

## NEWHAM 'WE ARE FOOD SECURE 11-19' PROJECT

The financial pressures, incentives and counter incentives shaping food provision in secondary schools

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

Newham's 'We Are Food Secure 11-19' project aims to improve food security for all adolescents in the borough. Secondary schools are key 'food places' for young people and so represent high-impact sites of intervention. Newham Council commissioned Bremner & Co to write a 'think piece' about the financial pressures, incentives and counter-incentives that shape the food offer. The research involved interviews with eleven stakeholders from local government, schools, the catering workforce and academia, as well as a literature review.

Newham's secondary school student population, with 55.5% having English as a second language and 39%<sup>1</sup> eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), highlights significant ethnic diversity and high food insecurity. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the student population's growth since 2011 makes it a key focus for the Council.

Though Newham's 'We Are Food Secure 11-19' project aims to support all secondary school students, FSM funding is a key part of the context for the economics of food provision in secondary schools as it anchors the amount that can be spent on all school meals. Schools receive FSM funding once entitled students are registered (a Newham FSM autoenrollment process is being discussed as a way of identifying and registering additional recipients of FSM). FSM funding allocations are currently £553 per pupil for the 2024/2025 financial year. This is a notional allocation as advised by the Department for Education's National Funding Formula calculations and is not ring fenced.

The amount charged for FSM and paid-for meals depends on procurement and operational contract arrangements between each school and caterer. Meal take-up rates are critical in affecting economies of scale for the catering operation though, perversely, a lower FSM take-up rate means the school pays less of its FSM funding to its caterers.

## Findings

Our research found that school food provision in secondary schools is influenced by a web of

complicated and interconnected economic and non-economic pressures. These interact with the school food system to create incentives and counter-incentives that dictate the provision and uptake of healthy food. Our findings are presented from the perspective of three stakeholder groups: caterers, schools, and students, and are summarised below.

### Caterers:

- Caterers work hard to provide a nutritious and appealing food service but are operating in a competitive market that has fostered a disproportionate focus on cost-cutting.
- External pressures include rising labour costs, associated with the increase in the London Living Wage and the local government pension scheme (LGPS), inflationary food costs, with prices rising by 50-70%<sup>2</sup>, and FSM funding constraints, with the funding failing to rise in rate with inflation.
- Internal pressures include managing diverse contract arrangements, balancing service profitability with meeting School Food Standards (SFS) and student preferences, and operating within short lunch breaks with inadequate catering and dining facilities.

### Schools:

- Schools face the challenge of providing healthy, accessible food while balancing costs (staffing, building maintenance and catering) with curriculum responsibilities. Under financial pressure, schools aim to cut costs and create revenue-generating opportunities where possible.
- A cost-saving strategy is to shorten break times, which impacts students' food choices, incentivising quick 'grab and go' items.
- The lack of ring fenced FSM funding and transparency in spending creates counter-incentives for meal uptake because unclaimed funds may be used for other school expenses. This issue is compounded by administrative burdens, such as registering entitled students and managing lunch account arrears, highlighting the potential benefits of ring fenced universal free school meals (UFSM).

### Students:

- Students drive demand in the secondary school food economic model by exercising autonomy over their meal choices. Caterers are incentivised to prioritise the most popular food items to maximise meal uptake and minimise waste (even if they are less healthy), accommodating the students' preferences for value, taste and convenience.
- Students are influenced by value for money, food appeal, queuing times and the dining environment. External competition from local fast-food outlets and packed lunches pose additional challenges to maintaining nutritious in-school food offerings.
- We were told some schools actively involve students in their school food provision – this ranged from engaging students in food menu and design decision-making, through to offering food service roles.

We asked the interviewees how school food provision could be reimagined so secondary schools are 'food havens' that better support students' health and wellbeing. They made the following suggestions:

- 1 Implement a fully funded UFSM policy in secondary schools – which has the potential to positively influence food security of Newham students.
- 2 Provide clarity and instruction on how schools should spend school food funding.
- 3 Extend the length of the lunchtime break.
- 4 Offer more food options across the school day, including healthy food incentivisation, and promoting breakfast consumption.
- 5 Encourage and empower strong leadership in schools' decision-making around food education and food provision.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH GOALS

Newham's 'We Are Food Secure 11-19' project, funded by the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Health Foundation, is a comprehensive policy approach to enhancing food security for 11-19 year-olds in the borough. Secondary schools play a crucial role, providing a high-impact opportunity for the Council to deliver nutritious, appropriate and accessible food that meets the needs of its young constituents. The project aims to make secondary schools 'food havens' for young people, i.e. places where students aged 11 to 19 are guaranteed access to substantial, nutritious and appropriate food. This involves providing affordable or free meals that cater to their needs, integrating supportive messages throughout the school curriculum and strong school leadership aligning external food providers with these goals.<sup>3</sup>

In seeking to provide students with the autonomy to make their own food choices, a sufficient variety of

age-appropriate food options must be offered. This introduces an economic model of consumer choice into the school food system (in contrast to the set meals of primary settings) that can be swayed by financial incentives that may not favour the most nutritious options. Newham Council aimed to explore the financial factors shaping food offerings in secondary schools and understand how different financial pressures and incentives might influence food provision. Specifically, the Council sought to identify any counter-incentives that undermine the availability of healthy food supporting students' food security. For this report, pressures are defined as factors within the school food system that make the provision and uptake of healthy school food challenging. These pressures interact with the current school food model, creating incentives or counter-incentives that either encourage or discourage healthy food provision and uptake.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted interviews with eleven stakeholders representing a diverse range of expertise within the secondary school food system, including representatives from local government, schools, the catering workforce and academia. Using GDPR-compliant software, we transcribed the interviews and analysed them for overarching themes. We also performed a literature review using Academic Search Complete and Scopus to find articles on food in secondary schools in the UK or England from the past

decade. Our research incorporated high-level findings and quotes from other research projects on the cost of a school meal (CoaSM),<sup>4</sup> conducted by the Bremner & Co team on behalf of School Food Matters, and on secondary students' lived experience of Tower Hamlets' UFSM policy.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, we leveraged the extensive institutional knowledge of the Bremner & Co team and their recommendations for relevant academic and grey literature.

