipt of Universal Credit in Southwark. The Council also knew that approximately 12,090 of them were already on statutory free school meals. Out of the remaining 3,375, the Council did not know how many were in secondary schools.
- 2.8.3 To address this, the Council requested further data to the Department for Work and Pensions. More specifically, the Council requested a breakdown of households in receipt of Universal Credit by school stage. However, this level of detail was not received within the available timescales.
- 2.8.4 The Council assumed that the proportion of secondary school pupils in receipt of Universal Credit, and not eligible for free school meals, was the same as the proportion of pupils in secondary schools out of the total of pupils: 46 per cent. As a result, the Council estimated that approximately 1,563 pupils, or 46 per cent of 3,375, would participate in the project.
- 2.8.5 An estimated cost of £2.90 per healthy meal bundle, across 190 school days per year, was applied to the estimate of project participants to obtain an estimated total cost for 2023-24.<sup>17</sup> The estimate was further refined to obtain a total for the cost of healthy meal bundles actually taken up, as opposed to just bundles entitled to, as part of the project.
- 2.8.6 The resulting total estimate was approximately £861,000 with a  $\pm 10$  per cent range of £845,000 to £1,010,000. In addition to this, the April-2023 audit estimated a need of capital funding of approximately £187,000, which brought the central estimate for the total project cost to £1,048,000, excluding the Council and the schools' staff and overhead costs.
- 2.8.7 The April-2023 audit estimated that six schools would require additional labour costs, over and above their existing staff, worth a total of £69,000<sup>18</sup>. These costs were not explicitly and directly funded by the project. As such, they were not included in the total cost estimate.
- 2.8.8 We highlight that the £2.90 estimate largely drew on the prices charged at tills for meal deals across secondary school canteens in Southwark. A meal deal typically includes a hot meal and a dessert, or a substantial cold meal, and was thought to be a good reference for the project's healthy meal bundles.
- 2.8.9 Whilst the £2.90 estimate included an uplift of approximately 60 pence over the average meal-deal price, the Council team gathered no evidence as to the extent to which the estimate reflected the true, full unit cost of the meals. This limitation can be extrapolated to the central estimate of approximately £1,000,000 for the totality of the project.

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<sup>17</sup> The £2.90 estimate was derived from a combination of prices charged at school canteens in Southwark, statutory free-school meal allowances, equivalent estimates for other London boroughs, and recommended unit costs by expert organisations. See Cohesion Consulting (June 2023), Catering Audit: Delivering the free secondary school meals project (unpublished), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Cohesion Consulting (June 2023), Catering Audit: Delivering the free secondary school meals project (unpublished), p. 7.

**Overall, we believe that the modelling undertaken by the Council analysts provided a good basis to inform the decision making.**

2.8.10 This assessment applies to the estimate of project participants. Similarly, the audit commissioned in April 2023 provided timely and detailed evidence for the Council to decide which schools were in most need of capital funding, based on an expert assessment of the existing facilities, and the estimates of the additional demand that each school would face as a result of the project.

**Given the criticality of the £2.90 unit cost, we believe that the average of the meal deal prices at the till provided an uncertain basis for decision making.**

2.8.11 During our fieldwork, we gathered qualitative views suggesting that the approximately 60 pence included in the £2.90 estimate were in relation to:

- an uplift due to the inflation at the time of the April-2023 audit, which might not have been passed on to canteen users in full at that point, and also the forecast inflation in the subsequent months;
- an uplift to ensure better compliance with school food standards, and so meet the requirements of a healthy meal bundle;
- an uplift on the food and preparation costs to ensure that the London Living Wage was paid to all catering staff, even though the healthy meal bundles taken up by project participants, and funded at £2.90, represented only a proportion of all the meals served at school canteens; and
- a compensation in relation to the administrative costs associated with project implementation, given that no admin funding was explicitly offered to schools.

2.8.12 As such, the design of the project could have benefited from additional analyses, for example estimates of the true unit cost of a meal deal for schools that use external catering services, compared to those using in-house services.

2.8.13 These estimates of the true unit cost could have been supplemented with estimates of the adjustments required to compensate for inflation; raise the quality of the meals to ensure better compliance with the school food standards; make the London Living Wage feasible; and cover admin implementation costs. Note such adjustments should have been analysed in the context of the whole school community because better-quality meals, which are prepared by staff paid the London Living Wage, are made available to all canteen users, not just project participants.

2.8.14 Our emphasis on the true unit cost of a meal is due to the fact that schools may charge a price lower than the true cost to their canteen users at the till, and therefore top up till revenues through other funding sources in order to meet catering contract payments, or in-house catering budgets. If this was proven to be the case, any impacts identified in relation to the project would need to be attributed to both the Council, as funder for the project, and the schools, as providers of the supplementary funding.

2.8.15 The limitations around unit costs affect directly some of the key elements of our summary theory of change, including:

- Output 3: Meals that better comply with school food standards.
- Outcome 2: Healthier nutrition among pupils.
- Outcome 5: Higher food quality at schools.

- 2.8.16 In terms of capital funding, we identified an opportunity which would have improved the design of the project. There is a possibility that project participants had been paying for meals prior to the project becoming in place. Where this was the case, the existing facilities had already been meeting a level of demand similar to that expected as a result of the project. It would have been reasonable for the Council to take this possibility into account and gather relevant evidence to adjust the list of schools assessed as in need of capital aid, and the corresponding capital grant amounts.
- 2.8.17 In our view, the input from the catering consultants signalled the Council's interest in improving 'the quality of the outcomes', in addition to the number of free healthy meal bundles, which may be technically referred to as 'the quantity of outputs'.

**The consultant input could be considered a distinctive feature of the Council's project in comparison to the Government's funding for statutory eligible pupils.**

- 2.8.18 In terms of the school food standards, the audit undertaken by the Council in April 2023 revealed compliance limitations. The assumption underlying the design of the project was that the grant condition on compliance would reinforce the pre-existing requirement, and so schools would increase quality standards.
- 2.8.19 We believe that the April-2023 audit could have been interpreted as evidence that just stating the requirement to provide healthy meal bundles, which include some guidelines from the standards, on a document, whether it is the Department for Education's publication on school food standards, or the Council's Conditions of Grant agreement, is not enough to raise compliance.
- 2.8.20 To address this, the project could have been designed to influence some key factors, such as: pupils' preferences, which may not necessarily be in line with the school food standards; and the commercial set-up of school canteens, which face a trade-off between compliance with the standards and ensuring a certain minimum level of purchases from pupils to achieve viability.

**It feels unrealistic to expect improvements in standard compliance simply by making some consultant time available, and including a pre-existing, poorly-adhered-to requirement in the Conditions of Grant agreement.**

- 2.8.21 Note that no penalty mechanisms were put in place alongside the project. In addition, there is no evidence that the funding per healthy meal bundle allowed quality improvements. As a result:

**the outcome relating to higher food quality at schools was unrealistic, and unlikely to be achieved in practice, mostly because of limitations in the way in which the project was designed.**

- 2.8.22 Note also that a prior published evaluation found that the extended entitlement to free school meals had little impact on diet and eating habits.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.9 Assessment of the theory of change: Activities

- 2.9.1 The Council team grew from one project lead during the design stage; to one head, one project lead, and two project officers during the early implementation stage of the project. All roles combined project responsibilities with other wider programme responsibilities.

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<sup>19</sup> Department for Education (2010), Evaluation of the free school meals pilot, Impact report, p. 2, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf)

- 2.9.2 In our expert view, the resourcing decision for the project lacked detailed planning. For example, we could not access evidence showing that the four part-time roles resulted from some bottom-up exercise that linked outcomes; detailed tasks; and levels of expertise, skills, and responsibility expected of the team roles.
- 2.9.3 The same limitation applies to the tasks allocated to schools. The Council's assumption was that the schools' management and administrative teams could accommodate the tasks around outreach, eligibility checking, and ongoing engagement with project participants. The school teams were assumed to be able to also accommodate the adaptation of till systems, and the requirement to participate in the project evaluation, including running some of the household surveys as part of the evaluation.
- 2.9.4 The Council team thought of the flexibility in the project launch dates as a compensation for not offering any administration funding. The assumption here was that timescale flexibility would allow administrative teams to launch the project at times where administrative resources would have otherwise been underutilised, also referred to as 'down times'.
- 2.9.5 We believe that the management and administrative tasks allocated to schools fulfilled a critical function for the success of the project. As such, they should not have been left without specific funding, or at a minimum, a more robust articulation as to why existing school resources should be able to cope with the extra administrative burden.
- 2.9.6 It is reasonable to expect some well thought-through alignment between tasks; individual roles allocated to tasks; other responsibilities and commitments already placed on those roles; and the funding required to sustain roles and tasks. This applies to both the Council, and the schools.

**From the design stage, there were limitations in the capacity and ability of the project to successfully undertake the activities required to achieve outputs and realise outcomes.**

## **2.10 Assessment of theory of change: Pupil outputs**

- 2.10.1 A published evaluation available at the time when the project was designed produced findings on meal take-up. The evaluation compared one pilot with extended entitlement, similar to the project, and another comparable local area. Take-up was defined as having school meals at least once in the week previous to collecting the data.
- 2.10.2 One of the conclusions was: 'The extended entitlement pilot did not significantly increase take-up [...] among secondary school pupils. Take-up [...] was lower for newly entitled pupils in the extended entitlement area than for pupils in the universal entitlement areas who would have been newly entitled [...] under the extended entitlement criteria.'<sup>20</sup>
- 2.10.3 In detail, 66 per cent of pupils in the extended entitlement pilot took up meals before the pilot was introduced. This percentage decreased to 62 per cent in the first year, and increased to 67 per cent in the second year of pilot implementation. The changes in take-up were small, and not statistically significant. However, take-up decreased in the comparator area.

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<sup>20</sup> Department for Education (2010), Evaluation of the free school meals pilot, Impact report, pp. 2, 29, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf)

- 2.10.4 This may be interpreted as evidence that the impact of the pilot was mostly about maintaining the take-up levels that had already been achieved prior to introducing the pilot, and avoiding the drop that would have otherwise happened. It must be noted that school meal prices increased during the extended entitlement pilot, and the results only apply to Years 7 to 9, or up to approximately 14 years of age.<sup>21</sup>
- 2.10.5 There is some tension between the existing evidence and the Council team's expectation that project participants would take up the meals freely available to them, and more specifically healthy meal bundles compliant with school food standards. This is even more the case if we consider that the published evaluation defined take-up as 'one meal taken up per week'. It would appear that this level of take-up is too low to achieve the project's expected outcomes around healthier nutrition.

**Despite being possibly too low for the Council's expectations, the take-up level changed little as a result of the pilot examined in the published evaluation.**

- 2.10.6 Note the Council identified outcomes on healthier nutrition, which were linked directly to take-up, but did not set any threshold for take-up, for example 'at least three healthy meal bundles taken up per week'. In addition, the Council did not measure the levels of take-up for project participants, prior to introducing the project, in order to produce forecasts, such as 'a 5 per cent increase in take-up of healthy meal bundles in 2023-24, relative to the 2022-23 baseline, where project participants had been paying for the meals'.

**The Council did not measure take-up for project participants prior to introducing the project, which makes it difficult to explain the outcome expected of the project.**

- 2.10.7 In addition, the Council team was aware of the possibility of also increasing take-up among those statutory eligible for free school meals. This was broadly framed within the spillover improvements from compliance with the school food standards, and the wider food culture at schools. However, we found no evidence of a detailed logic articulation by the Council team as to why and how access to free healthy meal bundles by project participants was expected to trigger an increase in meal take-up among the statutory eligible group.

## **2.11 Assessment of theory of change: Higher food-security outcome for statutory eligible group**

- 2.11.1 In principle, the statutory eligible group had been accessing free meals, and therefore experiencing the associated outcomes, for some time before the project was put in place. As an illustration, the number of statutory eligible pupils at each of the food-security statuses in 2022-23, the year before the project was put in place, would represent the result of having been exposed to the same intervention that the project provides: accessing free meals. This exposure also applies to students in Year 7, the first secondary-school year, because free school meals are universal in Southwark's primary schools.

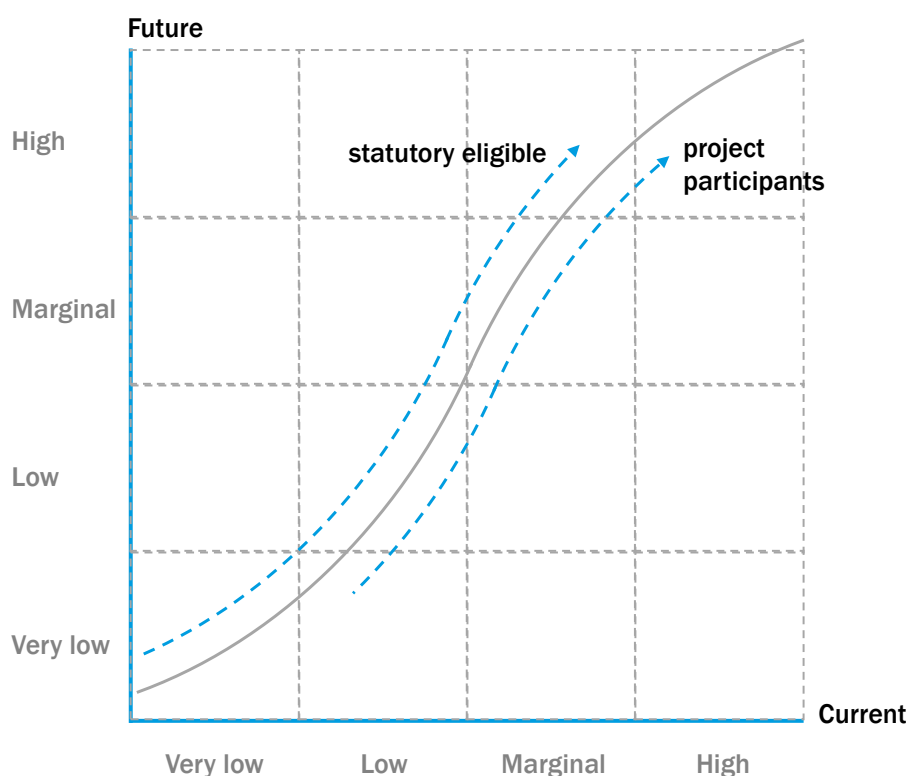
**In simple terms, the numbers of statutory eligible pupils in very low, low, marginal, and high food security reflect the realised outcomes of free school meals.**

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<sup>21</sup> Department for Education (2010), Evaluation of the free school meals pilot, Impact report, p. 38, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf)

- 2.11.2 It can be considered that the most socially meaningful, and critical transition is that from food insecurity; to food security, even if the latter involves unhealthy choices. This is because just one child exposed to food insecurity could be considered as a case meriting intervention from public services, and worth eradicating. As such, it is important as part of this evaluation to assess the extent to which those statutory eligible are included in the hunger or food insecurity status, despite having in principle realised the outcomes associated with free school meals.
- 2.11.3 If indeed those statutory eligible experience food insecurity rarely, the transition to food security could be considered as a reasonable expectation for the project. In other words, there would be some evidence to believe that the outcome expectation on the project is realistic.
- 2.11.4 On the other hand, if those statutory eligible, who have been accessing free meals for some time before the project started, experience food insecurity to some extent, there might be a case to moderate the expectations on the project. This would mean that the project could not be expected to eradicate food insecurity. It could only be expected to reduce the numbers in this level of need to some extent.
- 2.12 Assessment of theory of change: Higher food-security outcome for the project participant group**
- 2.12.1 Project participants are placed between those statutory eligible, and those non eligible in the need scale of **Figure 2.2**, earlier in this chapter. This could be interpreted to mean that project participants could in principle be distributed across all food security statuses. The outcomes experienced by project participants before and after participating in the project should logically present a pattern when compared to the other two groups.
- 2.12.2 For ease, we can refer to the fact that healthy meal bundles become available free of charge as ‘free offer’. The hypothesis implicit to our summary theory of change is that free offer would have greater weight in the participants’ transition from food insecurity to some form of food security. This compares with the weight that willingness would have in the transition from less healthy, to healthier food security.
- 2.12.3 The situation that best illustrates this hypothesis is a pupil whose household had not been able to afford regular lunches before the project, and then started accessing healthy meal bundles for free. In this case, free offer could trigger a transition towards greater food security. Beyond this, it is difficult to make assumptions on whether this hypothetical pupil would choose the less healthy, before the healthier option. **Figure 2.2**, earlier in this chapter, assumes so across all pupil groups simply for diagrammatic purposes.
- 2.12.4 Establishing the extent to which the project could be expected to reduce the proportion of participants in the hunger or food insecurity statuses proves challenging. Project participants start from a better baseline than those statutory eligible, or in other words, their level of need is lower.
- 2.12.5 As a result, and in theory, the scope for improvement or ‘the journey towards greater and healthier food security’ is shorter in the case of project participants. For example, taken all together, the statutory eligible group can be expected to include a larger number of pupils in greater need who can progress towards a number of different levels of lower need. In contrast, the group of project participants, as a whole, can be expected to have a smaller number of levels of lower need to progress towards, and therefore a shorter scope for improvement.
- 2.12.6 This shorter scope for improvement has consequences for the project. The level of effectiveness required for the project to realise outcomes is higher compared to statutory-eligible pupils. This is particularly the case if we assume diminishing marginal improvements as need levels decrease, or in other words, as wealth levels increase. **Figure 2.4**, below, depicts this assumption.

Figure 2.4: Scope and rates of improvement in food security



Source: Aldaba analysis

2.12.7 The horizontal axis in **Figure 2.4**, above, shows food security levels already achieved. For example, those closer to zero have achieved lower food security and could correspond to those statutory eligible in a hypothetical scenario where they have not accessed free meals yet. The vertical axis shows outcome realisation levels for interventions aiming at improving food security, or in other words, the resulting food security level after being exposed to an intervention. The marginal improvement for those with greater need is higher compared to those with lower need.

2.12.8 The blue dotted lines illustrate the scopes for improvement. The scope for improvement for statutory eligible pupils is longer, and exhibits more increasing marginal improvements, than that for project participants. It is more challenging for the project to achieve a marginal improvement for its participants.

**In simple terms, the assumption is that the statutory intervention has already picked the low hanging fruit, and so leaves the high hanging fruit for the project.**

## 2.13 Assessment of theory of change: Higher food-security outcome for the non-eligible group

2.13.1 A reasonable assumption would be that the non-eligible group experiences food insecurity rarely or never. This assumption would rest on the fact that those pupils are part of relatively wealthier households.

2.13.2 While remaining food secure, a project outcome for this group could be to choose the healthier option more often. In our approach, this transition can only be explained through personal willingness, given that free offer is not available to this group.

## 2.14 Assessment of theory of change: Unintended food-security outcomes

2.14.1 Where lunches had been affordable, and taken up prior to the project, there is a chance that the freed-up cash remains available to the pupils and is used to purchase additional food items, on top of the meal. This may result in positive outcomes, such as using the cash to purchase breakfast or snacks, whereas before these were unaffordable; or negative outcomes, such as overeating, wastage, or unhealthy purchases, which we consider to be a negative unintended outcome.

## 2.15 Assessment of theory of change: Validation of pupil outputs and outcomes through existing evidence

2.15.1 The published summaries of the Family Resource Survey show that UK households in receipt of Universal Credit experience food insecurity to a greater extent than the all UK households considered together. As shown in **Figure 2.5**, below, in 2021-22, 18 per cent of Universal Credit households in the UK experienced very low food security, whereas only 3 per cent of all households did so. Also in 2021-22, 54 per cent of Universal Credit households experienced high food security, whereas 88 per cent of all households did so.

2.15.2 Food security decreased in 2022-23. In this year, 25 per cent of Universal Credit households in the UK experienced very low food security in 2022-23, whereas only 5 per cent of all households did so. Also in 2022-23, 42 per cent of Universal Credit households experienced high food security, whereas 83 per cent of all households did so.<sup>22</sup>

**Measurements of food security can vary from one year to the next, particularly in relation to lower security statuses.**

2.15.3 Further analysis of the Family Resource Survey, based on data only available to researchers, allowed us to identify households with children in state-run secondary schools. Among these, we identified those in receipt of Universal Credit. Among these, we identified those where secondary school children were taking up, and not taking up free school meals.<sup>23</sup> This last sub-group can be considered as comparable with project participants.

2.15.4 Note the Family Resource Survey asks about take-up of free school meals the week before. This is different to being entitled to statutory free school meals. Those having taken up a free school meal the week before may be assumed to be statutory eligible, however those not having taken up a free school meal may be misleadingly included in the category of not statutory eligible.

2.15.5 With these caveats in mind, as shown in **Figure 2.6**, below, we estimated that 13 per cent of Universal Credit recipients not taking up statutory meals (and therefore, possibly not entitled to them) experienced very low food security in 2021-22, which is 10 per cent less than those taking up statutory meals, and 10 per cent more than those not in receipt of neither Universal Credit or taking up statutory meals.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gov.uk, Family Resource Survey, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2021-to-2022> ; <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2022-to-2023>

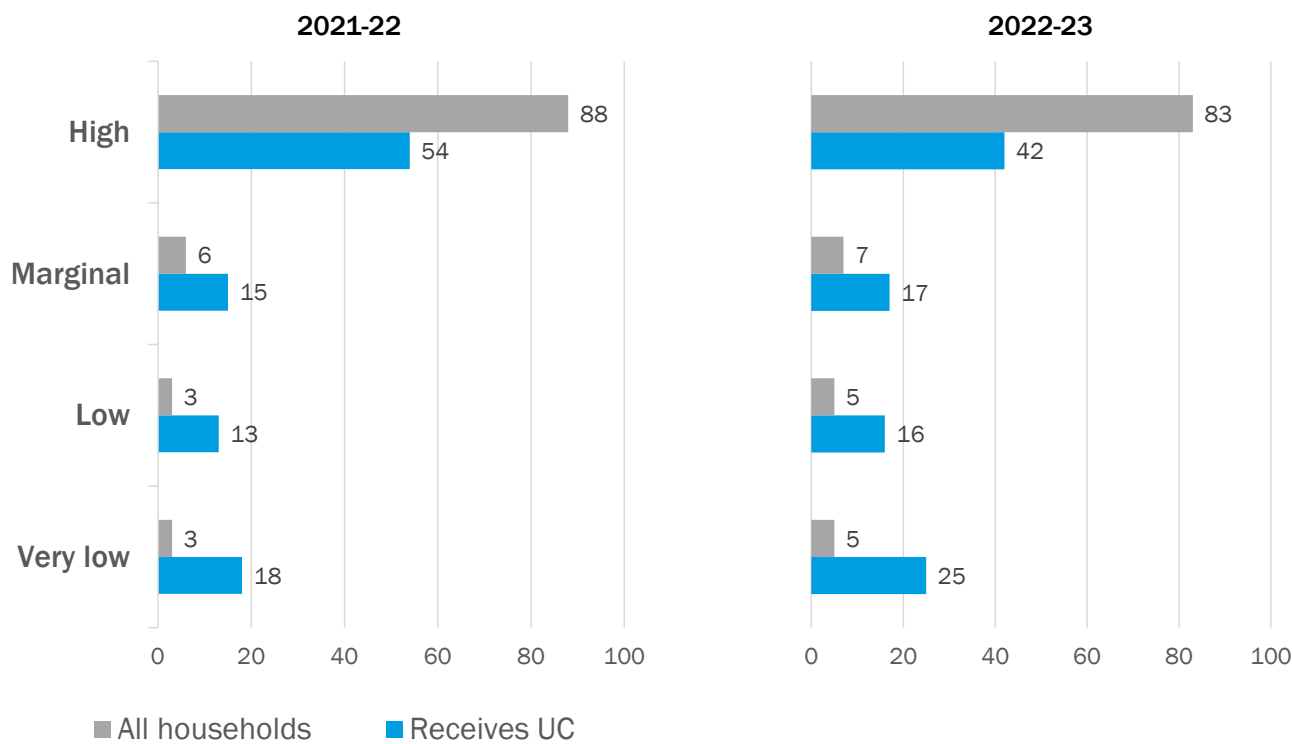
<sup>23</sup> In detail, the identification of children in state-run secondary schools was undertaken on the EDUCSCH variable of the child dataset. The take-up of free school meals was identified through the SMLIT variables in the child dataset. Both results were aggregated at household level and merged with the household dataset. The identification of Universal Credit recipient household was undertaken through the HHUC variable in the household dataset.

<sup>24</sup> We classified the food security scores into the intervals recommended by the questionnaire developers for households without children. This is to ensure comparability with published statistics. The intervals are: 0 = high, 1-2 = marginal, 3-5 = low, 6-10 = very low. See glossary, household food security, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2022-to-2023/family-resources-survey-background-information-and-methodology#glossary>



2.15.6 The situation worsened in 2022-23. The percentage of Universal Credit recipients not taking up statutory meals, and experiencing very low food security, increased from 13, in 2021-22, to 17 in 2022-23. This is 12 per cent less than those taking up statutory meals, and 12 per cent more than those not in receipt of Universal Credit or taking up statutory meals. **Figure 2.7**, below, sets out some of the 2022-23 information in Figure 2.6 in a different format.

Figure 2.5: Food security statuses in the last month, for households in the UK, by being in receipt of Universal Credit, in 2021-22 and 2022-23 (percentages)



Source: Aldaba analysis of Family Resource Survey

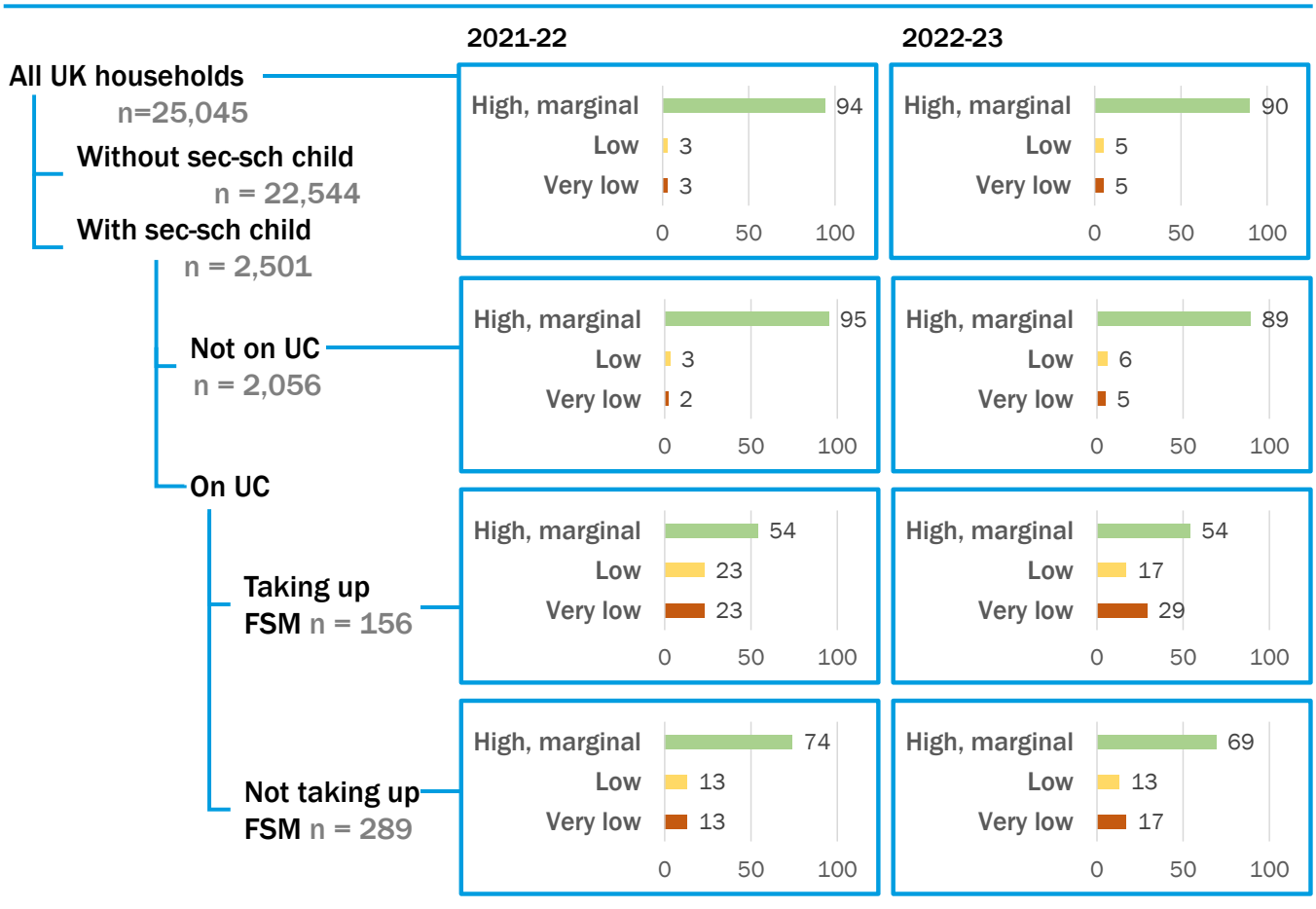
2.15.7 On the basis of this evidence, the Council could be considered to have made an appropriate decision when targeting the project at those households on Universal Credit. The reasoning for this would be that this group experienced a level of need which was considerable, and not met by the government's statutory services.

**The Council targeted the project at households experiencing high levels of unmet need.**

2.15.8 Note that nearly half of those taking up free school meals experienced low or very low food security in 2022-23. This is despite the fact that this group had realised the outcome associated with accessing free school meals.

2.15.9 The project's aim was not just for the Council and the schools to grant entitlement, but also for project participants to take up the healthy meal bundles. Our further analysis of the Family Resource Survey, based on data only available to researchers, revealed some patterns on the numbers of free school meals taken up per week by those statutory eligible.

Figure 2.6: Food security statuses in the last month, in the UK, for households with children in secondary schools, by being in receipt of Universal Credit, and taking up statutory free-school meals, in 2021-22 and 2022-23 (percentages)



Source: Aldaba Analysis of Family Resource Survey. Note 1: n values refer to surveyed households in 2022-23; those for 2021-22 are similar.

2.15.10 As shown in **Figure 2.8**, below, approximately 86 per cent of the statutory eligible households experiencing food security had taken up a free meal every school day in the previous week in 2022-23. In the case of those experiencing food insecurity, the percentage was 88. These similarities applied also to those taking up a lower number of free school meals in the previous week.

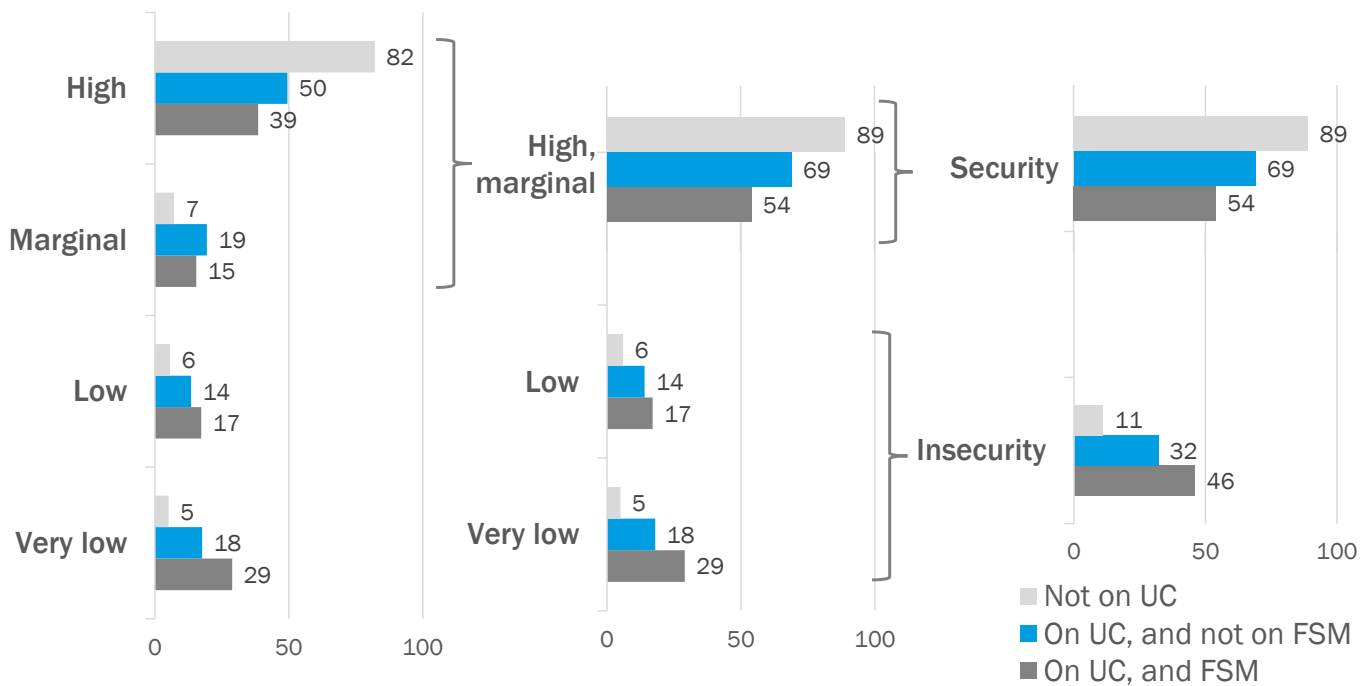
**We estimated take-up in the UK to be 4.7 free school meals per week, for statutory eligible households in both food security, and insecurity. Note these are not necessarily healthy meal bundles at lunchtime.**

2.15.11 Whilst probably affected by small sample limitations, this evidence cannot be used as a basis to assume that the higher the take-up, the higher the food security. Instead, it could be used to support the assumption that:

**food security is the result of factors which cannot be influenced through free-school-meal take-up.**

2.15.12 The causal direction might be more likely to go from socioeconomic factors affecting the households, to a qualification for free meals; rather than the opposite: a causal direction from taking up free meals to a reduction of those socioeconomic factors, which would manifest itself in higher, and healthier food security, as take-up increases.

Figure 2.7: Summary food-security statuses in the last month, in the UK, for households with children in secondary schools, by being in receipt of Universal Credit, and taking up statutory free-school meals, in 2022-23 (percentages)



Source: Aldaba analysis of Family Resource Survey. Note 1: See previous figure.

