



Hungry for Change

Working paper on free school meals

Professor Greta Defeyter & Professor Paul Stretesky

Northumbria University



A brief history of the school meals service

Within the United Kingdom, the school meals service is a government-led initiative that seeks to alleviate hunger and household food insecurity amongst children during term time. The origins of the school meal service can be traced to the passage of the Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906 that enabled local education authorities to provide free school meals (FSM) to the poorest children. Although the state did not originally provide funding to schools for such provision, this legislation enabled local education authorities to establish and fund school meal provision through local taxes (The National Archive, n.d.). The aim of the 1906 Act was to ensure that children were “no longer prevented by insufficiency of suitable food from profiting by the education offered in our schools” (p.9) (Welshman, 1997).

In 1941, formal standards on the nutrient content of school meals were introduced and the Education Act 1944 required all local education authorities to provide a free school meal to all children who wanted them. However, in 1980, the school meal service was classified as a non-essential service and nutritional standards were abolished.

Subsequently, the Social Security Act 1986 restricted entitlement to FSM to those in receipt of supplementary benefits and two years later, the Local Government Act required local authorities to put the school meals service out to competitive tender. This resulted in the de-regulation of the school meals service as private sector companies began providing school meals (Evans & Harper, 2009).

To improve the nutritional standard of school meals and all food sold or served in school, politicians introduced food and nutrient based standards in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The government adopted these food and nutrient based standards in 2001. In 2013, following a review of school meals, the government introduced a School Food Plan to reinvigorate school lunches by increasing their nutritional value and up take. These standards applied to all foods served and sold in schools (Dimpleby & Vincent, 2013).

In the same year, FSM were introduced for all children in reception and years 1 and 2 (years P1 to P3 in Scotland) in state funded schools in England and Scotland through the Universal Infant Free School Meals initiative (UIFSM) (NHS Scotland, 2016). The introduction of the UIFSM resulted in take up of FSM reaching a record high of 86%, with the greatest take up from low income families as the universality of provision reportedly reduced the stigma associated with FSM (Sellen, Huda Gibson, & Oliver, 2018; NHS Scotland, 2016). Whilst the financial impact of the introduction of UIFSM was not formally measured, it was considered that newly eligible parents/carers gained the most, saving around £11 per week/£380 per annum per child (Gruffudd et al., 2017; NHS Scotland, 2016, Sellen, Huda, Gibson, & Oliver, 2018).

For those children who are older than 7 years of age, FSM are a means-tested entitlement. Only families earning less than £7,400 per year (net income and before benefits are taken into account) are eligible to receive this entitlement. This threshold is £14,000 in Northern Ireland. Primary school children who pay for school meals typically pay £2.20 per day, although amounts vary between schools (APSE. State of the Market Survey 2018.). In Northern Ireland the price for school meals are set at £2.60 for primary school children and £2.80 for post-primary children. In England, the amount of money that secondary children receive seems to vary between £1.90 and £2.30 (Children’s Future Food Inquiry).

FSM and the Children's Future Food Inquiry

The Children's Future Food Inquiry (CFFI) addresses a number of food-related issues, through participatory research methods and reviewing peer-reviewed published papers. In 2019, the CFFI launched an important report that highlighted a number of issues, including children and young people's right to food, the lack of provision of free drinking water within schools and the plight of children living within households who have migrated to the UK and been granted leave but have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and therefore cannot claim FSM.

While the CFFI raised awareness around children's right to food, The Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University asks that additional attention be devoted to one particular issue raised directly by the young people at the CFFI's launch event. The CFFI Young Food Ambassadors pointed out that secondary school pupils access FSM entitlement with money that is pre-loaded on their electronic cards. However, they said that these cards are "wiped" at the end of each day so that, in their words, "unspent money is removed from the card." In effect, if a pupil is absent from school, misses lunch or does not use the full monetary entitlement, then they do not have access to any unspent money the following day. Whilst not so obvious in terms of the process, the Healthy Living Lab were also interested in the amount of unspent money in primary schools. We refer to this unspent money as the value of FSM that is claimed but not taken.

Estimated value of FSM that is claimed but not taken

The Healthy Living Lab research team were particularly interested in the extent of claimed but not taken FSM across the UK. In short, what is the value of FSM that is claimed but not taken? And, how is the value of claimed but not taken FSM distributed across the UK? As free school meal funding is fully devolved, the Department for Education (DfE) does not hold information on how much is spent in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Hence, the research team decided to analyse data that focusses solely on means tested free school meal provision in England.

The DfE allocates to English local authorities around £440 per year per pupil currently eligible for and claiming FSM through the national funding formula. For 2018-19, information from the DfE showed that local authorities collectively allocated £505 million for means tested FSM. Local authorities distribute this FSM money to schools through their local funding formula, which is set in consultation with schools. The school meal service, including FSM, is delivered to schools by either the Local Authority School Meal Service or by private catering companies. In most areas there is a mixed model of provision.