## RESEARCH STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

We engaged with a cross-section of secondary school food system stakeholders, allowing us to gather diverse perspectives despite the small sample size. We recognise that schools vary significantly in their catering models, contracts and food offerings. Although we only interviewed representatives from two schools,

the insights gained from a wide variety of stakeholders provided rich, contextual data. As a 'think piece,' the research used the team's institutional knowledge. This report highlights key themes and provides a foundation for further in-depth research.

## BACKGROUND

The economic focus of this report requires a brief discussion of the local demographic context, which influences not only the decision-making around food provision in Newham's schools but also their food security. The relationship between food security and school food is crucial, as school meals can mitigate the impacts of food insecurity in the home, support students' overall health and well-being, and promote equitable opportunities for academic and personal development.

### Student population characteristics

13% of Newham's population are between the ages of 10-19.<sup>6</sup> While the total population has grown at over twice the national rate since 2011, the 10-19 age group has disproportionately increased by 27%.

There are 23 state-maintained secondary schools in the borough, with a total of 28,938 pupils. Of these, 39% are known to be eligible for FSM, compared to 24.6% eligibility nationwide.<sup>7</sup> This data does not capture pupils who are entitled for FSM but are not registered (though Newham is considering an FSM autoenrollment project to address any shortfall.)<sup>8</sup> The Newham Food Security Strategy estimated that 32% of the borough's children live in food insecurity. As a result, this demographic is a significant focus for the Council.

In state-maintained secondary schools in Newham, 55.5% of pupils do not have English as a first language. The ethnic background of pupils is extremely diverse, with the largest proportion (21%) being of Bangladeshi ethnic origin. These population characteristics suggest that Newham needs to provide a diverse array of

culturally appropriate food for all students, and that there may be language barriers to successful registration for FSM. Consequently, a higher-than-average proportion of entitled children may be missing out on their right to FSM and schools may be missing out on FSM and other associated disadvantage funding.

### Policy landscape

The following national policies impact the economic set up of school food distribution.

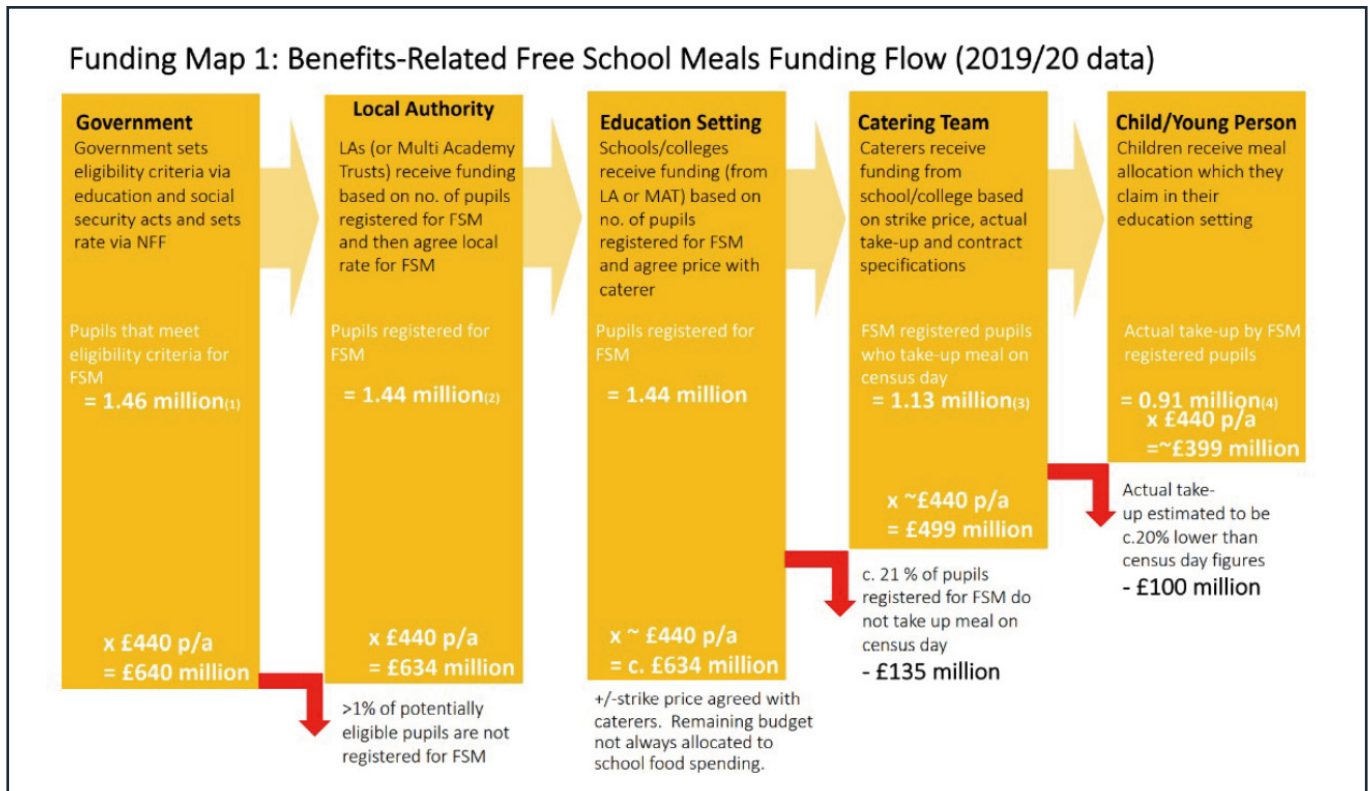
#### Free School Meals: FSM funnel and actual take up rates

A significant source of funding for all school food is supplied by the government’s FSM policy, which awards £2.58 per registered student per day, as set out in the National Funding Formula (NFF). This notionally calculated funding is sent to local authorities (and multi academy trusts) who set a per-meal rate based

on the local context, which may be higher or lower, and distribute it to schools according to the number of registered students (see **Figure 1** for illustration, though we note the figures used are out of date). This funding is not ring fenced for spending on FSM once it reaches schools and there is no requirement for schools to declare this in their budget reports. The amount that is received by caterers will depend on their contract arrangements with the schools and may be linked to actual meal take-up, rather than registration numbers or a pre-arranged set price.