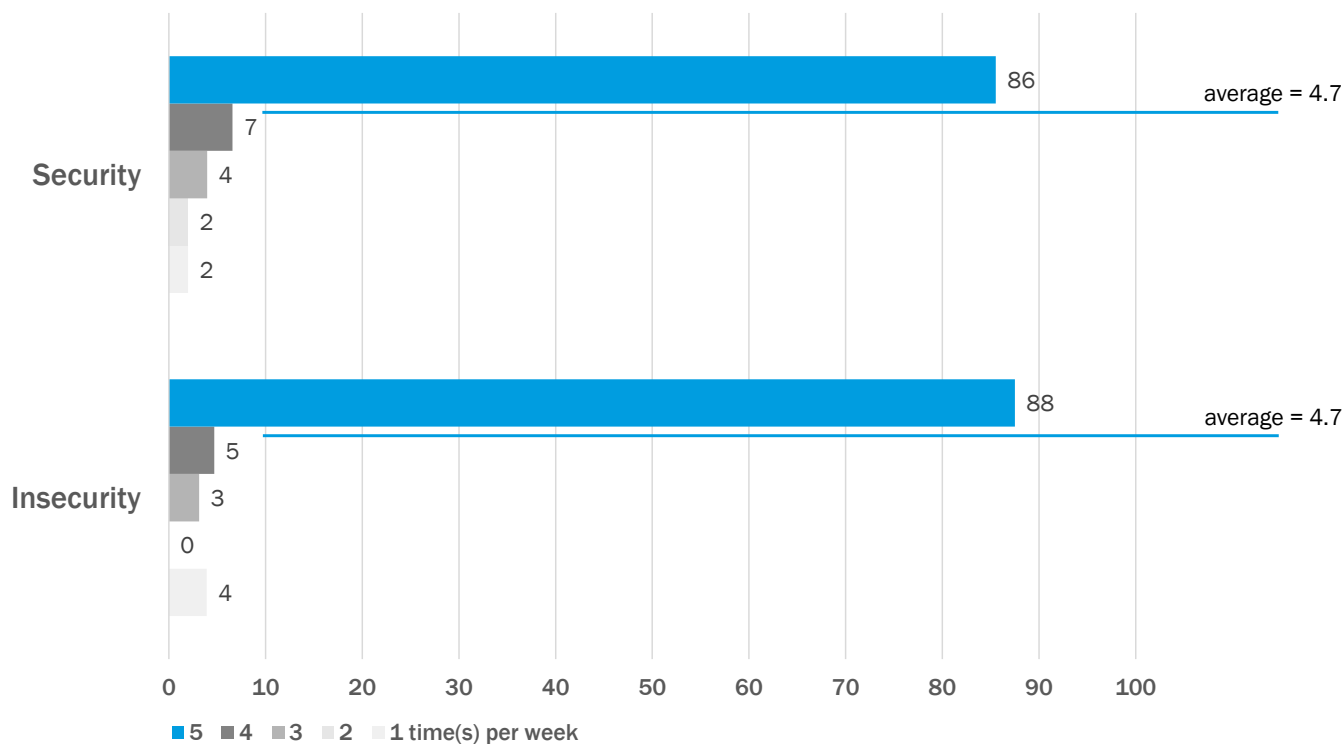
2.15.13 In summary, we propose to interpret the Council’s decision to target the project at those in receipt of Universal Credit, and not entitled to statutory free school meals, as in line with the evidence we analysed, and a good way of channelling limited resources to those most in need. On the other hand, the higher-food-security outcome, which is dependent on take-up, is ambiguous for three main reasons:

- It is uncertain whether participants were already taking up, and paying for meals prior to participating in the project, and therefore already experiencing the associated outcome.
- Past interventions similar to the project under evaluation have had little impact on meal take-up.
- Meal take-up cannot reverse other factors which appear to be responsible for food insecurity, as shown by those pupils on statutory free-school meals who are on very low or low food security.

2.15.14 As a result, the impact component of this evaluation, available later in this report, should limit itself to assessing relative improvements in food security, rather than binary outcomes of the type: food secure versus food insecure. For example, the impact evaluation might be able to evidence a reduction in the percentage of those experiencing very low food security, and a resulting increase in those experiencing a transition to low or marginal security.

**Some project participants may continue to experience hunger or very low food security, and fail to experience the most critical type of project outcome, which involves a transition towards some form of food security.**

Figure 2.8: Food security statuses in the last month, in the UK, by number of free school meals taken up in the last week, in 2022-23 (percentages, and average number of meals)



Source: Aldaba analysis of Family Resource Survey. Note 1: see previous figure for details. Note 2: We calculated the average number of meals taken up for those households with more than one secondary school child.

## 2.16 Assessment of theory of change: Household outputs and outcomes

- 2.16.1 A recent literature review concluded that ‘there is currently more limited evidence overall (and within the UK) examining the impact of universal free school meals on household finances’.<sup>25</sup> This limitation may also apply to the impact of expanded means-tested entitlement.
- 2.16.2 From the perspective of households, every healthy meal bundle taken up by the project participants represents a realised output which leads to savings. **Table 2.1**, below, sets out some scenarios for freed-up cash in those cases where the household had been paying for school meals; and notional resources newly available where the household had not been able to afford meals prior to participating in the project.
- 2.16.3 There is a case in between paying for school meals, and not being able to afford a meal, which is to provide some alternative, such as a packed lunch, or a take-away. The cost of the packed-lunch alternative would include both the ingredients, and the unpaid preparation time by household members. For simplicity, this evaluation focuses just on the two extreme cases of previously paying for school meals, and not being able to afford any meal.
- 2.16.4 In simple terms, savings to households were the clearest output in the theory of change in that a healthy meal bundle taken up by a project participant represents money that the household can use for something else. The extent to which this freed-up cash, or additional notional resource, contributes to the outcome on financial stability is less straightforward.

<sup>25</sup> Impact on Urban Health, and Bremner & Co. (2023), ‘Universal Primary Free School Meals: a Rapid Evidence Review’ (unpublished).

**Table 2.1: Freed-up cash scenarios for households, per year, by number of meals taken up per week, and meal prices paid at school canteens (£)**

Price \ Meals	0	1	2	3	4	5
£4.00	0	152	304	456	608	760
£3.90	0	148	296	445	593	741
£3.50	0	133	266	399	532	665
£3.25	0	124	247	371	494	618
£3.00	0	114	228	342	456	570
£2.90	0	110	220	331	441	551
£2.50	0	95	190	285	380	475
£2.25	0	86	171	257	342	428
£2.00	0	76	152	228	304	380
£1.90	0	72	144	217	289	361

Source: Aldaba analysis. Note: Assumed 190 school days, or 38 weeks.

- 2.16.5 Instead of financial stability, we propose distributional impacts as a way of better understanding the financial outcome experienced by households. Distributional impacts illustrate the fact that £1 is worth more to a lower income household, than to a higher income household. Calculating distributional impacts is required by the Green Book, which is HM Government’s guidance on economic appraisal.<sup>26</sup>
- 2.16.6 The techniques underpinning distributional impacts allow to illustrate the value of the cash savings in **Table 2.1**, above, when received by participant households who belong to a relatively low-income group, compared to the median-income household group. The results are available in **Table 2.2**, below.
- 2.16.7 To illustrate the meaning of these calculations, we could consider a central scenario where project participants took up three healthy meal bundles per week, on average, at a saved cost to their households of £2.90 per meal. This would be a cash saving of approximately £330 per year. The purchasing power of this money is the same, regardless of household income.
- 2.16.8 However, the fact that the saving goes to households below the national median income means that the saving is more valuable to them, or in other words, they obtain relatively more utility out of it than better off households. Based on the Government’s guidance, we estimated the total notional value of the saving to be equivalent to £950, once distributional impacts are considered.

<sup>26</sup> Gov.uk (2023), The Green Book and accompanying guidance and documents, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-green-book-and-accompanying-guidance-and-documents>

Table 2.2: Distributional impacts of freed-up cash scenarios for households, per year, by number of meals taken up per week, and meal prices paid at school canteens (£)

Price \ Meals	0	1	2	3	4	5
£4.00	0	439	877	1,316	1,755	2,194
£3.90	0	428	855	1,283	1,711	2,139
£3.50	0	384	768	1,152	1,536	1,919
£3.25	0	356	713	1,069	1,426	1,782
£3.00	0	329	658	987	1,316	1,645
£2.90	0	318	636	954	1,272	1,590
£2.50	0	274	548	823	1,097	1,371
£2.25	0	247	494	740	987	1,234
£2.00	0	219	439	658	877	1,097
£1.90	0	208	417	625	834	1,042

Source: Aldaba analysis based on Family Resource Survey, and HM Government’s Green Book. Note: Assumed 190 school days, or 38 weeks; household equivalised income for participants: £250 per week

2.16.9 The difference between actual cash underpinning the offered meals, and the distributional impacts that the cash represents is relatively large because the project is targeted at low-income households. **Figure 2.9**, below, shows how the difference would become smaller if the project was targeted at better off households which gradually approach the national median. This could be interpreted as the project gradually providing universal free school meals, and no longer using means testing.

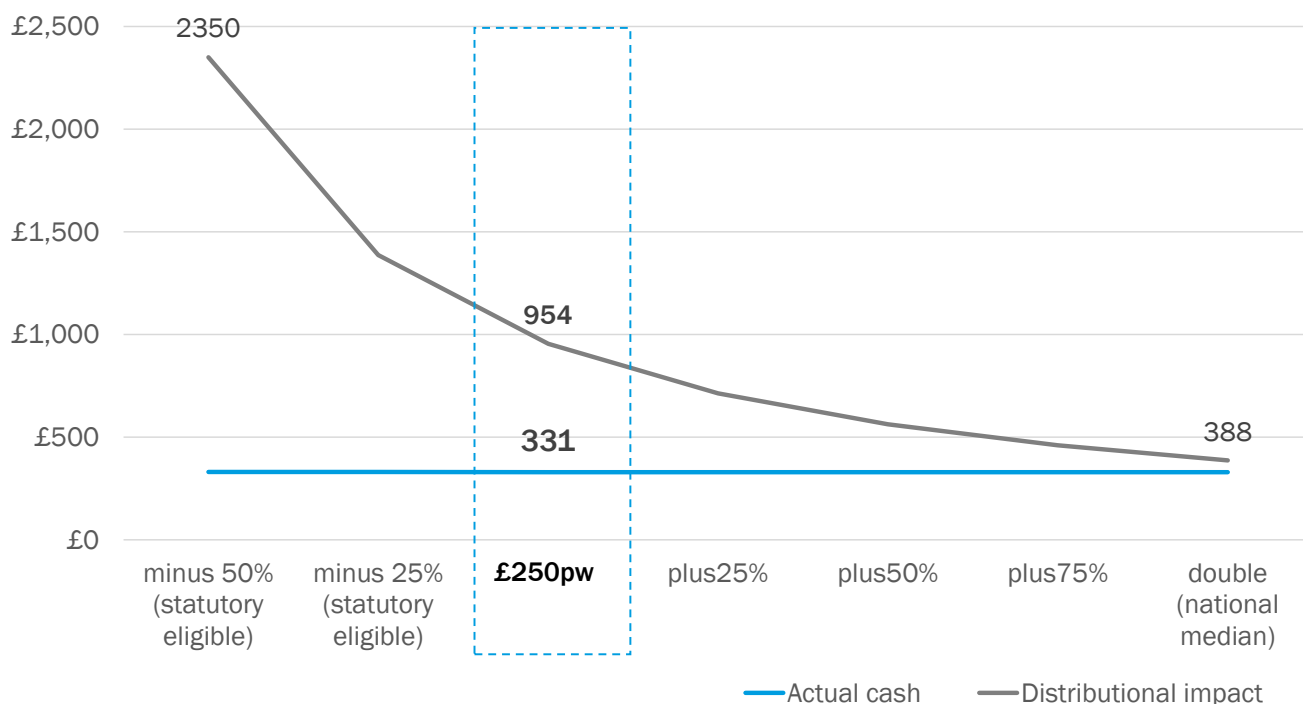
**As the income of the targeted households increases, the distributional impacts decrease, and become closer to the cash value of the offered meals.**

2.16.10 The freed-up cash, or additional notional resource, associated with taken-up healthy meal bundles can contribute to another outcome, which is higher food security for the whole household. This is particularly the case if the household chooses to purchase more healthier food to be shared by all household members.

2.16.11 Another link to higher household food security can come from project participants’ positive views on healthy meals. These views may be shared with other household members and result in some positive spillover effects, which in turn result in households’ making a greater effort to eat healthily.

2.16.12 Our view is that project participants’ ability to influence households is limited. It is typically parents and carers who influence children and young people’s eating habits, rather than the other way around. In addition, if project participants’ healthy meal bundle take-up is demonstrated to be low, the chances of them influencing the eating habits of the wider household, as a result of the project, would be further decreased.

Figure 2.9: Difference between the cash value of the offered meals, and the distributional impacts, per year, by income changes with respect to the weekly income of project participant households (£)



Source: Aldaba analysis based on Family Resource Survey, and HM Government’s Green Book. Note: Scenario where 3 meals per week are taken up on average, and the unit cost per meal is £2.90

## 2.17 Assessment of theory of change: School outcomes

- 2.17.1 The links between increased resources (in other words, funding); better sourcing and procurement; and higher food quality; all rest fundamentally on the achievement of economies of scale. There are several reasons for this.
- 2.17.2 Firstly, the ‘increased resources’ derived from the project’s free-meal funding, in and of themselves, cannot be considered as a factor influencing food quality because food quality does not vary with the source of funding. Schools use all the funding sources available to them to make decisions on ingredients and menus, catering options, and also other competing, non-food-related priorities.
 

**It is not possible to isolate a direct link between the project funding, and the quality of the funded meals, as opposed to the rest of the food served at school canteens.**
- 2.17.3 A similar reasoning applies to the capital funding. The extra facilities put in place thanks to the project are intended to provide extra capacity to meet the extra demand associated with the project. However, in practice, they apply to all meals taken up by all canteen users. This results, again, in the challenge of isolating any direct link between the project funding and any particular type of user.
- 2.17.4 In addition, project-funded facilitates, in and of themselves, cannot be thought of as enablers of greater quality, or healthier food. For example, they do not specifically contribute to cooking practices that may be considered as healthier, such as cooking techniques requiring lower, rather than higher fat use. Steam cooking, rather than frying might be an example of this. In fact, an extra oven, which is an example of capital-funded item, can be used to prepare more or less healthy meals interchangeably.

2.17.5 Critically, no evidence was considered by the Council team regarding the levels of take-up of healthy meal bundles prior to project launch. This means that measuring an increase in this specific type of take-up, and examining the extent to which this is attributable to the project, proves challenging.

2.17.6 As a result, in our view, the school outcomes around increased food quality can only be explored if economies of scale are evidenced. The theoretical discussion in previous sections can be supplemented by some illustrative thresholds which might signal the potential for, or existence of economies of scale. In detail, these signals would be the result of the increase that project participants, as individuals, represent over the number of pre-existing canteen users, and also the average meal take-up per project participant.

**Project participants may push total costs the other side of a tipping point and open opportunities for lower unit costs.**

2.17.7 **Table 2.3**, below, sets out a number of scenarios arranged by percentage increases in canteen users, along the rows; and percentage take-up, along the columns. For example, the bottom left cell is for a school where project participants represent a 5 per cent increase relative to existing canteen users, and on average take up healthy meal bundles one day a week, or 20 per cent out of the 5 days in a week.

**Table 2.3: Scenarios for the demand increase represented by project participants, and average take-up per participant (percentages, days per 5-day week)**

Participant increase \ take-up	20% 1 day	40% 2 days	60% 3 days	80% 4 days	100% 5 days
40%	8%	16%	24%	32%	40%
30%	6%	12%	18%	24%	30%
20%	4%	8%	12%	16%	20%
10%	2%	4%	6%	8%	10%
5%	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%

Source: Aldaba analysis

2.17.8 The red-amber-green coding across the diagonal lines is our attempt to illustrate the potential for economies of scale. Red could be interpreted as low potential because the change in demand represented by project participants is relatively small, and therefore less likely to trigger the additional batch of users which could commercially result in lower unit costs, or alternatively similar unit costs to those previously existing, but involving greater quality.

2.17.9 The outcome on ‘reduced school lunch shortfalls’, and ‘reduced administrative costs linked to shortfall chasing’ are similar to the household finance outcome in that, if evidenced, they would clearly represent some freed-up resource. In this case, the resource would be mostly notional, as opposed to cash. This is because this outcome cannot be realistically expected to result in one whole role being made redundant, and therefore resulting in a salary saving to the school.



2.17.10 A recent literature review concluded that ‘overall there is moderate evidence to suggest [...] improvements in school meal finances, although there is currently limited [UK] research with a low risk of bias’.<sup>27</sup>

2.17.11 **Table 2.4**, below, provides the key findings from our assessment of the summary theory of change. It may be used as a reference to understand the potential for impact that the project has, once the limitations implicit to project design have been taken into consideration. **Table 5.1**, later in this report, revisits the table below and provides summary evaluative conclusions.

**Table 2.4: Summary results from the assessment of the theory of change**

Key assessment or previous evidence	Feasibility
<b>Pupil output 1:</b> Healthy meal bundles made available to, and taken up by participants	
There is likely to be healthy meal bundles taken up by participants. Note the Council did not forecast any particular increase over the baseline prior to implementing the project. An existing evaluation of a similar project suggests that take-up levels are likely to be maintained with respect to the situation prior to the intervention, which means that any potential drop in take-up would be avoided.	Likely, no significant constraint identified
<b>Pupil outcome 1:</b> Higher food security	
Nearly half of those taking up free school meals experienced low or very low food security in 2022-23. This is despite the fact that this group had realised the outcome associated with accessing free school meals. Meal take-up cannot reverse other factors which appear to be responsible for food insecurity. Some project participants may continue to experience very low food security.	Limited, or unlikely due to confounding factors
<b>Pupil outcome 2:</b> Healthier nutrition	
DfE (2010): ‘The extended entitlement pilot had little impact on children’s diet and eating habits’. See also school outcome 5, on higher food quality.	Limited or unlikely, by project design
<b>Pupil unintended outputs:</b> Pupils entitled to statutory free school meals are identified	
	Possible
<b>Pupil unintended outcomes</b>	
Affording breakfast, and snacks.	Possible
Overeating.	Possible
Food wastage.	Possible
<b>Pupil deprioritised outcomes</b>	
Absence; anxiety, stress; stigma, shame; cognitive function; school engagement; learning behaviours; social behaviours; learning environment.	To be reviewed in year 2: 2024-25

<sup>27</sup> Impact on Urban Health, and Bremner & Co. (2023), ‘Universal Primary Free School Meals: a Rapid Evidence Review’ (unpublished).

<b>Household output 2: Savings to participant households</b>	
Every healthy meal bundle taken up by the project participants represents a realised output which leads to savings.	Likely, no significant constraint identified
<b>Household outcome 3: Higher financial stability</b>	
Distributional impacts may provide an approximation to the financial outcomes experienced by households, and financial stability levels.	Possible
<b>Household outcome 4: Higher food security</b>	
It is typically parents and carers who influence children and young people's eating habits, rather than the other way around.	Limited or unlikely, by confounding factors
<b>Household unintended outcomes</b>	
Higher welfare benefit take-up	Possible
Unhealthy, or negative purchases	Possible
<b>Household deprioritised outcomes</b>	
Absence; anxiety, stress; perception; food purchasing behaviours; household nutrition; indebtedness	To be reviewed in year 2: 2024-25
<b>School output 3: Meals that better comply with school food standards</b>	
Limited consultant input. Compliance with school food standards was limited prior to the project. Including the requirement in the Conditions of Grant is unlikely to suffice to ensure compliance. Lack of clarity on what the £2.90 unit cost is intended to include.	Unlikely, by project design
<b>School outcome 5: Higher food quality</b>	
Not possible to isolate link between project funding, and quality of meals for participants, or other groups of canteen users. Limited consultant input. Compliance with school food standards was limited prior to the project. Including the requirement in the Conditions of Grant is unlikely to suffice to ensure compliance. Lack of clarity on what the £2.90 unit cost is intended to include.	Unlikely, by project design
<b>School outcome 6: Better sourcing and procurement</b>	
This is contingent on economies of scale being evidenced. Project participants had possibly been using the canteens prior to the project becoming in place, which would mean no effects on demand volumes as a result of the project.	Possible
<b>School outcome 7: Reduced school lunch shortfalls</b>	
IoUH (2023): 'Overall there is moderate evidence to suggest [...] improvements in school meal finances, although there is currently limited [UK] research with a low risk of bias'	Possible

**School outcome 8: Reduced admin costs**

This is contingent on school lunch shortfalls being reduced, and is counterbalanced by the lack of funding for the administrative implementation of the project.

Possible

**School deprioritised outcomes**

Community cohesion; job creation; catering staff paid living wage; investment in catering staff; staff wellbeing

To be reviewed in year 2: 2024-25

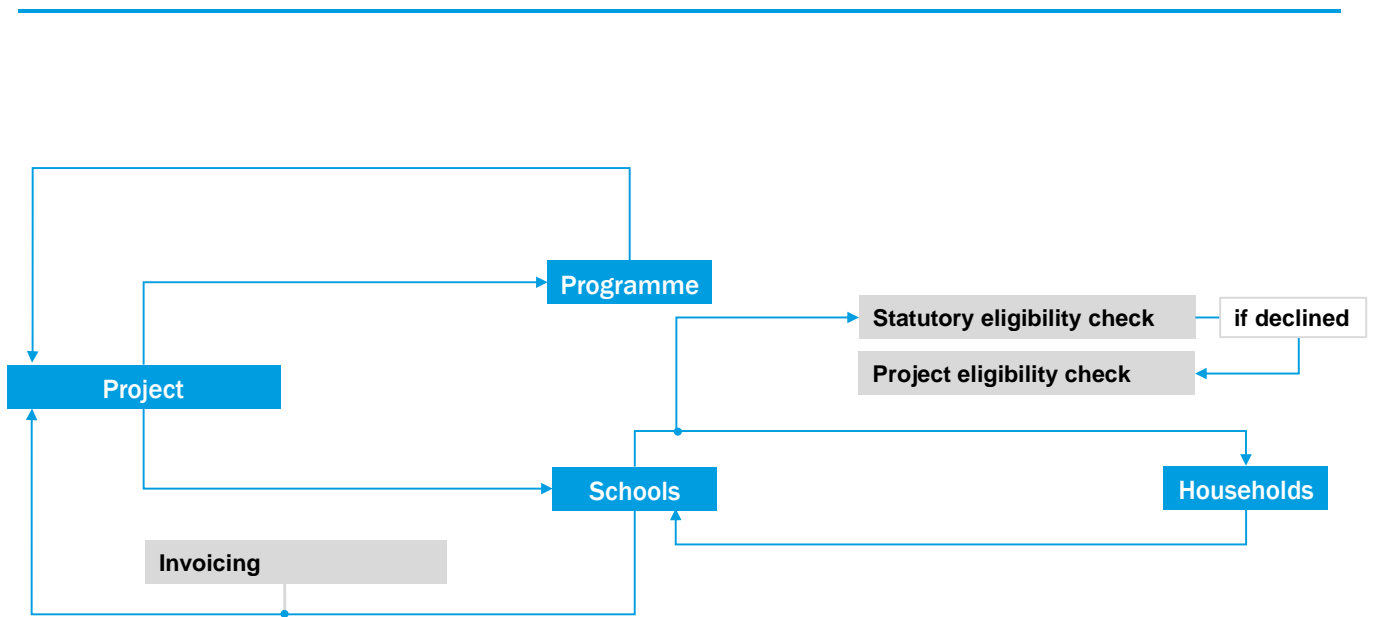
Source: Aldaba analysis



### 3.1 High-level description of the processes

3.1.1 **Figure 3.1**, below, shows a high-level description of the interactions between the agents involved in the project: the project and the programme, both within the Council; the project and the schools; and the schools, and the households and pupils. The figure also highlights the features we selected as particularly important to understand the project implementation processes.

Figure 3.1: High-level processes



Source: Aldaba analysis based on process workshops, and staff interviews

### 3.2 High-level description of the processes: Pilot

3.2.1 The Council selected a number of flagship schools to lead and showcase different aspects of the overarching programme. In Spring 2023, Ark Walworth Academy, one of the flagship secondary schools, implemented the project as a pilot.

3.2.2 The pilot included reaching out to households, assessing applications, updating till systems, and setting up the invoicing reports. The Council drew on the learnings from the pilot to finalise the Conditions of Grant, and Guidance documents for the project, as well as the training materials and sessions. The Ark Walworth Academy pilot may be referred to as the ‘test term’.

**The Council complied with best practice by piloting the project before rolling it out.**

### 3.3 High-level description of the processes: Eligibility checks

3.3.1 The Council team trusted schools to undertake all the activities required to check the eligibility for the project, including processing personal sensitive information, such as eligibility certificates for welfare benefits, and bank statements. The Council transferred to schools both the administrative burden and the risks associated with data protection, and accuracy issues in the decision to award entitlement to project participation. These risks were similar to those in relation to statutory eligibility, and therefore could be considered as already known to the schools.

#### Schools took on data-protection, and eligibility-accuracy risks.

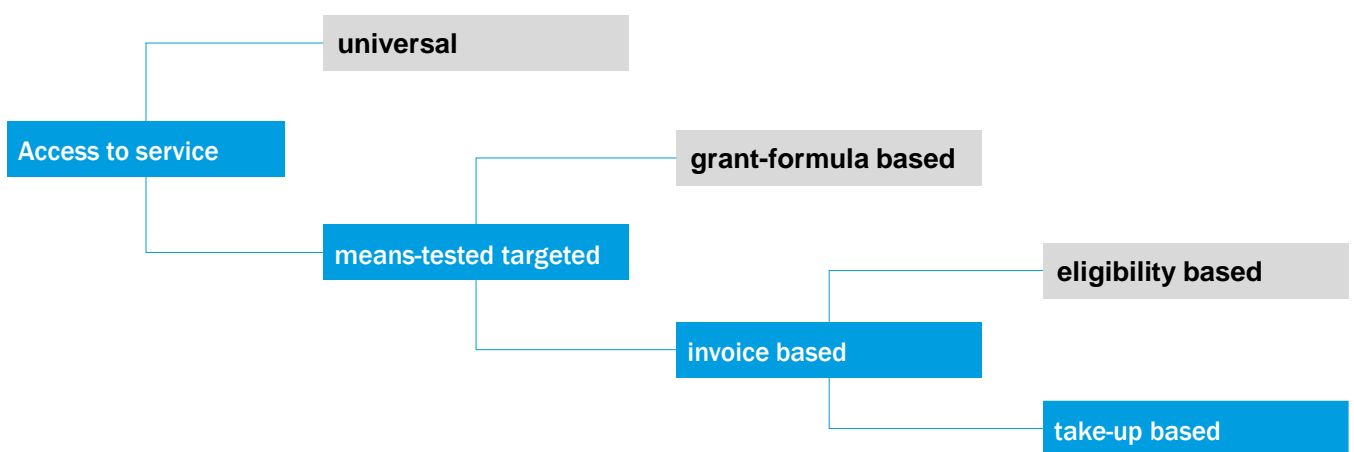
3.3.2 An aspect which became important upon project implementation, was the overlap between the eligibility checks for statutory free school meals and project participation. Some schools realised that the most efficient option was to encourage those households interested in participating in the project to apply first for statutory free-school meals. Schools have well established processes to undertake these checks by building on internal teams, or third-party providers, such as OFSM, or FSM Eligibility Checker.

3.3.3 Where statutory eligibility was approved, as previously mentioned, this constituted a positive unintended output for the project: rather than a new project participant, the relevant pupil became statutory eligible for free school meals. Where the result was negative, this meant that the relevant household was invited to fill in, and submit an application for the project.

### 3.4 High-level description of the processes: Invoicing

3.4.1 As set out in **Figure 3.2**, below, the Council's decision to provide free healthy meal bundles to those households in receipt of Universal Credit meant that the project was designed to provide a means-tested, rather than universal service. To be precise, the project expanded the statutory entitlement to free school meals through passported means testing. This means that the entitlement was dependent on a test of household income, which was undertaken indirectly, by checking the outcome of a means test previously undertaken as part of the Universal Credit processes.

Figure 3.2: Options for funding allocation



Source: Aldaba analysis. Note: blue shaded boxes denote the options made by the Council

3.4.2 Whilst not actively considered by the Council, there would have been an option to allocate the free healthy-meal-bundle funding based on a formula which would have included the means test, this is, being in receipt of Universal Credit and not eligible for statutory free meals, in addition to potentially other criteria such as the size of the school, or the index of multiple deprivation in the catchment area for the school.

- 3.4.3 Instead of a formula to allocate the funding upfront, the Council chose an invoice-based system whereby schools were required to report the number of healthy meal bundles taken up in the previous six to twelve weeks. Based on this report, schools received a mixed payment for the meals actually taken up in the previous reporting period, and an estimated payment for the next reporting period. The estimate was refined when the actual take-up report for the estimated period became available, resulting in a credit or a debit being added to each schools' account.
- 3.4.4 The funding allocation process was hosted by the Council. This involved a combination of inputs from the project team, as well as the finance and accounting teams.
- 3.4.5 As a key feature, note that the invoicing process was designed to be based on healthy meal bundles actually taken up by project participants, as opposed to numbers of project participants whose eligibility had been approved through the application process led by the schools. The implication of this is that the schools carried the risk that healthy meal bundles were prepared, and put on the counter, yet project participants chose not to eat them, and so no reimbursement was received from the Council.
- 3.4.6 Catering practices can moderate this risk to some extent. Take-up at the counter varies as a result of multiple factors which can be monitored, and anticipated with certain degree of accuracy, based on monitoring indicators. Should the numbers of project participants and healthy meal bundles taken up by project participants differ considerably, it would be reasonable to expect some adaptations to avoid wastage. This may be considered as one of the skills of a catering management function. Nonetheless, there would still be some remaining risks for schools to manage.

**Schools took on the risk of project participants choosing not to take up the healthy meal bundles, despite being free.**

- 3.4.7 From the perspective of taxpayers' money, allocating funding on the basis of the services actually taken up, as opposed to other types of approximations, can be considered a sign of value for money. In comparison with statutory free school meals, the Council's choice could also create incentives for schools not only to recruit project participants, but also to encourage them to eat healthy meal bundles at lunchtime, as intended by the project.

**Allocating funding on the basis of healthy meal bundles actually taken up represents value for taxpayers' money.**

### 3.5 Assessment of the processes

- 3.5.1 **Figure 3.3**, below, depicts in detail the steps in the processes in place between the project and the programme; and between the project and the schools. The grey-font boxes are for aspects which we identified as currently absent; or only partially, or ambiguously undertaken; and recommend for future developments. The following sections describe and assess each of the elements in detail.

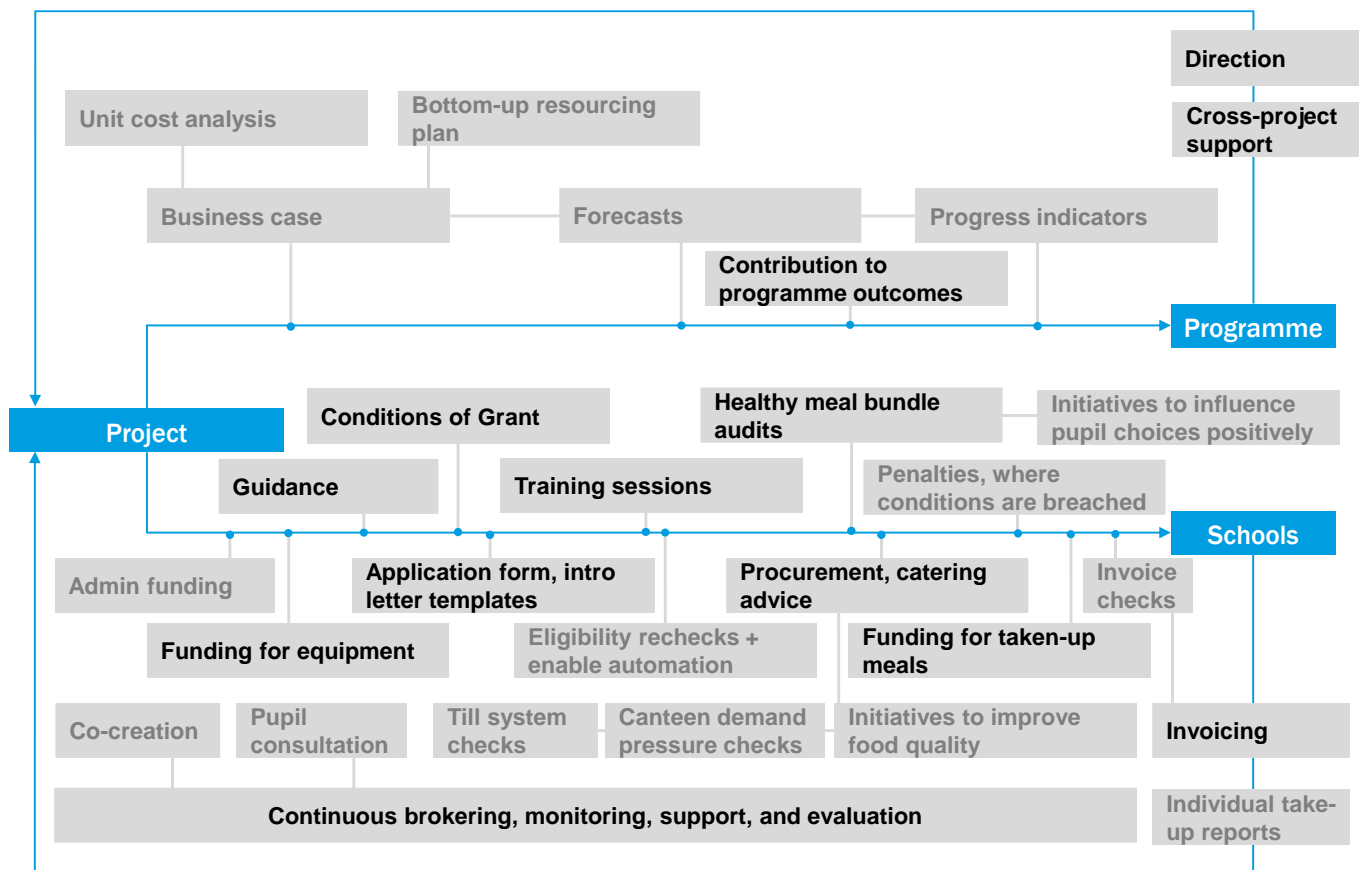
### 3.6 Assessment of the processes: Governance

- 3.6.1 **Figure 3.4**, below, shows the governance structure for the project, along with some of its stakeholders. The project was included in a pre-existing programme which aimed at transforming food across all school stages: the Southwark School Food Transformation Programme.
- 3.6.2 In turn, the programme was framed within the Southwark Food Action Alliance, an independent collective of local food providers and distributors, including public sector representatives from Southwark Council; and the Council's Sustainable Food Strategy 2023-2026, which includes an aim on right to food, and food security.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Southwark Food Action Alliance, Who we are, available at <https://www.southwarkfoodactionalliance.co.uk/who-we-are/> ; Southwark Food Action Alliance, and Southwark Council (2023), Good Food Southwark: Sustainable Food Strategy

Figure 3.3: Processes between programme, project, and schools



Source: Aldaba analysis based on process workshops, and staff interviews. Note: grey font is for recommended tasks which are currently not in place; or only partially, or ambiguously undertaken.