To provide a general estimate of the entitlement families in England are losing out on as a result of FSM that are claimed but not taken we employ a relatively simple estimation of GBP (£) associated with that loss using census data obtained from the DfE's 2017 report entitled *Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics*. Importantly, census data are collected across all 152 upper tier local authorities in England and loaded directly into the DfE database "Collections On-Line for Learning Education, Children and Teachers" (COLLECT). These data are then checked, cleaned and validated by the DfE to ensure accuracy of the submissions for data used in DfE reports.

We use COLLECT data to estimate the annual value of claimed but not taken FSM across England in 2016-2017. To do this we calculate the number of FSM that were claimed but not taken on 17 January 2017, a random census day, by subtracting the number of FSM all English pupils had taken on that day from the number of FSM claimed in England on that day. The calculation is as follows: 1,121,790 claimed FSM – 898,835 taken FSM = 222,955 claimed but not taken FSM. This result represents the number of meals claimed by families, funded by the government, subsequently administered through Local Authorities, but not taken by pupils on one school day. We multiply this result by 180, the number of days in a school year to get the total number of annual FSM claimed but not taken across England. Finally, we multiply the annual number of FSM claimed but not taken by the average cost of each meal (i.e., £2.20) to come up with the total value of FSM claimed not taken in 2016-2017 across England. This amount is approximately £88.3 million (i.e., 222,955 claimed but not taken FSM * 180 school days * £2.20 = £88.3M).

Our estimate of FSM funds claimed but not taken is larger than the £65M estimated by Citizens UK recently reported in *The Guardian* (Weale, 2019). The difference between our estimate and the Citizens UK estimate is that we include primary, secondary and special schools across England while the Citizens UK investigation includes secondary schools across England and Wales (though the data Citizens UK used to estimate FSM loss are not provided in *The Guardian*). We also emphasise that our general estimate does not include instances in which pupils claim a proportion of their FSM entitlement for the day (e.g. they do not spend the total daily amount) or days when pupils are present but skip lunch.

The amount of money as a result of FSM claimed but not taken is not consistent across local authorities in England as Figure 1 suggests. In Figure 1 we map the estimated value of claimed but not taken FSM across England's Upper Tier Local Authorities. As might be expected, the value of claimed FSM not taken by pupils is generally highest in local authorities that have the greatest number of pupils claiming FSM. It is also important to point out that the relationship between the number of FSM pupils and the value of FSM claimed but not taken is not linear. More disadvantaged local authorities have higher rates of pupil absenteeism. Thus, the local authorities with the most economically disadvantaged residents are also likely to have larger relative amounts of claimed but not taken FSM. Table 1 displays the ten areas in England that have the largest estimated claimed but not taken FSM lunch funds.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the issue of claimed but not taken FSM in primary, secondary and special schools is widespread across England. The estimate of £88.3M is likely to be a conservative estimate as it only captures data on pupils who were absent from school on the census date and does not include pupils who either skipped lunch or those who did not spend their full daily entitlement.

It is important to note that some schools use private catering companies to provide their school meal service whilst others provide school meals through their local authority service. Unfortunately, the sources of data we used for data capture and analysis do not provide us with detailed information on FSM finances. Hence, we were unable to calculate what proportion of this money (£88.3M) remains at the local authority level, with private school catering companies, with the school, or is returned to the DfE. We were also unable to determine, whether this money is repurposed, at any level, to support the dietary requirements of those children entitled to FSM. Finally, we are unable to determine the extent to which the estimated value of FSM not taken up applies to universal infant free school meals since DfE does not report data to compute these potential losses. For instance, in the academic year 2017-2018 - the latest year in which data is available - the DfE spent £649 million delivering free meals for all infant children in reception, year 1 and year 2 in state funded schools through the universal infant free school meal policy.

In secondary schools smart cards were introduced to reduce the stigma associated with FSM. To some extent, smart cards have reduced stigma. However, the current process of wiping money from FSM pupil's smart cards creates a different type of problem that by its very nature introduces inequality. We argue that it seems unjust that FSM pupils lose any remaining balance on their smart cards at the end of day while non-FSM pupils do not lose their balance. This process of wiping cards for some pupils is effectively a two-tier system of treatment. In addition, as evidenced in the Children's Future Food Inquiry, secondary pupils in receipt of FSM feel that the current system is discriminatory and interferes with their right to food.