Barriers to the uptake of FSM occur at various stages: difficulties during registration, potentially caused by language and technology barriers; lack of promotion of the scheme by schools; stigma association; and issues with the quality, sufficiency and variety of food available due to funding or other limitations.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1:** Funding flow of benefits-related FSM (Source: Impact on Urban Health)<sup>10</sup>



FSM-eligible children consume more of their calories and nutrients at school compared to non-eligible children.<sup>11</sup> Improving the quality and uptake of FSM can reduce health inequalities and address food insecurity among students. An effective intervention could be through implementation of UFSM, which have been shown to increase take-up among already FSM-eligible students in primary schools.<sup>12</sup> Newham Council have invested in the 'Eat for Free' UFSM primary school programme<sup>13</sup> for over ten years and have well-documented benefits for the policy. These include anchoring spend within the Borough, through protecting and increasing Newham-based school food workforce and saving families money that would otherwise have to be spent on school meals.<sup>14</sup> Ensuring children get one hot meal a day and saving families (with two children at primary school) up to £1,000 a year over two years is one of the founding premises of the Mayor of London's FSM programme.<sup>15</sup>

### School Food Standards: improving quality and leadership

All food provided in state-maintained schools is required to meet the Department for Education's Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014<sup>16</sup> (henceforth the School Food Standards or SFS).

These standards have been shown to lead to overall healthier food provision in secondary schools, especially at lunchtimes.<sup>17</sup> However, there is no standardised monitoring body in local authorities, multi academy

trusts or national government, leading to inconsistent adherence in schools.<sup>18</sup> School governors and leadership teams have a statutory responsibility to ensure SFS are met but they do not always fulfil this role.<sup>19</sup> Incentivisation for schools to promote healthy eating may have declined since the discontinuation of the national government Healthy Schools award in 2011, although Newham Council has continued to invest in the scheme locally. Additionally, there is no restriction on including ultra-processed foods in the Government's procurement rules or SFS.<sup>20</sup>

The Department for Education recommends that school governors "*work with the senior leadership team to develop a whole school food policy that sets out the school's approach to its provision of food, food education (including practical cooking), the role of the catering team as part of the wider school team and the school's strategy to increase the take-up of school lunches.*"<sup>21</sup> From data declared in Newham, only 5 out of 28 secondary schools have a school food policy, indicating limited support for a whole school approach to improving meal take-up, although we recognise that there may be schools with food policies that have not been shared publicly.<sup>22</sup>

# FINDINGS

## School food economic overview

Based on our findings and interviews, we have created **Figure 2**. This illustrates the flow of money involved in school food provision in secondary schools (left) and the complex web of interconnected pressures influencing economic decisions in the system (right), that make it difficult to explain clear causal lines in its set up, leading to poor or good outcomes. These pressures create incentives and counter-incentives that dictate the provision and uptake of healthy food.

As the 'customers' of school food, students can, to an extent, influence the types of food and service styles available by choosing how to spend their money: on school catering, outside food or packed lunches (depicted in the middle). A key influencing pressure here is their ability to afford meals, especially for those who live in disadvantage but do not meet FSM eligibility thresholds, impacting food security.

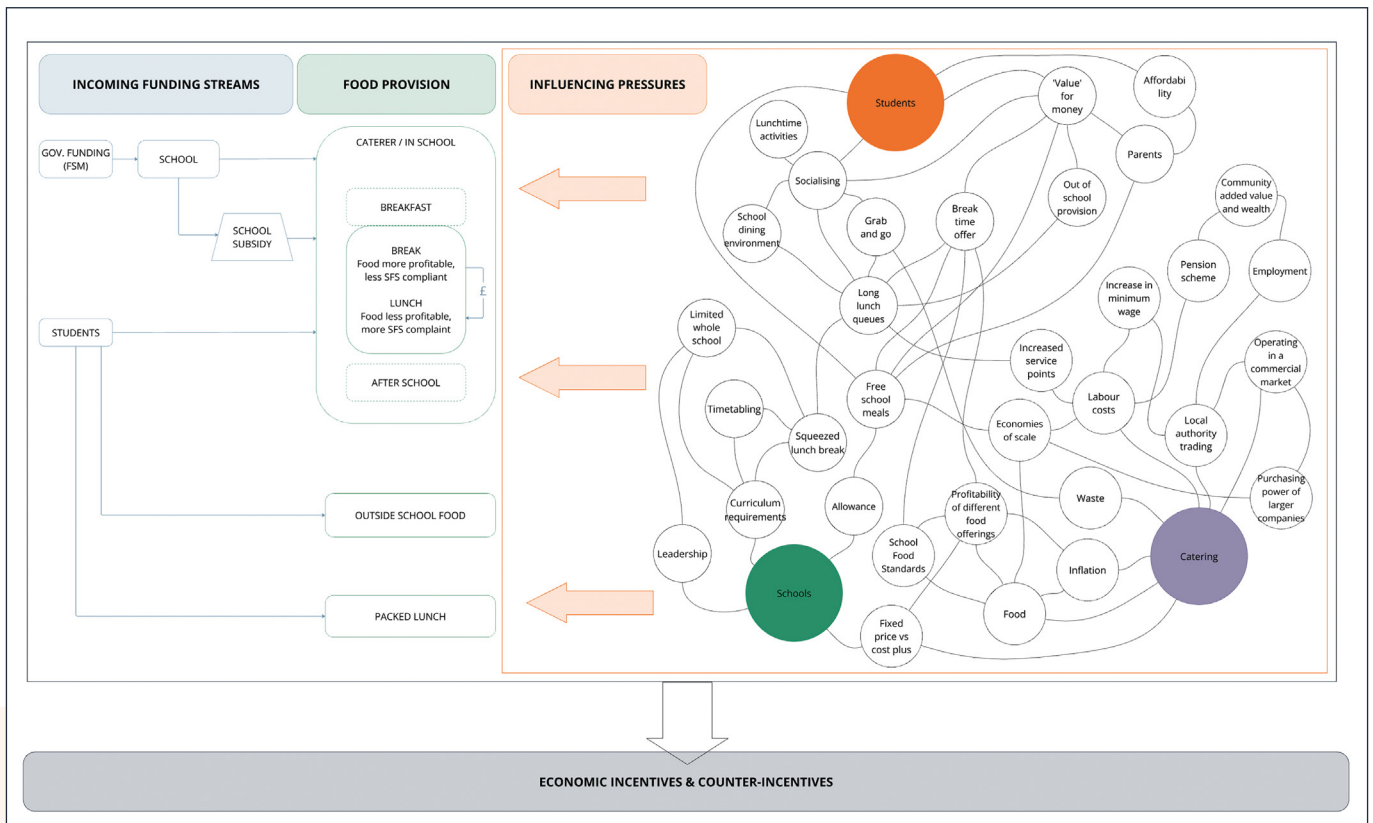
Schools can support students' decision-making in controlled environments by offering healthier foods