3.6.3 It is worth noting that the spending envelope for the programme was estimated at approximately £1 million over four years, from 2021 to 2024, whereas the spending envelope for the project was also estimated at approximately £1 million, just for the school year 2023-24.<sup>29</sup>

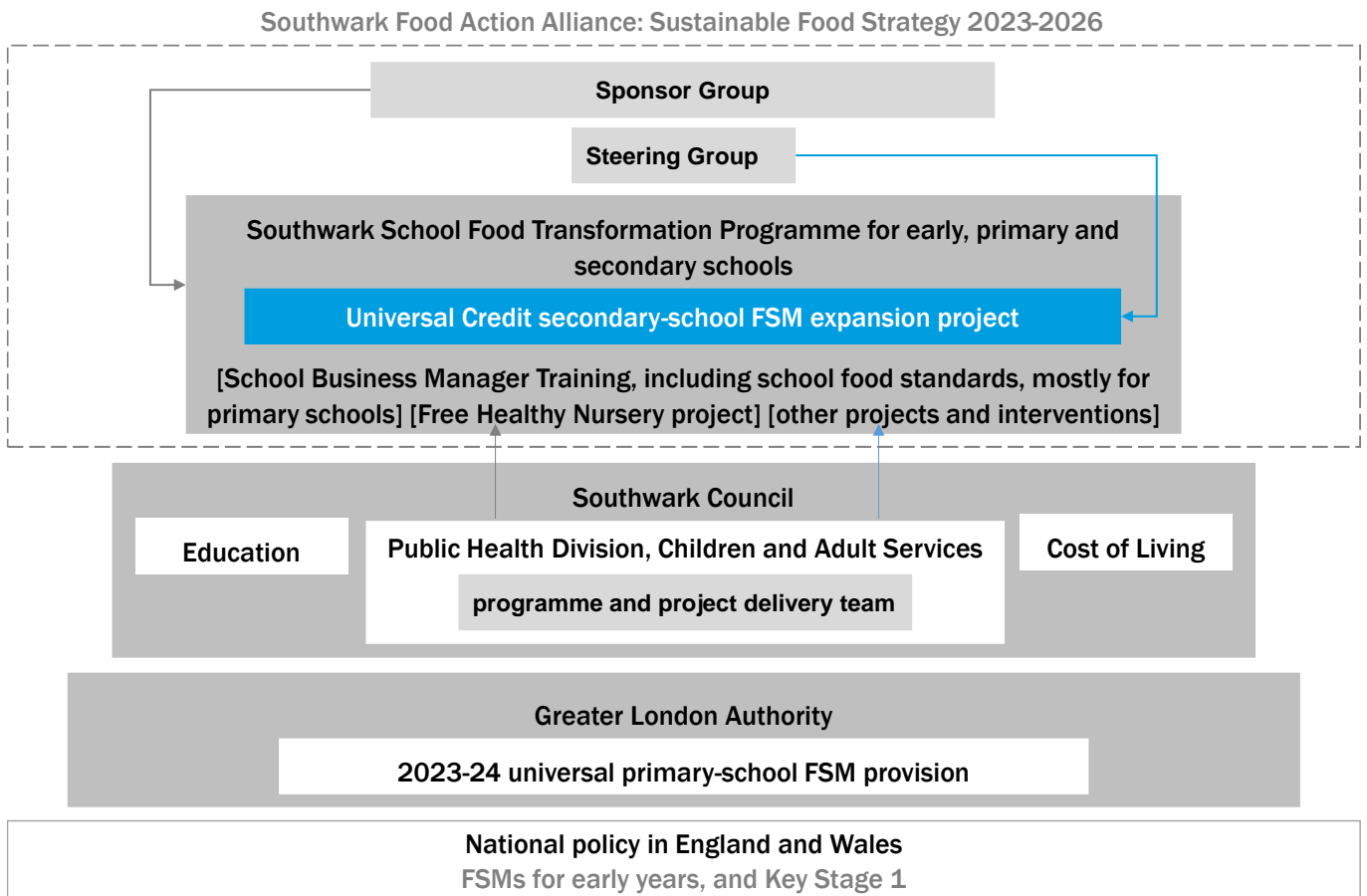
3.6.4 The project team sat within the Council’s Public Health division, and drew on the expertise of the Education, and Cost of Living divisions<sup>30</sup>. As a result of the concurrent provision of universal free meals at primary schools in London, the Greater London Authority maintained an interest in the project.

2023-2026, available at <https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=de2401fbfff15780JmltdHM9MTcxMjYyMDgwMCZpZ3VpZD0xNG00OWY3Zi05ZG05LTyxMzgtMzgtOYi05MTIxOTk0TYyNmlmaW5zaWQ9NTMwOQ&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=14d49f7f-9dd9-6138-384b-912199d9626b&psq=southwark+right+to+food&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuc291dGh3YXJrLmdvdi51ay9hc3NidHMvYXROYWNoLzlxNDk3MC9Hb29kLUZvb2QtU291dGh3YXJrLVN1c3RhaW5hYmxlLUZvb2QtU3RyYXRIZ3ktMjAyMy0yNi5wZGY&ntb=F>

<sup>29</sup> Southwark Council (2021), Southwark School Meals System Transformation, the business case to achieve transformation in Southwark’s school food system (unpublished).

<sup>30</sup> Southwark Council (2023), Decision details: Southwark’s response to the Cost of Living Crisis 2023-24, available at <https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?Allid=67228>

Figure 3.4: Governance structure for the project



Source: Aldaba analysis based on document reviews, and staff interviews

3.6.5 The programme was governed by a Sponsor Group where lead councillors and senior managers from the Council and the charity Impact on Urban Health sat. The project had a Steering Group including officer-level representation from the Council’s Public Health, Education, Finance, Procurement, Legal, and Environmental Health divisions; and Impact on Urban Health. The Steering Group was shared with other projects, including universal free primary-school meals, and free healthy nursery meals. It was supported by an Expert Advisory Panel with representation from across the national school meals system.

3.6.6 The responsibilities and accountabilities of the Steering Group, also referred to as Steering Board, were to:

- approve and review project plans, budgets and grants to schools;
- oversee commissioning and contracting of catering audit, project mobilisation and evaluation;
- provide advice to the Free Secondary School Meals project team; and
- review communications plans.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Southwark Council (24 July 2023), Steering Board: Free Healthy School and Nursery Meals programmes, Terms of Reference (unpublished).



3.6.7 Some members of the Steering Group had active procurement contracts with the Council as they contributed to the responsibilities and accountabilities listed above. Some members were discussing future procurement contracts with the Council, and some were instrumental in securing procurement contracts between the Council and other organisations. There were limitations in these members' ability to steer the project objectively, and provide effective challenge to the Council.

**The Council should have applied stricter checks on conflicts of interest when approving membership for the Steering Group**

3.6.8 As a new project is incorporated into a programme, best practice issued by the Government recommends that a business case be prepared.<sup>32</sup> A key feature of a business case is the analysis of the options available to implement the project. Costs and benefits for each of the options must be compared.

3.6.9 In the case of the project under evaluation, examples of options could have been universal versus means-tested provision; formula-based versus take-up-based allocation of funding; and offer-, versus demand-focused activities. The April-2023 audit would have provided the basis for cost calculations in relation to universal, versus means-tested provision, but not benefit calculations.

3.6.10 A business case also requires the estimation of the costs associated with each option, including indirect costs. This includes the administrative costs incurred by delivery organisations in the front line, such as schools. It may also include a resource plan detailing the roles required for project delivery, along with salary and overhead costs. This should also include the meetings and preparatory activities in relation to the Steering Group.

3.6.11 The Council prepared no business case ahead of project implementation for consideration and approval by the Sponsor Group. This means that the design of the project was the result of decisions which were not fully documented, or captured in a format suitable for the exercise of the Sponsor Group's responsibilities, notably those in relation to strategic direction and ultimate accountability.

**The lack of a business case involves limitations in the ability to govern the project effectively.**

3.6.12 For example, without a business case it is more challenging for the Sponsor Group to provide constructive feedback and support. This applies to the whole lifecycle of the project because business cases are intended to be live documents which serve as a reference during project delivery, and must also be updated at key milestones.

3.6.13 Once a business case has been considered, and the preferred option approved, best practice in project management requires the development of a monitoring system. This involves the production of some forecasts which estimate how project outputs, and contributions to programme outcomes, may be gradually achieved across some milestones. For example, '25 per cent of schools have launched the project by November 2023, with the remaining 75 per cent having done so by February 2024'.

3.6.14 In addition, progress indicators may be displayed against the forecasts to monitor progress on a monthly or quarterly basis. For example, if the forecast is that 25 per cent of schools have launched by November 2023, it would be useful to know that by October, 10 per cent have launched. Forecasts, and progress indicators may be referred to as key performance indicators (or KPIs).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gov.uk, Project and programme management, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/project-and-programme-management>

<sup>33</sup> The Right to Food Plan by Southwark Council may provide an example and is available at <https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/documents/s114661/Appendix%20%20Right%20to%20Food%20Action%20Plan.pdf> We note the ambiguity in describing this present project evaluation as an indicator.

3.6.15 This type of monitoring information was not set up, or updated in a systematic way for the project under evaluation. As a result, both the Sponsor, and Steering groups lacked a detailed evidence base to fulfil their responsibilities.

**Better monitoring information might have helped to make more timely decisions; obtain more support from other projects within the programme as events unfolded; and take corrective actions more confidently.**

3.6.16 This assessment is further corroborated by our review of the Steering Group minutes. Whilst updates on project progress were shared with Steering Group members, particularly in the second half of year 1, we found little evidence of specific operational actions being agreed at the meetings. Instead, the Steering Group meetings were seemingly used to share decisions already taken by the Council team, and to provide some details and clarifications about those decisions.

**The limitations in the governance practices, and the allocation of functions and risks to schools, do not reduce the Council's accountabilities.**

3.6.17 As recipient of the Public Health Grant, the Council remains accountable for the success of the whole project, which includes all the processes from the decision to fund the project, to the point when a healthy meal bundle is taken up by a project participant.

3.6.18 Much of the project plans, and changes to them, were tacit knowledge held by individual members of the Council team. As an example, halfway through year 1, the Council team deemed compliance with the healthy-meal-bundle requirement to be less of a priority. It was verbally communicated that specific remedial actions to ensure compliance had been postponed for year 2. However, these plans were not documented, thus making it difficult to apply accountability checks, and ensure continuity.

**Project delivery was contingent on the availability of individual members of the team. Unanticipated absences and employment terminations could have resulted in tacit knowledge being lost, and effective project implementation being put at risk.**

3.6.19 We drew the limitations just highlighted in the governance and planning practices to the attention of the Council team in November 2023, as part of a learning session which built on the interim findings from the evaluation to that date. We produced 10 recommendations.

3.6.20 We invited the Council to provide a response to the recommendations in March 2024. The recommendations that had been acted upon at that stage included to check compliance with the requirement for healthy meal bundles through an audit, and to examine the possibility of providing automated eligibility checks, based on a third-party organisation with access to real time changes in Universal Credit entitlements.

3.6.21 We produced an interim version of this evaluation report in April 2024, including 25 recommendations. The recommendations that had been acted upon at the time of writing included, initiating quality assurance of eligibility checks; and obtaining approval to reimburse participant households whose schools had launched the project later than September 2023. The actual reimbursements had not taken place yet.

3.6.22 We further note the following:

- Some key members of the governance structure for the project had not been made aware of the interim evaluation of April 2024 report six weeks after the report had been completed and submitted to the Council.

- The interim evaluation report alerted to financial mismanagement, qualified audit opinions, and judicial reviews. Shortly afterwards the Council decided to make the project more generous by increasing the allowance and expanding the eligibility criteria for project participants as of implementation year 2. It would have rather been expected to rectify a faulty project before expanding it.

### 3.7 Assessment of the processes: the Council team’s instructions to schools

3.7.1 In April 2023, the Council wrote a letter to Headteachers letting them know about the project. During Spring, and early Summer 2023, the Council team undertook a series of engagements with schools to discuss the practicalities of the project. A project officer remained available for queries.

3.7.2 Schools were asked to sign a Conditions of Grant document, and familiarise themselves with a Guidance document detailing the eligibility criteria for the project, the characteristics of a healthy meal bundle, and some high-level steps to be followed as part of the implementation process. See **Table 3.1**, below, for the Conditions of Grant.

**Table 3.1: Extract from the Conditions of Grant document**

Condition	Rationale and further detail
The funding is for lunchtime service only	The nutritional quality of food served at morning and afternoon break is generally poor across secondary schools.
Lunch must be sold as a ‘healthy meal bundle’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least two portions of fruit, vegetables or salad every day (portion = 80g)</li> <li>• At least three portions of lean protein per week, including pulses, eggs, meat and beans (portion = 120g)</li> <li>• No more than two fried portions of food per week</li> <li>• No more than two portions of pastry per week</li> <li>• No more than one portion of processed meat or meat substitute per week</li> <li>• No fizzy or &gt;5% sugar (by volume) drinks</li> <li>• Provide 500-700 kcal per meal (a chef guide nutritional analysis is not required)</li> </ul>
A cashless payment system must be used	Pupils taking a meal must not be identifiable in dining hall or at service points.
Report monthly meal uptake once per term	Costs reimbursed termly: half in arrears, half estimated in advance. Payment made November, March, June or similar.
Contribute to the evaluation of the offer	Provide meal take up and catering sales data to help demonstrate best value for money. Participate in infrequent qualitative evaluation workshops.
Make efforts to maximise benefits related FSM take up.	Increasing take up across the borough.

Source: Southwark Council (July 2023), Free Secondary School Meals, Guidance for Schools (unpublished)

3.7.3 To supplement the written documents, the Council team ran four training sessions in time for the start of the 2023-24 school year. These were not necessarily sequential sessions organised as part of a course, but rather opportunities for schools to join as suitable, and learn more about the project. Contents included project overview for headteachers; the roles and responsibilities of catering consultants; and one-to-one support from the Council team.

**In our expert view, the Conditions of Grant, and the Guidance documents fulfilled a critical function at the initial implementation stage.**

3.7.4 Both documents stated clearly the information required by headteachers, and school business managers to plan for the launch, and continuous implementation of the project. The personalised support provided by the training sessions, and particularly the flexibility and availability of the policy officer, further contributed to clarifying project requirements.

3.7.5 In comparing the Conditions of Grant, and Guidance documents; with our summary theory of change; we concluded that the essence of the links between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes was captured. As illustrations, the Guidance document included a vision statement. It also provided clarity in terms of the expectation to serve meals which complied with some of the guidelines from the school food standards.

3.7.6 A missed opportunity would have been to also include details of the expected outcomes, particularly in relation to schools, such as better sourcing and procurement, and reduced school-lunch shortfall. There could have even been an invitation for schools to monitor these outcomes internally, which could have potentially resulted in a better understanding of the value of the project.

3.7.7 The Conditions of Grant, and Guidance documents confirmed that no administrative funding was made available for the implementation of the project. Implicitly, these documents also confirmed the unbalanced approach to risk sharing mentioned earlier in relation to potential data-protection, and eligibility-checking issues.

3.7.8 The Council quite rightly anticipated some technical challenges. To manage these, the Guidance document stressed the importance of updating the till systems so that schools could monitor and report project participation accurately. Similarly, the Guidance document recommended schools to plan for the provision of healthy meal bundles, including consultation with pupils, and menu planning, so that compliance with the quality requirements was compatible with the commercial viability of catering service.

3.7.9 During fieldwork, we identified a number of process-related aspects which would have benefited from additional clarifications as part of the Conditions of Grant, and Guidance documents.

3.7.10 **The funding was only available for lunches.** The rationale for this was that the nutritional quality of the food served at morning and afternoon breaks was generally poor. However, this was also the case to some extent with lunches, as evidenced by the audit commissioned by the Council in April 2023. Whilst the condition was clear, some schools questioned the focus on lunches given that some approaches to healthy eating stress the importance of breakfast for pupils to be able to participate in the school day productively.

3.7.11 **The allowance for project participants was just for healthy meal bundles at lunchtime.** It would have been helpful to clarify the extent to which the £2.90 per healthy meal bundle stated in the Conditions of Grant implied any inconsistency with respect to the following:

- the prices charged at the till for the same healthy meal bundles to those non-eligible for free school meals.
- the way in which the allowance for statutory free meals could be used at each school, for example whether the statutory allowance:

- was for an amount different to £2.90;
- could be used throughout the day, rather than just at lunchtime; or
- was affected by restrictions to particular bundles, or alternatively any item available at the canteen could be purchased through the statutory allowance.

3.7.12 **The eligibility checks allocated to schools prove a risk to the project.** They require sight of ‘recent bank statement with Universal Credit deposit evidence’; ‘screenshot of current Universal Credit portal account’; or ‘letter confirming support from the Council due to Non-Recourse to Public Funds’.

3.7.13 Bank statements are brief and rarely spell out in detail the origin and purpose of the transfers. Similarly, just starting an application online at gov.uk gives access to what looks like a Universal Credit portal account, and so a screenshot of it does not necessarily mean that the account holder is eligible for, and in receipt of Universal Credit. Greater clarity on what constituted valid proof would have been helpful to the project, including for example training sessions showing valid and invalid screenshots.

**The Council should not have assumed that school admin staff were in a position to distinguish genuine from fake proofs for welfare benefit entitlement.**

3.7.14 **The monthly reporting required by the Conditions of Grant was for actual take-up.** Whilst this was clearly stated, the fact that just being eligible did not trigger a reimbursement could have been made explicit to avoid confusion. This would have been similar to the clarification around ‘only lunch’.

3.7.15 **Changes of circumstances.** It would have been helpful to specify the frequency with which approved applications should be reviewed. This is because changes in the circumstances of households might mean that project participants become no longer eligible.

**The Guidance document should have made it explicit, for example, whether eligibility remained valid for a year, or until the end of the school year, and when it needed to be rechecked.**

3.7.16 A few of the school staff we interviewed during fieldwork found that the early implementation phase of the project was confusing. They found the training sessions of limited use. The experiences shared by the pilot school were not directly applicable to their cases. As one interviewee put it, ‘it all felt quite improvised; I didn’t have the impression it had been properly trialled out’. In contrast, a few other staff felt overwhelmed at first, but then found the project more straightforward to implement than they had thought.

### 3.8 **Assessment of the processes: the Council’s allocation of capital funding**

3.8.1 The initial budget estimate for capital funding was approximately £187,000 for the school year 2023-24. As at March 2024, the budget estimate was approximately £150,000 which is approximately £37,000 less than originally planned. Most of the budget had already been justified by, and paid to schools by March 2024. We did not undertake any detailed analysis on these payments.

3.8.2 During our fieldwork, we interviewed a few of the schools which were in the process of putting the capital items in place. The feedback was overall positive.

**It was highlighted that the funding and the items were put in place ‘swiftly’, ‘quicker than these things normally take’, and ‘efficiently’.**

3.8.3 One of the schools described these items as ‘a game changer’ because they had allowed to speed up the lunch services considerably. This school had taken a staged approach to implementation, including engagement with pupils to let them know about the new service locations; piloting certain meal options before rolling out the best options; and actively managing the implementation timescales, including calculated and justified delays, where necessary. This school highlighted the helpful advice from the Council’s catering consultants.

3.8.4 As mentioned earlier, there was no analysis undertaken at the project design stage to assess whether project participants had been using school canteens in the past. A few schools reported no noticeable change in volumes going through the counter after project implementation.

**It is possible that the project did not increase demand, and therefore no additional capital funding would have been required.**

### 3.9 Assessment of the processes: the Council’s expert catering advice to schools

3.9.1 In parallel to the dissemination of instructions in Spring, and Summer 2023, approximately 25 days’ worth of catering consultancy were made available during Autumn, and Winter 2023; and Spring 2024, up until March 2024. The list below provides the broad tasks allocated to the consultants. Note food quality could be considered one among a number of other responsibilities.

- To make the necessary equipment purchases and payment system preparations for both capital and taken-up meal funding.
- To negotiate with outsourced food service providers around the menu offer and meal prices. This includes mobilisation of catering staff, food offer, contract negotiation, menu development, and embedding conditions of grant.
- To provide clear communication on the offer to families. This includes sharing menu best practice with school chefs through a new chef led working group to make healthy meal bundles appealing to pupils.<sup>34</sup>

**Only one day’s worth of catering expertise was available to each school.**

3.9.2 The consultants undertook a series of visits to, and engagements with schools to improve their facilities and practices. The consultants also organised some sessions open to all schools, such as Chefs’ Forums, where some practices were demonstrated.

3.9.3 The Council’s requirement to update till systems was also supported by the catering consultant. This can be considered a strength in the process.

**The need to have till information for reporting, and evaluation purposes was anticipated at the beginning of the project.**

3.9.4 While timely, the requirement focused mostly on distinguishing project participants from statutory eligible pupils on the till records, and failed to consider potential differences also in terms of the items and types of meals funded by each scheme.

**The expert advice from the catering consultant highlighted the project’s emphasis on quality, not just quantity.**

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<sup>34</sup> Southwark Council, Gateway 1 Procurement Strategy Approval and Gateway 2 Contract Award Approval for Free Secondary School Meals Mobilisation (1 August 2023, unpublished).

- 3.9.5 In addition, the advice on quality was provided practically. During fieldwork, some schools reported how the catering consultant was able to run support sessions on till system updates in front of the computer, as well as hands-on sessions on facilities management and cooking techniques. A few schools remained dissatisfied with the advice and reported it had not worked in their particular case.
- 3.9.6 Our conclusion is that the advice from the catering consultant was valuable, particularly because it was tailored specifically to issues which were affecting individual schools. However, beyond the audit of April 2023, much of the tailored advice was as a result of queries from the schools, as opposed to a systematic plan. The latter would have included proactive requests from the consultants and a system to verify that the recommended actions had been undertaken by the schools.
- 3.9.7 Whilst valuable, the available inputs from the catering consultant were insufficient. An average of just one day per school is not enough to meet all the responsibilities allocated to the consultants. In particular, it is unrealistic to expect any meaningful improvement in terms of food quality, better compliance with school food standards, and pupils' willingness to take up healthy meal bundles. Note also that the result of the assessment of the theory of change was that the higher food-quality outcome was 'unlikely, by project design'.

### **3.10 Assessment of the processes: the Council's early implementation support to schools**

- 3.10.1 A distinctive feature of the approach taken by the Council team was one-to-one support. The policy officer in place during Spring, and Summer 2023 was responsive to ad-hoc requests from schools, and followed up personally on the circumstances affecting individual schools. This was through a combination of visits, email correspondence, and phone-call conversations.
- 3.10.2 Where possible, adjustments were agreed to enable the implementation of the project alongside other school priorities. Examples include delaying project launch until the project-funded facilities were up and running. One-to-one support to all schools continued when the new policy officer came to post by the end of 2023.

### **3.11 Assessment of the processes: outreach to households and application assessments by schools**

- 3.11.1 **Figure 3.5**, below, sets out the processes between households and schools. The Council supported the schools' outreach role by producing an introductory letter template, and an application form. Schools could choose to use these documents, or any suitable alternative approach to reaching out to parents and inviting those who believed might be eligible to submit an application.
- 3.11.2 During our fieldwork, schools reported having used the introductory letter, and application form templates. Some schools preferred to use other formats, including hardcopies, text messages, and electronic forms on platforms other than the one suggested by the Council.

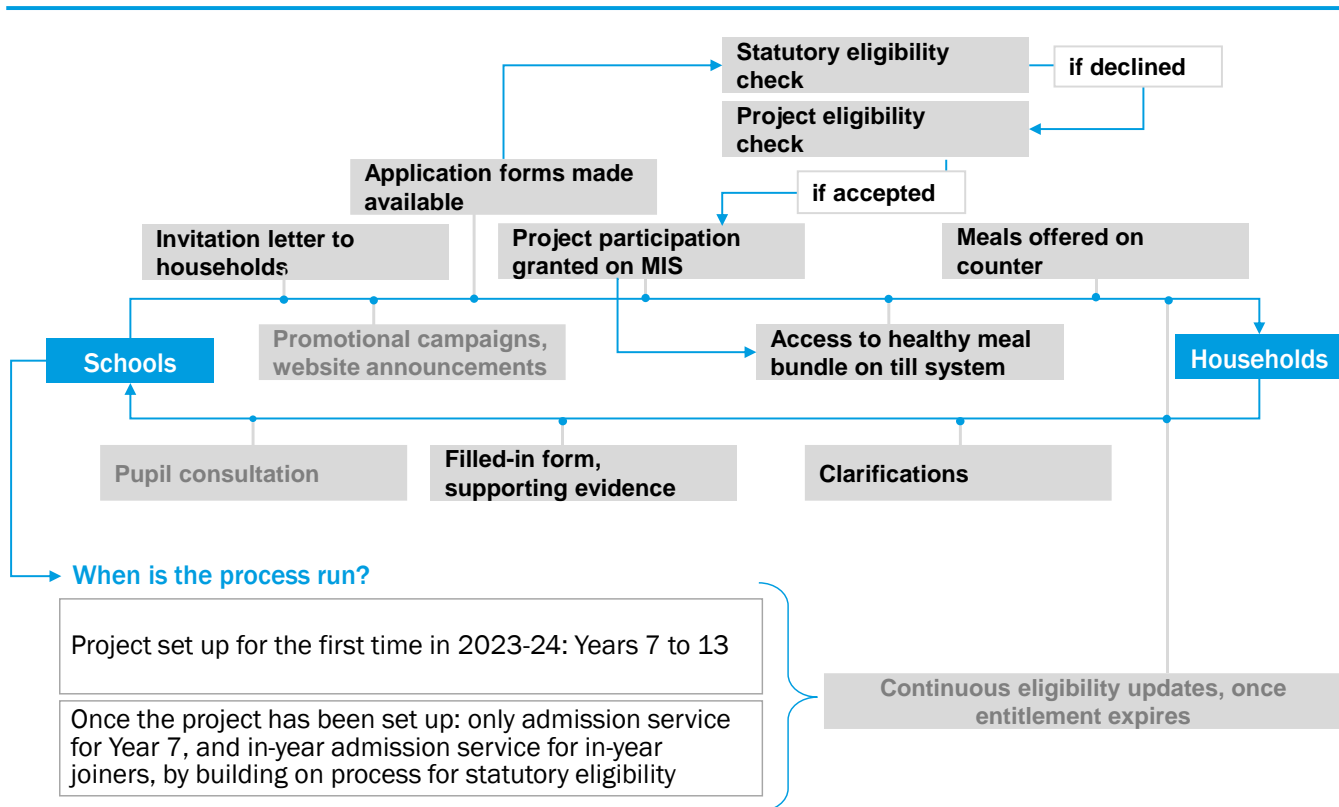
**We saw some application forms which contained technical errors in their design.**

- 3.11.3 These errors affected some of the critical items to establish eligibility, and might have resulted in applications from eligible households being turned down by mistake. When we alerted the schools to these errors, we did not perceive enough of an interest to rectify the errors.

**We could not find any examples of project recruitment campaigns, which could have been run at relatively small scale.**

- 3.11.4 For example, posters at the areas where parents pick up their children, messages on the digital displays at the school receptions, or presentations at parent evenings. These could have been opportunities to promote the project both at the beginning of the school year, and later in time with a view of recruiting those who might have missed the first round.

Figure 3.5: Processes between schools and households



Source: Aldaba analysis based on process workshops, and staff interviews. Note: grey font is for recommended tasks which are currently not in place.

3.11.5 We came across a few examples of schools which had noticed an increase in parent queries after having received holiday food vouchers. This is a scheme unrelated to the project. Once the vouchers had been used, parents realised that accessing free meals could have a positive impact on household finances. This resulted in a few successful applications for the project. Schools had not initially anticipated it.

3.11.6 Another opportunity would have been to use schools' websites to promote the project. We undertook two desk-based reviews in March, and August 2024. Almost all secondary school websites had a page dedicated to school food. The majority explained statutory eligibility, including application forms for it.

**Only five school websites, out of all 25, provided some information about the project, with two including a hyperlink to the Council's website.**

3.11.7 Even where the project was mentioned, there was not enough clarity about the key criterion around Universal Credit households below an annual income of £7,400 being able to apply for statutory free school meals, and those between £7,400 and £16,000 being able to apply for the Council's project.

**It could have been efficient to share brief communications with parents containing hyperlinks to more detailed school websites.**



- 3.11.8 This limitation was to some extent addressed by the information published on the Council’s website, which explained the differences between statutory, and project eligibility criteria.<sup>35</sup> We believe that explaining this difference was important because many parents were likely to know the statutory eligibility criteria; be aware that they did not qualify for statutory meals; and mistakenly believe that there was no other option for their children to access free school meals. In addition, the Council published blurbs in the Southwark Life resident’s magazine, and the Council’s e-newsletter. It also used media opportunities to advertise the project, for example press releases following on from the Mayor’s announcements on London-wide universal free-school meals at primary schools.
- 3.11.9 The schools allocated the responsibilities on outreach, and application assessment to a project lead, typically among their junior to middle management administrative team. The key task was checking the evidence proving eligibility. The whole process was normally completed under the supervision of the school business manager.
- 3.11.10 During our fieldwork, a few schools stressed the accuracy risks associated with checking project eligibility. Some schools were concerned they might have made mistakes when checking the proofs of eligibility. A few others had the perception that the Council did not expect very strict checks, and was rather keen for the schools ‘to let as many in as possible’, as one interviewee put it. The Council team did not recognise this as a fair characterisation of the instructions provided to schools.
- 3.11.11 Many schools highlighted the benefits of engaging third-party organisations, as is the case with statutory eligibility. These organisations check eligibility automatically, by building on daily updates of the information provided by the Department for Work and Pensions. Parents are invited to provide their national insurance number, and other details directly to the third-party organisation, and schools receive updates each time that an income variation involves a change for the statutory eligibility to free school meals.
- 3.11.12 As provider of central support for the project, the Council is in a good position to lead conversations with the relevant third-party organisations and explore the possibility of them undertaking automated eligibility checks for the project. Our understanding is that the Council has already started to examine the possibility of putting automated eligibility checks in place, based on a third-party organisation with access to real time changes in Universal Credit entitlements
- 3.11.13 As shown in **Figure 3.5**, above, once schools were satisfied that the eligibility criteria were met, the next step was for them to let parents know that their child could access free school meals, normally through an email, letter, or text message. Schools also needed to update their contactless till systems so that project participants could eat a healthy meal bundle at lunchtime without needing to have funds on their digital wallets.
- 3.11.14 Schools were considered to have succeeded at setting up the project as soon as the first project participant took up their first healthy meal bundle. This was done in some cases within short timescales.
- Some schools reported having been able to receive, assess, and approve an application; confirm the outcome to parents; and allow the student to have their first free meal, all within 48 hours.**
- 3.11.15 The remaining tasks once project participants were onboarded included: liaison with parents whose applications had been turned down, in case the right type of proof had become available; reaching out to further project applicants by resending the invitation letters, or through informal engagements; and managing the reporting and invoicing process.

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<sup>35</sup> Southwark Council website, available at <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/schools-and-education/information-for-parents/financial-support/free-school-meals-during-term-time>

- 3.11.16 Through our interviews with parents, we became aware of a few instances where the application to participate in the project had been approved, but five months later the till system had not been updated yet. This meant that the parents had to continue to top up their child's digital wallet. See **Case study 1**, in **Chapter 4**.
- 3.11.17 On a few other occasions, the delay had been just a few days, and the parents had claimed the £2.40 they had paid for a meal each day after the application had been approved. According to the interviewees, the schools had only reimbursed £1.35 for each meal, and justified this by saying that the Council only reimbursed £1.35, rather than the full amount the parent had paid while the till system was being updated.

### **3.12 Assessment of the processes: healthy meal bundles offered on the counter by schools**

- 3.12.1 Schools were expected to restrict the use of the allowance by project participants to lunchtime, and so some of them programmed the till systems to only activate the allowance between 11 am and 2 pm. However, we could not find any example where the till systems were programmed to only allow the use of the allowance for healthy meal bundles.
- 3.12.2 Instead, in a few cases catering staff were trained to invite project participants to choose healthy meal bundles if they wanted to use their allowance, as they intended to check out non-compliant items. The invitation was not typically compulsory. Pupils were ultimately allowed to use the allowance for items other than healthy meal bundles, if they wished so.
- 3.12.3 Beyond these few instances at check-out, we could not find any initiatives to encourage the take-up of healthy meal bundles. Such initiatives could have been addressed at the whole school community. They would have been a way of bringing the offer of healthy meal bundles closer to the actual demand for them, and so working towards some of the key expected outcomes of the project.

**There is no evidence to believe that invoicing just for take-up created an incentive for schools to promote take-up.**

- 3.12.4 Either the schools, or the Council, could have taken the lead on implementing these take-up promotion initiatives. Examples include posters promoting the benefits of healthy meal bundles; brief presentations by speakers from school staff, or external; and group activities, like setting individual weekly targets and then sharing with peers the experience from taking up healthy meal bundles regularly.
- 3.12.5 More generally, our process workshops, and staff interviews at schools demonstrated virtually no awareness that the project pursued outcomes in relation to higher food quality, and healthier nutrition. When asked to explain the project vision in their own words, school staff made reference to accessing food for free, but not specifically healthy meal bundles which represented an improvement in quality in relation to the meal deals that used to be served before the project, or other options concurrently available at the canteens.

