

<b>Committee</b>	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
<b>Title of Report</b>	Free School Meals
<b>Date of meeting</b>	21 March 2024
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<b>Cabinet Member for Education</b>	Councillor Beca Brown

## 1. BACKGROUND

1.1 On 17 December 2021, Jeremy Miles MS, Minister for the Welsh Language and Education, published a written statement which extended the right to Free School Meals to all primary school children in Wales.

1.2 The policy is part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru and stems from the understanding that younger children are more likely to be living in relative income poverty, and by implementing the Free School Meals scheme, that 196,000 more children would become eligible for free school meals in Wales. Here is a link to the full statement by Jeremy Miles, Minister for the Welsh Language and Education: [Written Statement: Extending Free School Meal entitlement to all primary school children \(17 December 2021\) | LLYW.CYMRU](#)

1.3 In realising the commitment, the Welsh Government believed it would be a way of contributing to:

- tackling poverty / the problem of children going hungry,
- ensuring the well-being of future generations and reducing inequality,
- removing stigma,
- healthy eating habits and attitudes.

1.4 In April 2022 it was decided to include free school meals for primary pupils as a priority in the Council Plan to reflect the national priority, and to address the necessary changes that would be required to the infrastructure of our school dinners provision.

## 2. WELSH GOVERNMENT CAPITAL AND REVENUE INVESTMENT

2.1 The Welsh Government announced that £25m of capital funding would be invested in kitchens and dining halls in Welsh schools as part of the plans to introduce free school meals to all primary school children in Wales over a three-year period, starting with the youngest children, with the aim that all primary children would be able to have free school dinners by September 2024.

2.2 Eligible expenditure for this funding included the following capital costs:

- purchasing new equipment;
- upgrading existing equipment;
- upgrading existing dining/kitchen facilities; and
- work to increase the capacity of the school meals infrastructure

- 2.3 In February 2022, Cyngor Gwynedd received a grant letter allocating £1,121,603 of capital funding (100%) from the Welsh Government.
- 2.4 The Education Department began working with the Property Development Team in the Housing and Property Department to secure appropriate equipment and kitchen space and adequate dining areas in all the county's primary schools.
- 2.5 49 primary and special schools received new kitchen equipment. The Council invested in alterations or extensions to the kitchen or dining area in 16 primary schools to address the higher numbers of children who would need to be provided with a school meal.
- 2.6 The spending period for the capital finance will end on 31 March 2024, and the Education Department has managed to spend all this capital funding.
- 2.7 In March 2022, the Welsh Government also announced that revenue funding of up to £200m would be allocated to local authorities to fulfil the commitment, with the funding being provided to local authorities over three years as follows:
- £40m in 2022-23
  - £70m in 2023-24
  - £90m in 2024-25

The main purpose of this revenue funding is to assist with higher staffing costs in light of the increase in the numbers of learners that would take up the offer of free school meals.

- 2.8 As a result of the financial investment and the joint-working between the Education Department and the Housing and Property Department, the Council succeeded in realising the offer of free school meals for all primary children in Gwynedd by 1 September 2023. In Gwynedd, the offer was brought in gradually as follows:

YEARS	TIMETABLE
Reception and Year 1	1 September 2022
Year 2	1 January 2023
Years 3 and 4	5 June 2023
Years 5 and 6	1 September 2023

- 2.9 We managed to fulfil the commitment of providing free schools meals in Gwynedd exactly one year ahead of the national timetable. The Welsh Government agreed to fund any Local Authority that would be in a position to offer free school meals before the national timetable.

### **3. THE NUMBERS WHO HAVE TAKEN UP THE OFFER OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS SINCE SEPTEMBER 2023**

- 3.1 The Education Department have been gathering data on the numbers that have been taking up the free school meal offer since introducing the offer in every school back in September 2023. Gathering the data helps us to identify schools to target.
- 3.2 Data is gathered across the 79 primary schools (not including the two special schools, nor the latter schools). Data is collected, based on whole schools and per school year. We gather data on
- Number of eFSM meals and pupils (Eligible for Free School Meals)