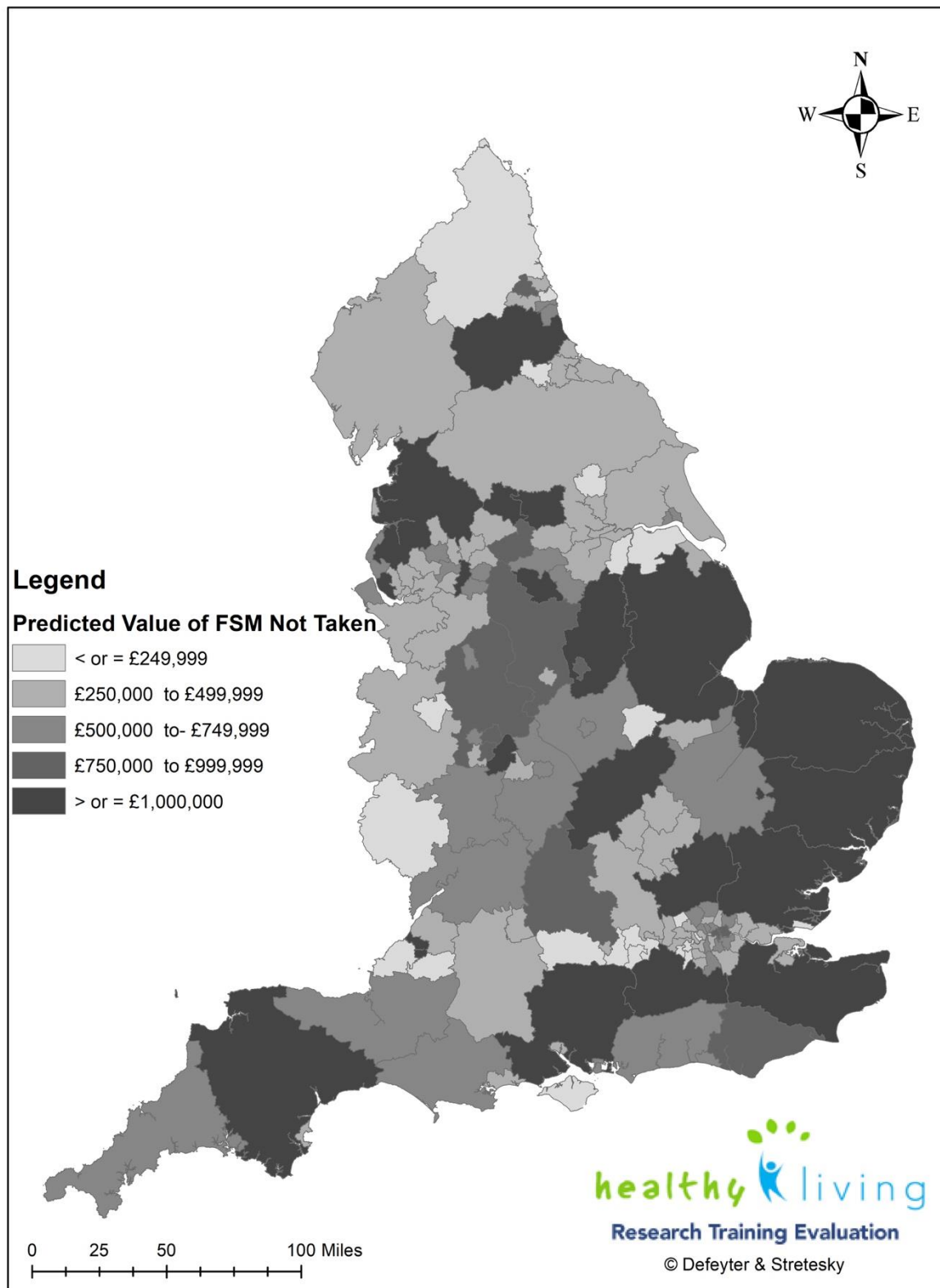
Given the evidence presented in this report we feel compelled to ask, "What happens to this money?" We recommend that the DfE immediately sets in hand an audit to find out where the money goes and, on the back of this exercise, introduces a new policy requiring all unspent money to be recycled directly towards the feeding or schooling of those children who are currently losing out. Having decided that these sums should be spent on improving the nutrition and life chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, such a policy is required from the DfE to ensure this decision is honoured in full.

Table 1. Estimated value of claimed but not taken FSM in Ten English Counties and Unitary Authorities, 2016-2017^(a)

Birmingham	£3,072,960
Kent	£2,281,752
Sheffield	£1,773,288
Leeds	£1,583,208
Manchester	£1,568,952
Liverpool	£1,560,636
Hampshire	£1,462,824
Essex	£1,399,860
Bradford	£1,397,484
Lancashire	£1,328,580

^(a) Value estimated using data obtained from Department for Education SFR28_2017_LA_Tables 8a, 8b, 8c.

Figure 1. Estimated Value of FSM Claimed But Not Taken Across Upper Tier Local Authorities In England (N=152)



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