### **3.13 Assessment of the processes: the Council's continuous implementation support to schools**

- 3.13.1 The support provided by the Council team to schools concentrated on the early stages of the project, particularly in the run-up to launch, which was signalled by the first day when a project participant accessed the free meal allowance at a given school.
- 3.13.2 Beyond this point in the process, the Council team remained available for any type of project-related query from the schools. In January 2024, the Council sent a formal letter to schools to maintain the momentum of the first year of implementation (2023-24) and announce funding for the second year (2024-25).

- 3.13.3 In April 2024, the Council sent a letter to Headteachers reminding them of the Conditions of Grant, and in particular, the condition around engaging in evaluative activities. In May and June 2024, the Council organised two sets of two sessions to promote the engagement in evaluation activities, and present plans for implementation year 2 (2024-25), respectively.
- 3.13.4 Similarly to the early stages, and aside the sessions mentioned above, the ongoing support by the Council team was mostly provided on a one-to-one basis. Examples include phone-calls, email conversations, and visits. This approach had the benefit of tailoring the support to the specific needs of the school.
- 3.13.5 On the other hand, the one-to-one approach risked being inefficient in that the same type of support, such as clarifications on key administrative tasks, might need to be repeated by the Council team several times to different audiences. One-to-one support by the Council team was a strength, although it risked being inefficient.
- 3.13.6 We note that there were no established mechanisms to share key messages collectively, beyond the sessions listed above. Opportunities could have been created for the schools and the Council team to exchange information as part of meetings or events, as a group.
- 3.13.7 Examples include an online session to stress the requirement on healthy meal bundles; a bite-size session on invoicing reports; a refresher on till-system requirements; or opportunities to showcase achievements, such as the schools with the largest take-up rate, or the schools processing applications most effectively.
- 3.13.8 Whilst acknowledging the benefits of collective sessions, the Council team reported difficulties in getting key messages acknowledged, and adhered to, such as meeting key requirements, and deadlines; and providing the correct contents for the submissions due to the Council. Collective sessions did not seem to result in key messages being understood and acted upon, so further follow-up engagement was almost always required with individual schools. In doing this, the Council team often experienced difficulties engaging with the admin teams at schools, including key email communications not being responded to, and telephone messages not being returned.

**Greater involvement and responsiveness from schools could have created greater opportunities for the project to achieve its intended outcomes.**

- 3.13.9 We were able to corroborate the difficulties in the working relationship between the Council and the schools. We also experienced similar difficulties in terms of the level of engagement with our evaluation activities, which were part of the Conditions of Grant, and further stressed in the Council's letter of April 2024. Only a few schools met the four types of evaluation activities, which involved facilitating: household surveys; interviews with parents and pupils; extraction of till data samples; and process workshops with school staff.
- 3.13.10 Based on our qualitative interviews with the Council team, our conclusion is that the team perceived their workload to be manageable, while acknowledging unavoidable peaks due to the nature of an innovative project involving a range of stakeholders. There was a perception that additional capacity to undertake administrative tasks, such as the follow-up activity with schools described above, could be beneficial in the future.
- 3.13.11 We did not receive any feedback from the Council team in terms of maintaining existing capacity, but adopting more efficient ways of working, such as better records management, agreeing stricter rules in terms of unresponsiveness from schools on key matters, or designing tracking spreadsheets more efficiently.

### 3.14 Assessment of the processes: the Council's audit of food quality, and environments

3.14.1 In January-July 2024, the Council team undertook an audit of food quality, and environments. The focus was on compliance with the requirement on healthy meal bundles. The audit took place through visits to 18, out of the 25 secondary schools. It shared some commonalities with the audit undertaken in April 2023. Detailed results are included in **Chapter 4**, further down in this report.

3.14.2 The 2024 audit identified a few instances where fewer than half of the healthy-meal-bundle requirements had been met. All audited schools received an audit report which reminded them of the need to address unmet requirements. No other specific remedial action was undertaken by the Council team. A similar conclusion regarding remedial actions may be drawn in relation to the April-2023 audit.

**The Council might have chosen to act on the April-2023 audit, rather than running another similar diagnostic exercise in 2024, without being able to take any specific remedial action in either instance.**

3.14.3 The audit of food quality compliance highlighted the Council's responsibility to oversee the implementation of the project. Other examples could have included:

- sample checks on the application assessments, particularly in relation to the evidence used as a basis to ensure that eligibility criteria were met;
- sample checks on till systems to assess whether the systems allowed the required type of restrictions regarding timings and types of items purchased; and
- analyses to understand whether the project was putting pressures on catering facilities and practices, such as organising services, clearing queues in time for lunch break end, and minimising waste; and if so, how those pressures could be eased.

**There is scope for the Council team to perform checks on the processes run by schools, such as eligibility checks, till system updates, and demand volumes at catering services.**

### 3.15 Assessment of the processes: invoicing

3.15.1 Invoicing rounds took place at deadlines set by mid-November 2023, and mid-February and mid-June 2024. The Council designed a reporting spreadsheet which each of the schools that had launched the project by the deadline was required to submit. The spreadsheet calculated a grant payment for each school based on the number of healthy meal bundles actually taken up by the project participants, multiplied by the unit cost of £2.90.

3.15.2 During our fieldwork, we became aware of a few examples where the school had challenged the Council team regarding the requirement to report actual take-up, rather than eligibility, for invoicing purposes. These few schools complained that the approach was unfair. This is because there was a risk that the meals were made available and if not taken up by project participants, then the associated costs were not reimbursed by the Council.

3.15.3 We received confirmation by these schools that they were filling in the invoicing reports assuming that all project participants were taking up meals every school day. They seemed under the impression that the Council was comfortable with this.

3.15.4 When sighted on an early draft of this report, the Council confirmed that at the training sessions prior to the start of the 2023-24 school year, the Council offered additional set-up funding to all schools. Two of them requested it. The Council agreed that these two schools could invoice for 100 per cent take-up to mitigate for the risk of project participants not taking up the meals already prepared. Neither the offer of additional set-up funding to all schools, nor the agreement with the two specific schools was documented.

**Two schools were allowed to use the invoicing reports to claim reimbursements on the basis of an assumed 100 per cent take-up. No section within the invoice made this explicit for future audits.**

3.15.5 We analysed the reports for mid-February, and mid-June 2024, which included data for all the previous months since the project had been launched at each school. It was concerning to observe irregular funding claims on the basis of:

- numbers of applications received, rather than meals actually taken up by those whose applications had been approved;
- assumptions that project participants had taken up meals on absolutely all, or exactly 50 per cent of the trading days in a month; this is beyond the two instances acknowledged by the Council, above; and
- months when the project had not been launched yet.

3.15.6 As a result of these irregularities, some schools received up to 3 or 4 times more than what they should have. This means that some other schools, who were likely to have followed the reporting rules, received up to 3 or 4 times less. The identified irregularities may constitute financial mismanagement.

**The Council is urged to investigate the invoicing process and put in place remedial action, where required.**

3.15.7 We need to highlight the inconsistencies in invoicing reporting practices as a serious limitation in the implementation of the project. Any extra funding, not calculated in relation to healthy-meal-bundles actually taken up, should have been invoiced separately, including clear descriptions of the amounts claimed. More generally, the Council team would have been expected to require all schools to comply with the Conditions of Grant and not to have allowed deviations of the type just set out. It would have been reasonable to also expect accuracy checks on the invoicing reports received from schools.

### **3.16 Assessment of the processes: overall assessment**

3.16.1 Overall, the collaboration between the Council team and the schools could be described as fluid and pragmatic, in that a constant focus was maintained on addressing issues and progressing towards a point where the project could be launched. **Table 3.2**, below, summarises the strengths and weaknesses identified by the Council team as part of a focus group we ran during the evaluation.

3.16.2 In our view, the design of the project, and to some extent also its implementation, were far from a co-creation approach. This type of approach would have involved consultation and working sessions where stakeholders, particularly the Council team and the schools, would have shared their views and agreed the key aspects of the process collectively. Some schools reported that catering companies should have also been involved.

**There are opportunities to bring the Council and the schools closer together and work collaboratively towards the achievement of outcomes.**

Table 3.2: Council team’s perceptions of project performance

Strengths	Weaknesses
Novelty: first time this initiative is trialled in London, possibly in the UK.	Constraints imposed by a food system which is perceived to be underfunded.
Long-term nature: minimum of three years in place.	Small number of participants per school, which means limited leverage with schools.
Learning opportunity, including through the evaluation.	No leverage with catering companies.
Positive team dynamics, and interactions with stakeholders.	Flexibility, and limited responsiveness from schools, results in extra admin work which could be avoided.
Project implementation pace adapted to schools.	Limited time for project monitoring, and remedial actions, and more generally engaging with schools.
Rare example covering the whole policy cycle: from political mandate, to pilot, and full implementation	
Rare opportunity to have four roles dedicated to school food in a local authority.	

Source: Aldaba analysis of focus group run with Council team

3.16.3 Our fieldwork provided multiple examples where schools and the Council had had negative experiences when working together, mostly in relation to clarity of communication, and coordination of tasks. On occasions, there was an overall sentiment of fatigue, and even professional hostility. This could be counterbalanced by examples of positive feedback where the project was perceived to be valuable, and straightforward to implement.

3.16.4 The identified limitations were aggravated by the fact that practically no consultation, or involvement of any sort, took place with pupils and their parents. The Council team could have used the pilot in Spring 2023, for example, to run focus groups which could have elicited feedback to make the take-up of healthy meal bundles more likely. Similarly, schools could have explored with pupils the barriers and enablers to transform eligibility, into actual take-up of healthy meal bundles.

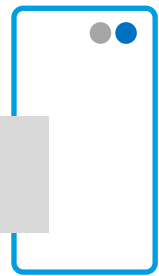
**We believe that the absence of pupil and parent engagement is an important weakness of the project.**

3.16.5 The Council team’s perception that the project had limited leverage with schools is based on the relatively small number of project participants per school. The Council team perceived this as an obstacle to overcome. However, the efforts to gain leverage with schools should be understood within the broader project vision to support children and household at risk of food insecurity.

**Project-participant pupils, and households, are as important, if not more, than schools.**

3.16.6 Five out of all 25 schools supported pupils with special needs. Their pupil numbers were small, and so were the numbers of project participants. In their case, the food offered at the school canteens was typically adapted to groups of pupils, and also individual pupils, as required. We invited these schools to participate in all the evaluation activities. Only a few agreed to provide a small amount of information.

3.16.7 Both the Council and the schools showed limited commitment to learning from this evaluation. The Council initially specified the formative character of the evaluation. This meant that interim findings should provide the basis for changes in project implementation. This only happened in practice on a few aspects of the project, but not generally. No school showed an interest in receiving and engaging with the results from our food security survey. This is despite the critical nature of the topic, and the fact that no other relevant evidence was available for them to understand its implications.



### 4.1 Pupil outputs: project participant numbers

4.1.1 This chapter aims to assess the impact of the project by building on information which we collected from all the agents involved in the project: the Council, the schools, parents, and pupils. The aim is to verify the hypotheses and conceptual frameworks developed in the previous chapters. We will attempt to draw conclusions on the size and nature of the changes observed, and the extent to which those changes may be attributed to the project, as opposed to other factors, or just chance or random variation.

4.1.2 At project design stage, the Council estimated that approximately 1,600 pupils would be eligible for the project in implementation year 1: the school year 2023-24. We used two sources to estimate the actual number of participating pupils: interviews with schools, which in turn built on consultations of the schools' management information systems; and invoicing reports submitted by the schools to the Council in November 2023, February 2024, and June 2024, as part of the Conditions of Grant agreements.

4.1.3 We identified discrepancies between the two sources. For example, as at February 2024 our interviews provided confirmations of project participant numbers for 22 out of the 25 schools. The invoicing reports due that month provided confirmations for 18 out of the 25 schools. The total derived from our records was 24 per cent less than the total in the invoicing reports. Note there were more schools in our records, than those with invoicing reports. The average variation for the 16 schools which were included in both sources was 12 per cent, with some schools registering a positive difference, and others a negative difference.

4.1.4 Schools were continuously updating project participant numbers throughout year 1, for example to include newly approved applications. Whilst some variation is to be expected, it is concerning to observe discrepancies of the magnitude just described. The following are some of the explanations we became aware of:

- Some invoicing reports contained errors, such as potentially providing numbers of applications received, as opposed to applications approved.
- The information management systems in some schools were not fit for purpose, with some schools reporting they were unable to collate all project participants, or all project participants and their parents, in one single list. Manual, paper-based cross-checking was required each time submissions were due to the Council.
- Similarly, some information management systems were not capable of distinguishing project participants, from those statutory eligible for free school meals. Inexplicably, some schools had siblings included in both lists. For example, one sibling was classified as project participant, whilst the other was classified as statutory eligible. There were also numerous duplicates where the same individual appeared on both lists.
- Attempts to rectify these situations were sometimes hampered by misplacement or accidental deletion of the original applications, and approval decision records. As a result, some schools were unable to redress these instances of mismanagement.

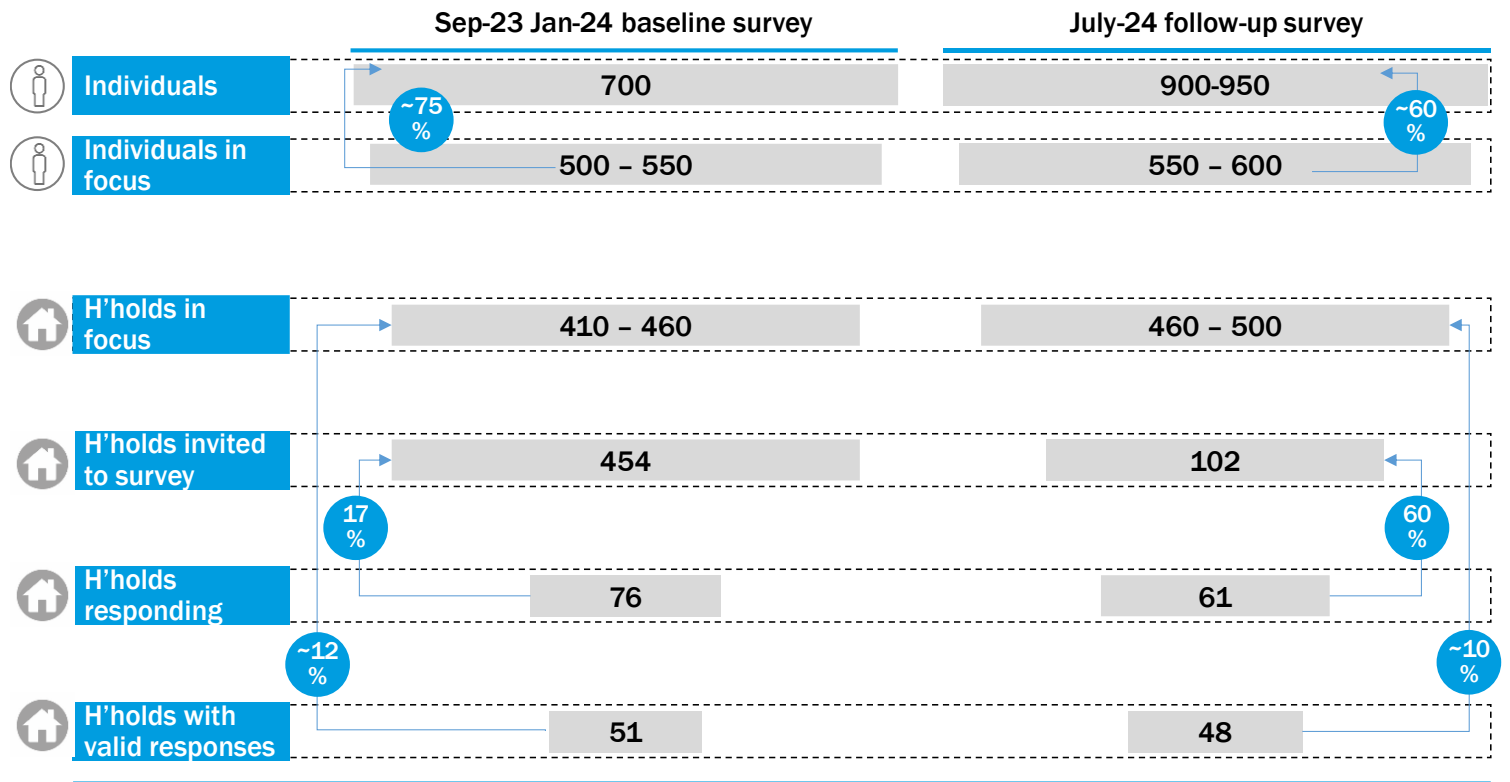
4.1.5 We produced an estimate of the total number of project participants by combining the information in the invoicing reports for June 2024, which included counts for all the previous months where the project had been in place at each school; and the information we had collected through interviews and email correspondence with the schools up to that date. This could be considered as an estimate of the steady-state number for year 1, once the project had finished recruiting participants for the year.



**Our estimate is between 900 and 950 actual project participants as at May 2024; assuming 1.3 siblings per household, this is equivalent to 690 to 730 participating households**

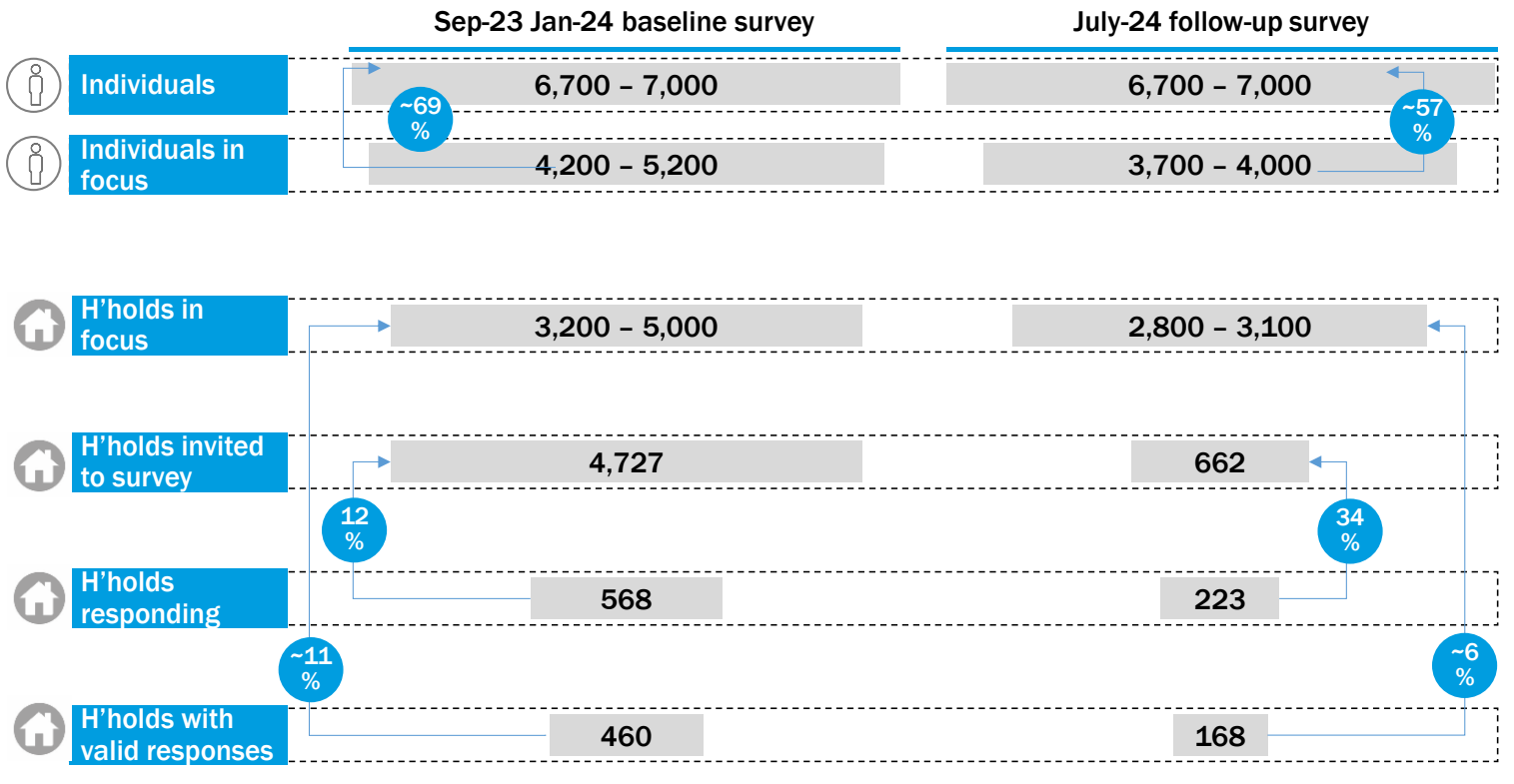
- 4.1.6 As explained, note this estimate may be affected by errors, such as duplicates, or include individuals who might be entitled to statutory free school meals, or potentially not entitled to any type of free school meal. We chose May because it was the last full month included in the June-2024 invoicing reports.
- 4.1.7 Also note the number was lower for earlier months in year 1, as schools gradually implemented the project and recruited participants. For reference, we estimated that there were approximately 700 project participants by February 2024. Therefore, there was an estimated increase of approximately 30 per cent between the 700 project participants in February, and the 900-950 project participants in May 2024.
- 4.1.8 A subset of twelve schools implemented the project between September 2023 and February 2024, and agreed to participate in a food security survey, as explained further down. The baseline survey took place between September 2023 and February 2024. Approximately 500 to 550 project participants were in scope for the baseline survey, grouped into approximately 410 to 460 households. See **Figure 4.1**, below.
- 4.1.9 Three of the schools were not in a position to participate in the follow-up survey, which took place in July 2024. As a result, the subset of schools was reduced from twelve to nine. At the follow-up, approximately 550 to 600 project participants were in scope, grouped into approximately 460 to 500 households. There were fewer schools, but more individuals and households because the schools increased the number of project participants gradually between the baseline and follow-up points.
- 4.1.10 Even though the number of project participants as at May 2024 might be between 900 and 950, this impact evaluation focuses on a subset of 500 to 550 in September 2023 – February 2024, and another subset of 550 to 600 in July 2024. In an attempt to reduce data-protection, and respondent-fatigue risks, the surveys did not allow cross-checking the identity of the respondents to each survey. As a result, the individuals responding on behalf of their households were not necessarily the same in each subset.
- 4.1.11 **Figure 4.1**, below, refers to these subsets as the ‘individuals in focus’ and ‘households in focus’ to denote the focus of this impact evaluation. For completeness, **Figure 4.2**, below, provides the equivalent numbers for the statutory eligible (our main comparator group) in the subset of twelve (baseline) and nine (follow-up) schools.
- 4.1.12 **Figure 4.3**, below, provides a demographic breakdown for a subset of project participants which broadly corresponds to those ‘in focus’ at the follow-up survey, compared with official statistics for statutory eligible pupils in Southwark in 2020-21, the latest available year. The average proportion of participating boys was 53 per cent, and the average proportion of participating girls was 46 per cent. Nearly half of the project participants were in Years 7 or 8, which broadly corresponds to the ages between 11 and 13 years old. This contrasts with statutory eligible pupils who were evenly distributed across years 7 to 11 at around 16 to 19 per cent in each year.
- 4.1.13 Among project participants, the largest ethnic group was Black, with 54 per cent; followed by White, with 17 per cent; and Asian, with 11 per cent. In the case of statutory eligible pupils, the largest ethnic group was also Black, although with a slightly lower percentage: 49 per cent. The percentage for White was 19 per cent among the statutory eligible, which is comparable to project participants; followed by Asian with 7 per cent, nearly half the equivalent group among project participants.

Figure 4.1: Numbers of pupils and households participating in the project, and the food security survey



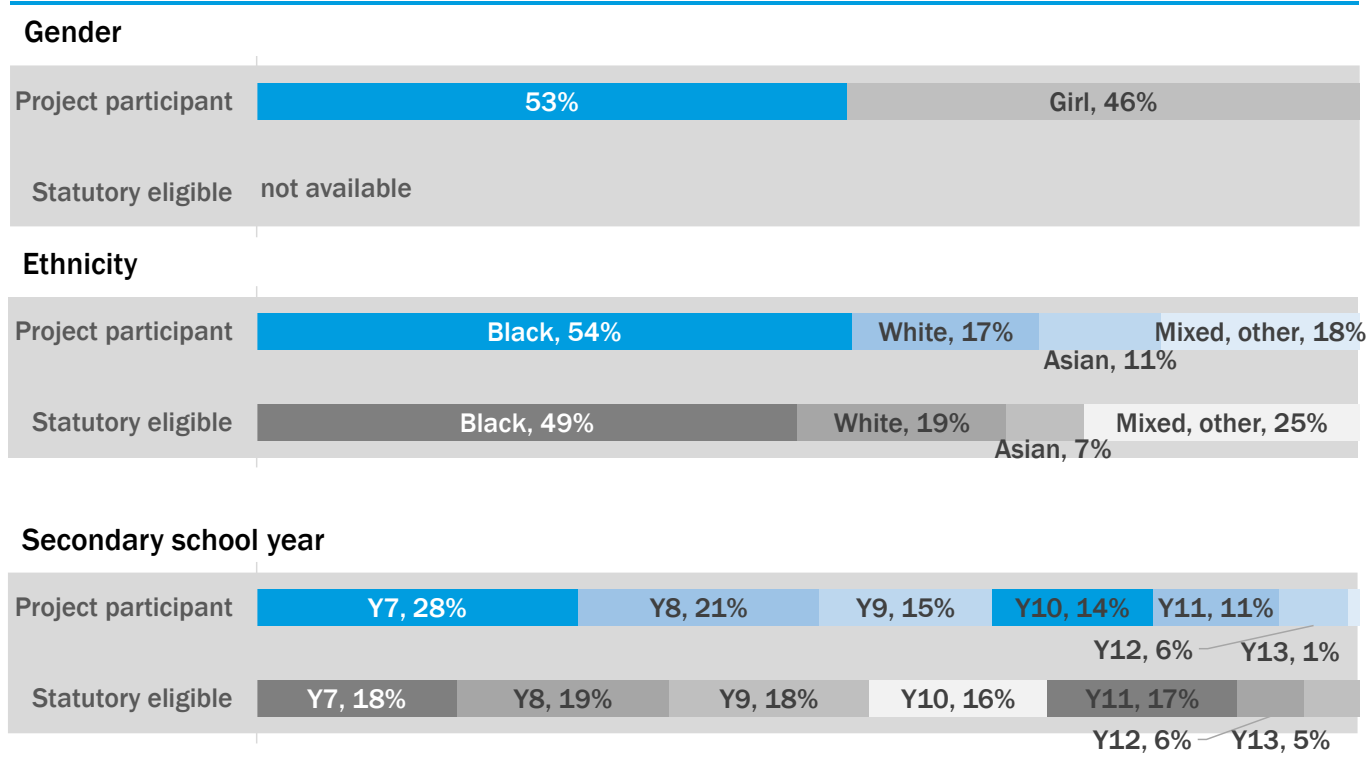
Source: Aldaba analysis based on interviews with schools, and survey administration records

Figure 4.2: Numbers of statutory-eligible pupils and households, participating in the food security survey



Source: Aldaba analysis based on interviews with schools, and survey administration records

Figure 4.3: Demographic profile of project participants, compared to statutory eligible pupils



Source: Aldaba analysis of invoicing reports by 14 schools for June 2024, and Office for National Statistics, Education Census for England and Wales 2020-21<sup>36</sup>. Note 1: n = 569 project participants included in invoicing reports. Note 2: n ~ 5,900 statutory eligible pupils in Southwark.

## 4.2 Pupil outputs: Take-up of healthy meal bundles

4.2.1 The audit commissioned by the Council in April 2023 estimated take-up by applying a top-down approach. In simple terms, the total free-school meal allowance used, was made relative to the total available. The audit estimated take-up by the statutory eligible to be 50 per cent<sup>37</sup>. This is equivalent to 2.5 days per week. As part of this evaluation, we had three additional sources to examine take-up:

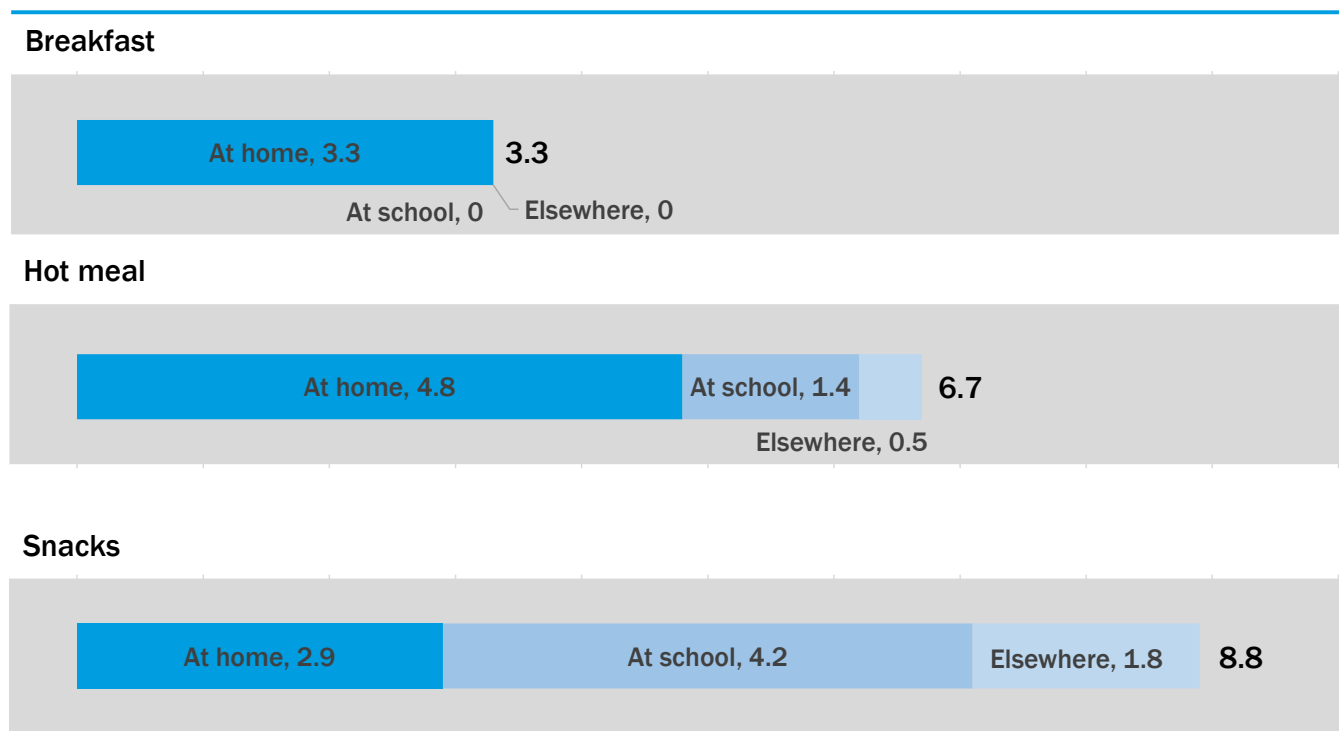
- Interviews, and one focus group with a total of 16 pupils in receipt of either statutory, or project free meals. This is not statistically representative.
- Invoicing reports submitted by schools to the Council. This is statistically representative, although subject to error.
- Random samples of purchases recorded in the till systems for three schools. This is statistically representative for each of the sampled schools.

<sup>36</sup> Office for National Statistics, Education Census for England and Wales 2020-21, available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/educationcensus2021inenglandandwales#:~:text=Education,%20England%20and%20Wales:%20Census%202021.%20Usual%20residents%20aged%2016> Note Edubase suggests a higher number of statutory eligible, possibly above 6,500 in 2022-23.

<sup>37</sup> Cohesion Consulting (June 2023), Catering Audit: Delivering the free secondary school meals project (unpublished), p. 12.

4.2.2 **Figure 4.4**, below, sets out the results of an exercise pupils did at the beginning of their interviews, and focus group. They were asked to think of a typical five-day school week. They identified the number of times they had breakfast, hot meals, and snacks; and where. On average, the interviewed pupils had breakfast on three to four days on a typical week, always at home. They had a hot meal almost every day at home, whereas they did so only one to two days at school. There is some ambiguity in terms of what constitutes a snack. However, the place where pupils have snacks most often is at school.

**Figure 4.4: Types of food eaten on a typical five-day school week for selected pupils, by eating place, absolute number**



Source: Aldaba interviews, and focus groups with pupils. Note: n = 16 non-representative pupils in receipt of either statutory, or project free meals, both combined.

4.2.3 In line with these findings, our interviews with both pupils and parents provided multiple examples where the school canteen was perceived as a source for snacks, particularly when pupils feel peckish or hungry, rather than a place to have hot meals regularly.

4.2.4 Through our pupil interviews, we identified the following barriers to eating hot meals at school canteens:

- Food is no longer properly hot by the time pupils get to the front of the queue.
- Seasoning is poor, with some dishes being tasteless, and others too salty.
- Older and taller pupils skip the queue and push the younger ones around, so it is perceived to be safer not to join the queue.
- Portions are too small, so not worth queuing.
- The price of the hot meals is too expensive; as one pupil put it: ‘you pay £2.50 but it should be more like 60p’.

4.2.5 In our interviews, we deliberately avoided asking pupils or parents to disclose whether they had access to free school meals. Quite often, they disclosed this voluntarily as they addressed our general questions about food. As one pupil put it:

**'I am free meals, but I only had a meal once at the canteen. It wasn't good. It wasn't even hot, so my mum does my own thing. She puts everything into a lunch box and I eat it at breaks'**

4.2.6 The invoicing reports for May 2024, when the number of project participants could be considered to have reached its steady state, suggested the following take-up rates:

- Statutory eligible: 62 per cent, or 3.10 days per week.
- Project participants: 62 per cent, or 3.10 days per week.
- Not entitled to free school meals: 69 per cent, or 3.44 days per week.

4.2.7 These estimates might be assumed to be approximations to allowance take-up, and not necessarily take-up of healthy meal bundles. Note they refer to a subset of nine schools which had submitted their invoicing reports to the Council by the time of writing.

4.2.8 As explained earlier in this report, we found several errors and discrepancies in the invoicing reports. These might explain the considerable difference between the estimate from the April-2023 audit, which was 2.5 days a week for the statutory eligible, and the May-2024 invoicing reports, which suggested an average of 3.1 days per week for the same group. To shed further light on this, we obtained till transactions for random samples of pupils in three schools.

