



## Pioneering new approaches to children's food budgets

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### Background

While the [Children's Future Food Inquiry](#) (CFFI) raised awareness around children's access to food, Citizens UK, Feeding Britain, and Professor Greta Defeyter at Northumbria University asked that additional attention be devoted to one particular issue raised directly by the young people at the CFFI's launch event.

Rabiya Hussain, a young food ambassador for the Food Foundation, pointed out that secondary school pupils access free school meal entitlement with money that is pre-loaded on their electronic cards, or biometric system. However, the young food ambassadors said that these cards are "wiped" at the end of each day so that, in their words, "unspent money is removed from the card". This issue was also raised by young people from Park View School in Chester-le-Street – who are involved with Tyne & Wear Citizens, a chapter of national community organising charity, Citizens UK – as one of the biggest issues affecting their school day. Specifically, young people from Park View School drew attention to the social injustice of the current system.

In effect, if a pupil is absent from school, misses lunch (in order to attend extra-curricular activities, for example), or does not use the full monetary entitlement, they do not have access to any unspent money the following day.

Cumulatively, the voices of these young people led Northumbria University, Feeding Britain and Citizens UK to research this issue further. Two published papers (Northumbria University and Feeding Britain's [Hungry For Change](#) and Citizens UK's [Just Change Campaign](#)) have estimated that free school meal funds ranging between £65 million (Citizens UK; secondary schools in England and Wales) and £88.3 million (Northumbria University and Feeding Britain; primary, secondary, and special schools in England) are 'claimed but not taken'.

Changing the system to enable pupils in receipt of free school meals to 'carry over' any unspent money, to spend on school meals on subsequent days, will ensure that the system is more equitable for all pupils.

### A new approach: Just Change

This case study provides examples of good practice and describes, in detail, how two school trusts have led the way, adopting Citizens UK's 'Just Change' system.

**Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust (CET)** – After hearing about this issue via Tyne & Wear Citizens, Maura Regan and her senior leadership team set out to change the system at Bishop Hogarth CET. In March 2018, Carmel College became the first school to back the Just Change Campaign and to roll it out to the schools in the Trust. In order to assess the impact of changing the financial system on pupils, staff, and the wider school, Professor Greta Defeyter asked Maura Regan a number of questions:

#### **1. Why did you change your school meal system to allow pupils to roll over school dinner monies?**

The main objective of free school meals is to ensure that disadvantaged pupils are provided with healthy, nutritious food to support their physical, psychological and educational development. One of the main reasons that the biometric system was developed was to reduce inequality (e.g. stigma). However, on

investigation it became clear that there were unexpected social inequalities built into the system which meant that pupils in receipt of free school meals were not able to carry forward any unspent allowance; rather this money went back into the system.

## 2. How did you change the system?

All schools in the Bishop Hogarth CET use an in-house catering service and, like many schools, operate a cashless biometric system. In order to change the cashless system, the biometric system was re-configured. The cost to do this was minimal in that it cost £250 shared amongst the then three secondary schools in the Trust. After reconfiguring the IT system, pupils in receipt of free school meals were able to roll over unspent money. This change enabled pupils to maximise their meal allowance, at school, over time.

## 3. What impact did it have on food spend, food waste, school culture and the educational attainment gap?

In the Trust, an in-house catering service delivers all school meals. While most students may use their allowance at the canteen as they wish, in practice, those on free school meals are generally restricted to buying a meal at lunchtime.

During the first year of operation, free school meal pupils at Carmel College spent an additional £17,000 on school food (this amount would be considerably more for a school with very high levels of pupil premium eligibility). Students are able to manage their own meal allowances and have greater spending power to access food at any time of the day, including breakfast and after school. Such is the wide selection in the canteens there is very little waste as all students are free to choose for themselves.

Importantly, this change in practice has had no negative effect on the educational attainment of free school meal pupils. Indeed, the educational attainment gap in all three schools is narrowing and Directors are to commission impact statements with changes in, or modification of, policies to ensure that no student is disadvantaged.