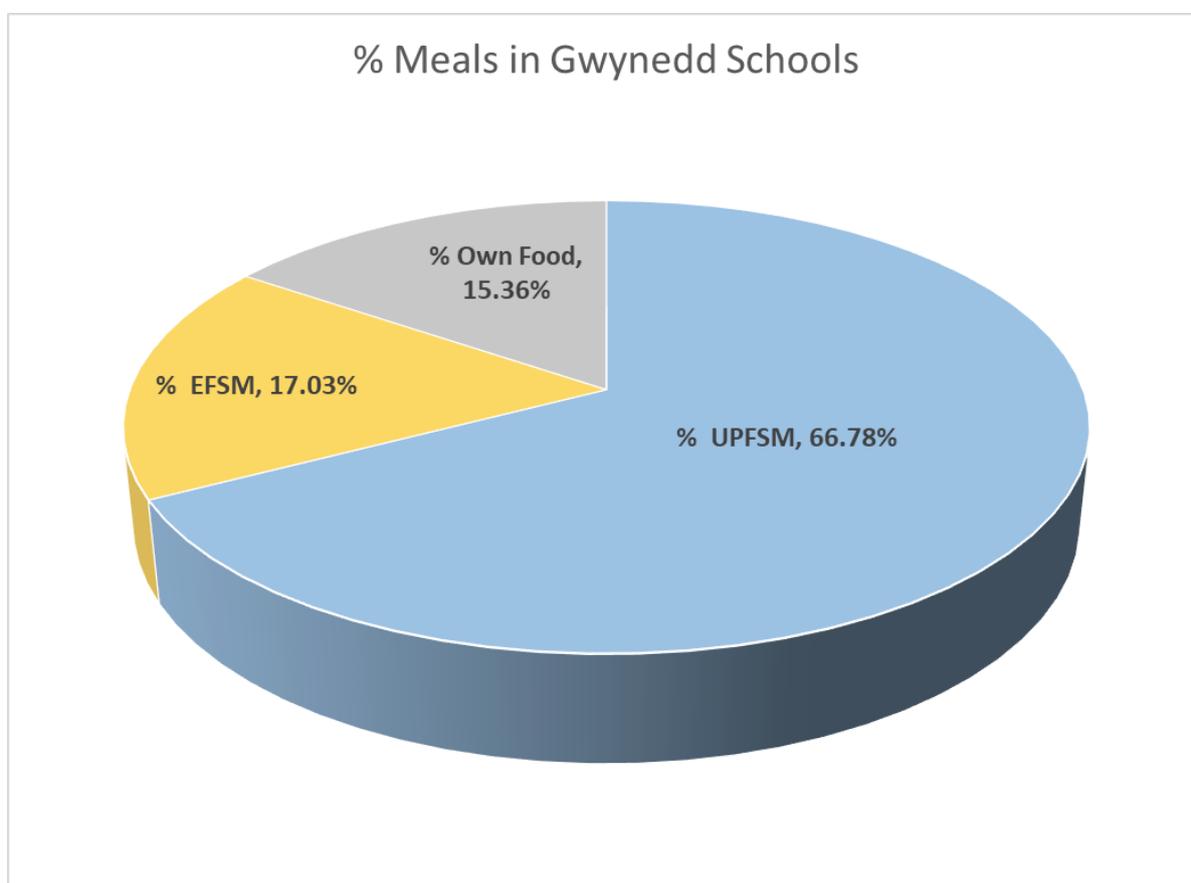
- Number of FSM meals and pupils (Free School Meals)
- Numbers of meals and pupils not taking up the free school meal offer but choosing to take their own lunch box to school instead.

3.3 Although every child is now eligible for free school meals in the primary sector, we continue to gather data on the eligibility for FSM as it is an indicator used as a proxy for deprivation regarding the additional spend requirement on education and other services in the settlement, but it is not used as a proxy for the spending requirement on school meals.

3.4 We report monthly to the Welsh Government on the number of meals provided.

3.5 The data presented below is for the period September 2023 to the end of January 2024.

3.6 On average to date, 66.75% of the meals provided are FSM, and 17% are eFSM meals (83.79% in total), and 15.34% are own food (lunch box).