4.2.9 In one of these schools, we obtained one random sample for project participants, and another random sample for statutory eligible pupils, both for November 2023. In another school, we obtained one random sample for project participants for November 2024, and another for March 2024; and another random sample for statutory eligible pupils just for November 2023. In another school, we only obtained one random sample just for project participants for November 2023. The sampled months were chosen because there were fewer bank, or school holidays, resulting in 20 to 22 school days, also referred to as trading days for the school canteens.

4.2.10 We analysed the transaction reports for each of the randomly selected pupils. We started by distinguishing between the purchases funded by the free-school-meal allowance, and those funded by the households through online top-up transfers by parents into their pupils' digital wallets. Where possible, we checked whether the use of the allowance complied with the project requirement on healthy meal bundles.

4.2.11 We then estimated the proportion of instances of use, or compliant use of the allowance over the total number of trading days in the month. We used this proportion to estimate the average weekly take-up.

4.2.12 To ensure greater accuracy, we adjusted the total number of trading days by the number of absences for each pupil in the samples. A half-day absence counted the same as a full-day absence for this purpose.

4.2.13 In this way, we managed the risk that a pupil appeared not to have used their allowance, when in fact they had not gone to school that day. We did not distinguish between authorised, and unauthorised absences, for simplicity.

### **4.3 Pupil outputs: Take-up of healthy meal bundles in random samples from school 1**

4.3.1 In school 1, statutory eligible pupils were allocated a £2.30 allowance per day, whereas project participants were intended to be allocated a £2.90 allowance by the school.

4.3.2 In our November-2023 random sample of 20 project participants, or 31 per cent of all the project participants in this school, seven had had added a daily allowance of £2.90, whereas the remaining 13 had had added a daily allowance of £2.30. Our March-2024 random sample originally had 10 project participants: two with a £0 allowance, and eight with a £2.30 allowance. The school did not respond to our requests for clarification, so we deemed more cautious to exclude the two cases with £0 allowance, and focus the analysis on the eight with a £2.30 allowance.

**In all cases, at this school the allowances may be used on any item at lunchtime, not necessarily a healthy meal bundle: this contravenes the Conditions of Grant.**

4.3.3 As a member of staff put it 'we used to take a hard line with free school meals: just hot food, but take-up was low, so we added in flexibility, and saw more students coming to the canteen and using their allowances, so it's better for them'. No evidence was made available to substantiate this view.

**Some project participants were allowed to take up £2.90's worth of items per day, not necessarily healthy meal bundles; other project participants just £2.30's worth: all this in one single school.**

4.3.4 In our random sample of 10 statutory eligible pupils, or two per cent of all statutory eligible pupils, the average spent on canteen purchases was £29 in November 2023. This contrasts with approximately £54 for project participants. Prices were the same for all canteen users.

4.3.5 We were able to identify the allowance-funded purchases which appeared to comply with the project requirement on healthy meal bundles, at lunchtime, although we did not undertake any detailed analysis to establish compliance with the Conditions of Grant, or school food standards. These purchases were coded in the till system as 'meal deal', which is charged at £2.30; 'sandwich deal', which is charged at £2.25; 'pasta pot', which is charged at £2.00; and 'jacket potato or salad', which is charged at £1.85.

4.3.6 Our exchanges with the catering manager confirmed that these items were the closest match to healthy meal bundles. For example, the meal deal was typically made up of:

- a main course, which changed every day within 2-week menu cycles, and might be, for example, chicken and rice, pasta, or stir-fried noodles; and
- a dessert, which might be yoghurt, jelly, cake with custard, or apple crumble.

4.3.7 Note that the allowances were also used for other purchases which **Table 4.1**, below, classifies into 'non-FSM allowance', as a shorthand for 'allowance-funded but non-compliant with the project requirement on healthy meal bundle, either because it did not take place at lunchtime, or it did, but was not for a bundle'. The 'non-FSM allowance' category also includes purchases funded through parents' online top-ups, once the allowances run out.

4.3.8 As an illustration, in school 1, those project participants who had a £2.90 allowance added to their digital wallets by the school could, for example, take up a £2.30 meal deal and an additional 60 pence' worth of food, for free, which we would classify as 'non-FSM allowance'. If instead they had 90 pence' worth of food, over and above the meal deal, then 60 pence would be funded by the allowance, 30 pence would be funded through a parent top-up, and all 90 pence would be classified as 'non-FSM allowance' as part of our analysis.

4.3.9 We estimated that the average statutory eligible pupil took up on average £21's worth of healthy meal bundles in November 2023, whereas the average project participant took up £33's worth in November 2023, and £21 in March 2024. This is equivalent to an average of 2.20; and 3.41 and 2.31 healthy-meal-bundle take-up days per week, respectively. Some unreported rounding applies.

4.3.10 Confusingly, it should not be assumed that all these expenditures were funded through free school-meal allowances. At this school, the first £2.30 and £2.90's worth of purchases after 11 am were funded by the government's scheme, or Southwark's project, respectively. Therefore, the bundles might have been technically paid for through parent online top-ups, if the allowance had been used up at some point before the bundle purchase. For simplicity, we assumed that the bundles that were purchased on a given day were funded through that day's allowance.

4.3.11 Even more confusingly, a minority of pupils in the samples purchased more than one healthy meal bundle per day. For simplicity, we refined our assumption so that a maximum of one out of all the bundles purchased on a given day were funded through that day's allowance, with the rest being added to the 'non-FSM allowance' category.

4.3.12 Interestingly, both groups of pupils made purchases over and above the allowance-funded healthy meal bundles. In the case of statutory eligible pupils, these purchases were equivalent to 43 per cent of those funded through the allowance, whereas in the case of project participants the extra purchases were 93 per cent, or nearly the same as the allowance-funded purchases, in November 2023, and 57 per cent, or just over half the allowance-funded purchases, in March 2024.

**At one of the schools, project participants had average take-up rates of healthy meal bundles between 2.31 and 3.41 days per week.**

**In line with this variability, project participants might spend between 50p and £1 extra for each £1 funded.**

4.3.13 Note that many participant households paid less than the 57 to 93 per cent extra (over and above the allowance-funded bundles) because in the case of project participants, at this particular school, the daily allowance was £2.90, or 20 per cent more than the £2.30 allowance for statutory eligible pupils. This does not apply to those project participants who only had £2.30 allowances added to their digital wallets.

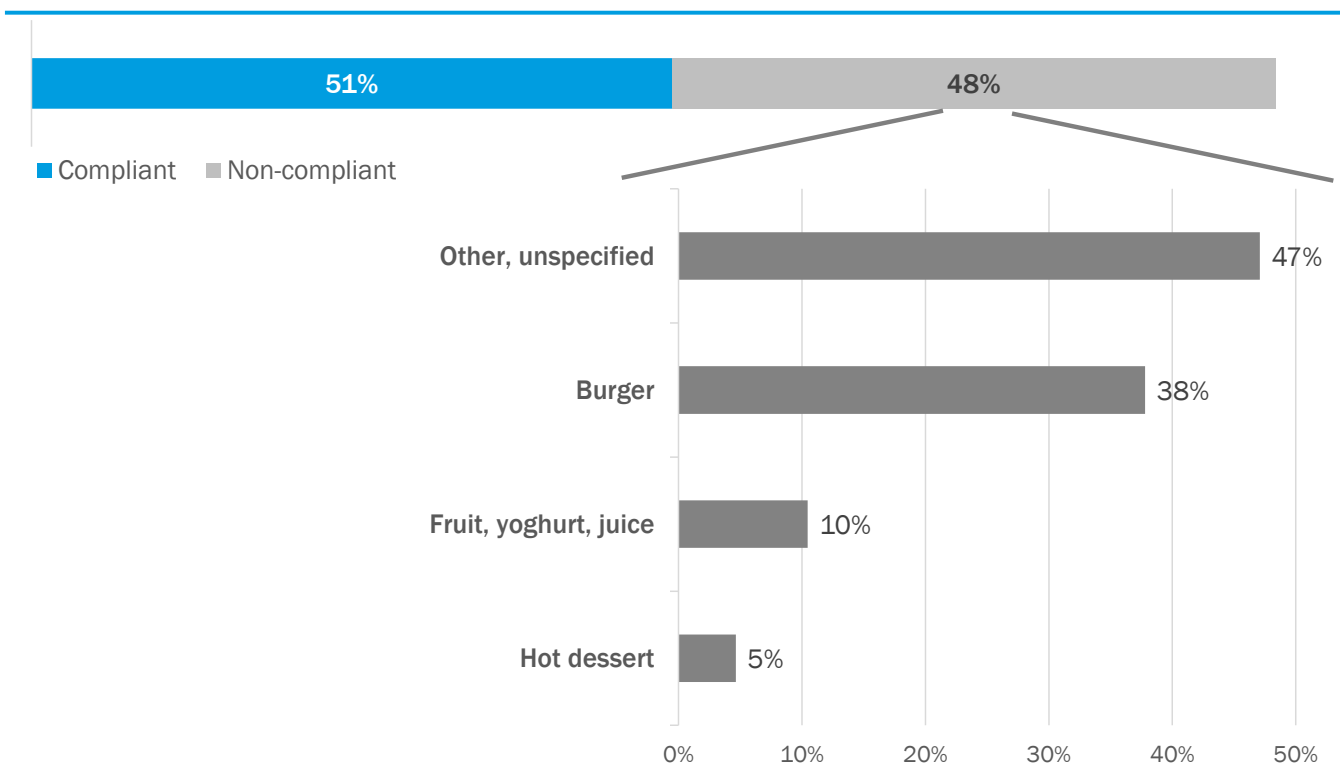
4.3.14 We do not have any basis to assess whether the extra purchases were adequate. They could be the result of healthy levels of food intake needs, or alternatively might mask some overeating patterns. Our interviews with parents identified instances where:

- portions at school canteens were perceived to be small;
- snacking was considered to be necessary because menu options were not aligned with faith rules, for example, halal food being available occasionally, but not always; or health conditions, for example, transient phobias towards certain food colours linked to mental health; or simply,
- strong preferences meant that certain favourite items were purchased several times, like cookies.

4.3.15 **Figure 4.5**, below, breaks down the over 300 extra purchases at school 1 in November 2023 by as much detail as allowed by the information received. Around 40 per cent of the extra purchases were for burgers, with around 10 per cent for fruit, yoghurt or juice. Note that at this school fresh fruit is freely available. Only a minority of types of fruit is paid for at any one particular time of the year, and therefore recorded on the till data.

4.3.16 The random sample picked up an extreme case where the project participant spent approximately £125 on canteen purchases, with approximately £54 complying with the healthy-meal-bundle requirement, and £71 not doing so. Out of these £71, burger purchases represented £26, or 13 burgers eaten in a month with 22 trading days. All burgers were purchased in the morning break. This is equivalent to one burger every other school morning.

Figure 4.5: Items assessed as non-compliant with the healthy meal bundle requirement at school 1, November 2023 (percentages)



Source: Aldaba analysis of random samples of till transactions at an anonymised school. Note: n = 722 items purchased by a random sample of 20 project participants, and another of 10 statutory eligible, both combined; 366 items were assessed as compliant, and 345 as non-compliant.

4.3.17 In summary, the overall analysis of school 1 shows that project participants may spend up to approximately double the amount compared to statutory eligible pupils. This relatively large spend may explain why project participants exhibited a higher take-up rate of healthy meal bundles in November 2023: 3.41, compared to 2.20 days per week, on average, in the case of statutory eligible pupils. However, the take-up for project participants in March 2024 was similar to that for the statutory eligible in November 2023: 2.20-2.30 healthy meal bundles per week. There is some evidence to question the nutritious value of a significant proportion of extra purchases.

4.3.18 There were some instances of unequal treatment at this school:

- In those instances where the allowance available to project participants was £2.30, rather than £2.90, the affected households had to top up comparatively more to cover the extra purchases. They could be considered to be at disadvantage, relative to the other participant households who had had £2.90 allowances added to their accounts.
- The allowance for project participants took them further than in the case of statutory eligible pupils. Note that any item could be purchased at lunch item at this school until the allowances ran out. Also note that participant households have higher incomes than statutory eligible households.



#### 4.4 Pupil outputs: Take-up of healthy meal bundles in random samples from school 2

4.4.1 In school 2, we drew a random sample of 9 project participants, or 26 per cent of the total; and another random sample of 10 statutory eligible pupils, or 2 per cent of the total. Both groups were allocated a £2.40 allowance per day. In both cases, the allowances may be used on any item, at any time throughout the school day: from the morning, to canteen closure in the afternoon. Prices were the same for all canteen users.

**At this school, the project allowance may be used on any items other than healthy meal bundles, at any time of the day: this contravenes the Conditions of Grant**

4.4.2 The average statutory eligible pupils spent a total of approximately £48 on canteen purchases in November 2023. This compares with approximately £54 for project participants, almost exactly the same as in school 1.

4.4.3 We were unable to identify the allowance-funded purchases which might have better complied with the project requirement on healthy meal bundles, at lunchtime. The reports provided by the school only specified whether the till had automatically deducted the purchases from the free-school-meal allowance (from the government, or from Southwark's project), or from a parent online top-up. No additional details on the type of purchase were available.

4.4.4 We estimated that the average statutory eligible pupil took up on average £35's worth of allowance-funded items, whereas the average project participant took up £37's worth. This is equivalent to an average of 3.66 and 3.62 allowance take-up days per week, respectively. Note these estimates may or may not include healthy meal bundles.

4.4.5 In the case of statutory eligible pupils, extra purchases above the allowance were equivalent to 34 per cent of those funded through the allowance, whereas in the case of project participants the extra purchases were 45 per cent. As it was the case with school 1, project participants supplemented the allowances by a larger proportion than statutory eligible pupils. In the case of school 2, the 45-per-cent supplement was approximately 10 per cent higher than the 34-per-cent supplement by statutory eligible pupils.

#### 4.5 Pupil outputs: Take-up of healthy meal bundles in random samples from school 3

4.5.1 In school 3, we were able to draw just one random sample of 10 project participants, or 19 per cent of the total. Only four types of meals may be taken up by project participants free of charge, only at lunchtime, as part of their allowance. The four types of meals may be considered to comply with the requirement on healthy meal bundles, although we did not undertake any detailed analysis to establish compliance with the Conditions of Grant, or school food standards. Each of the four meals has a different price: 'hot meal' (£2.45), 'meal deal' (£2.90), 'sandwich deal' (£2.90), and 'baguette meal' (£2.90). The hot meal does not include a dessert, whereas the meal deal does. Both the sandwich and baguette options include a dessert, and a small drink.

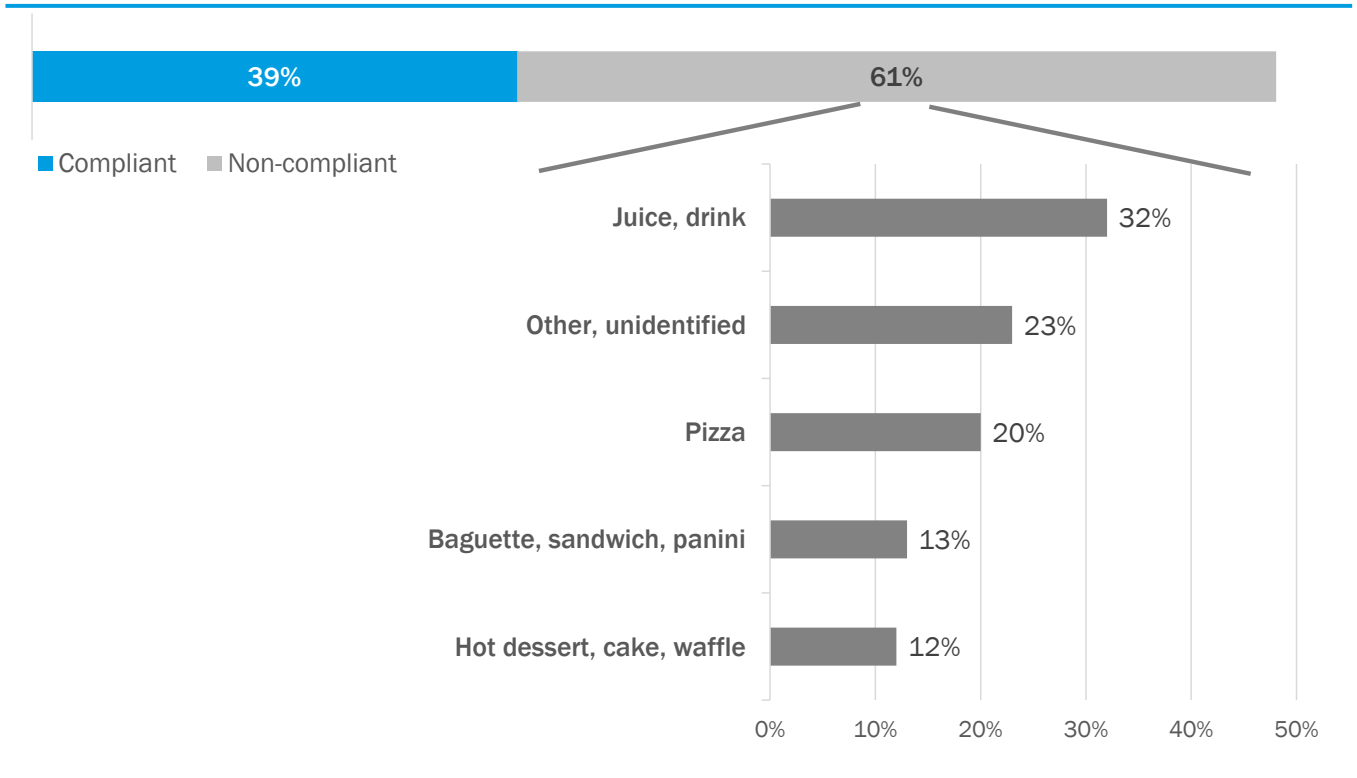
**At this school, the requirements to use the allowance just at lunchtime, and just for healthy meal bundles appear to be met.**

4.5.2 The average project participant spent a total of approximately £56 on canteen purchases in November 2023, almost the same as in schools 1, and 2. Within this figure, we estimated that approximately £32 corresponded to healthy meal bundles which were funded through the project allowance. This is equivalent to an average of 2.87 healthy-meal-bundle take-up days per week.

4.5.3 Extra purchases above the allowance were worth £24, or 44 per cent of those funded through the project allowance. This is almost the same proportion as in school 2.

4.5.4 **Figure 4.6**, below, breaks down the approximately 180 extra purchases at school 3 by as much detail as allowed by the information received. Around 30 per cent of the extra purchases were for juice and drinks, with around 20 per cent being for pizza slices.

**Figure 4.6: Items assessed as non-compliant with the healthy meal bundle requirement at school 3 (percentage)**



Source: Aldaba analysis of random samples of till transactions at an anonymised school. Note: n = 294 items purchased by a random sample of 10 project participants; 115 items were assessed as compliant, and 179 as non-compliant.

#### 4.6 Pupil outputs: Overall findings on take-up of healthy meal bundles

4.6.1 None of the schools that provided till transactions may be considered to be fully aligned with the project requirements:

- School 1 restricts the use of the £2.90 allowance to lunchtime, but not necessarily to healthy meal bundles.
- School 2 does not restrict the use of the allowance, which is set at £2.40, to any particular time of the day or type of item.
- School 3 does restrict the use of the £2.90 allowance to healthy meal bundles at lunchtime, although one of the options is priced at 50 pence less than the allowance because it contains less quantity of food.

4.6.2 As a result of these differences, the three schools are not directly comparable. Despite the limitations, we consider that the analysis of till transactions provides the most reliable findings in relation to take-up. Excluding school 2, for which we have no indication of whether the purchases complied with the healthy-meal-bundle requirement, we can draw the following tentative findings:

- Project participants purchased items worth between £30 and £60 per month at school canteens.

- Between £20 and £30's worth of these purchases was funded by the project, and broadly corresponded to healthy meal bundles.
- Between £10 and £20's worth of project participant purchases was funded by parents. These extra purchases represented more than 40 per cent of the project-funded purchases.
- Between 20 and 40 per cent of the extra purchases could be for less nutritious items, such as burgers and pizzas.

**On average, project participants used their allowance to take up healthy meal bundles approximately 2.3 to 3.4 days a week.**

- Average take-up for statutory eligible pupils might be in line with this, or lower.
- Take-up by project participants varied within the same school, with some months possibly taking up healthy meal bundles 2.3 days per week, and other months 3.4 days per week.
- For reference, the analysis of the invoicing reports suggested an average take-up of 3.1 days per week, this is, towards the upper bound of our 2.3 – 3.4 range, although the invoicing reports did not necessarily capture just healthy meal bundles, as our range does.
- Also for reference, the analysis of statutory free-school meal take-up which we reported in **Chapter 2**, based on the Family Resource Survey, found an average take-up of 4.7, at national level, although this higher take-up rate was not specific to healthy meal bundles either.

**Table 4.1: Till transactions by pupils in random samples in three schools**

School 1						
November 2023	Statutory eligible pupils (n=10, or 2%)			Project participants (n=20, or 31%)		
	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average	Max
Total spent on canteen purchases £	£0.00	<b>£28.99</b>	£67.30	£1.25	<b>£54.25</b>	£124.95
Non-FSM allowance £	£0.00	<b>£8.22</b>	£37.40	£0.00	<b>£21.69</b>	£70.75
FSM allowance £	£0.00	<b>£20.77</b>	£32.20	£0.00	<b>£32.56</b>	£54.20
FSM allowance #	0.00	<b>9.05</b>	14.00	0.00	<b>13.55</b>	21.30
FSM types	Any item at lunchtime; above, only FSM allowance spent on healthy meal bundles: meal deal; sandwich deal; pasta pot; jacket potato or salad					
Non-FSM relative to FSM allowance %	0.00	<b>43.00</b>	125.00	0.00	<b>93.00</b>	696.00
FSM take-up days relative to month %	0.00	<b>44.00</b>	70.00	0.00	<b>68.00</b>	100.00
FSM take-up days per week #	0.00	<b>2.20</b>	3.50	0.00	<b>3.41</b>	5.00

March 2024				Project participants (n=8, or 7%)		
				Min	Average	Max
Total spent on canteen purchases £				£9.60	<b>£29.71</b>	£60.10
Non-FSM allowance £				£0.00	<b>£9.03</b>	£30.80
FSM allowance £				£6.90	<b>£20.69</b>	£41.40
FSM allowance #				3.00	<b>8.88</b>	17.00
FSM types	Any item at lunchtime; above, only FSM allowance spent on healthy meal bundles: meal deal; sandwich deal; pasta pot; jacket potato or salad					
Non-FSM relative to FSM allowance %				0.00	<b>57.00</b>	143.00
FSM take-up days relative to month %				15.00	<b>46.00</b>	100.00
FSM take-up days per week #				0.75	<b>2.31</b>	5.00
School 2						
November 2023	Statutory eligible pupils (n=10, or 2%)			Project participants (n=9, or 26%)		
	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average	Max
Total spent on canteen purchases £	£2.50	<b>£48.17</b>	£94.75	£3.40	<b>£54.20</b>	£87.85
Non-FSM allowance £	£0.00	<b>£13.56</b>	£44.44	£0.98	<b>£17.46</b>	£36.41
FSM allowance £	£2.42	<b>£34.60</b>	£50.31	£2.42	<b>£36.74</b>	£51.44
FSM allowance #	1.00	<b>14.30</b>	20.79	1.00	<b>15.18</b>	21.26
FSM types	Any item, any time; no compliance with healthy meal bundles, or lunchtime requirements					
Non-FSM relative to FSM allowance %	0.00	<b>34.00</b>	88.00	7.00	<b>45.00</b>	71.00
FSM take-up days relative to month %	6.00	<b>73.00</b>	98.00	5.00	<b>72.00</b>	97.00

FSM take-up days per week #	0.28	3.66	4.88	0.24	3.62	4.83
School 3						
November 2023	Statutory eligible pupils (n=0)			Project participants (n=10, or 19%)		
	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average	Max
Total spent on canteen purchases £				£17.45	£56.13	£84.57
Non-FSM allowance £				£4.90	£23.95	£46.14
FSM allowance £				£2.90	£32.18	£59.55
FSM allowance #				1.00	11.50	21.00
FSM types	Only four types of healthy meal bundles at lunchtime: 'hot meal'; 'meal deal'; 'sandwich deal'; 'baguette meal'					
Non-FSM relative to FSM allowance %				17.00	44.00	94.00
FSM take-up days relative to month %				5.00	57.00	100.00
FSM take-up days per week #				0.23	2.87	5.00

Source: Aldaba analysis of random samples of till transactions at anonymised schools.

#### 4.7 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (baseline survey)

- 4.7.1 Outcomes 1 and 4 in our summary theory of change refer to higher food security at pupil, and household levels, respectively. We ran a survey of households to assess food security at a baseline. This was approximately within a month from project launch at each school, in September 2023 to February 2024, depending on launch date at each school.
- 4.7.2 We then ran another survey of households at one follow-up point. This was towards the end of the 2023-24 school year, in July 2024, for all schools. The aim was to measure the differences between each point in time, for both statutory eligible (main comparator group), and project participant households ('intervention group'). Conclusions at household level could inform a discussion for the outcome at pupil level.
- 4.7.3 According to our records, 23 out of all 25 secondary schools in Southwark launched, and succeeded at recruiting project participants, between September 2023 and February 2024. This resulted in a total of approximately 700 project participants. Five of the schools had fewer than 10 project participants each, which we considered too low to justify the administrative cost required from the schools to organise the survey distribution. We invited the remaining 18 to participate in the baseline survey. Out of the 18 invited, the 12 schools that agreed to participate in our survey had a total of 500 to 550 project participants.

- 4.7.4 We used the short (six-item) version of the Household Food Security Survey developed by the US Department of Agriculture. For reference, the long (ten-item) version is used in the Family Resource Survey by the UK Department for Work and Pensions.<sup>38</sup> We invited parents to respond to the survey on behalf of their households.
- 4.7.5 In the case of statutory eligible households, we included a time reference to the last month prior to responding to the survey. Note that for this group, accessing free school meals was a continuous action which had typically started a few years into the past. The Family Resource Survey also uses the last-month reference.
- 4.7.6 In the case of project participants, we adapted the time reference to ‘thinking of the time before your child, or children, started accessing free school meals’. This adaptation mitigated for the difficulty and potential confusion if respondents had been asked to think of the month prior to the point in time when their children had started accessing meals, which was already some time in the past relative to the point when they received, and chose to answer the survey.
- 4.7.7 At the baseline, we designed the questionnaire and made it available to schools for use in their preferred survey administration platforms. We also provided to schools an introductory email for distribution among parents.
- 4.7.8 The baseline survey remained open between three and six weeks in each school, depending on circumstances, school staff availability, and school break dates. We requested schools to email reminders to parents half-way through the time window. We received anonymised responses which had been compiled by each school in their respective survey administration platforms.
- 4.7.9 As set out in **Figure 4.1**, and **Figure 4.2**, above, the 500-550 project participants from the 12 schools that agreed to participate in the baseline survey corresponded to 410-460 households. The difference is as a result of siblings living in the same household, and going to the same school. However, we were also made aware of instances where the same household was invited to respond to the survey more than once because schools had been unable to remove sibling-related duplication. We believe that approximately 454 households were invited to respond to the baseline survey.
- 4.7.10 We were unable to achieve sufficient clarity on the correspondence between the households invited to respond to the baseline survey, and the actual number of households for project participants. Other limitations affecting the administration of the baseline surveys include:
- Anyone, other than the intended recipient of the survey emails, could respond to the survey, such as the children in the households, as opposed to the parent.
  - A legitimate recipient, or anyone receiving the email from a legitimate recipient, could provide answers more than once.
  - Reminders were sent to all those invited to take part in the survey, including those who had already responded. This increased the risk of multiple responses from the same household.
  - Invitation emails could be diverted to spam folders. The survey administration platforms did not allow any type of monitoring on this.
  - Other usual limitations in a self-administered survey apply, such as misunderstanding questions, providing random responses, or failing to consider consistency across the responses provided.

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<sup>38</sup> USDA, Economic Research Service, Food Security, available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/survey-tools/>

- 4.7.11 Out of 454, a subset of 76 project participant households, or 17 per cent, responded to the baseline survey. In the case of statutory eligible households, out of 4,727 invited, a subset of 568, or 12 per cent, responded to the baseline survey.
- 4.7.12 In response to the first question in the survey, a few respondents did not give their informed consent, and therefore did not continue to answer the rest of the questions. In addition, we performed some quality checks on the responses. We identified the following inconsistencies:
- The project-participant respondent stated having accessed free school meals at a date prior to project launch at their school.
  - The respondent stated not being aware of the outcome for their application for the project.
  - The respondent provided extreme, and inconsistent answers on the scales, such as ‘often food did not last, and did not have money to get more’; and at the same time ‘did not eat less than I felt I should’; and ‘did not ever go hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money’.
- 4.7.13 Once non-consent, and inconsistent responses were removed, we obtained 51 project participant households, or approximately 12 per cent of those in focus; and 460 statutory eligible households, or approximately 11 per cent of those in focus in this impact evaluation.

**The response rates to our baseline food-security survey can only be considered to be low.**

- 4.7.14 We lacked responses for the majority of the households in each group. We did not have any basis to assess the extent to which those who responded were representative of, or exceptional relative to those who did not respond. This is also referred to as non-response bias. Some possibilities include the following:
- Those parents keener to interact with their electronic devices, such as mobile phones, and more used to reacting positively to invitations received through them, were more likely to respond. This would mean that those more digitally constrained, who might also be in more economically deprived situations, would have declined to respond.
  - Some parents might have erroneously perceived that responding to the survey might have some bearing on the decision to allow their children to access, or continue to access free school meals, and so responded to the survey, whereas those who had a more accurate understanding of the eligibility criteria did not feel compelled to do so.
  - Being aware of the importance of providing information to improve public services might have prompted some to prioritise the survey among their other duties, and find the time to respond. Others might have felt fatigued by the amount of surveys of various kinds they receive daily, and chose not to respond.
  - It is possible, although there is no basis to deem it likely, that through self-selection respondents became close to an uncontrolled random sample.

## **4.8 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (follow-up survey)**

- 4.8.1 Our follow-up survey ran for approximately three weeks in July 2024. Out the 12 schools that had agreed to participate in the baseline survey, nine were in a position to also run the follow-up survey. There were between 550 and 600 project participants in this subset of schools.

- 4.8.2 As with the baseline, at the follow-up we used the short version (six-item) of the Household Food Security Survey developed by the US Department of Agriculture.<sup>39</sup> We invited parents to respond to the survey on behalf of their households. Both statutory eligible, and project participant households were asked to think of the last month when responding to the questions. This is consistent with the time reference used in the Family Resource Survey.
- 4.8.3 Unlike the baseline survey, we ran the follow-up survey directly by using a specialist survey-administration platform. Schools used their internal data protection procedures to share parent email addresses with us. This resulted in many email addresses not becoming available, either because parents did not consent for schools to share their details with us, or because no confirmation was obtained from them.
- 4.8.4 As set out in **Figure 4.1**, and **Figure 4.2**, above, the 550-600 project participants from the nine schools that participated in the follow-up survey corresponded to 460-500 households. We obtained email addresses for over 100 of them. However, we identified duplicates and inconsistencies, which we attempted to clarify with the schools.
- 4.8.5 Whilst not entirely satisfied with the quality of the data, we deemed practical to distribute the follow-up survey to 102 project participant households. Similarly, we distributed the follow-up survey to 662 statutory eligible households. Recipients were again asked for their consent before answering the survey questions, and informed that those responding in full would enter draws to win £100 shopping vouchers, as a research participation incentive
- 4.8.6 We kept the follow-up survey open for approximately three weeks. Our survey administration platform allowed us to monitor diversions to spam inboxes, recipients accessing the survey but not answering it, and partial responses. The survey could only be accessed from the email address provided for each respondent. Repeat answers, or answers from non-authorized email addresses were not allowed. Based on this information, we sent reminders just to non-respondents every three days while the survey remained open. Our monitoring information allowed us to send the reminders at the times that appeared to be most likely to result in full responses.
- 4.8.7 In addition to duplicates and inconsistencies in the email addresses for the households, other usual limitations in self-administered surveys applied, such as misunderstanding questions, providing random responses, or failing to consider consistency across the responses provided.
- 4.8.8 Out of 102, a subset of 61 project participant households, or 60 per cent, responded to the follow-up survey. In the case of statutory eligible households, out of 662 invited, a subset of 223, or 34 per cent, responded to the baseline survey.
- 4.8.9 In response to the first question in the survey, a few respondents did not give their informed consent, and therefore did not continue to answer the rest of the questions. In addition, we performed some quality checks on the responses. We identified instances where the respondent provided extreme, and inconsistent answers on the scales, such as 'often food did not last, and did not have money to get more'; and at the same time 'did not eat less than I felt I should'; and 'did not ever go hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money'.
- 4.8.10 Once non-consent, and inconsistent responses were removed, we obtained 48 valid responses from project participant households, or approximately 10 per cent of those in focus; and 168 valid responses from statutory eligible households, or approximately 6 per cent of those in focus in this impact evaluation.