and appealing settings to eat in. However, they face the challenge of providing these conditions on a limited budget while balancing responsibilities for curriculum, behaviour and catering management.

Schools vary significantly in their food provision throughout the day. The main food offerings are at break and lunch but some schools also offer breakfast and after-school snacks. Different food touchpoints are used to balance meeting both the SFS and student preferences in a financially viable way, with profits from break often supporting the lunch offer.

The findings section will focus on these pressures, incentives, and counter-incentives from the perspectives of caterers, schools, and students, exploring how they impact nutritional outcomes. It will also discuss wider influencing factors that, while not strictly economic, impact economic considerations around school food provision.

**Figure 2:** How food provision interacts with wider system pressures to create incentives and counter-incentives (Source: Authors' own)



## A. Caterers

This section explores financial pressures, incentive and counter-incentives that influence catering operations.

### A market-based model

Caterers operate in a challenging, competitive market. The rise of academies in England and the increase in private catering providers have led to a fragmented school meal sector and a shift to a market-oriented system. The lack of effective monitoring mechanisms for SFS and broader school funding pressures have fostered a disproportionate focus on cost-cutting, with financial considerations often overshadowing the health and social value of school meals. Instead of improving service quality, the competitive nature of the market has often led to declining standards in tendering processes.<sup>23</sup> This issue is exacerbated by severe budget constraints, including FSM funding not keeping pace with inflation.

We interviewed catering staff from Newham and Tower Hamlets. Both referred to this market-based model, describing how the wider economic environment exacerbates the pressures they face, particularly when comparing local authority catering with the purchasing power of private caterers.

### External inflationary pressures

Our desk research and interviews indicated that caterers face increasing external economic pressures, including rising labour costs, food inflation and inadequate, non-ring fenced funding.

Almost all interviewees highlighted labour costs as the greatest challenge, particularly due to the recent 10% increase in the London Living Wage. A LACA survey found that 20.5% of catering services reported increased meal prices in response to this wage increase.<sup>24</sup> Interviewees also mentioned the London Government Pension Scheme (LGPS), noting the competitive advantage commercial companies have by not being required to offer higher pensions. However, one interviewee emphasised the added community value and wealth that local authority trading companies bring to Newham through employment and pensions.

A second key cost consideration raised by the interviewees was the cost of food. Following record food inflation,<sup>25</sup> caterers across the UK report food prices have increased

by 50-70% across all food categories since the cost-of-living crisis.<sup>26</sup> Alongside price increases, the LACA survey found 98% of respondents reported food shortages and substitutions within their supply chain. Most respondents expressed concern over maintaining the quality of school food and their ability to meet the SFS.<sup>27</sup> Many participants in Bremner & Co's COASM research described seeking cheaper products but found these were less likely to meet school food and other standards.<sup>28</sup>

*“ Lots of menu engineering, swapping expensive proteins, cheaper proteins. ”*

Procurement consultant, CoaSM<sup>29</sup>

The pressures linked to wage and food costs have been exacerbated by the fact that the FSM funding rate has not increased in line with inflation since being set in 2014.<sup>30</sup> If it had, the rate would now be £3.04. In Newham, this represents an annual shortfall in funding of around £1,093,000 (based on numbers of FSM-eligible secondary school students).<sup>31</sup>

### Reduction in menu and food choice

Several catering interviewees highlighted FSM funding constraints, noting the challenge of providing a uniform set menu for all students tied to this budget. This makes it difficult to attract paying students, leading to decreased overall take-up. Some interviewees mentioned offering more profitable but less healthy items to compensate for funding shortfalls, which further reduces main meal uptake and economies of scale.

*“ Their set menus all have to be produced within [the FSM] allocation. That constrains what caterers can offer in terms of the quality and portion sizes of the meals. They say it's not enough to provide a good quality meal, particularly for adolescents, that's satisfying and fills them up. If they want to make a profit, that's where all the extra things they sell come in. ”*

Academic

Conversely, in Newham, one interviewee reported that the high uptake of FSM in schools with a large proportion of FSM students helps manage their three-week menu cycle, reducing waste and saving money.