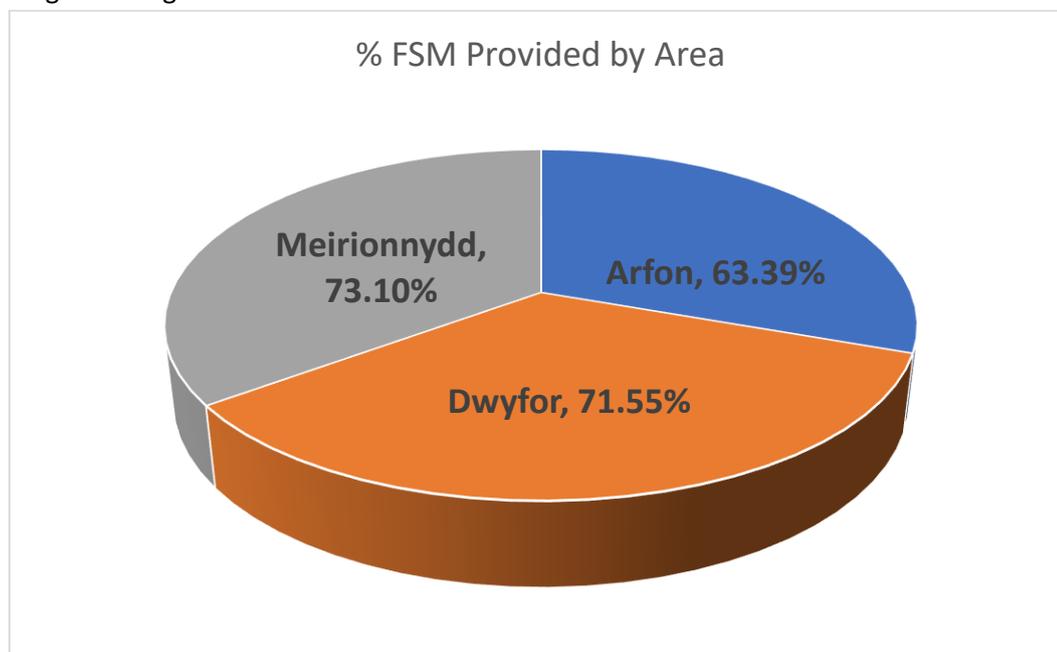
3.7 Prior to the introduction of the Universal Free School Meal Offer there were 1674 children receiving sFSM in our primary schools at the end of the 22-23 school year. The free school meal offer was introduced for all at the start of the 22/23 school year (see 2.8 above).

3.8 The number of children receiving free school meals varies daily, and varies from school to school due to issues such as absences, school trips, training days, and the child's preference for taking school meals some days and packed lunches on other days.

3.9 We gather the numbers of children who receive school meals by sample, on one day of each month. The numbers of children receiving FSM by month are set out below. Over 4000 more children are receiving school meals as a result of this scheme.

