

Case Study – An Enhanced Free School Meal Offer

(Led by Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council)

The Stockport School Meal Support Scheme (SMSS) was adopted in response to:

- The continuing cost of living crisis, with soaring food prices, means that more families are struggling to afford school lunches.
- A hot and nutritious school meal improves children's concentration and behaviour during lessons and positively impacts on school attendance, children's health and academic performance.
- Many low-income families miss out on eligibility for means-tested Free School Meals due to the low eligibility threshold (less than £7,400 a year after tax and not including benefits).

Stockport Council passed a motion at [Full Council in January 2023](#) to establish the SMSS for the 2023/24 academic year with the aim of providing a paid-for school meal to children living in families in receipt of Local Council Tax Support and/or Housing Benefit and not already eligible for the nationally funded universal and free school meal support.

The SMSS was approved for the 2023/24 academic year (starting September 2023) meaning that the project was delivered between February 2023 to July 2024.

Our anti-poverty work with schools is ongoing and continues to develop. For instance, rolling out a programme of poverty proofing in schools, running an assisted Free School Meals enrolment scheme, and recently launching the ReLoved school uniform scheme.

Development Process

Following the approval of the motion, Council officers were tasked with the design and rollout of the scheme which including agreeing the eligibility processes, data collation, and agreeing the mechanism for providing the paid-for school meal.

Eligibility

The scheme eligibility was agreed as:

- Child is living in Stockport
- Child is living in a low-income family i.e. a family in receipt of Local Council Tax Support and/or Housing Benefit
- Child is aged between 7 and 18 years old on 4th September 2023
- Child is attending a school/college setting from September (including out-of-area)
- Child is not already eligible for the nationally funded universal or the means-tested Free School Meals (FSM)

This was a local scheme - no Pupil Premium was attached to this cohort of children, therefore, there was no change on the school census for this cohort of children.

Process

- Briefing sessions held for schools.

- The letter to parents included a link to the online request for support form. The council wrote to all eligible households to explain the scheme and to invite parents to request support if they wished for their children to receive a paid-for school or college meal. A crucial element of this request process was to confirm ages, benefit recipient confirmation and school setting. Communication to parents was carried out 4 times during the academic year (in line with school term dates) to ensure all newly eligible children were invited to benefit from the scheme.
- Request triaged to ensure eligibility criteria met.
- Outcome letter (via email) sent to parent/carer.
- Council prepares a list of children enrolled in the scheme, by education setting.
- Names of children requesting support shared with education setting.
- Confirmed eligible children will receive paid-for meal from agreed date (start of term)
- Calculation of funding allocation for each education setting to provide meals to children requesting support for the academic year.
- Funding allocation transferred to education setting.

Payments

All payments were made directly to schools. The amount provided per child depended on the school they attended, and the school meal provider used by that specific school. The standard Free School Meal rate within the borough of Stockport was £2.53, but across Stockport there are three school meal providers charging different rates. Instead of paying a flat rate for eligible children, the council pay the exact amount it cost to feed each eligible child at their school to ensure that school budgets were not negatively impacted.

The only exception to providing the funding directly to the schools is a small subset of the cohort; post-16 children who attend colleges outside the borough. Instead of paying for their lunchtime meal, the council took a cash-first approach to funding this group's equivalent of a free school meal, by providing the equivalent of £2.53 (the cost of a free school meal) per day, per child in a cash Post Office Pay Out to their parent or carer at the beginning of each term. The reason for this is due to practicalities around food provision at college campuses and timetabling. The council felt it more practical and appropriate to provide this funding in a cash-first manner, which also maximises choice, dignity and control for young adults.

Outcomes

By the end of the academic year, 1300 children were supported by the scheme. A total of 150 settings supported the scheme – 104 Stockport schools/colleges, 46 schools/colleges outside Stockport.

Alongside the development of the SMSS, Public Health worked in partnership with the main provider of school meals in Stockport to further develop their menu offer to reduce the amounts of fat, salt & sugar, increase the plant-based offer and develop marketing materials that would appeal to students and families. The provider is now accredited by both Pro Veg Uk and SUGARWISE. The provider has also recently launched Project Green Genius, a recipe design competition, where students will have the opportunity to create and share plant based and

planet-friendly recipes. The project will further help to engage students in the process of designing a healthier diet whilst highlighting the importance of sustainable, vegetable-based food choices. The winning dish will feature in future menus.

Key Stakeholders

A wide range of stakeholders were involved in delivering the scheme including:

- Stockport Council – Revenues & Benefits Team
- Stockport Council – Business Intelligence Team
- Stockport Council – Communities & Inclusion Team
- Stockport Council – Resident Advice & Support Team
- Stockport Council – Information Governance
- Stockport Council – Stockport Family
- Schools and school-meal providers

Delivery of the scheme was overseen by the Cost of Living Task Force (now Anti-Poverty Steering Group) and regular updates provided to the council's Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resource.

Challenges and Barriers

The scheme had significant complexities which had to be resolved including:

- Mechanism to pay the cost of the school meal to children attending schools outside of the borough. This created an additional layer of complexity regarding the administration of the scheme because, unlike schools and colleges within Stockport borough, the council had little to no relationship with the schools and colleges in outside boroughs.
- The mechanism to pay the cost of the school meal to pupils attending settings with no appropriate food provision (as described above).

Community Mobilisation

Throughout the design and implementation of the SMSS, the project lead consulted Elected Members.

Crucial to the design of the SMSS was the views and feedback from schools. A series of workshops were held with school business managers to understand the practical implications in order to ensure that the scheme did not have a detrimental impact on school capacity.

Evaluation Insights

Whilst the scheme ended in July 2024, the council continues to support recipient families with cost of living support. For example, in July and December 2024, the council awarded Family Support Vouchers (worth £190 per child) to SMSS recipient families that would not ordinarily be eligible for the vouchers. This benefited 182 families (including 246 children).

Links for Further Information

The Stockport School Meal Support Scheme was included in a Resolve Poverty/Child Poverty Action Group report entitled [Free School Meals in the North West](#) (published February 2024).