### Perverse FSM funding incentive

An Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) report notes that the challenge with FSM funding not being ring fenced and spending falling to the school's discretion is that "this runs the risk of the funding not reaching the child and being used for other purposes, culminating in the catering service being under-resourced and food standards being driven down."<sup>32</sup>

*"I do know that there are schools where they don't want to promote free school meal uptake because they maintain that money in their budgets, and they're using it for other things. I think that's a challenge because that money is there to feed students that would otherwise go hungry."*

Private caterer

### Internal pressures from school requirements

Internal pressures include balancing the service's profitability while meeting both SFS and student preferences, as well as operating within short lunch breaks and with inadequate catering and dining facilities.

School food service is shaped by various tendering arrangements and contract management, requiring significant skill and resources within schools to navigate effectively. The diversity of these arrangements led one interviewee to note that contracts can be complicated and opaque. In a similar vein, an APSE report found school budgets do not detail FSM allocation and spend.<sup>33</sup>

### Unhealthy food can deliver better economics

We were informed that the profitability of the catering contract impacts the healthiness of the food offered and can create a negative feedback loop. The subsidy responsibility placed on the school can act as a counter-incentive to prioritising healthy food and in turn impact food security.

*"The school has a vested interest to allow the caterer to have a less compliant offer because they'll generate a higher margin and a lower bottom-line cost. I would suggest that the majority of caterers and schools, whilst they aspirationally want healthy food on the menus, are realistic about the bottom-line cost and, if you have an entirely compliant menu, the cost of catering billed back to the school will be higher than a non-compliant offer."*

Catering consultant

The viability of the catering service becomes a balancing act, challenged by the need to meet diverse student food preferences and needs while complying with SFS and offering good value for money. During the interviews, we explored the profitability of food provision touch points across the day and were told that:

*"Morning break is, historically, where caterers make lots and lots of money, where it's high margin and high volume, so that would consist of paninis, pasta pots, sausage rolls, chocolate croissants, a completely non-compliant food offer."*

Catering consultant

Comparatively, the hot meal offer at lunch tends to be the most expensive to deliver, while also being the most nutritious. As a result, the break time offer often subsidises the hot lunch and budget shortfalls. Similarly, grab-and-go lunch foods, which may be less compliant with SFS, are popular with students (see section on Students) and are used to make the service more profitable. However, when the SFS-compliant offer is "paired against a Monday to Friday pizza or panini offer, the volume of those sales is negligible." (Catering consultant)

60% of secondary schools nationally do not meet the SFS across the school day.<sup>34</sup> Secondary school data from Newham Council indicates there is a data gap on SFS compliance.<sup>35</sup> A national pilot scheme (run by the Food Standards Agency) has explored the use of local authority food safety officers in undertaking a quality assurance role to assess whether schools are meeting the required school food standards.<sup>36</sup>

National secondary school food provision tends to be made up of high levels of ultra-processed foods, particularly among the grab and go offer.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the availability of foods high in fat, sugar and salt, combined with greater independence at secondary school level, leads to a “pick ‘n’ mix culture”,<sup>38</sup> meaning it’s harder to guarantee a SFS-compliant diet as the students aren’t taking complete, nutritionally balanced meals.<sup>39</sup>

The catering interviewees reported varying experiences in terms of making a profit, breaking even, or receiving a subsidy from the school. The ability to make a profit was often linked to the purchasing power and influence of private caterers, with one interviewee noting:

“That’s the challenge we have when schools go out to test the marketplace because the larger commercial companies have that ability to raise capital to invest in food and they say, oh we’ll come in, we’ll put in a pod there, a pod here’ – they have the opportunity to make margins that we don’t.”

Local authority caterer

### Recognising investment is needed to promote healthy options

Where the interviewees recounted caterers successfully meeting student preferences while keeping to the SFS, they referred to the “razzmatazz” (Catering consultant) and “culinary journey” (Private caterer) needed to get the students excited about the food, for example, through taster sessions. As one interviewee put it: “it’s about that step change” (Private caterer).

The interviewees also mentioned that the short length of the lunchtime break, combined with inadequate catering or dining facilities, affects the type and manner of food being served. According to Newham Council data, lunch breaks in Newham’s secondary schools range from 35 to 60 minutes. The largest school, Brampton Manor Academy, must serve 2,880 students in 40 minutes, but has multiple serving points that enables them to do this.<sup>40</sup>

The catering and local authority interviewees felt that many schools are unwilling to extend the lunchtime break, opting instead to invest in multiple serving points to accommodate large numbers of students within the short lunch window. However, this approach increases labour costs, further impacting economies of scale.

School interviewees acknowledged that students: “just want to play basketball or football, they don’t want to sit down, they don’t want to line up” (School). Linked to student preferences, the short lunch break and lack of dining space create significant queuing issues, leading to a prioritisation of grab-and-go options.

“It’s timing and timetabling, those that have to reduce their lunch service down to 30 minutes, that really is a grab and go. You might get access to a pasta pot, maybe a street food pot, a piece of pizza or panini. But actually, the queuing times make it really, really difficult for [students] in half an hour to be able to access a quality meal because you’ve got to feed 1,000 students, start to finish – that’s really difficult.”

Private caterer

The wider competitive market, along with external and internal pressures discussed in this section, create mostly counter-incentives for caterers to prioritise a healthy food offer. Although the catering interviewees stated they provide a fully SFS-compliant menu, doing so is very challenging and often results in subsidy responsibilities being placed on schools.

## B. Schools

We interviewed a headteacher and a school business manager to understand how the financial setup of schools impacts the delivery of healthy, accessible food for students. We also reviewed wider academic literature. Findings indicated that schools are cutting costs, retaining non-ring fenced government funding and creating revenue-generating opportunities where possible.