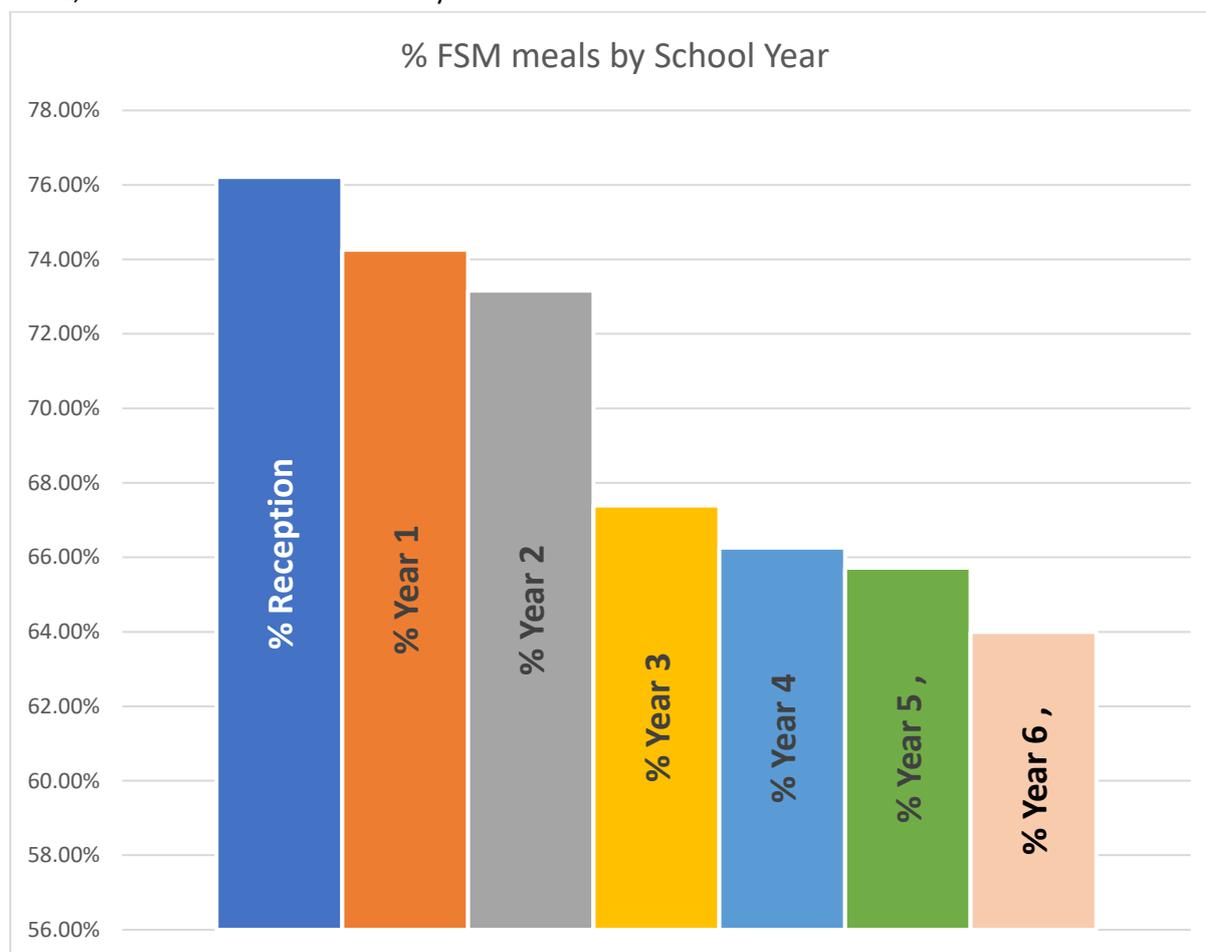
Month	Number of Pupils receiving free School meals on the day	Percentage of pupils receive free School meals on the day
September 2023	5937	78%
October 2023	6169	81%
November 2023	5969	78%
December 2023	5847	76%
January 2024	5806	76%

3.10 Based on the number of meals provided there is a variation in the average uptake across individual schools and areas, as follows :- Arfon has the lowest average with 63% of FSM meals provided, followed by Dwyfor with 71%, and Meirionnydd with the most children taking advantage of the FSM offer at 73%.



3.11 The school with the highest percentage of FSM meals provided, has an average of 96%, and the school with the lowest percentage of FSM meals provided, at 30%.

3.12 Overall, there are higher rates of FSM provided to children in Reception, years 1 and 2, and then the rates reduce in years 5 and 6.



#### 4. LEARNERS' OPINIONS OF SCHOOL DINNERS

4.1 As well as data on the numbers taking up the offer, we also gather information on children's opinions and satisfaction with the provision.

4.2 The school iPad is used and the children are asked to input their opinion through a purposeful app. The data is gathered over the course of a week out of every month so that the children can note their opinion after tasting a variety from the weekly menu. We do not gather the opinions of every school at the same time, we gather data from a sample of schools.

4.3 We ask the school to ensure that only the children complete the questionnaire without input from the teachers, assistants or the kitchen staff.

4.4 Since September 2023 we have had 448 responses, and 78% are satisfied with the choices.

4.5 The app also gives children the opportunity to write comments about the provision, and here are some of the comments we received:

"I like everything there and the way they are cooked"

"Need to mash the potatoes more"

“Want a bigger portion please”

“I like meatballs, thumbs up for the cake and custard”

## **5. LEARNER OUTCOMES SINCE IMPLEMENTING THE FREE SCHOOL MEALS OFFER**

### **Headteachers' Opinions**

- 5.1 The headteachers of all primary schools in Gwynedd were asked for their opinions on learner outcomes since implementing the free school meals scheme for every primary aged pupil. We received 52 responses out of a possible 78 (66%). Many interesting and useful comments were received as possible reasons why some pupils were still choosing not to receive school meals. A breakdown of the questionnaires and a summary of the headteachers' comments can be seen here – [Free School Meals questionnaire data.docx](#)
- 5.2 75% of the headteachers who responded stated that they were of the view that more pupils were eating more healthily since the scheme was implemented, and 23% noted that they did not see a difference. The percentage of pupils who were already having school dinners was high in most of the schools that had indicated that they did not see much difference.
- 5.3 36% of headteachers noted that they thought that the behaviour of the pupils receiving school meals had improved, with 49% stating an improvement in concentration levels, 40% stating an increase in pupils' commitment and 40% noting improved achievement in the afternoons.