**The response rates to our follow-up food-security survey can only be considered to be low.**

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<sup>39</sup> USDA, Economic Research Service, Food Security, available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/survey-tools/>

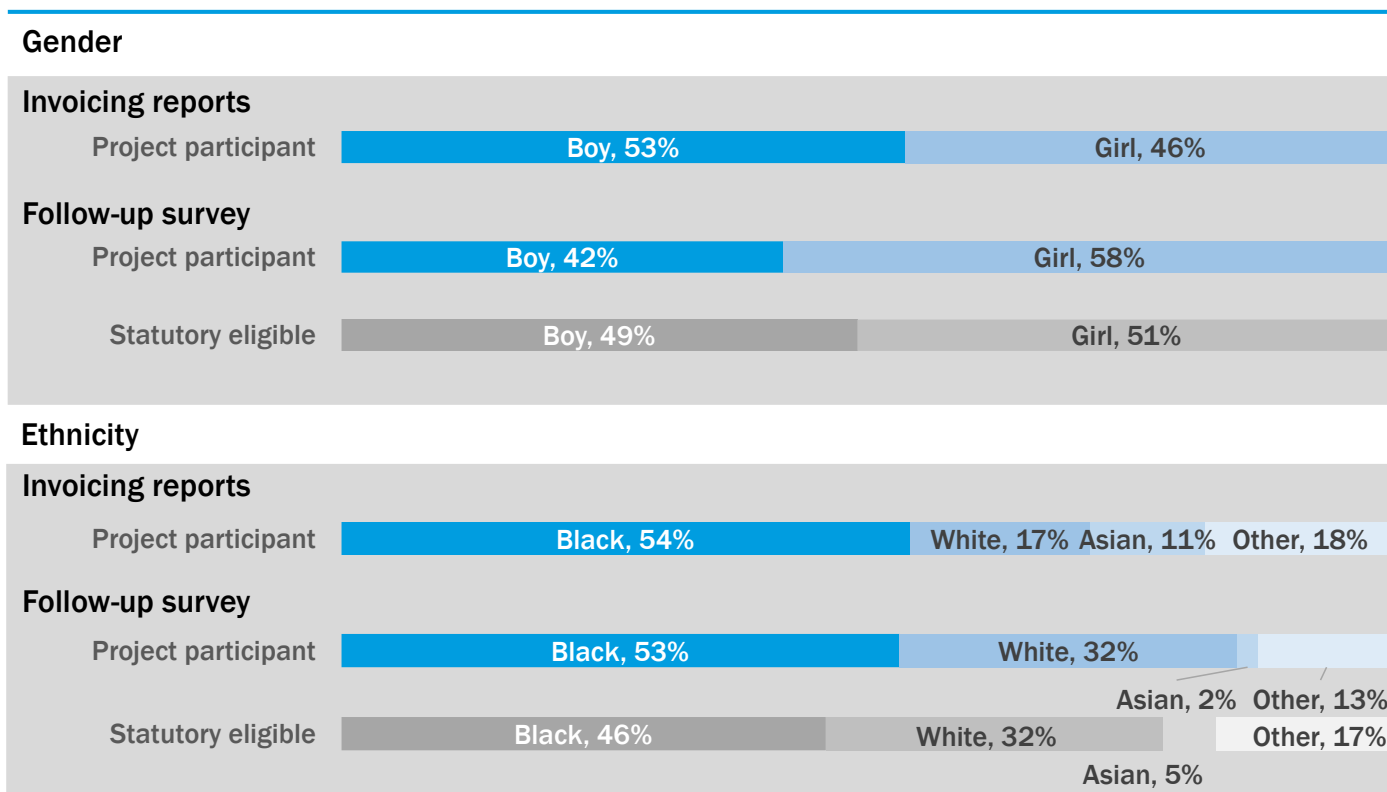


4.8.11 We lacked responses for the majority of the households in each group. As with the baseline survey, we did not have any basis to assess the extent to which those who responded to the follow-up were representative of, or exceptional relative to those who did not response. This limitation is also referred to as non-response bias.

**4.9 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (comparison between baseline and follow-up): representative character of the results**

4.9.1 **Figure 4.7**, below, provides the demographic profiles for those households responding to the follow-up survey. We assume that these profiles were also indicative of those households responding to the baseline survey.

**Figure 4.7: Demographic profiles of all project participants, compared to those responding to the follow-up food security survey, and statutory eligible pupils**



Source: Aldaba analysis of May-2024 information contained in the invoicing reports by 14 schools for June 2024, and responses to follow-up survey. Note 1: n = 569 project participants included in invoicing reports, and 61 project participant households included in the survey. Note 2: 'other' includes 'mixed, and other ethnicity'.

4.9.2 In comparison with the profiles obtained from the invoicing reports for May 2024, available also in **Figure 4.3**, earlier in this report, we observe a lower representation of households with boys, and a higher representation of households with girls in the surveys, compared to the actual, wider group of project participants. Note that, for simplicity, the survey asked for the total number of secondary-school boys and girls in the household, not necessarily just those receiving statutory, or project free-school meals in the secondary schools of Southwark. This may explain some of the difference.

4.9.3 The proportion of parents describing their ethnicity as Black in the survey was similar to that of the project participants according to the invoicing reports. However, there was a larger proportion of parents self-described as White in the survey, than in the actual population, according to the invoicing reports. This was at the expense of Asian; and mixed, and other backgrounds, which seemed to be underrepresented in the survey. Given the small sample sizes, relatively large percentage changes may result from very few individuals.

- 4.9.4 In terms of the statutory eligible, it is only possible to compare them as survey respondents with project participants, also as survey respondents. This is because the invoicing reports did not provide demographic breakdowns in their case, and therefore it is not possible to compare statutory eligible respondents, with actual statutory eligible pupils.
- 4.9.5 There are more boys in the statutory eligible households who responded to the survey, compared to project participants. There were fewer Black parents among the statutory eligible households who responded to the survey, whereas the proportion of White parents was exactly the same in both groups. The same limitations explained earlier regarding sample sizes apply here.
- 4.9.6 Beyond this descriptive analysis, the statistics discipline provides the option to apply inferential analysis to further explore the representative character, or otherwise, of the survey responses. However, survey responses were not randomly selected from the population. As a result, it is not possible to reliably apply inferential statistics in this case.

**There is some ground to believe that the survey responses were not representative, and potentially not even indicative, of the actual groups of statutory eligible, and project participant households.**

- 4.9.7 The differences observed between the invoicing reports, which in turn should build on the schools' information management systems, and the survey responses are considerable. Similarly, the statutory eligible and the project participants are different between themselves, as far as demographic profiles are concerned.
- 4.10 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (comparison between baseline and follow-up): food-security scores, means, and statuses**
- 4.10.1 With the previous, important limitations in mind, our aim is to compare food-security statuses in the UK, from the 2022-23 Family Resource Survey, and in Southwark, from our baseline (September 2023 to February 2024), and follow-up (July 2024) surveys.
- 4.10.2 Note that **Chapter 3**, earlier in this report, set out 2022-23 Family Resource Survey results for households with secondary-school children who had taken up free school meals the week before they answered the survey. In contrast, here we aim to use a different approximation to statutory free-school-meal entitlement.
- 4.10.3 Our approach here involves identifying those households who have a total household income below and above £150 per week, or £7,830 per year. This is close to the threshold below which households typically become eligible for statutory free school meals.<sup>40</sup>
- 4.10.4 Unfortunately, the sample size for those households below £150 per week (our main comparator group in this evaluation) was too small to yield meaningful insights. As a result, we focused the analysis on households above £150 per week, and in receipt of Universal Credit, as an approximation to the target population for the project under evaluation (our 'intervention' or participant group).

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<sup>40</sup> The threshold set by the Government to be entitled to statutory free school meals is £7,400 net earned income, or less. We used £150 per week, or £7,830 per year, including both earned income and benefits, as a convenient approximation: this corresponds with the summary bands produced by the Department for Work and Pensions including net earned income, and benefits. See Gov.uk (2024), Free School Meals, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdad5965ca2f00117da947/Free\\_school\\_meals.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdad5965ca2f00117da947/Free_school_meals.pdf)

4.10.5 The US developers of the food security survey established how the answers to the survey must be used to calculate food security scores, and how the scores must be classified into statuses. It is the statuses that the developers prescribe as meaningful for analytical purposes, rather than the scores. **Table 4.2**, below, sets out the correspondence between scores and statuses, for the short- and long-versions of the survey.

**Table 4.2 Correspondence between scores and statuses in the US Department for Agriculture’s Household Food Security Survey**

10-item version		18-item version		6-item version	
for households without children		for households with children		for all households	
Scores	Status	Scores	Status	Scores	Status
0	High	0	High	0	High or marginal
1,2	Marginal	1,2	Marginal	1	High or marginal
3,4,5	Low	3,4,5,6,7	Low	2, 3, 4	Low
6,7,8,9,10	Very low	8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16, 17,18	Very low	5, 6	Very low
Note the UK Department for Work and Pensions applies this version to all households in its Family Resource Survey				Note we applied this version to our baseline and follow-up surveys of project participant, and statutory eligible households	

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Food Security, available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/survey-tools/>

4.10.6 The 10-item version of the questionnaire used in the Family Resource Survey applies to all households in as much as the adults within the households are concerned. The food security of children can only be assumed to be consistent with that for the adults they live with. The time reference used in the Family Resource Survey is ‘in the last month’.

4.10.7 The version of the questionnaire we used as part of this evaluation is applicable to all households. However, it does not ask specifically about children’s food security. It does not capture, either, the most severe situations of adult food insecurity, which in turn may also affect children most severely, compared to the 10-item version.

**We believe that the version of the survey used in this impact evaluation is broadly comparable to the version used nationally as part of the Family Resource Survey, in as much as a broad representation of adult-, and to some extent child-situations is concerned.**

4.10.8 In our baseline survey, we used the time reference ‘in the last month’ for statutory eligible households, and to ‘thinking of the time before your child, or children, started accessing free school meals’ for project participant households. In our follow-up survey, we used the time reference ‘in the last month’ for all surveyed households.

- 4.10.9 In addition to the methodology endorsed by the survey developers, we propose to examine the mean and standard deviations for the scores. Whilst the scores are technically a categorical variable, we see some value in treating them as a continuous variable, and so examine their mean and standard deviation. We are of this opinion because the cut-off points for the statuses, whilst backed by detailed research undertaken by the developers, result in asymmetries.
- 4.10.10 We consider that some of the statuses are particularly sensitive to the cut-off points. For example, responses with a score of 0 are classified as high food security in the 10-item version of the questionnaire. Those with one or two scores are classified as marginal. They are one or two scores away from the low security status. In contrast, those in the low security status are between one and three scores away from the next status up. For completeness, the very-low security status contains five scores. As a result, we believe that the combined analysis of the raw scores, treated as a continuous variable, and the statuses, can help us understand some of the sensitivities inherent to the methodology.
- 4.10.11 Our analysis follows the methodology used by the UK Department for Work and Pensions as part of its publications of summary results from the Family Resource Survey. As set out in **Table 4.2**, above, this yields scores ranging from 0 to 10. Our analysis of surveyed households in Southwark is based on the 6-item version of the survey, with scores ranging from 0 to 6. We adjusted the mean and standard deviations for our surveys proportionally.
- 4.11 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (comparison between baseline and follow-up): Southwark results in the national context**
- 4.11.1 As shown in **Figure 4.8**, below, both the mean; and the standard deviation, which may be thought of as a measure of variability around the mean; increase as we narrow down the UK population closer to a comparator for Southwark's project participants. Note that the interpretation here is: the higher, the more food insecurity, or in simple terms, the higher, the worse.
- 4.11.2 Starting with the highest level depicted in **Figure 4.8**, below, we can see that all UK households, taken together, have a mean of 0.6, which is quite close to 0, or high food security. These statistics are consistent with the situation for households without secondary school children, and those with secondary school children, earning above £150 per week, and not being in receipt of Universal Credit. Note, again, that the source for these results does not specifically measure child-related food security. The results might be different if this was included.
- 4.11.3 Within the households with secondary-school children, those earning above £150 per week, being in receipt of Universal Credit, and living in top-80% areas, as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation, have a mean of 2.3, which could be interpreted as high, or marginal food security. Finally, those in receipt of Universal Credit and living in bottom-20% areas, which are the closest equivalent to project participant households, register the highest mean: 2.9. Whilst this mean can be interpreted as high or marginal food security, it also represents the lowest food security within the national groups considered in our analysis.
- 4.11.4 Instead of using means, the same information may be conveyed by using frequencies for each of the statuses, as endorsed by the survey developers, and set out in **Figure 4.8**, below. Unfortunately, the rules for restricted datasets do not allow us to disclose these breakdowns due to sample sizes.
- 4.11.5 It is important to note that the standard deviation increases as the level of financial difficulty and deprivation increases. This means that the level of variability around the mean is greater, and as a result, the reliability of the mean as a central-tendency measure is lower. In lay terms, this means that households experience a greater range of situations in relation to food security as their income decreases. As a result, trying to capture a reliable picture through the analysis of data taken at a particular place and point in time proves more difficult.

Figure 4.8: Food security statuses in the UK (2022-23), and for Southwark’s project participants (2023-24), percentages, and mean (the higher the mean, the worse)



Source: Aldaba analysis of Office for National Statistics, Social and Vital Statistics Division, NatCen Social Research, Department for Work and Pensions. (2024). *Family Resources Survey, 2005/06-2022/23: Secure Access*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 9256, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9256-1> ; and responses to own food-security survey run in Southwark. Note 1: red-amber-green coding for the mean is our own interpretation based on the methodology endorsed by the survey developers.

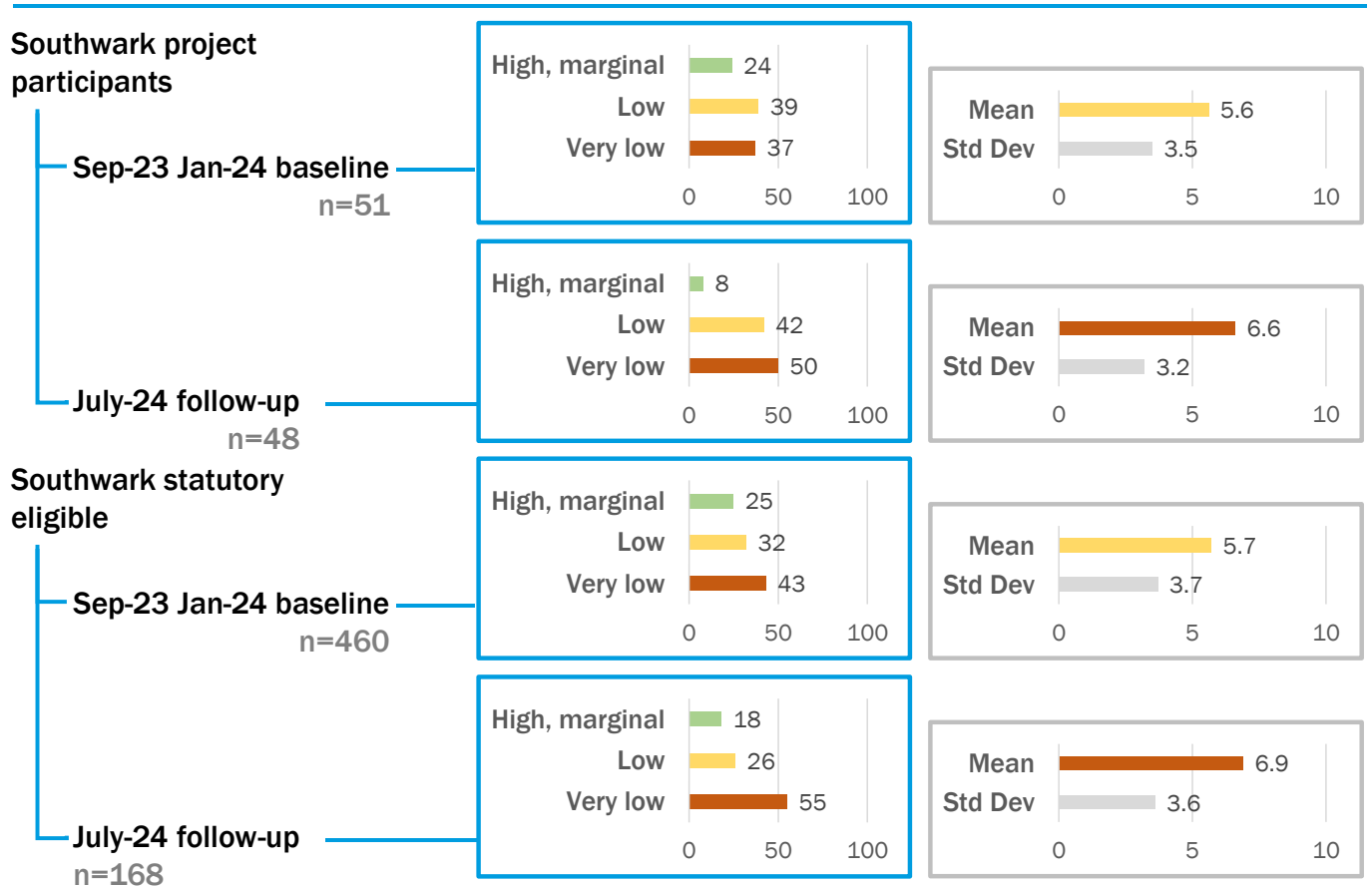
4.11.6 The bottom panel in **Figure 4.8**, above, sets out the results of our Southwark survey. The mean for the baseline is higher than any of the means obtained for the UK groups: 5.6, whereas the standard deviation is in line with that for the households on Universal Credit living in bottom-20% deprivation areas: 3.5. The mean for the follow-up is even higher: 6.6, whereas the standard deviation is slightly lower: 3.2.

**There is no logic to support that participating in the project decreases food security. Therefore, we consider that the difference between baseline and follow-up is due to random variation, rather than a meaningful indication of impact.**

4.11.7 In terms of the statuses, **Figure 4.8**, above, explains that 24 per cent of the project participant households experienced food security at the baseline, whereas only 8 per cent did so at the follow-up. The difference for those in low food security was 3 percentage points: from 39 at the baseline to 42 at the follow-up. The difference increases to 13 percentage points in the case of those in very low food security: from 37 at the baseline, to 50 at the follow-up.

4.11.8 **Figure 4.9**, below, facilitates the comparison between project participant, and statutory eligible households. The latter is our main comparator group in this impact evaluation. The means and standard deviations are remarkably similar. At the baseline, both groups had a mean of approximately 5.6-5.7, with a standard deviation of 3.5-3.7. At the follow-up, project participants had a mean of 6.6 (standard deviation: 3.2) whereas the statutory eligible had a mean of 6.9 (standard deviation: 3.6).

**Figure 4.9: Food security statuses for Southwark’s project participant, and statutory eligible households (2023-24), percentages, and mean (the higher the mean, the worse)**



Source: Aldaba’s analysis of responses to own food-security survey run in Southwark.

- 4.11.9 In terms of the food security statuses, the similarities between project participant, and statutory eligible households are remarkable at the baseline. For example, 24 and 25 per cent of the households, respectively, were in high or marginal food security; 39 and 32 per cent were in low food security, respectively; and 37 and 43 were in very low food security, respectively.
- 4.11.10 At the follow-up, the differences were starker. In the case of project participants, 8 per cent were in high or marginal food security, whereas in the case of the statutory eligible, despite being in principle on lower incomes, 18 per cent were in high or marginal food security. A combination of the sensitivity of the classification methodology endorsed by the survey developers, particularly in relation to the high, and marginal classification; and small sample sizes, may explain the differences. Indeed, a relatively small number of respondents being classified within a particular status as a result of just one or two extra scores might lie behind the differences.
- 4.11.11 At the follow-up, 42 per cent of project participant households were in low food security, whereas 26 per cent of the statutory eligible were so. In the case of very low food security, 50 per cent of project participant households, and 55 per cent of statutory eligible households belonged to this status.

**Three quarters, or more, of both the statutory-eligible, and project-participant households might be food insecure, both before and after the project.**

- 4.11.12 We stress the fact that the status results suggest differences between the two groups at the follow-up which seem less stark when looking at the means. The follow-up mean for the project participant households was 6.6, whereas that for the statutory eligible households was 6.9. In both cases the mean fell into the status of very low food security.
- 4.11.13 **Figure 4.10**, below, provides a simplified version of the status results by using just two classifications: food secure versus food insecure.
- 4.11.14 To better understand the questions underpinning the means, and statuses, **Figure 4.11**, below, shows that for 22 per cent of statutory eligible households, food often did not last at the baseline, and there was no money left to buy more. This happened in 27 per cent of the project participant households. Around half of both groups of households experienced this situation sometimes.
- 4.11.15 At the follow-up, 39 per cent of the statutory eligible households often experienced this situation, which is 17 percentage points more than at the baseline. In the case of project participant households, 33 per cent were in this situation, or 11 percentage points more than at the baseline.
- 4.11.16 There was also variation for those who sometimes experienced a lack of food: this was the case for 45 per cent of the statutory eligible households, and 58 per cent of project participant households, or in other words, a 10 per cent decrease, and a 5 per cent increase with respect to the baseline, respectively.
- 4.11.17 The pattern is more difficult to describe in relation to not being able to afford balanced meals. In this case, the percentages were identical for both groups at the baseline.
- 4.11.18 In contrast, at the follow-up, 42 per cent of the statutory eligible households often could not afford balanced meals, an 18 per cent increase with respect to the baseline. This compares with 29 per cent of the project participant households, or a 5 per cent increase with respect to their baseline. Those households who sometimes could not afford balanced meals decreased from 49 at the baseline, to 39 at the follow-up in the case of the statutory eligible; and increased from 49 at the baseline, to 56 at the follow-up in the case of the project participants.

Figure 4.10: Summary food-security statuses for Southwark’s project participant, and statutory eligible households (2023-24), percentages, and mean (the higher the mean, the worse)



Source: Aldaba’s analysis of responses to own food-security survey run in Southwark.

4.11.19 We asked these questions at the parent interviews. As illustrations, two of the responses we received to the question on food duration and affordability were ‘sometimes true’.

4.11.20 The main reason for one of the responses was that the ingredients for some dishes were expensive, such as spices, and not affordable at certain points in the month, particularly when most of the monthly income had already been spent, and there were still a few days left before the next payday. As a result, the interviewee purchased cheaper versions of the ingredients. Therefore, on this occasion, ‘sometimes true’ does not necessarily mean food scarcity, but rather not being able to afford certain ingredients which are replaced by cheaper versions.

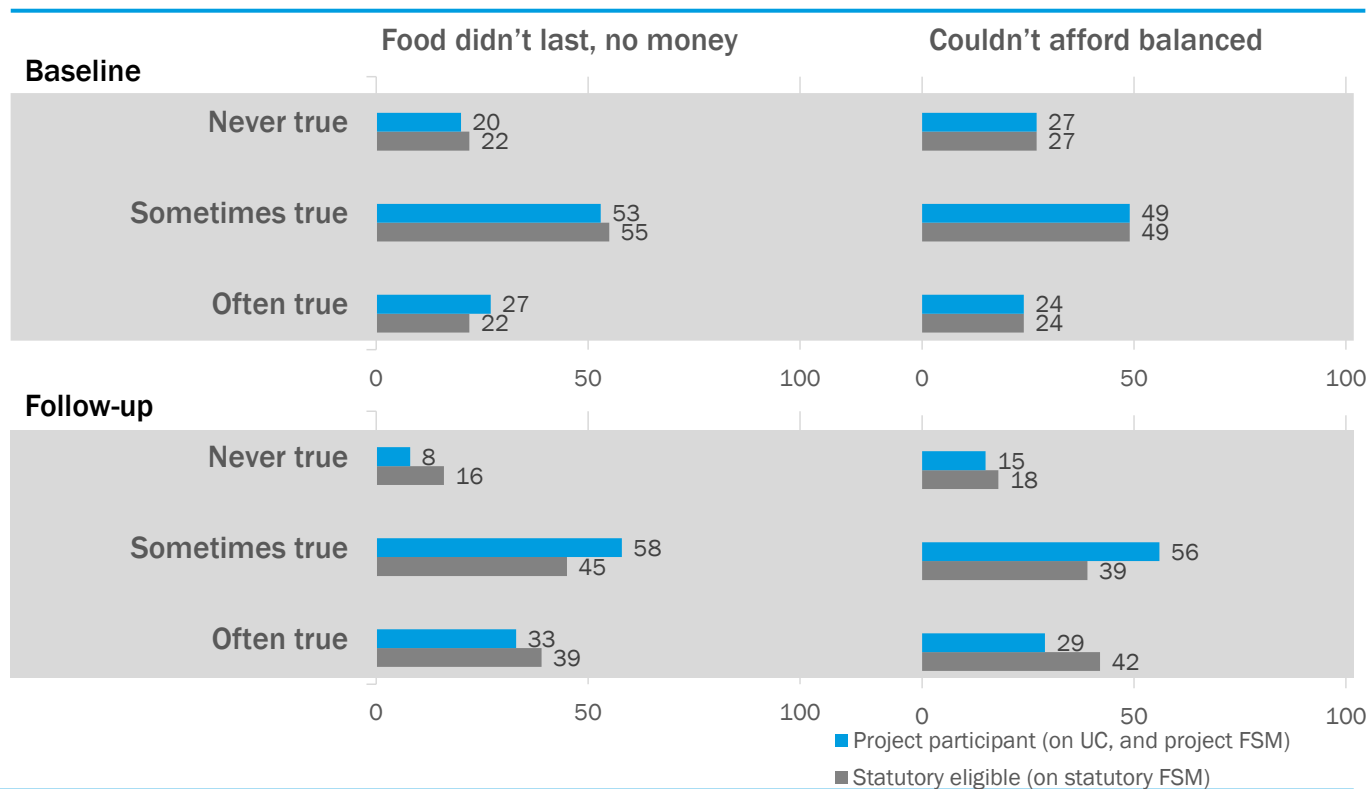
4.11.21 The main reason for the ‘sometimes true’ answer in the case of another interviewee was that during the worst times of the pandemic the adults in the household had not had enough food, although the interviewee stressed that their child had never been aware of that, or exposed to food scarcity. The situation was better at the time of the interview, although it might repeat itself in the near future, hence the ‘sometimes true’ answer. The time reference to ‘the last month’ seemed to have been missed by the interviewee on this occasion.

4.11.22 Another interviewee responded ‘never’ to the balanced meal question. However, during the course of the interview we learned that in this household the same meal was repeated twice or three times a week. The interviewee regretted this, and confirmed that it was not always affordable to vary the ingredients ‘particularly the last few days before payday’. Therefore, some of the answers suggesting food security might mask instances of food insecurity which last several days.



4.11.23 Just one of the interviewees interpreted the question on balanced meals as the right balance between carbs, fibre, and protein. This interviewee was confident that all the meals they prepared at home were in line with this type of balance, even if at times the quality of the ingredients was not as high as they would like.

Figure 4.11: Food-security survey responses to: ‘How often did these statements apply to your household?’ ‘The food that we bought just didn’t last, and we didn’t have money to get more’; ‘We couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals’, percentages



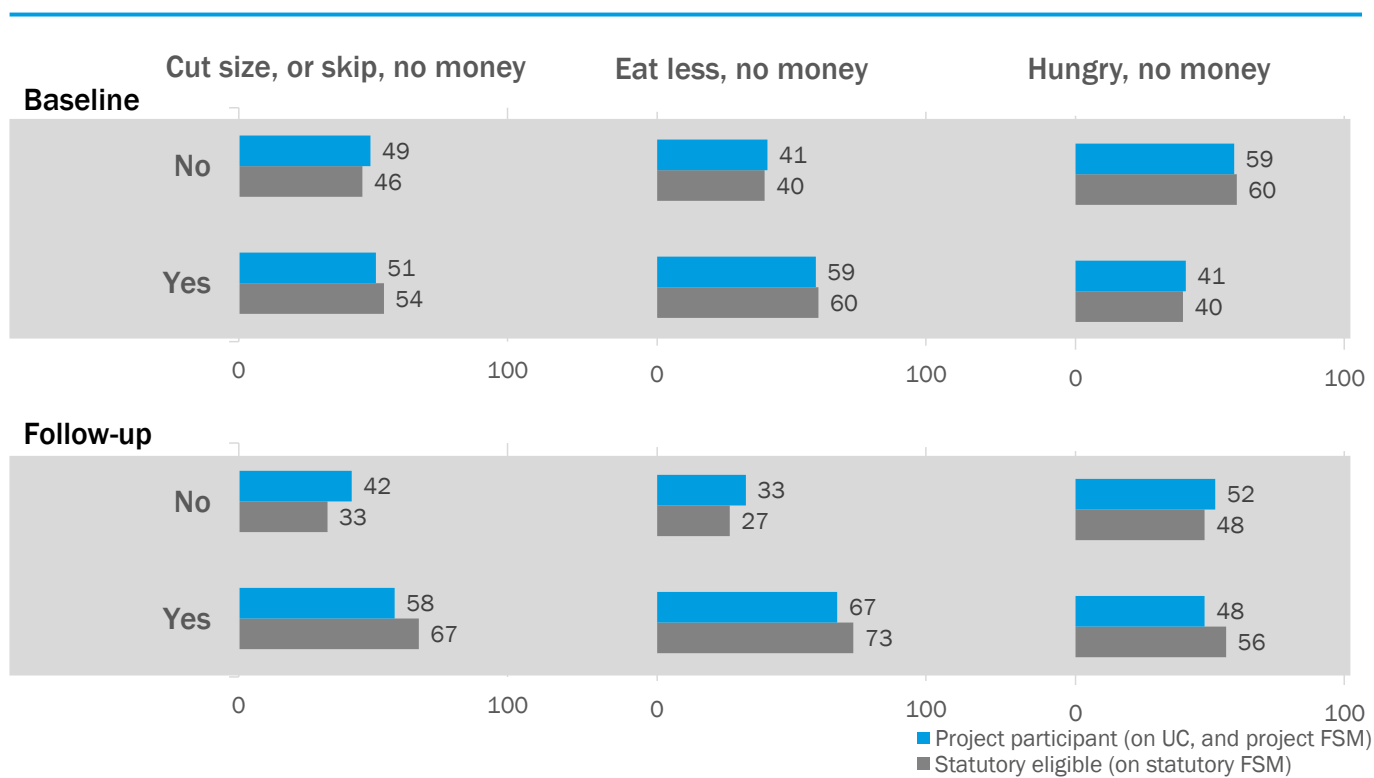
Source: Aldaba’s analysis of responses to own food-security survey run in Southwark. Note: project participant households at baseline, n = 51, or 12 per cent of those in focus; and statutory eligible households, n= 460, or 11 per cent of those in focus; project participant households at follow-up, n= 48, or 10 per cent of those in focus; and statutory eligible households, n=168 or 6 per cent of those in focus.

4.11.24 To further understand the questions underpinning the means, and statuses for food security, **Figure 4.12**, below, shows that statutory eligible households had to cut the size of the meals, or skip them altogether at the baseline, in 54 per cent of the cases, whereas 51 per cent of project participant households did so. These percentages increased to 67 and 58 at the follow-up, respectively.

4.11.25 Around 60 per cent of the households in both groups ate less than they felt they should because there was not enough money at the baseline, with the percentage increasing at the follow-up to 73 in the case of the statutory eligible, and 67 in the case of project participants.

4.11.26 At the baseline, around 40 per cent in both groups went hungry because money was lacking. At the follow-up, there was a 16 percentage-point increase to 56 for the statutory eligible, and a 7 percentage-point increase to 48 for the project participants.

Figure 4.12: Food-security survey responses to: ‘Did you (as a household) ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?’ ; ‘Did you (as a household) ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn’t enough money for food?’; ‘Were you (as a household) ever hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food?’, percentages



Source: Aldaba’s analysis of responses to own food-security survey run in Southwark. Note: project participant households, n = 51, or 11 per cent of those invited; and statutory eligible households, n= 460, or 10 per cent of those invited. Note: project participant households at baseline, n = 51, or 12 per cent of those in focus; and statutory eligible households, n= 460, or 11 per cent of those in focus; project participant households at follow-up, n= 48, or 10 per cent of those in focus; and statutory eligible households, n=168 or 6 per cent of those in focus.

4.11.27 We asked the question on going hungry as part of our qualitative interviews. One of the interviewees answered ‘no’. However, the interviewee went on to say that the first month after losing their job they definitely went hungry ‘more than one evening’. This may be interpreted as children having had access to food, whilst adults having gone hungry. If this interpretation was correct, the ‘no’ category to the ‘going hungry’ question, at household level, might mask many instances where some of the adults in the household did indeed go hungry.

**The level of food security might be overestimated in our survey, with more individuals within households being food insecure than the results suggest.**

#### 4.12 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (comparison between baseline and follow-up): sensitivity analysis and limitations

4.12.1 The developers of the food security survey thoroughly tested the methodology to obtain summary results. We have no valid basis to propose alternative methodologies. However, by way of analytical exploration, we tested the sensitivity of the results to each of the questions in the short version. We removed one question at a time, and readjusted the methodology proportionally.

- 4.12.2 We concluded that the questions on ‘food didn’t last’, and ‘couldn’t afford balanced meals’ registered a greater number of increases or decreases of more than 5 per cent in the statuses, compared to the rest of the questions. This is consistent with our qualitative interviews, where we also observed wide-ranging answers to these two particular questions. Some examples were provided earlier on.
- 4.12.3 In the scenarios where we removed one of the two questions, we still obtained lower food security for both groups of households at the follow-up, compared to the baseline. However, the change was smaller, compared to the full application of the methodology endorsed by the developers.
- 4.12.4 We choose not to report the results of our sensitivity analysis in detail because it lacks consensus in the scientific community. However, we confidently conclude that the self-administration of the food security survey may result in inconsistent interpretations by respondents, particularly for the questions on ‘food didn’t last’ and ‘couldn’t afford balanced meals’. In turn, this might add to the variability which is already inherent to the socioeconomic situation of certain households, and so add difficulties to the interpretation of statistical results.
- 4.12.5 Another limitation refers to Year 7 pupils, all of whom had been previously receiving free school meals during primary school in Southwark. In the case of project participants, Year 7 pupils had already realised the project outcomes, and therefore experienced no difference as a result of participating in the project. In their case, there would be no scope for project-attributable improvement in relation to food security.
- 4.12.6 In an attempt to manage respondent fatigue, our surveys did not collect the years which the children of the household were in. As an alternative source, the invoicing reports from schools suggest that around 30 per cent of the project participants were in Year 7. This may be interpreted as around 30 per cent of project participant households experiencing the same food security situations as statutory eligible households, in as much as accessing free school meals is concerned. This might explain the similarities observed in the surveys between both groups.
- 4.13 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (comparison between baseline and follow-up): conclusions**
- 4.13.1 The fact that a household experiences a certain level of food security, does not mean that each and every household member, individually, experiences the same level. It is not within the scope of this evaluation to assess food security at individual pupil level. We therefore use the indications of food security previously presented at household level as an approximation to the individual pupil level. This approximation involves limitations.
- 4.13.2 To better understand those limitations, we note that our qualitative work suggested that some survey respondents might have interpreted the word ‘household’ as just the children in the household, as opposed to both children and adults. The implications of this are the following:
- Food security at household level might be overestimated in our survey because some parents were exposed to food insecurity while ensuring their children were food secure, and responded to the survey just thinking of their children.
  - As a result, using the household survey as an approximation to food security at pupil level might be less risky than it might initially appear to be. In other words, some of the survey results might just apply to pupils, or reflect pupil situations better than whole-household situations.
- 4.13.3 More generally, there are serious limitations in our attempt to test empirically our conceptual framework through quantitative analysis, and in particular the combined analysis of a national-level survey of food security, as part of the Family Resource Survey, and the bespoke food-security survey of statutory eligible, and project participant households which we ran as part of this evaluation.
- 4.13.4 The following are two key interpretations that could be made in relation to our empirical tests:

- Strict application of statistical principles: The samples were too small, and biased. Therefore, the results are neither meaningful nor reliable. A higher response rate could have modified the results substantially.
- Practical, non-statistical interpretation: There might be some valuable indicative evidence to be taken into consideration while waiting for better-quality evidence to become available. Taking into consideration best available evidence, whilst limited, is justified given the seriousness of the situations affecting some children.