Catering is one of the few revenue-generating opportunities available to schools and is crucial for balancing budgets. Consequently, offering popular, paid-for food and drink is seen as a valuable revenue source.

### Cutting costs

As school budgets become increasingly tight, pushing some schools into deficit, schools have been forced to cut costs in areas that do not directly impact the mandated curriculum, particularly the core subjects.<sup>41</sup> One strategy has been to shorten break times, compressing the school day. This saves on staffing

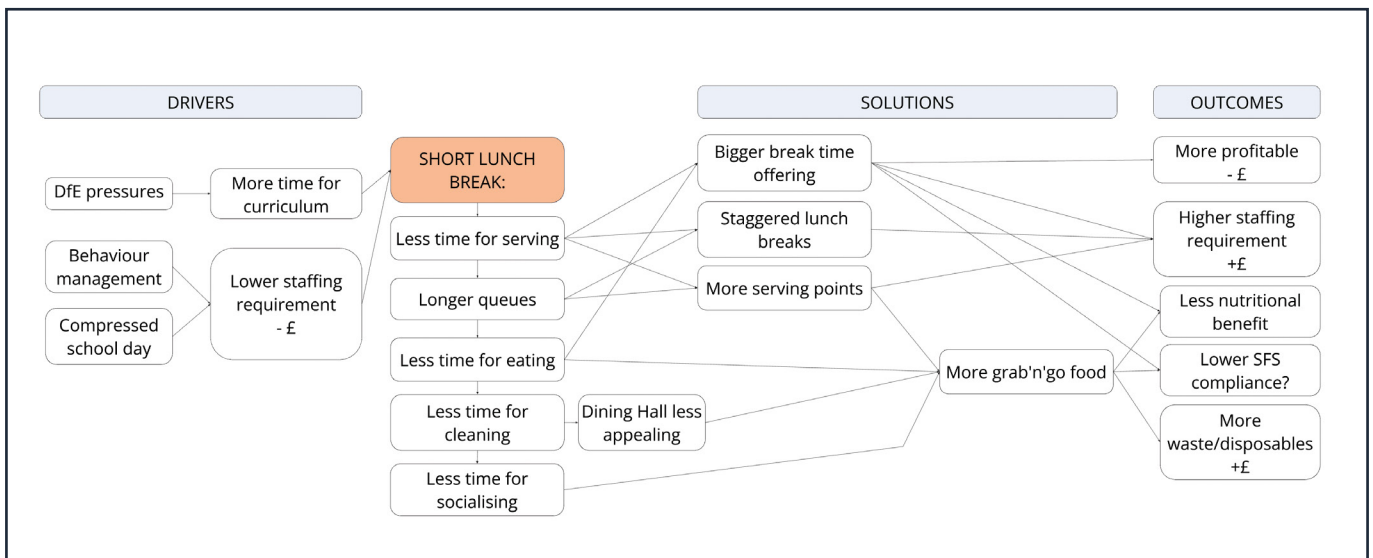
during breaks, allowing more time for lessons. The impact of reducing break times on food provision was highlighted multiple times in our interviews, mainly regarding students being unwilling to spend their limited break time queuing or sitting down for a meal, instead opting for 'grab and go' options. **Figure 3** provides a breakdown of the drivers and impacts of shorter lunch breaks.

*“ The simplest route is to increase the length of lunch. But that’s never going to happen because it eats into the timetable. Teachers will fight you tooth and nail to change lunch breaks.”*

Catering consultant

The functional attitude towards break times as a time to efficiently feed the school population, rather than as a social gathering time, has been noted in the literature as potentially detracting from behaviour management and undermining messages on healthy eating.<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 3:** Drivers of shorter lunch breaks (Source: Authors’ own)



### Swapping mid-morning break for breakfast

One interviewee highlighted an alternative model of food provision, where breakfast is offered for free before school. This approach attracts students early, improving attention in class, attendance, and behaviour management. The school does not feel compelled to provide a break time food offering, allowing for more lesson time and reduced catering before lunch. The simpler breakfast service also requires lighter staffing. However, this model does not chime with stereotypical adolescent biology, whereby, anecdotally, hunger does not set in until later in the morning.

### Ring fencing funding

Registering pupils for FSM brings significant additional deprivation funding to the school, including pupil premium and other notional allocations in the main school grant. However, the FSM funding process falls short of incentivising actual meal take-up and may even act as a counter-incentive. Unclaimed meal funding may not be passed on to caterers, allowing schools to use these funds for other purposes.

For example, some schools only allow the FSM allowance to be used on hot lunch 'meal deals' (i.e. canteen service) rather than at break times. While this may encourage healthier meal uptake, an unintended consequence is that FSM-eligible students might choose to pay for less healthy foods at break time and not claim their free hot lunch. This counter-incentive negatively impacts students' health while freeing up funds for other uses within the school. Literature suggests students consume up to 15% of their daily energy intake in substantial morning break snacks, foregoing complete meals at lunchtime.<sup>43</sup>

*“ The disincentive is for every meal that isn't taken, the schools benefit because they get that funding. There's no clawback from the caterer. And that is completely wrong, counterintuitive, they should be encouraging the pupils who are eligible, perhaps their only meal of the day, they should be prioritising them above all others. They're not because they can benefit financially if that child chooses not to have a meal. ”*

Local authority caterer

One interviewee highlighted the need for discretionary use of FSM funding for other costs due to underfunding from other streams. A Newham school interviewee mentioned that FSM students are allowed to spend their allowance throughout the day, with any unspent balance rolling over until Friday, when it resets to zero. The interviewee felt the amount of unspent funding was minimal, but the pressure to meet the subsidy requirement is so great that any remaining funds would be spent on this.

*“ Last year the contract increased by about 23% and we're already subsidising it. If a school dinner should cost the students £2.90, we're only charging £2.60. ”*

School

The administrative burden of chasing parents to register for FSM or recovering lunch accounts in arrears was also highlighted as a management cost. This issue could be alleviated by the introduction of UFSM.