## **6. CHALLENGES FOR THE CATERING SERVICE IN PROVIDING THE OFFER**

- 6.1 The biggest challenge for the catering service is having a sufficient workforce across all the schools, which includes a relief workforce for filling in at any school during periods of absences. The Catering and Cleaning Service has faced this challenge since the start of introducing the offer and are still failing to secure an adequate workforce. At the beginning of March there were nine vacant posts across the service as well as a high number of sickness absences.
- 6.2 The Service is currently responding to this by recruiting for posts regularly, attending jobs fairs, advertising jobs on social media, and distributing recruitment posters in community centres, libraries, surgeries and Byw'n lach centres.
- 6.3 From the recruitment that has been undertaken, in some cases we do not manage to attract candidates in some areas (Dwyfor and Meirionnydd).
- 6.4 Feedback from employees suggest that the hours, pay levels, and the increase in responsibilities are proving a barrier to attracting candidates.
- 6.5 Currently we are looking at options for responding to these recruitment challenges, jointly with neighbouring authorities.
- 6.6 Our inability to recruit enough is also contributing to sickness levels in the service. Many of the workers are taking on extra hours to cover the shortage of staff in nearby schools.

- 6.7 Another challenge for the Service is ensuring that the scheme is financially viable. Since the start of the scheme, the Welsh Government has been paying a fee of £2.90 to the Council for every meal that is provided to a child (excluding children of parents on Low incomes).
- 6.8 The Welsh Government have acknowledged that this amount as a "unit price" is low, therefore they have now increased the amount from £2.90 to £3.20. However, the cost of producing a meal before the Free School Meals for All Children scheme began, was around £4.30.
- 6.9 At present, the Council is plugging that gap by making some savings on the basis that an increase in numbers means we can make savings on fixed costs, which reduces the cost per meal, but this is unlikely to fully close the gap.
- 6.10 As food prices and employment costs increase, it is paramount that the "unit price" received from the Welsh Government for the provision increases to a rate that would see the Council receiving a "unit price" that covers the actual cost.
- 6.11 The Education Department with the support of the Finance Team are in continuous discussions with the Welsh Government to review the "unit price".

## **7. RAISING AWARENESS AND PROMOTING THE FREE SCHOOL MEALS OFFER**

- 7.1 Since launching the scheme the Welsh Government has led a national marketing and publicity campaign which started back in June 2022. The Press Team have been supporting this campaign and have been using the resources from the pack to carry out promotion work locally. That campaign has been a public campaign, targeted through the schools.  
[Claim help with school costs | LLYW.CYMRU](#)
- 7.2 In addition, the Family Information Service in the Children's Department have been promoting the offer through the Families Newsletter; and a dedicated section about the offer has been developed on the Council's Costs of Living web-page.
- 7.3 The Council has appointed a temporary post in the Education Department to undertake work with specific schools and localised campaigns.

## **8. NEXT STEPS**

- 8.1 The School Meal Promotion post is now working alongside one of the Council's Well-being Promoters to engage directly with families who are continuing to take a packed lunch rather than take advantage of the free school meal offer. These officers are working with the two schools that have the lowest rates of children receiving free school meals. They will contact the families directly and complete a questionnaire with them.
- 8.2 The initial calls suggest that parents are providing packed lunch for their children due to reasons such as not being aware of the scheme, being uncertain of the food and the menu; and worrying about dietary requirements.
- 8.3 The officers will respond to the findings of their surveys in the school by arranging further discussions with the families; providing information about menus; arranging taster sessions etc.

- 8.4 Supporting a family to take up the offer would give them a saving of around £500 per child annually.
- 8.5 Supporting a child to take up the offer would ensure that the child has their daily nutritional requirement of fat, saturated fat, sodium, carbohydrates, fibre, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, zinc and several others.
- 8.8 Supporting a family to take up the offer would bring further income to the authority of £608 per child per annum, with perhaps only a very low increase in the cost of provision.
- 8.9 The work of increasing the numbers that take up the offer will run concurrently with the ongoing work to recruit a sufficient workforce; gathering information on satisfaction and reviewing the menus; and collaborating the Welsh Government to review the "unit price".

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 The members are asked to accept the content of the report.