4.13.5 In keeping with the practical, non-statistical interpretation, there is a case for us to revise the conceptual framework we presented in **Chapter 2**, and in particular the assumptions depicted in **Figure 2.4**, earlier in this report. Never leaving aside the important limitations affecting the survey, our results could indicate the following:

- The assumption that project participants experience greater food security than statutory eligible households, based on their higher income, might be wrong. Project participants might be exposed to food insecurity to an extent similar to the statutory eligible.
- The scope for improvement, or ‘the journey towards greater and healthier food security’ might be similar for both project participant, and statutory eligible households. This is despite the fact that in principle the former are expected to be in a better financial position than the latter. As a result, the level of effectiveness required for the project to realise outcomes might not necessarily be higher compared to statutory eligible pupils. Note that errors in the school administrative systems might mean that certain households were wrongly classified, and so cause inaccuracies in our results.
- Our combined analysis of food-security statistical means, and statuses; and the underpinning questions, is consistent. It shows a seeming increase in food insecurity for project participants which is matched almost identically by the statutory eligible households, when comparing baseline and follow-up. The factors explaining this increase, whatever they are, may be:
  - applicable to both groups, and
  - totally unrelated to accessing free school meals.
- The lack of relationship with free school meals is justified because the statutory eligible had been historically accessing free school meals, including prior to the baseline survey, and as a result their seemingly worse food-security results at the follow-up, which were matched by project participants, could not be reasonably explained in relation to free school meals.

**Attempting to reduce food insecurity by providing access to free school meals, as the project does, might have no impact**

4.13.6 A technical lesson for future evaluations might be that the higher variability experienced by the households of interest, as measured by the standard deviation, does not lend itself to a before-and-after evaluation of impact. This is because food security may vary in their case from one month to the next, or even more frequently. As a result, measuring food security at several points throughout the year might be a more accurate approximation to the impact of an intervention than just measuring at two points.

4.13.7 In summary, our overall, practical, non-statistical interpretation of the quantitative analysis presented so far in this report is the following:

- Project participant households in Southwark appear to experience food security to similar levels compared to statutory eligible households.
- Both project participant, and statutory eligible households in Southwark could experience less food security than their equivalents at national level.

**In the absence of better-quality evidence, our estimate is that both project participant, and statutory eligible households experience food insecurity, irrespective of free school meals**

- Food security is seemingly affected by considerable levels of variability, which were not appropriately, or comprehensively captured by our surveys due to small sample sizes.
- Variability might need to be measured on a monthly basis, rather than just twice a year, as in our evaluation design.
- To the variability in food security statuses, we need to add variability in the take-up of free school meals, which involves additional complexity when it comes to measuring the impact of the project.
- In other words, improving food security through a project that expands access to free school meals is complex because:
  - food security changes often due to factors beyond the control of the project, and
  - full participation in the project also changes often, not necessarily in line with food security, possibly due to factors related to the offer of, and the willingness to take up free school meals.

**If a health analogy is allowed, the medicine is taken from time to time, not necessarily when the illness hits the hardest**

4.13.8 In relation to existing evaluations of other similar projects, as explained in **Chapter 2**, we cannot discard, or confirm, the possibility that the seeming ineffectiveness of free school meals might be the result of containing a deterioration of food security which might have been more severe in the absence of free school meals.

#### **4.14 Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (instability of food security)**

4.14.1 In line with the variability identified in our quantitative surveys, a theme emerging from our qualitative interviews with parents was instability and unpredictability. Precarious circumstances could last just a few weeks and be followed by more prosperous ones. This could be the result of changes in employment; household composition, such as taking responsibility for a vulnerable relative temporarily, or hosting some relatives for a few months; or finances, such as deciding to make an informal loan to a friend, or receiving one from a relative. See **Case study 1**, below, for a detailed example of instability and unpredictability in food security.

4.14.2 Most parents mentioned being exposed to food security risks, either at the time of the interview, or in the recent past. Parents drew a distinction between the food security of adults and children in their households. Adults ensured that their children had sufficient food, at times by reducing their own portions, or giving up whole meals so that their children could eat normally. One of the parents said:

**‘Sometimes I forget to eat, because I am so busy, but it doesn’t matter. I do make sure my children each have what they like. There is always something for them in the kitchen’.**

4.14.3 A few parents explained that they tried to hide food security issues from their children. This included, for example, not being seen when eating smaller portions, or making up excuses not to join their children at the table. A few parents reported that their children had noticed there were problems and asked them directly about the financial situation of the household.

- 4.14.4 Some of the parents we interviewed talked about times when the same meal was eaten several evenings in a row because they could not afford any other alternative. Partly to compensate for this, as soon as these parents received some extra money, they tried to treat their children to a meal out, sometimes twice in the same week.
- 4.14.5 Most parents mentioned that eating out played a role in the upbringing of their children. Examples include a chicken-and-chips take-away, a burger at a high-street chain restaurant, or 'just sitting at a food stall at the local market'. This may be seen as a reward for good behaviour, or good performance at school. It also helps to break up the routine. In relation to children's strong food preferences, sometimes eating out was seen as a way of introducing children to new flavours, which could then be incorporated into the meals prepared at home.
- 4.14.6 One of the interviewed parents explained how their children often asked to eat out. The parent must often postpone the date until payday because eating out is not affordable. However, instead of mentioning the affordability issue, this parent makes a deal with their children, like achieving a good mark in an upcoming exam in exchange for a meal out. This parent added: 'Other times I provide an alternative to MacDonalds, like going to Iceland and letting them pick one packet of whatever they want'.

#### **4.15 Pupil and household outcomes: healthier nutrition (general themes)**

- 4.15.1 Our qualitative work suggested three general themes which frame the healthier nutrition outcome:
- Skipping breakfast
  - Role of less healthy food while maintaining an overall healthy diet.
  - School canteen as mainly a source of snacks, rather than hot meals.
- 4.15.2 Whilst not within the scope of this evaluation, we identified a common theme around skipping breakfast at our interviews with both parents and pupils. Many pupils arrive at school with an empty stomach. This is not normally perceived as an issue. Justifications for it include oversleeping, 'not being in the habit of doing it', or 'preferring to grab something quick on the way to school'. There was often confusion as to whether the school offered free breakfast. None of the interviewees came across as eager to clarify the confusion in case they could profit from an opportunity to have free breakfast.
- 4.15.3 There were a few exceptions to this complacency. A few parents perceived breakfast skipping as undesirable. They explained that this habit was perceived by their children as part of growing up, compared to earlier ages where they were forced to always have breakfast. These parents' concern was compounded by a perception that the options chosen by their children at morning, and lunch breaks, at the school canteen, were not sufficiently nutritious. These parents did consider that eating breakfast is healthier than skipping it.
- 4.15.4 Another general theme was less healthy food. School food standards provide clear requirements for healthy and nutritious meals. In contrast, it proves difficult to find references to establish the role of less healthy food.
- 4.15.5 It is obvious that a diet driven by unhealthy food must not be encouraged, or accepted in the case of publicly-funded catering services, such as school canteens. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a child diet where sweets, burgers, pizza, or other types of less healthy food play no role whatsoever. Whilst not explicitly acknowledged, this tension was present in our qualitative interviews with parents.

4.15.6 Another general theme arising from the interviews with parents and pupils was the perception that the school canteen was a place for snacking, rather than to have a hot meal. This perception was partly due to the quality of the hot food available, which did not suit the taste of many of the pupils. It was also partly the result of preferring home for hot meals, and having a limited knowledge of what was available at the school canteen. Special dietary requirements, for example faith-related, can only be met at the school canteens some days, but not every day.

#### **4.16 Pupil and household outcomes: healthier nutrition (changing habits)**

4.16.1 Some parents stressed that secondary school represents a transition in their children's attitudes towards food. Children gradually have more independence to make food purchases, both in terms of the school digital wallets, and their pocket money outside of school. This helps them improve their ability to make decisions, and ultimate to mature.

4.16.2 A few parents actively supported their children in this transition. As an example, we became aware of a child who used to buy bottled water until their parent realised this when checking the daily transactions on the digital wallet. The parent advised the child to bring an empty bottle to school, and top it up at the water dispensers. This example illustrates the fact that children are likely to make errors, or less wise choices, which parents help address. Implicitly, interviewers felt that the main driver for these types of advice was to save money, rather than to achieve a healthier diet.

4.16.3 Another example is bingeing. Some parents support their children to pace themselves, for example when they buy a new tin of biscuits. Children gradually learn that eating big quantities of snacks in one go is not good for themselves, and means that they will need to wait longer until they can try those snacks again. Parents explained that treats are only affordable every so often.

4.16.4 A critical point in the transition experienced at secondary schools is when policies allow pupils to leave the premises at lunch break and purchase food outside. As one interviewed parent put it, 'as soon as they hit Year 12, they are allowed out, and I don't like that. I am already worried even though we are still a couple of years away. I try to tell him [the child] that it's all about the choices he makes, not whether he eats here or there, but he thinks he is going to be more of a grown-up. He does have some older friends...'

4.16.5 Peer pressure was highlighted by parents as a key factor to bear in mind as they brought up their children. Some of the strong food preferences shown by children were the result of habits shared by groups of peers. Some of these habits were quite short-lived. For example, one of the parents we interviewed explained how during three or four months their child replaced school meals by 'chicken and chips' on the way home, almost every afternoon. None of the parents we interviewed mentioned examples where peer pressure resulted in liking particularly healthy options, such as vegetables, or fruit.

#### **4.17 Pupil and household outcomes: healthier nutrition (strong preferences)**

4.17.1 All the parents we interviewed commented on their children's attitudes towards food. Most of them had strong preferences towards some types of food. A few parents described these preferences as repetitive and tiresome.

4.17.2 As an example, one interviewee described in a relaxed way that their children would only eat tuna sandwiches, when available, at the school canteen. Another interviewee described their child as a fussy eater, both in terms of meals liked and disliked, and particular ingredients within meals, such as not tolerating onion, egg, or leafy vegetables.

4.17.3 According to our interviews, if asked to eat something they dislike, children normally refuse, and may occasionally display challenging behaviours. 'Just seeing a bit of green on a plate, even if they can put it to one side, means they just don't touch the plate!' complained one of the interviewees.

- 4.17.4 Very rarely do children embrace novelty in the food they eat. Parents also pointed out that children actively dislike everything that is not included in their shortlist of food preferences. **Case study 2**, below, provides an example where a child entitled to free school meals systematically chooses not to eat them.
- 4.17.5 A few parents stood out for their commitment to changing their children's attitudes towards free school meals. They encouraged their children to try whatever hot meal was on offer, discussed the children's impressions in the evening, and actively followed up with them next time less-liked meals were due to be served again. **Case study 3**, below, elaborates on one of these households.
- 4.17.6 A few other parents mentioned instances in the past where they had tried to change their children's preferences towards more fruit and vegetables. They reported having given up because a lot of food was going to waste. There was some recognition that parents were not too fond of healthier options themselves.

**Parents' encouragement to take up free school meals could be a key success factor for the project**

- 4.17.7 **Case study 4**, below, illustrates the point of view of a pupil who had a strong preference for snacking and home food, rather than school food.
- 4.17.8 Mental health conditions were drawn to our attention as the cause for some likes and dislikes, which could be repetitive. A few parents whose children had mental health conditions accepted that only certain types of food were eaten by their children, including at school canteens, even if from the point of view of healthy eating, a wider variety, and a better balance would be preferable. One parent said: 'my child, who has [redacted: name of mental health condition], just eats [redacted: a few very precise dishes], and that's it!'
- 4.17.9 Within the range of mental health conditions, obsessive behaviours may make diet planning difficult. Sudden dislikes may mean that meals already served at the table need to be packed away for a later occasion. This also applies to school canteens. To deal with this, parents explained that having a variety of snacks available may be a practical way of ensuring that children with mental health conditions maintain some food intake levels. This is critical when children are on certain types of medication.

**4.18 Pupil and household outcomes: healthier nutrition (food quality)**

- 4.18.1 All of the parents we interviewed said that their children had at least one main meal per day. This could be a meal at the school canteen, or if this had been skipped, then an evening meal at home. A few mentioned two: one at the school, and another one at home.
- 4.18.2 Breakfast was typically described as 'something before going to school', or 'making sure they do not go to school with an empty stomach'. It did not appear to play a central role in the children's daily diet. None of the interviewees said that their children had breakfast at school.
- 4.18.3 At our interviews, we asked parents for examples of food and meals which were part of their household's typical diet. We did not ask parents explicitly to classify those examples as more or less healthy.
- 4.18.4 Based on our previous knowledge, we deemed the majority of the examples as unhealthy, or less healthy than the types of diet implicit in the school food standards. As illustrations, parents mentioned ready-made, sauce-based meals; discount red meat, and chicken; frozen pizza, and pies; deep fried items; and large carbs portions. In contrast, a few parents confirmed that their children disregarded burgers and pizzas as Western food which they disliked.
- 4.18.5 A few parents stressed the importance of eating healthy food. However, their accounts of their households' typical diet were inconsistent with commonly known, healthy eating habits. None of the parents mentioned free school meals' having an influence over household diets.



4.18.6 A few parents complemented the quality of the meals served at the school canteen for what they did not provide. For example, a few said they agreed with added-sugar-free policies. However, they also mentioned that in reducing fats and sugar, schools had ended up serving very unappealing meals. In contrast, **Case study 5**, below, illustrates the case of pupils who are broadly happy with the hot meals available in their school canteens.

#### **4.19 Pupil and household outcomes: healthier nutrition (overall assessment)**

4.19.1 Overall, the types of household diets described at our interviews could be classified as unhealthy, or less healthy. Interviewed parents showed little awareness about this. There was not sufficient recognition that children's preferences, and overall household diets, could and should be improved.

4.19.2 The attitude of the parents we interviewed was predominantly to adapt to their children's preferences, mainly to avoid wasting money, rather than trying to influence them. As one of the interviewees put it, 'my kids know what they want very well; they say it very clear; so when I go to the supermarket I only buy what they will eat, otherwise it goes to waste'. In contrast, we came across a few instances of parents showing some confidence to rectify their children's food preferences, if they felt they were not sufficiently healthy, or generally good for them.

4.19.3 In some instances, parents hinted at cultural differences to explain their children's tastes. In these households, adults prefer traditional food from their countries of origin, whereas children prefer fast food, which parents perceive to be more typical of the UK. These parents appear to accept their children's preferences because they are in line with the culture where their children were born, and belong to.

4.19.4 Accessing free meals at school was perceived by parents mostly as a change in financial terms, but not necessarily in terms of their children's nutrition. We did not come across any instance where the parent perceived that school food was healthier, and could contribute to an overall healthier diet for their children. Quite the opposite, a few parents were concerned that making regular use of the school canteen resulted in eating too much bread, and thinking that 'you can spend the whole day just eating small bites, just the things you fancy', as one parent put it.

4.19.5 There were frequent criticisms towards the quality of the school meals. Many parents were aware that their children did not eat the hot meals. However, this was not perceived as an issue, at least a type of issue which requires actions, such as complaints. Parents accepted the situation and worked around it. Interviewers perceived some resignation. As one parent put it:

**'If they don't eat it, they don't eat it, so I just have to make packed lunches, or have dinner ready when they get back home, it's money out of my pocket, but what can I do?'**

4.19.6 There was another instance which illustrates this sense of resignation. The parent explained that when they applied for Southwark's project, they knew already that the child did not like the hot meals at school. The main reason for applying was to fund the sandwiches that the child normally took at lunch break. The parent was happy because this represented a saving, even though having a hot meal, if the child wished to, would be healthier than a sandwich.

#### **4.20 Pupil unintended outcomes: affording breakfast, and snacks; overeating; food wastage**

4.20.1 A few of the parents we interviewed were concerned about their children's overweight. They shared some examples of tips they gave to their children every morning to avoid that their choices at the school canteen contributed negatively to their health. For example, some parents were concerned about some sauce-based meals. They confirmed that their children's preference was to just eat the sauce, and nothing else.

4.20.2 Our analysis of till data, earlier in this chapter, also highlighted some concerning patterns in the purchases made in excess of the free-school-meal allowances. There seems to be some grounds to believe that in some cases accessing free school meals may be associated with eating more unhealthy items, than it would be otherwise the case.

4.20.3 We found no evidence to support that participating in the project was linked with being able to afford breakfast, or snacks, particularly compared to not being able to do so before participating; or any instance where having access to free school meals resulted in wasting food, for example, taking a meal from the counter, but then not eating it.

#### 4.21 Household outputs and outcomes: savings, and higher financial stability

4.21.1 When asked about recent financial changes, the parents we interviewed mentioned events such as a settlement to share childcare costs as part of a divorce process; a debt consolidation process facilitated by the justice system; a promotion at work; or an increase in rent payments. Many also mentioned cash transfers from the Government and Southwark Council worth between £100 and £300 in connection with the cost-of-living crisis. Parents only mentioned accessing free school meals as they addressed other questions.

4.21.2 Many parents confirmed that accessing free school meals represented a saving of around £50 to £70 per month. A few compared the monthly top-up they used to make on the digital wallet before participating in the project, and the top-ups afterwards. As one of the parents put it:

**'I had to make sure I added about £50 per month, and then check in case it had run out, but now I think I added about £20 one month, or two months ago, and when I last checked there was still something left, so I can now kind of forget about it!'**

4.21.3 Many parents pointed out that secondary-school children eat a lot. One of them said 'they eat a lot, particularly my boy; I compare my portion to his and it's scary...; you think he will be sorted for the whole evening, but he asks for more after an hour or so; I did have to tell him to pace himself; food is expensive; I felt bad about it, but... Sainsbury's is crazy... I tried Asda and Lidl and Morrison's... some people say it's cheaper there, but it is not... sometimes I go in the evening to get reduced prices'.

4.21.4 One of the parents we interviewed illustrated the concept of distributional impacts when commenting on cost-of-living payments: 'It was just £100 but for me it was like £1,000 because it just came at the right time!' Based on **Table 2.2**, earlier in this report, if we assumed that project participants took up on average three free school meals per week, which is in line with the invoicing reports, and our range of 2.3-3.4 healthy meal bundles per week:

**there is evidence to prove a cash saving of approximately £330 per year, which would notionally represent approximately £950, once distributional impacts are considered.**

4.21.5 A few parents elaborated on household budgeting. They explained that they planned in advance how to spend their monthly income. Food shopping was a priority, along with rent, taxes, utilities, and clothing. Some months it was not affordable to go to the shops that parents felt were relatively more expensive, or to treat their children to their favourite food stall, or restaurant.

4.21.6 A few parents stressed the impact of fuel prices. They needed a car to take their children to school and other places because they had mental health conditions which prevented them from using public, or collective transport. In addition, mental health crises often resulted in items being broken down, which required replacement, and extra expenses.

- 4.21.7 One of the interviewed parents estimated that half of their household income was for rent, taxes, the student loan of one of the parents, and utilities. The other half was for ‘mobile phones, food, clothes, and occasionally going out for a meal, or for some fun. It comes to £80 per week, per child’. Child tax credit went to a dedicated bank account, which was only used in case of a financial emergency.
- 4.21.8 This parent came across as particularly aware of the importance of budgeting. They saw these types of calculations as central to their role as parents. ‘I always say to my children: I will try my best to provide everything for you. You must try your best to study hard’.
- 4.21.9 Another parent we interviewed stated that they had £250 left for the whole month, once rent, taxes, and utilities had been paid. This household had applied for, and received Universal Credit in order to be able to apply for the project. Only £20 per month had been awarded as part of Universal Credit.
- 4.21.10 The interviewee estimated that accessing free school meals as part of the project saved the household between £60 and £70 per month, which meant that the £250 left after rent, taxes, and utilities ‘can take us [the household] a bit further’. In addition, the child had cooking lessons and was able to bring home some of the food they had practiced cooking. See **Case study 1** for further details.
- 4.21.11 A few parents involved their children in their household budgeting. They stressed it was important for children to learn this skill. It was also highlighted as a way of ensuring some commitment from children to eat the types of food they had added to the budget.
- 4.21.12 Food banks were mentioned several times at our parent interviews, but only a few parents had direct experience of them. Their view was that food banks provided mostly leftovers from restaurants and supermarkets, which were not varied enough. There were also some concerns about edibility, and suitability for a child’s diet. Similarly, a few parents had enrolled in a mobile application to receive bags of fresh food discarded by supermarkets. There were also some concerns about edibility and variety.

#### **4.22 Household unintended outcomes: higher welfare benefit take-up**

- 4.22.1 At our interviews, welfare benefits were generally perceived as too bureaucratic, time-consuming, and prone to errors which involved paying back high sums at inconvenient times. Some parents preferred to give up the benefits to avoid the hassle. In contrast, two of the five parents we interviewed had become aware of the possibility of applying for Universal Credit as a result of a turned-down application for the project. In both cases, the application for Universal Credit was successful, and provided the basis for a successful application for the project.

#### **4.23 Household unintended outcomes: unhealthy, or negative purchases**

- 4.23.1 As previously stated, household diets appear to be unhealthy, or less healthy, based on our interviews with parents. In addition, the savings associated with accessing free school meals have importance in the household finances. However, we have no evidence base to establish a link between the savings and certain purchases of unhealthy food. This unintended negative outcome remains a possibility to which we cannot attach any likely probability.

#### **Case study 1: Household made up of a different-gender couple, and a secondary school child**

- 4.23.2 The interviewee was a non-White woman. Her household also included her different-gender partner, and a secondary-school child. For many years, there were two salaries in this household. Unexpectedly, one of them became no longer available. The remaining salary covered mostly rent, and utilities. This household had no debts. There was enough money left for food, but not of the same quality, and variety as before.

4.23.3 The initial application for the project was turned down. As a result, the interviewee applied for Universal Credit, and obtained it. The Universal Credit amount was perceived to be low: in the region of £20-£40 per month. However, Universal Credit was mostly perceived to be the passport to free school meals, which the interviewee estimated could save the household approximately £40-£60 per month.

Whilst access to the project had been confirmed in October 2023, at the time of the interview, five months later, the interviewee's child had not had their first free meal yet because of an error in the till system.

4.23.4 The interviewee had complained about this several times, but the technical issue had not been sorted out yet. The interviewee cooked large meals and froze daily portions which her household used gradually. She also prepared packed lunches for her child while waiting for the error in the till system to be solved.

4.23.5 Before losing her job, the interviewee topped up their child's digital wallet every Friday so that they could eat fish and chips at the school canteen.

After losing her job, the interviewee could only afford £1 or £2 occasionally to treat their child to some snack at the school canteen, but not a full fish-and-chips meal, as before.

4.23.6 Whilst looking forward to being able to access free school meals, the interviewee was concerned that her child might not have enough variety of food compliant with their faith's rules. Her child might be restricted to side dishes such as just chips, naan bread, or pizza portions.

4.23.7 The interviewee felt depressed. She mentioned 'I have the feeling I am only giving my child loads of rice with little else'. She questioned her role as a parent. Partly as a result of her faith culture, she felt she should cater for her child's needs better. When applying for benefits, she felt the people at the other side of the desk thought she was lazy, when in fact she really wanted a job, but was surprised how difficult it was to find one.

4.23.8 She also felt disappointed with the Government. She was frustrated about having been told about free school meals, but not actually having had access to them yet. After paying taxes for many years, she felt she was entitled to a greater level of support. She was aware of food banks, but had little information about the ones nearby, if any. Her priority was to find a job as soon as possible to go back to her previous lifestyle.

#### Case study 2: Household made up of a single parent, one secondary school child, and more than one adult child

4.23.9 The interviewee was a White woman with a part-time job. The adult children contributed to meeting some of the household expenses through their own employment income. Once bills got paid, most of the remaining income was for food. The interviewee did the shopping twice a week. She stressed that fresh food is more expensive and goes off more quickly, than canned or frozen food.

4.23.10 The interviewee described the secondary school child as fussy. 'None of the usual stuff works! Everything needs to be separated on the plate for my child so that then they can check it and eat it bit by bit'. Both the parent and the child disliked vegetables.

4.23.11 The child often skipped breakfasts, or just had a small item on the way to school. This was compensated at morning break. The morning break offer at the school canteen was perceived as varied and appealing. Examples include cookie and drink, pizza, and sausage roll.

4.23.12 At this school, the free-school-meal allowance could not be used at morning break, so the interviewee topped up their child's digital wallet frequently. At lunchtime, the choices were perceived to be limited. The child only took up their free school meal on Fridays, when fish and chips were available. The child told the parent that sometimes there were good items available at lunchtime, but the queue was too long and they ran out quickly.

4.23.13 The interviewee described the restrictions around the use of the free-school-meal allowance as a shame. Some money could be saved, but instead the interviewee paid for morning break items, and evening dinner at home. The interviewee refused to prepare packed lunches because when she had tried, their child was told at school that the items in it were not allowed by the school policies.

**'The free-school-meal money is about £2 or £3 a day, but doesn't get used. Frustrating! They should allow to use it at morning break. There is just not enough choice at lunchtime'.**

4.23.14 The interviewee had a clear understanding of the impact of this situation. Quite often, there was not enough money to buy more food before payday. Some relatives often provided informal loans by the end of the month. Sadly, the interviewee admitted she needed to ask their children 'to slow down on their trips to the fridge' when they were all at home in the evenings and weekends.

4.23.15 Whilst cooking from scratch was her preference, the interviewee pointed out that it was less expensive to buy lunch deals at a local supermarket when the whole family was at home for lunch. As a general thought, the interviewee would like the quality and variety of the lunchtime offer to be better at the school.

### Case study 3: Household made up of a single parent, more than one secondary school child, and one primary school child

4.23.16 The interviewee was a White woman with a part-time job. Some of the household members had health conditions. The household had undergone important changes in relation to composition, income, and housing, following some traumatic events.

4.23.17 The financial situation of this household was precarious. The income available did not suffice to meet all the costs and debts. Informal loans from relatives were essential. The interviewee had great awareness of how the financial situation impacted on the household's diet. This was because their financial situation, and diet had been much better in the recent past. 'I know already that if on Monday I only have [£x], I will have to skip meals by the end of the week, but the kids will be fine'.

4.23.18 Accessing free school meals was not described as an important recent change. Other events were so. However, the interviewee had a very clear awareness of the positive impact free school meals had had on the situation of the household.

4.23.19 The school had let the interviewee know about Southwark's project. This was a positive surprise for the interviewee because she knew that her part-time job was incompatible with statutory free school meals.

**'All my children are on free school meals. If it wasn't for that I would need to pay about £50 more per week. Another bill! I couldn't cope. I am already in arrears with other things!'**

4.23.20 The interviewee described some strong eating preferences in her household. Some of them were linked to health conditions. It was not always possible to sit down at the table for a meal. Eating could take place standing, walking, or while undertaking manual activities. The school had been supportive in relation to this, and made adaptations.

4.23.21 When one of the children started accessing free school meals, their initial reaction was not to eat the hot meals. They described them as 'weird'. The interviewee realised that the school meals were different to the dishes the child ate at home. The interviewee was keen for the child to get used to the cooking style at the school so that a saving could be made in the household finances.

4.23.22 The interviewee described how each morning she brought up the topic of school meals while the child was getting ready to go to school. The interviewee encouraged the child to try whatever was on offer, and reassured them that if it was available at the school, it was because it was good for them. Then, in the evening, the interviewee checked with the child and engaged in a conversation with them about what they had liked more and less about the hot meal that day.

**'They have made great progress. They now ask me to cook the same as at the school! I do tell them: do you remember what you said about it back in October? It was just different, not worse!'**

4.23.23 The interviewee was aware that morning break food was popular among children. Whilst happy to fund some morning break items outside the free-school-meal allowance, the interviewee made sure this did not replace the main hot meal at lunchtime.

4.23.24 In addition to financial reasons, the interviewee was keen to make the most of free school meals because she was aware that the quality of the food at home had decreased in recent times. This was both in terms of the nutritious value, and the variety of the dishes that were affordable. There was awareness of the impact that poor diet was having on the health of household members.

#### Case study 4: Male pupil, aged approximately 13 to 16

4.23.25 This pupil has a long journey to school. He argues that as a result he has no time for breakfast at home. Out of his own initiative, he disclosed that he had access to free school meals.

4.23.26 He claimed he disliked hot meals at school. As the interview progressed, he added he was not really familiar with the dishes served at the school canteen. 'It is just not to my taste'. On the rare occasions where he went to the canteen, he preferred to join the queue for sandwiches and baguettes because he was more familiar with the options available.

4.23.27 He showed a strong preference for packed lunches. He described his lunch box as a life saver. 'There is always nice in there when I feel peckish, or just bored, or not feeling like doing anything'. He explained that the school policy was strict in terms of packed lunches. Only healthy snacks and fresh fruit were allowed.

4.23.28 He only had one hot meal a day, at home. He looked forward to it because the journey back home was long, so by then there was nothing left in his lunch box.

4.23.29 This pupil showed great awareness of what constituted healthy eating, and was also mindful of food wastage. He disapproved of instances where people took food from the counter and then threw it to the bin when they realised they did not need it, or did not like it.

4.23.30 He was comfortable with his eating patterns. Neither he, nor his parents were discontent with the fact that the free-school-meal allowance was not used. The lunch box and a hot dinner as soon as the pupil arrived home seemingly provided a fair and balanced arrangement to spend a typical school day.

4.23.31 This pupil spoke fondly of the takeaways they occasionally ordered at home, as a family event. He particularly liked the option to have certain ingredients removed, which is not possible at MacDonal'd's.

## Case study 5: Female pupil, aged approximately 11 to 13

- 4.23.32 This pupil was engaged in a number of after-school sports, and other activities. She enjoyed using the school facilities throughout the day, including the canteen. Out of her own initiative, she confirmed she had access to free school meals.
- 4.23.33 Her daily routine started with breakfast, typically at home, although sometimes at school. She normally had a small snack at morning break which she typically brought from home, with the exception of those days when her favourite sandwich was available at the canteen.
- 4.23.34 She enjoyed having hot meals at school every day, for example mac and cheese, or pasta. She normally had some cake or jelly for dessert. Some of her friends only had sandwiches or cold options, but she preferred hot meals. On Fridays, she normally had fish and chips, and occasionally pizza and chips. 'It's all nice. Always good. I wouldn't change anything'.
- 4.23.35 Two days a week she had an afternoon snack at the canteen before joining the after-school activities. Then, when she arrived at home, she had a hot dinner with her family. Sometimes dinner was ready later than usual and she had a sandwich while waiting. She explained that after-school activities could be tiring, so she felt hungry in the evenings.
- 4.23.36 This pupil described how her parents gave her recommendations regarding the types of dishes and snacks she should choose throughout the day. Out of her own initiative, she explained that making use of the free-school-meal allowance was important for her family. That is why she tried her best to keep additional purchases to a minimum, for example at morning break, and always made sure to bring some snacks prepared at home.
- 4.23.37 This pupil showed awareness that contributing to her household finances was important. She was aware she had no income herself. Making the most of the free-school-meal allowance was her way of helping out. She liked managing her pocket money and deciding how much to spend, and how much to save.

**'There is no point in spending money on small things at breaks when you can have a proper hot meal later, and help mum and dad save a bit'**

- 4.24 School outputs and outcomes: meals that better comply with school food standards, higher food quality**
- 4.24.1 The Conditions of Grant document signed between the Council and the schools included the requirement to provide healthy meal bundles, which in turn should comply with some of the school food standards. In line with this, the Council led some Chefs' Forums with the support from catering consultants. These forums included working on recipes to improve compliance with healthy meal bundles, provide more sustainable food, and tailor recipes that were perceived by some pupils as preferable, and were also affordable.
- 4.24.2 We became aware of no other specific actions which could have resulted in better compliance with school food standards, and generally higher quality food. However, the Council did undertake two diagnostic exercises to assess compliance systematically.
- 4.24.3 The audit undertaken on behalf of the Council in April 2023 concluded that compliance with school food standards at lunchtime ranged between 67 and 92 per cent, with the average being estimated at 83 per cent across all secondary schools. Compliance during morning services was slightly lower.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cohesion Consulting (June 2023), Catering Audit: Delivering the free secondary school meals project (unpublished)

- 4.24.4 Another audit undertaken directly by the Council approximately a year later, between February and June 2024, focused on a subset of the school food standards: those explicitly included in the Conditions of Grant agreement signed between the Council and the schools. Compliance ranged between 29 and 100 per cent, with the average being estimated at 69 per cent across 18 out of all 25 secondary schools in Southwark.<sup>42</sup>
- 4.24.5 The two audits are not directly comparable. For reference, if we analyse the scores for the 18 schools which were included in both audits, on average, the 2024 audit resulted in scores 13 percentage points lower than the 2023 audit, with the difference ranging from 23 per cent higher to 50 per cent lower. Whilst this is not necessarily evidence of a worsening, both audits combined highlight limitations in compliance with school food standards, and more generally, the quality of the food made available to the school community, including project participants.
- 4.24.6 The Council shared the results from the 2024 audit with each individual school. The schools were reminded to comply with the specific standards that had been found to be outstanding. However, no other specific remedial action was enforced.
- 4.24.7 Our fieldwork with schools did not provide any evidence that schools perceived the Council as an agent capable of enforcing improvements in food quality. This may be as a result of the degree of independence that individual schools have, and the fact that key school inspections fall outside the remit of local authorities.