*“ So, on a daily basis, we'll probably be about £1,200 down, so that's then a lot of telephone conversations with parents. ”*

School

Schools observed that parents of children entering secondary school were not always aware that school lunches are not free, as they are in Newham primaries. It was noted that those who did not register in time or were not FSM-eligible might not realise they were falling into arrears in the first few months of the school year because the school chose not to withhold lunches from these students.

## C. Students

Secondary school students drive demand in the system. To keep the food offering profitable, caterers and school business managers aim to maximise meal uptake, minimise waste (both food and packaging), and encourage high sales volumes by providing popular options.

At this age, students have greater autonomy over how they choose to eat and spend their lunch break

compared to primary school.<sup>44</sup> In secondary settings, a wider variety of food and dining options are available to manage the volume of students needing to be fed in a short time. Some interviewees noted that Year 7 students more commonly opt for hot lunches in the dining hall, perhaps due to the familiarity of that setup, but this tends to taper off in older year groups.

### Choice within school food offering

Factors influencing what students choose to eat during the school day are consistently identified in the literature. These include value for money (low prices and large portions), appeal (taste and appearance), and predictability/high confidence (familiar, low-risk foods that are properly labelled and packaged).<sup>45</sup> These factors were largely confirmed by interviewees.

“ [Students] identified seven key areas to improve meal uptake – they said authenticity matters, if there’s a curry on the menu, they don’t want a bland version. Keep menus simple, make sure the menus advertised are what is offered, don’t run out of food. They commented on the fact that portion sizes weren’t always consistent. They wanted menu variety. And, of course, they said to improve take up, you’ve got to address the queues. ”

Local authority caterer

These considerations overlap with the mode of food provision and how students choose to eat, which are influenced by social and environmental factors. Interviewees noted that pod-style outlets selling pre-packaged ‘grab and go’ foods in the playground have become more popular. These outlets save students time from queuing, offer familiar foods and eliminate the need to spend time in the dining hall. Additionally, school lunch clubs and socialising influence students’ lunch service choices based on queuing and eating times.

Staggered lunch times for different year groups may influence where and what students can choose to eat:<sup>46</sup>

“ It is not just about what the food is, it’s also about the eating environment, and where they want to be and how they want to socialise. If you’ve got a not very nice eating environment, which I think a lot of school canteens are, then that will drive you to make certain food choices as well. ”

Academic

### External competition

While most schools do not allow students off-site during the school day, there are examples in the literature of schools permitting students to buy food off-site.<sup>47</sup> This has been a challenge for some of our interviewees, who noted that numerous fast-food outlets near the schools offer students abundant, cheap, unhealthy food options that compete with the in-school food offering.

Alternatively, students may bring a packed lunch from home if they are dissatisfied with the school food offering (in addition to facing food insecurity challenges that prevent them from affording paid meals). Both outside food outlets and packed lunch options have been found to be less nutritious than school meals.<sup>48</sup>

“ There was a whole trading game going on in playgrounds, people trading doughnuts from Tescos. And I said to the school, ‘you’ve got to help us here. We’re not making a profit here.’ It’s an area I think schools could police but it’s time, it’s resources, it’s staff. ”

Private caterer

### Motivations for eating in school

The engagement of pupils in decision-making and reporting on school food, as well as some schools offering paid hands-on roles in the catering department, was highlighted in several interviews. These examples of good practice demonstrate a whole school food approach, integrating student voice, education and participation in the delivery of school food.

Evidence suggests school nutrition action groups (SNAG), working parties involving school pupils, can help students to exert influence for better co-ownership over school meals.<sup>49</sup>

*“ We do student Councils and get feedback from them. And it also gives them the opportunity to ask why don't we have burger and chips every day? And there's a lot of education that goes on. ”*

Local authority caterer

### Affordability of school meals

Several interviewees commented on the important responsibility schools have for pupils who may

experience food insecurity at home, or maybe not be able to afford school meals. However, despite asking direct questions within the research guide on food insecurity, stakeholders did not focus on, or talk to this area. This may be indicative of issue prioritisation, where funding and logistics are front of mind, as opposed to the long-term impacts. The lack of focus on food insecurity that came through in the interviews may be due to the range of stakeholders that were contactable for interview and that pastoral activity in addressing food insecurity sits elsewhere across the secondary school function. Some interviewees reported that this is not the situation in primary school settings, where food insecurity focus is more embedded within the catering and school business manager functions.

## REIMAGINING SCHOOL FOOD – RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SECTOR

The interviewees were asked how school food provision could be reimagined so secondary schools are 'food havens' that better support students' health and wellbeing.

### Recommendation 1: Implement a fully funded UFSM policy in secondary schools

The interviewees identified that a secondary school UFSM policy would ensure all children have access to a nutritious, hot meal and reduce the administrative burden and costs of chasing lunch money debt. This has the potential to significantly impact food security. However, they noted that school kitchen and dining infrastructure would need upgrades, particularly to reduce queuing issues. Securing the necessary funding would be challenging but essential. One interviewee also emphasised the importance of incorporating student preferences into infrastructure upgrade plans and funding requirements.

*“ I can't stress enough, it goes back to student preferences because if you don't provide the food that the students want, they won't take up the school meals, even if they're free. There needs to be the investment in the actual food, there needs to be investment in the dining spaces and the environments within which the students eat. ”*

Academic

The interviewees' comments are supported by a recent evaluation of the feasibility and acceptability of UFSM in secondary schools.<sup>50</sup> This study found that limited kitchen infrastructure and increased queuing times were barriers to implementation, requiring kitchen upgrades in one school and increased catering workload. The schools also noted an increase in preparatory work to inform and encourage parental participation, but this eased once the policy was established, involving less ongoing management than means-tested FSM. UFSM was seen as cost-effective

with significant potential benefits, though funding was deemed crucial. Concerns included the impact on catering companies' profit margins and food quality if UFSM were widely implemented without adequate funding. While there was some student dissatisfaction with meal quality and quantity, many students appreciated the increased social dining opportunities.