		Progress 8 Score		Change
		2018	2019	
<b>Carmel</b>	Disadvantaged	-0.20	-0.03	0.17
	Other	0.56	0.43	-0.13
	<b>Gap</b>	<b>-0.76</b>	<b>-0.46</b>	<b>0.30</b>
<b>Our Lady &amp; St Bede</b>	Disadvantaged	-0.09	0.43	0.52
	Other	0.60	0.44	-0.16
	<b>Gap</b>	<b>-0.69</b>	<b>-0.01</b>	<b>0.68</b>
<b>St Michael's</b>	Disadvantaged	-1.13	-0.74	0.39
	Other	-0.25	-0.30	-0.05
	<b>Gap</b>	<b>-0.88</b>	<b>-0.44</b>	<b>0.44</b>

## 4. How has the school food system been received by pupils and staff?

### a. Pupils

Pupils self-report:

- Feeling more confident
- A greater level of responsibility in managing their school meal budget
- Having greater choice over food intake
- Greater flexibility in selecting food at different time points across the day
- Reduced stigma
- Feeling equal to their peers who pay for school meals.

Generally, the introduction of the scheme has been positively received by pupils and parents.

Quotes from students:

"I can now spend my money on the food I want, when I want" (P1)

"As someone who has free school meals I think I am now treated the same as everyone else" (P2)

#### *b. Staff*

Staff have seen tangible results in terms of pupils' levels of concentration and engagement. Members of staff commented that:

"The change has led to students having greater self-esteem, they are able to join extra-curricular activities at lunchtime and after school knowing that they won't lose their food allowance" (S1)

"The engagement of some of the most vulnerable students has increased dramatically as a result of this new scheme as they feel they have been listened to and are valued" (S2)

**Venerable Bede CE Academy** – In 2019, pupils at Venerable Bede CE Academy, part of Dayspring Trust, began discussing the issue and how they might work with school leadership to adopt a Just Change system. School leadership and pupils worked together to change the system, which has been in place since September 2019. Gill Booth, CEO/Executive Headteacher of Dayspring Trust, met with representatives of Tyne & Wear Citizens to discuss the issue:

#### **1. Why did you change your school meal system to allow pupils to roll over school dinner monies?**

Having conducted an audit and listened to the voice of our young people, we were concerned about the unfairness in the system and were determined to rectify this as soon as possible. In our eyes, this money belongs to the pupils and they should have some ownership in how they manage it on a weekly basis. It also seemed highly unfair that, if they were absent, the money was then lost and went back into the system.

#### **2. How did you do this? (What were the practical steps, how easy was it?)**

It was actually quite a simple thing to do as we use an in-house catering system. It simply meant reconfiguring the code within the CRB Cunningham online system so that the money stays on a pupil's allowance for the full week. This was easy for CRB Cunningham to implement as they also hold the contract for the Carmel Education Trust, so had developed the code. Costs to the school were therefore minimal. This now means that the money rolls over to the next day if a child is absent or does not use up their full allowance for the rest of that week.

#### **3. What impact did it have on pupils?**

The Just Change system was implemented in September 2019 and schools were in lockdown between March and September 2020. Comparative data sets on attainment, wellbeing and happiness could not be attained in such a short period of pupils being in school.

We are monitoring the impact this year and hope to have some statistically viable information by the end of this academic year. However, what is interesting is that it did not have a negative effect on attendance during the time that it was in operation before schools closed.

#### **4. How has the system been received by;**

##### *a. Pupils*

Pupil feedback has been extremely positive, with one pupil saying that it has "taken the stigma away" and that they now feel "trusted" to manage their own finances. Another commented that he is learning some new skills and is managing his money more, sometimes saving small amounts daily for a treat on a Friday!

#### *b. Staff*

Mrs Booth commented, "As a Trust, we pride ourselves on being inclusive and working together to find solutions. This project has not only raised pupils' self-esteem, but it has also removed an invisible barrier from our young people's lives and enabled all pupils to have some ownership of their financial affairs – an important life skill.

"It also had a direct impact on school leaders across the trust and we have continued to develop the way we use pupil voice as a result."

Mr. Airey, Head Teacher of Venerable Bede CE Academy, added, "The most exciting part of the project for me was watching what happened when we gathered together a group of young people and empowered them to find a solution to the current system. They have really made a difference to their lives and the lives of their peers."

#### Recommendations

These findings suggest that a Just Change system gives secondary school pupils from low-income households greater freedom and responsibility, while significantly improving their access to food and opportunities for a better dietary intake across a typical school week, especially at times when they may otherwise have been hungry.

In the light of these findings, we recommend that the Department for Education shares the Just Change case studies with all secondary schools in an upcoming round of guidance, with a particular emphasis on demonstrating both how this new approach can be embedded in schools with their own in-house catering arrangements, as well as the benefits of doing so.

We recommend also that additional work be undertaken to identify similar examples of good practice in schools with external catering arrangements, for inclusion in future rounds of guidance.