**The actions put in place by the project were not enough to achieve any improvement in food quality. The Council should consider whether to keep this outcome within the project, given its limited ability to influence it.**

#### **4.25 School outcomes: better sourcing and procurement**

- 4.25.1 **Table 2.3**, earlier in this report, proposed an approach to assessing the potential for achieving economies of scale based on the proportion that the take-up by project participants represented over the take-up by the total number of pupils in each school.
- 4.25.2 **Figure 4.13**, below, sets out those proportions for a subset of participant schools: those with more than 10 project participants. We chose this cut-off point to reduce the risk of including anomalies due to small sample sizes. The red-amber-green coding is consistent with **Table 2.3**, earlier in this report.
- 4.25.3 For example, red could be interpreted as low potential for economies of scale because the change in demand represented by project participants is relatively small, and therefore less likely to trigger additional batches of users which could commercially result in lower unit costs, or alternatively similar unit costs to those previously existing, but involving greater quality.
- 4.25.4 On average, take-up by project participants represented 3 per cent. In most schools, the additional take-up represented by project participants remained below 5 per cent. As a result, the potential for achieving economies of scale, as an approximation to ‘better sourcing and procurement’ was very low.

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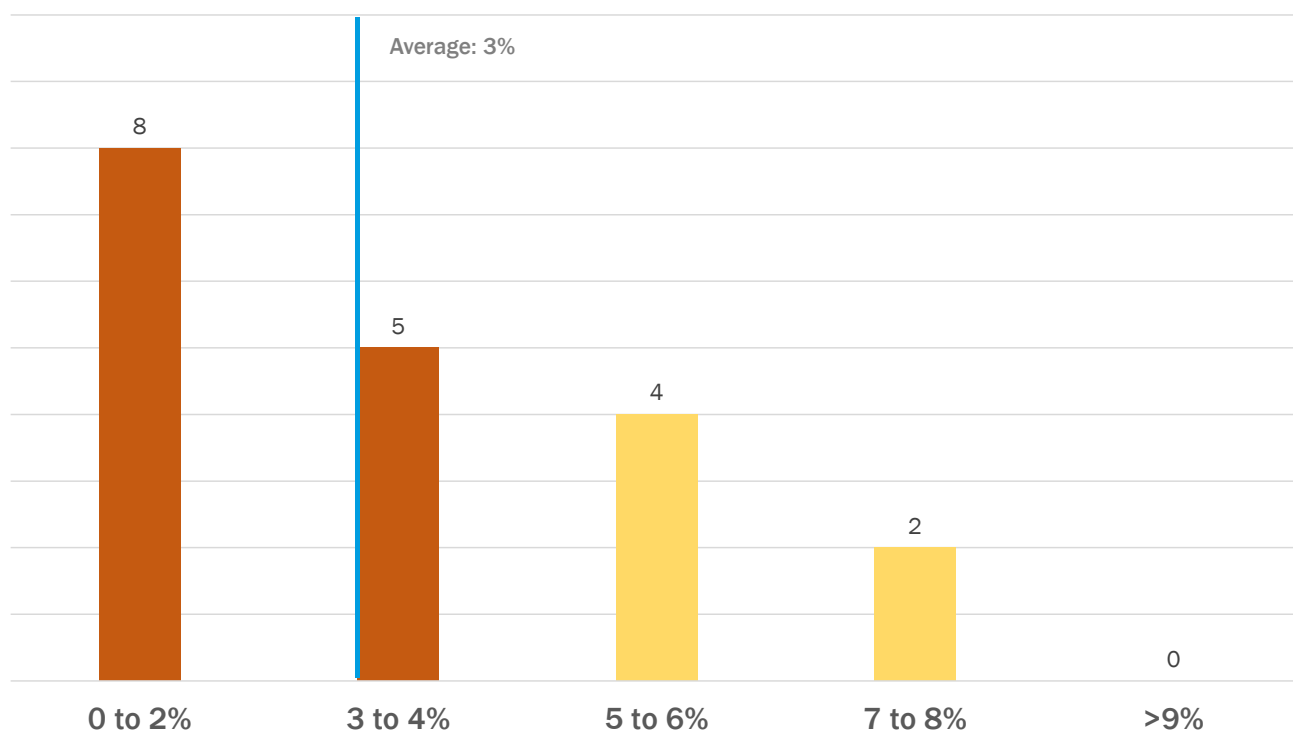
<sup>42</sup> Southwark Council (2024), Audit of food quality and environments (unpublished)



4.25.5 For a minority of schools, the additional take-up could represent between 5 and 8 per cent in relation to the take-up by the total number of pupils. We estimate that this is where the potential for economies of scales may start to be realised. As pointed out earlier, the challenge is that we have no evidence to establish whether this actually represents additional demand to be met by school canteens, relative to the point in time prior to implementing the project, or it is simply consistent with prior demand, and therefore represents no additional pressure onto, or efficiency opportunities for catering services.

4.25.6 Note that only one of the six schools in the ‘amber region’ for economies of scales received additional capital funding as part of the project.

**Figure 4.13: Numbers of schools where project participants represented certain percentages over total numbers of pupils, and assessment of the potential for achieving economies of scales**



Source: Aldaba analysis based on project participant numbers reported in school interviews, and correspondence; and invoicing reports for June 2024. Note 1: n = 19 schools with more than 10 project participants each. Note 2: assumed take-up is 3 days per week.

4.25.7 Our qualitative work with schools identified limited awareness of the intended project outcomes beyond providing free meals to eligible pupils. Whilst explicitly prompted, school staff were unable to describe impacts on sourcing and procurement practices in connection with the project.

**This evaluation found no evidence to support improvements in the outcome ‘better sourcing and procurement’ at school level**

4.25.8 During project implementation year 1 (2022-23), the Council designed an initiative as part of the Southwark School Meals Transformation Programme which was aimed at supporting a dialogue between schools and contract caterers through the development of a Southwark School Meals Procurement Framework. This outlines the necessary conditions for serving healthy meal bundle.

#### **4.26 School outcomes: reduced school lunch shortfalls**

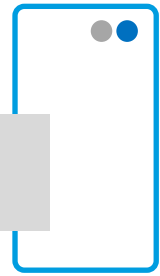
4.26.1 Our fieldwork suggested that lunch shortfalls were mostly perceived by school pastoral staff as a way to identify household difficulties, rather than an administrative burden. Reminding parents about paying the shortfall was an opportunity to suggest remedial actions, such as applying for Universal Credit, and/or for the project. We came across no mention about the project helping to reduce admin costs.

#### **4.27 School outcomes: reduced admin costs**

4.27.1 In line with the previous outcome, during implementation year 1 (2022-23), the project cannot be thought of as an enabler of administrative savings. Quite the opposite, the implementation of the project, including updating till systems; completing invoicing, and other types of reports for the Council; and participating in the evaluation activities; were perceived by schools as additional administrative tasks which attracted no extra funding.

4.27.2 Equally clearly, we failed to see examples where schools put together the perceived additional admin costs and the new value that the project added, including financial savings for participant households, and opportunities to gain new insights into food-related issues, such as food security, canteen food quality, and parent and pupil views.

**This evaluation found no evidence to support improvements in the outcomes 'better school lunch shortfalls' and 'reduced admin costs' at school level**



5.1 Aim

- 5.1.1 The executive summary at the beginning of this report provided all the conclusions in the form of a story. It used less technical, and detailed language than the rest of the report. The recommendations in the executive summary related to those conclusions which required action.
- 5.1.2 The body of this report also provided summary conclusions, including through highlighted take-away messages, and at the end of key sections.
- 5.1.3 The aim of this chapter is to provide succinct conclusions for the outputs and outcomes identified in our summary theory of change. **Table 5.1**, below, revisits **Table 2.4**, earlier in this report. Most of the conclusions build on the analysis undertaken as part of the impact evaluation, as set out in **Chapter 4**.

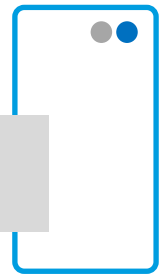
Table 5.1. Conclusions on the empirical testing of our summary theory of change

Key evaluative evidence	Evaluative conclusion
<b>Pupil output 1:</b> Healthy meal bundles made available to, and taken up by participants	
<p>The healthy meal bundles taken up by participants varied considerably, even within the same school. A range that could apply across all project participants is an average of 2.3 to 3.4 healthy meal bundles per week. Our estimate is lower than others because it refers exclusively to healthy meal bundles. However, there seems to be scope to increase take-up up to 4.0 to 4.5 days per week, as suggested by the Family Resource Survey at national level.</p> <p>Note the Council did not forecast any particular increase over the baseline prior to implementing the project. An existing evaluation of a similar project suggests that take-up levels are likely to be maintained with respect to the situation prior to the intervention, which means that any potential drop in take-up would be avoided.</p>	<p>Full assessment not possible due to lack of baseline (2022-23) take-up estimates</p>
<b>Pupil outcome 1:</b> Higher food security	
<p>In the absence of better-quality evidence, our conclusion is that project participant households experience great variability within the very-low food-security status, irrespective of the free school meals they can access as part of the project. Meal take-up does not seem able to reverse other factors which appear to be responsible for food insecurity.</p>	<p>No outcome has been evidenced</p>
<b>Pupil outcome 2:</b> Healthier nutrition	
<p>Expert consultant input; and audit of food quality, and environments; provided diagnostic evidence, and high-level guidance and compliance reminders, but did not result in remedial actions. No outcome may be reasonably attributed to the project.</p>	<p>No outcome has been evidenced</p>
<b>Pupil unintended outcomes</b>	
<p>Affording breakfast, and snacks.</p>	<p>No outcome has been evidenced</p>

Overeating.	Some qualitative examples found
Food wastage.	No outcome has been evidenced
<b>Pupil unintended outputs</b>	
Pupils entitled to statutory free meals are identified.	Some qualitative examples found
<b>Pupil deprioritised outcomes</b>	
Absence; anxiety, stress; stigma, shame; cognitive function; school engagement; learning behaviours; social behaviours; learning environment.	To be reviewed in year 2: 2024-25
<b>Household output 2: Savings to participant households</b>	
If we assumed that project participants took up on average three free school meals per week (which is in line with the invoicing reports, and our range of 2.3-3.4 healthy meal bundles per week), there is evidence to prove a cash saving of approximately £330 per year.	Outcome has been evidenced
<b>Household outcome 3: Higher financial stability</b>	
The distributional impacts associated with the £330 cash saving are £950 per year. This may be interpreted as some contribution towards higher financial stability.	Some evidence found as contribution to this outcome
<b>Household outcome 4: Higher food security</b>	
In the absence of better-quality evidence, our conclusion is that project participant households experience great variability within the very low food-security status, irrespective of the free school meals they can access as part of the project. Meal take-up does not seem able to reverse other factors which appear to be responsible for food insecurity.	No outcome has been evidenced
<b>Household unintended outcomes</b>	
Higher welfare benefit take-up.	Some qualitative examples found
Unhealthy, or negative purchases.	No outcome has been evidenced
<b>Household deprioritised outcomes</b>	
Absence; anxiety, stress; perception; food purchasing behaviours; household nutrition; indebtedness	To be reviewed in year 2: 2024-25

<b>School output 3: Meals that better comply with school food standards</b>	
Expert consultant input; and audit of food quality, and environments; provided diagnostic evidence, and high-level guidance and compliance reminders, but did not result in remedial actions.	No outcome was evidenced
<b>School outcome 5: Higher food quality</b>	
Expert consultant input; and audit of food quality, and environments; provided diagnostic evidence, and high-level guidance and compliance reminders, but did not result in remedial actions.	No outcome was evidenced
<b>School outcome 6: Better sourcing and procurement</b>	
Very limited opportunities to achieve economies of scale. In addition, no evidence as to whether the take-up associated with project participants was already present prior to the project being implemented.	No outcome was evidenced
<b>School outcome 7: Reduced school lunch shortfalls</b>	
No evidence found. Any potential reduction might be offset by the extra administrative burden required to launch and run the project.	No outcome was evidenced
<b>School outcome 8: Reduced admin costs</b>	
No evidence found. Quite the opposite, the project was perceived as an extra admin cost.	No outcome was evidenced
<b>School deprioritised outcomes</b>	
Community cohesion; job creation; catering staff paid living wage; investment in catering staff; staff wellbeing	To be reviewed in year 2: 2024-25

Source: Aldaba analysis



## 6.1 Aim

6.1.1 The aim of this appendix is to provide summary answers to the research questions agreed with the Council as part of our evaluation contract. The summary responses include references to sections of the report where further details may be found.

## 6.2 Research question 1: Who did the project reach?

6.2.1 **Research question 1.a:** How many families in receipt of Universal Credit [in 2023-24] and not currently eligible [in 2022-23] for means-tested free school meals were successfully identified and registered by schools?

6.2.2 Our estimate, subject to error, for May 2024 is 900 to 950 pupils. If we assume 1.3 siblings per household, this is equivalent to 690 to 730 households. See 4.1: Pupil outputs: project participant numbers.

6.2.3 **Research question 1.b:** For those newly registered, what was the take-up rate?

6.2.4 According to the invoicing reports submitted by the schools to the Council, the take-up rate for project participants was 62 per cent, or 3.1 days per week. This is subject to error, and includes both healthy meal bundles and other items purchased by project participants through their free-school-meal allowances.

6.2.5 According to our analysis of random samples from till systems at three schools, the take-up rate for healthy meal bundles was between 46 and 68 per cent, or between 2.3 and 3.4 days per week.

6.2.6 See 75: Pupil outputs: Take-up of healthy meal bundles.

6.2.7 For comparison, note that the Family Resource Survey suggests a take-up rate of 4.7 days per week for statutory eligible pupils at national level.

6.2.8 See 2.15: Assessment of theory of change: Validation of pupil outputs and outcomes through existing evidence.

6.2.9 **Research question 1.c:** Who were the students who newly registered, including demographics such as ethnicity, in order to understand any widening or narrowing of current disparities.

6.2.10 The average proportion of participating boys was 53 per cent, and the average proportion of participating girls was 46 per cent. Nearly half of the project participants were in Years 7 or 8, which broadly corresponds to the ages between 11 and 13 years old. This contrasts with statutory eligible pupils who were evenly distributed across years 7 to 11 at around 16 to 19 per cent in each year.

6.2.11 Among project participants, the largest ethnic group was Black, with 54 per cent; followed by White, with 17 per cent; and Asian, with 11 per cent. In the case of the statutory eligible, the largest ethnic group was also Black, although with a slightly lower percentage: 49 per cent. The percentage for White was 19 per cent among the statutory eligible, which is comparable to project participants; followed by Asian with 7 per cent, nearly half the equivalent group among project participants.

6.2.12 See 4.1: Pupil outputs: project participant numbers.

6.2.13 **Research question 1.d:** Was there any impact on take-up rates for those already eligible [in 2022-23] for means-tested FSM?

6.2.14 No impact evidenced as part of this evaluation.

### **6.3 Research question 2: Was uptake sustained?**

6.3.1 **Research question 2.a:** Did newly registered students [in 2023-24] take up free school meals throughout the year or was there any attrition?

6.3.2 Take-up varied throughout the year, although no specific cause was evidenced as part of this evaluation. In one of the schools, project participants took up healthy meal bundles 2.3 days per week, in one month, and 3.4 days per week, in another month.

6.3.3 This level of variability might not necessarily be due to attrition. It might relate to the perception that the school canteen is a place to be used flexibly and variably, rather than a permanent eating place for a regular type of food.

6.3.4 See 4.2: Pupil outputs: Take-up of healthy meal bundles; and 4.6: Pupil outputs: Overall findings on take-up of healthy meal bundles.

### **6.4 Research question 3: What was required from the Council to successfully deliver the project?**

6.4.1 **Research question 3.a:** Operational and governance requirements

6.4.2 A Sponsor Group, Steering Group, and Council team were required, all in the context of an overarching programme aiming at transforming school food.

6.4.3 See 3.6: Assessment of the processes: Governance.

6.4.4 **Research question 3.b:** Factors that influenced internal engagement and support

6.4.5 Steering group meetings to discuss details relating to project implementation.

6.4.6 Absence of business case, and limited monitoring information were barriers.

6.4.7 See 3.6: Assessment of the processes: Governance.

6.4.8 **Research question 3.c:** Any other skill, knowledge or relational factors.

6.4.9 Practical knowledge of project implementation and monitoring, as a responsible agency delivering through others, is a skill requiring further development at the Council team.

6.4.10 For examples of other skills, see 3.14: Assessment of the processes: the Council's audit of food quality, and environments ; and 3.15: Assessment of the processes: invoicing.

6.4.11 Administrative time to follow up matters with schools became a requirement, although a more reasonable engagement from schools should have avoided, or considerably reduced this.

6.4.12 See 3.13: Assessment of the processes: the Council's continuous implementation support to schools.

### **6.5 Research question 4: What were the barriers or challenges for the Council in delivering the policy?**

6.5.1 Lack of business case, and effective governance structures.

6.5.2 Project planning reliant on tacit knowledge held by individual members of the Council team.

6.5.3 See 3.6: Assessment of the processes: Governance.

- 6.6 Research question 5: What was required from schools to successfully deliver the policy?**
- 6.6.1 **Research question 5.a:** Operational and administrative requirements.
- 6.6.2 Eligibility checks which involved data-protection, and eligibility-accuracy risks.
- 6.6.3 Monitoring project participant numbers, and submitting invoices to the Council.
- 6.6.4 Making healthy meal bundles available to project participants at risk of those not being taken up.
- 6.6.5 Meeting all the administrative costs associated with project implementation, with the exception of two schools who received additional administrative funding.
- 6.6.6 See 2.9: Assessment of the theory of change: Activities ; 3.3: High-level description of the processes: Eligibility checks; 3.4: High-level description of the processes: Invoicing; 3.15: Assessment of the processes: invoicing ;
- 6.6.7 **Research question 5.b:** Factors that influenced engagement and buy-in from Governors, leadership, teaching staff, kitchen staff.
- 6.6.8 Very limited evidence of engagement from Governors, leadership, teaching staff, or kitchen staff. The project was delivered by the admin teams with supervision from the school business manager. No engagement factors identified as required to successfully deliver the project.
- 6.6.9 **Research question 5.c:** Any other skill, knowledge or relational factors.
- 6.6.10 No evidence found as part of this evaluation.
- 6.6.11 Limitations in the schools' administrative skills were found.
- 6.6.12 See 4.1: Pupil outputs: project participant numbers.
- 6.7 Research question 6: What were the barriers or challenges for schools in delivering the policy?**
- 6.7.1 Whilst overall fit for purpose, the Conditions of Grant, and guidance documents would have benefited from clarifications, as explained in 3.7: Assessment of the processes: the Council team's instructions to schools.
- 6.7.2 Multiple limitations in the ability to implement administrative tasks effectively, including errors in application forms, incomplete or misleading information available in the school websites, and invoicing.
- 6.7.3 Updating till systems delayed access to meals.
- 6.7.4 See 3.11: Assessment of the processes: outreach to households and application assessments by schools ; 3.15: Assessment of the processes: invoicing.
- 6.8 Research question 7: What were the benefits that schools experienced?**
- 6.8.1 Six schools accessed capital funding. However, it is possible that the project did not increase demand, and therefore no additional capital funding would have been required.
- 6.8.2 See 3.8: Assessment of the processes: the Council's allocation of capital funding.
- 6.8.3 Limited access to expert catering advice.
- 6.8.4 See 3.9: Assessment of the processes: the Council's expert catering advice to schools.



- 6.9 Research question 8: How was the set up and delivery experienced by key stakeholders, including Council staff, school staff, school pupils, families)?**
- 6.9.1 Example for this research question include perceptions of the project, such as desirability, acceptability, concerns, or stigma; and if and how these changed throughout the course of set-up and delivery.
- 6.9.2 The response to this research question includes absence of co-creation approach, and consultation with pupils and parents, and limited opportunities for all stakeholders to work together, although when these opportunities were created the results were limited.
- 6.9.3 See 3.13: Assessment of the processes: the Council’s continuous implementation support to schools ; 3.16: Assessment of the processes: overall assessment.
- 6.10 Research question 9: What was the effect on reducing hunger and boosting pupil and family food security?**
- 6.10.1 The scope of this evaluation did not include hunger because this is an individual-level feeling. We designed our fieldwork to examine food security outcomes only at household level, partly because of the ethical considerations associated with examining hunger directly with minors.
- 6.10.2 Food security is the result of factors which cannot be influenced through free-school-meal take-up. Attempting to reduce food insecurity by providing access to free school meals, as the project does, might have no impact.
- 6.10.3 See 2.15: Assessment of theory of change: Validation of pupil outputs and outcomes through existing evidence 2.15 ; and 4.10: Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (comparison between baseline and follow-up): food-security scores, means, and statuses.
- 6.10.4 Both project participant, and statutory eligible households in Southwark could experience less food security than their equivalents at national level.
- 6.10.5 Food insecurity seemingly increased after participating in the project. However, there is no logic to support that participating in the project decreases food security. Therefore, we consider that the difference between baseline and follow-up is due to random variation, rather than a meaningful indication of impact.
- 6.10.6 In the absence of better information, we estimate that three quarters, or more, of both the statutory-eligible, and project-participant households might be food insecure, both before and after the project.
- 6.10.7 See 4.11: Pupil and household outcomes: higher food security (comparison between baseline and follow-up): Southwark results in the national context.
- 6.11 Research question 10: What was the effect on pupil attendance and behaviour?**
- 6.11.1 This was out of scope.
- 6.12 Research question 11: For those taking up the offer, what types of food were purchased with the funding?**
- 6.12.1 The requirement to only use the allowance for healthy meal bundles was clear in the Conditions of Grant, however in practice the allowance was also used for other items on offer at school canteens.
- 6.12.2 See 3.12: Assessment of the processes: healthy meal bundles offered on the counter by schools ; and 4.6: Pupil outputs: Overall findings on take-up of healthy meal bundles.

**6.13 Research question 12: What was the impact of the policy on the nutritional quality of food consumed by secondary school students?**

6.13.1 No impact evidenced as part of this evaluation.

6.13.2 See 2.8: Assessment of the theory of change: Inputs ; 3.12: Assessment of the processes: healthy meal bundles offered on the counter by schools.

**6.14 Research question 13: Were there any unintended outcomes or consequences?**

6.14.1 Positive unintended outputs include newly statutory eligible pupils being identified.

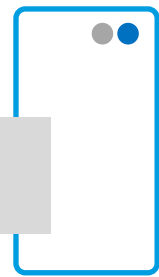
6.14.2 Positive unintended outcomes include being able to afford breakfast or snacks, and higher welfare benefit take-up.

6.14.3 Negative unintended outcomes include overeating, food wastage, and unhealthy or negative purchases by households.

6.14.4 See Chapter 5.

**6.15 Research question 14: Changes to operations and supplier relationships?**

6.15.1 Not evidenced as part of this evaluation.



### 7.1 Aim

- 7.1.1 At the Council's request, the aim of this appendix is to identify some principles and broad areas of work to be taken into consideration by local authorities, if interested in implementing the project under evaluation in this report.
- 7.1.2 As a general principle, local authorities should consider approaches other than the one taken by Southwark Council. For example, some objectives may be achieved without delivering the project through free school meals. An example might be grocery vouchers granted directly to households.
- 7.1.3 We do not necessarily believe that the project can serve as a model at its current stage of development in Southwark. As independent evaluators, we do not endorse the information provided in this appendix as best practice, or the recommended way of implementing the project.
- 7.1.4 We will structure this appendix into project design and project implementation. It may be supplemented by **Appendix C**, later in this report, where implementation tips are provided for schools.

### 7.2 Project design tips

- 7.2.1 To involve all stakeholders, develop a theory of change, and identify project objectives. The theory of change should build on existing reliable evidence, and be reviewed to mitigate against optimism bias. Critically, the objectives should specify:
- Eligibility criteria for those participating in the project. Options include: universal provision; being in receipt of certain benefits; having a certain employment status.
  - How long proven eligibility will last. Options include: one school year; until the end of secondary school; until circumstances change.
  - Types of meals to be funded, for example any item at any time during the school day, or just specific types of meals meeting specific nutritional criteria, at lunchtime.
  - Whether improving the existing quality levels of meals is within the scope of the project.
  - Whether influencing existing take-up levels is within the scope of the project, or alternatively whether just providing access to free school meals to a new cohort of pupils constitutes an objective.
  - Unit cost for the meals, and accordingly the amount of allowance per project participant.
  - How reimbursements will be calculated and transferred. Options include: calculations based on a generic formula; a fixed sum for those whose eligibility has been proven; variable reimbursements once actual take-up of meals has been reported.
- 7.2.2 As part of the theory of change, every objective must be underpinned by a delivery mechanism. This is essentially specific tasks, undertaken by specific roles; and initiatives included within the project scope, which are likely to bring about the objectives. Critically, incorporating objectives around improving food quality, and influencing pupils' take-up habits requires a wider range of tasks and initiatives.

- 7.2.3 To identify and prioritise the evidence required to design the project. Where collecting new information at local-authority level is not practical, to consider samples from administrative systems held by schools, the local authority, or central government. Required evidence should include:
- Baseline: types, costs, and take-up of meals prior to implementing the project, including by those statutory eligible for free school meals, compared to the rest of pupils.
  - Estimated number of project eligible households, and existing take-up for their children. This relates to assessments of impacts on capacity, such as kitchen and dining facilities; and costs, as explained next.
  - Estimated implementation costs for the project, distinguishing between:
    - Implementation year 1, vs later years where the project might become business as usual, and less resource intensive
    - Costs incurred by the local authority, compared to schools and other public and private organisations.
- 7.2.4 To develop a proportionate business case based on HM Treasury’s guidance<sup>43</sup>. At this stage, some of the options left open at earlier stages should be appraised. The business case includes:
- The relevant documents resulting from the proportionate application of the guidance.
  - The governance and decision-making processes associated with the documents.
  - Updating the relevant documents as the project is implemented, and ensuring they act as an enabler for project implementation monitoring, accountability, and continuous learning.
- 7.2.5 To develop a governance structure that holds accountability for meeting the option within the business case that is approved. This structure should include all relevant stakeholders. A senior responsible officer should be nominated. Where the project is accommodated within an existing programme, there should be an understanding of how the programme will be adapted, for example, how existing roles might require support for ‘wearing double hats’.
- 7.2.6 To develop a project implementation plan, and monitoring framework. This takes the business case to the level of detail required by project managers, and the rest of the project team. It should include:
- Milestones, and deadlines.
  - Forecasts for levels of project outputs, and outcomes, to be achieved by each deadline. These forecasts should be approved by, and become the responsibility of the senior responsible officer, supported by the project lead, or manager.
  - Tolerances which establish the levels of deviations from the forecasts that can be managed internally by the project team, and the levels which merit escalation to the senior responsible officer.
  - As the project progresses, forecasts are to be compared with actual indicators.
  - Building on the estimates of administrative costs, a resourcing plan should detail the numbers of roles, and types of skillsets required for the implementation of the project.

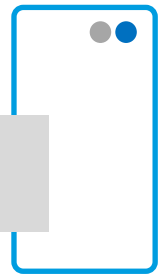
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<sup>43</sup> Gov.uk, Project and programme management, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/project-and-programme-management>

### 7.3 Project implementation tips

- 7.3.1 As a general principle, to communicate clearly the project objectives, and outcomes, to all stakeholders. This should take place at the beginning of, and throughout the project. It is important to avoid partial visions which might result in just the most straightforward outcomes being considered.
- 7.3.2 Also as a general principle, to pilot the project at small scale and put the resources in place to evaluate, and learn from the experience.
- 7.3.3 To develop guidance documents, and where appropriate, signed agreements to ensure responsibilities and accountabilities. This might be especially important where local authorities deliver the project by engaging other public or private organisations. Testing early versions with members of the intended audiences for the documents can help gain greater clarity. Guidance documents, and agreements may include:
- Rewards for good performance, as well as actions triggered by underperformance.
  - Financial and reporting requirements, particularly in relation to funding allocations, such as frequency, criteria, and timing for invoicing submissions.
  - Requirements in relation to audits; research and evaluation.
- 7.3.4 To launch information campaigns. This may benefit from a range of approaches, such as website announcements; letters and messages; face-to-face sessions; and posters. An example is raising initial awareness of the project and recruiting participants through a stand at a parent evening.
- 7.3.5 To identify roles holding accountabilities across the delivery organisations. Similarly, to identify management roles, and points of contact for the continuous delivery of the project. It is important to bring all the relevant organisations and individual roles together as part of a network, including:
- Regular opportunities to exchange views and learn from each other.
  - Creating a sense of shared achievement, for example by showcasing how obstacles in certain areas can be overcome, or temporarily compensated by achievements in other areas of the project.
  - Involving project participants, and their households. This can be to maintain them informed, or to seek their support in relation to specific objectives, such as increasing take-up.
- 7.3.6 To identify ways of engaging with key organisations which are not direct party to the project-related agreements, such as catering companies, or those responsible for the management information systems.
- 7.3.7 To monitor areas of the project which might have unanticipated cost implications for certain stakeholders, such as solving administrative issues, or devoting extra resources to engage with certain groups of participants. The option of sharing the cost implications should be considered.
- 7.3.8 As take-up increases, to monitor potential pressures faced by school canteens, including in relation to preparing sufficient meals, and being able to accommodate increasing numbers of canteen users.
- 7.3.9 To support the development and maintenance of project records which may effectively support audits, as well as making decisions on changes to the delivery of the project. Accuracy in the records for project participants, and their households should be prioritised, including:
- Ready access to initial applications and assessments; date when project participation started; and key demographic characteristics. This may be accommodated within management information systems.

- Take-up, including details of meals and other items accessed by project participants. This typically sits within the till management systems, and may require specialist support to be introduced and maintained.



### 8.1 Aim

- 8.1.1 Through our process workshops, we identified some practices which may be considered as enablers for the successful implementation of the project. The aim of this appendix is to report those practices in a structured way. In doing so, we will follow the main steps as part of the implementation processes involving the schools and the households.
- 8.1.2 We do not endorse these practices as best practice, or the recommended way of implementing the project. We invite the Council to consider this information and use it as part of its responsibilities as it deems appropriate.

### 8.2 Pupil, and parent, consultation and engagement

- 8.2.1 To involve pupils, and parents in the changes required by the project. Importantly, to engage with them to promote the take-up of healthy meal bundles, and reduce purchases of less healthy items. Other examples include consultations to better organise lunch services, align cooking techniques closer with pupil preferences, and discuss arrangements for serving stations.

### 8.3 Outreach and promotion

- 8.3.1 When the project is implemented for the first time, to invite all parents to: 1. apply for the Government's statutory free school meals; and 2. if declined, then apply for the expanded entitlement project. This may be done through letters, emails, or text messages at two or three points in time during the school year.
- 8.3.2 When the project becomes business as usual, to invite parents to do 1. and 2., above, as part of the procedures for: Year-7 intake; and in-year intake.
- 8.3.3 To update the school website to explain clearly that Universal Credit households below an annual income of £7,400 can apply for statutory free school meals, and those between £7,400 and £16,000 can apply for Southwark Council's project. This information may be hyperlinked to the letters, emails, and text messages to parents.
- 8.3.4 To run campaigns to promote applications for free school meals, funded through both the Government's statutory scheme, and Southwark Council's project. Examples include posters, slides on digital displays at reception, and presentations at parent evenings.
- 8.3.5 To train catering staff to identify pupils who appear not to have lunch, or those who try to use the canteen but have no funds on their digital wallets, or only buy small quantities because of limited funds on their digital wallets. To engage with pastoral care staff, and other staff, to flag up pupils who might experience food insecurity and might be eligible for free school meals.

### 8.4 Applications and eligibility checks

- 8.4.1 To take the school's management information system as starting point. The system should be updated to allow to record the following instances:
- A parent expresses an interest in free school meals, as a result of outreach letter, on intake procedures.
  - Following an expression of interest, a parent receives instructions to complete an application for the Government's statutory eligibility check.

- Outcome of the application for the Government’s statutory eligibility check. This may be run internally at the school, or by using automated checks provided by third-party organisations.
- If the check above is negative, a parent receives instructions to complete an application for Southwark Council’s project.
- Outcome of the Southwark Council’s project’s eligibility check. This may be run internally at the school, or by using auto-enrolment processes subject to ongoing examination by the Council.

8.4.2 To check that the management information system enables reports showing numbers expressing an interest; applying for the Government’s scheme, and the Council’s project; outcomes of each type of application; and breakdowns by Year, age, and ethnicity.

8.4.3 To check that the management information system allows the identification of siblings. To act on instances where one sibling is participating in the project, and another sibling is not.

## **8.5 Management information system, and canteen till system**

8.5.1 To connect the management information system, and the canteen till system so that an approved application for free school meals is automatically transferred from the former to the latter.

8.5.2 To check that the canteen till system enables reports showing the transactions for pupils on the Government’s statutory scheme, and for those on Southwark Council’s project.

8.5.3 To update the canteen till system so that the allowances are used according to the rules. In the case of Southwark Council’s project, the allowance is for £2.90 up until July 2024, and may only be used for healthy meal bundles that comply with the Department for Education’s school food standards; at lunchtime. This means that the allowance may not be used for items other than healthy meal bundles, or at times other than lunchtime.

8.5.4 To check that the canteen till system runs reports showing who is on the Government’s free school meals, and who is on Southwark Council’s free school meals. The reports should allow breakdowns by individual pupils, and also aggregate reports for each group.

8.5.5 To check that the canteen till system runs reports showing the transactions for healthy meal bundles that comply with the Department for Education’s school food standards, versus other types of items purchased by the pupil. Again, the reports should allow breakdowns by individual pupils, and also aggregate reports for each group.

8.5.6 Where updates to the system delay access to free school meals, to provide vouchers for healthy meal bundles from the day when the application was approved. Vouchers may be referred to as ‘meal slips’.

## **8.6 Validity of eligibility, and eligibility re-checking**

8.6.1 Once eligibility for Southwark Council’s project has been approved, it remains valid for an amount of time to be confirmed by the Council. When these timings are met, to run the process outlined above again, including the application for the Government’s statutory free school meals, and where the application for this is declined, application for Southwark Council’s project.





<b>0</b>	<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>5</b>
0.1	Southwark's project starts where the Government's free school meals end.	5
0.2	In putting the project in place, the Council reacted quickly to the circumstances.	5
0.3	The Council targeted the project at households experiencing high levels of unmet need.	5
0.4	The project provides a critical public service, but it cannot succeed at guaranteeing food security.	5
0.5	Embracing an outcome-oriented approach, the Council made the choice to supplement quantity with quality in the meals offered to pupils.	6
0.6	The project's potential to achieve a positive change for its target population was hampered by the lack of a theory of change, and a business case.	6
0.7	Possibly as a result of not having a theory of change, or a business case, the Council was overoptimistic in designing the project, and so key project outcomes were missed.	6
0.8	The Council chose the type of funding allocation which possibly represents best value for taxpayers' money, although this came with additional risks to schools.	7
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