Tower Hamlets launched its UFSM policy in secondary schools in 2023. Early findings in an ongoing study into the success of this programme show take-up and food quality have both improved, though progress is slow at times. Qualitative research undertaken in schools by Bremner & Co found there was some dissatisfaction among the students around food quality and the dining environment, despite there being positive support for the policy,<sup>51</sup> indicating work to embed a whole school approach in some of the schools might be beneficial. Importantly, early data has indicated that the programme is having a positive impact on children living in disadvantage.<sup>52</sup>

The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham conducted a short UFSM pilot program in two secondary schools. While the quantitative findings on hunger and food insecurity did not show any effect, stakeholders perceived improvements in many aspects of school life, including food insecurity, hunger, school performance, family stress and reduction in stigma.<sup>53</sup> The findings of this pilot may have been limited by its timing during the pandemic, when meals were not delivered as usual.

### Recommendation 2: Provide clarity and administrative instruction on how schools should spend school food funding

The interviewees highlighted that funding must be ring fenced and monitored to ensure it is spent on providing nutritious meals to students.

*“ The challenges are making sure that money ends up on the school plate – my concern there is the monitoring. How do they know that the money they've thrown at schools is ending up on the plates? Is it ring fenced? ”*

Local authority caterer

We were told that, following the roll-out of UFSM in secondary schools in Tower Hamlets, conditions of grant tied to a highly compliant menu have led to the plateauing of morning break sales, greater take up of lunch and a higher overall standard of food being served. However, one interviewee cautioned that conditions of grant can place further pressure on the viability of catering services if they're not linked into wider efforts to integrate a whole school food approach.

*“ I would say that conditions of grant have a negative impact upon the revenue streams. Conditions of grant have to be introduced at the same time as you introduce a whole school philosophy around food, and I think the two things need to run at the same time. ”*

Catering consultant

### Recommendation 3: Extend the lunchtime break

Many of the interviewees reflected on the value of extending the lunchtime break. Extending lunch breaks could provide numerous benefits, including improved nutrition, reduced queuing, enhanced social interaction, better focus in afternoon classes, increased meal uptake, support for local and fresh foods, reduced food waste and educational opportunities. However, schools are hesitant to extend lunch breaks due to challenges such as scheduling conflicts, the need for additional supervision and potential disruptions to the academic timetable.

*“ Well, I think extending the lunch break is feasible, but it seems to be an area where schools are a bit rigid. ”*

Local authority caterer

Many interviewees noted that queuing issues at lunchtime deter students, who might instead opt for unhealthy options like fast food. There are practical solutions like using apps for pre-ordering and using collection counters for healthy grab and go.

#### **Recommendation 4: Offer more food options across the school day, including healthy food incentivisation and promoting breakfast consumption**

Several stakeholders suggested adding more food provision touchpoints throughout the school day, with breakfast and after-school food identified as missed opportunities to ensure students access nutritious food. Allowing students to spend their FSM allocation throughout the day could be linked with healthy eating incentivisation, which in turn could lead to healthier eating habits.

#### **Recommendation 5: Encourage and empower strong leadership in schools**

The interviewees noted senior leadership play a key role in the delivery and integration of a healthy food offer. One interviewee gave the example of high SFS-compliance in one school in Tower Hamlets, referring to the insistence of senior leadership around ensuring the catering provision is healthy.

*“ It'd be quite interesting in Newham to know how engaged head teachers or senior leadership are and how much authority they have to check the compliance, and do they know how to check whether it's compliant? ”*

Local authority caterer

*“ Caterers are crying out for more conversation and consultation with senior management. ”*

Academic

#### **Recommendation 6: Conduct a cost-benefit analysis of a 'Eat for Free' style policy in secondary school meals in Newham**

The successful 'Eat For Free' (EFF) UFSM policy in Newham's primary schools exemplifies the cost-benefit of the policy, and how it anchors funding within the borough.

EFF has been shown to keep investment in primary school food within the borough, creating increased jobs in the Newham population. Conditions of grant ensure that working pay and award conditions are beneficial, and that food provision is healthy and respects the environment. Not least, pupils are able to access nutritious meals, improving food security in the borough. In financial terms, the Newham investment of £6m a year anchors an additional £14m of school food spend within the borough, with another £25m with the full roll-out of conditions of grant.

Carrying out a cost-benefit analysis of a similar program in Newham secondary schools would provide policy makers with further economic evidence of how increased investment for school food policies in secondary schools could benefit the borough.

## CONCLUSION

This report explores the complex interplay of financial pressures, incentives, and counter-incentives shaping food provision in Newham's secondary schools. Through interviews with eleven stakeholders and a literature review, the research uncovered a web of interconnected economic and non-economic pressures that influence the school food system, creating incentives and counter-incentives for providing and consuming healthy food. These, in turn, have the potential to impact food security.

Caterers strive to offer nutritious and appealing meals but are constrained by external and internal pressures that challenge their ability to run a financially viable service meeting both the SFS and student preferences. Schools, balancing numerous responsibilities and financial pressures, often resort to cost-saving measures that can compromise the quality and accessibility of healthy school meals. Students, for whom food choice is important, tend to prioritise convenience and value, complicating efforts to promote healthy eating.

Interviewees made several recommendations for reimagining the school food system to create an economic model that promotes food security and incentivises healthy food. These include: implementing a fully funded UFSM policy, extending lunch breaks, providing more food options throughout the school day, fostering strong leadership in schools prioritising SFS-compliant food, and conducting a cost-benefit analysis of an EFF-style policy in secondary schools.

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## MORE INFORMATION

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For more information on the project, please visit

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