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Evaluation of Free Fruit in Schools Initiative

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Evaluation of Free Fruit in Schools Initiative

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Introduction

The national Free Fruit in Schools initiative aims to provide one portion of fruit three times a week during term time to all primary 1 and primary 2 pupils in local authority managed schools. The initiative is an additional measure to the recommendations made by the Expert Panel on School Meals in their Report, *Hungry for Success*. Both initiatives are part of the Scottish Executive's Health Improvement Programme which recommends eating more fruit and vegetables. Improving the uptake of school meals and fresh fruit is also an essential part of supporting those children in most need. The Scottish Executive has provided £2m per year for financial years 2003-04 to 2005-06 to introduce the Free Fruit initiative across all publicly funded schools in Scotland.

The initiative had been implemented in most schools by December 2003 and the 2005 SEED School Meal census showed that almost 100% of primary schools were giving free fresh fruit to P1 and P2 pupils. Only four local authorities did not report full coverage of the initiative within all of their primary schools. The Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) was commissioned by the Schools Group Research team in the Education Department of the Scottish Executive in February 2005 to evaluate the implementation of the Free Fruit in Schools initiative in Scotland.

Aim of the Research

This research was designed as a process evaluation to examine how the initiative had been implemented by Local Authorities and schools.

Research Methods

ScotCen used a mixed methods approach to evaluate the free fruit initiative:

A formative phase which encompassed in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and further qualitative work in pilot schools. This phase helped inform the development of the research instruments for the main study phase:

- (i) semi-structured telephone interviews with 47 local authority professionals able to comment on both the policy context and the operational aspects of the free fruit initiative. Responses were gathered from all of the 32 local authorities in Scotland.
- (ii) questionnaire survey of a representative sample of 510 primary schools addressing all aspects of the implementation of the scheme at a school level. After telephone follow-up, 458 questionnaires were completed, a response rate of 90%.

Responses were received from schools in every local authority in Scotland, with the response ranging from 4 schools in an Island authority to 44 forms in an urban area. Given that the sample was designed to be representative of Scotland, the vast majority of the schools which responded belonged to one of the urban or rural categories – schools in the 'accessible small town/remote small town' categories were less in number reflecting a smaller proportion of schools in these areas. It should be noted that schools based in urban areas were more likely to have high school rolls and high levels of pupil entitlement to free school meals when compared with rural schools.

Where there any existing free fruit schemes and how did the initiative impact on these?

Previous fruit schemes

Respondents in a majority of local authorities (20) reported that fruit and vegetable schemes were already running in their areas before the implementation of the Scottish Executive Free Fruit Initiative. However, these schemes varied widely, from large, well-established programmes in all the primary and nursery schools to the introduction of fruit into school tuck shops or free fruit offered on a limited basis. These findings are supported by responses from schools. 13% of schools reported that schemes similar to the Free Fruit Initiative were in operation before the Scottish Executive scheme was implemented. Schools in about one-third of local authority areas reporting no previous fruit-related schemes. The introduction of the national Free Fruit Initiative affected most of these pre-existing schemes in a number of different ways. For example, fruit was now given to pupils in other primary years, or given on a more frequent basis.

Supply and distribution and of fruit to schools

Respondents in 9 local authority areas said that the school meals service was the supplier of fruit for the initiative, although in four of these areas local suppliers of fruit were also involved. In the majority of areas fruit was supplied by a local fruit or fresh produce wholesaler. A community food initiative and a housing association were involved in supplying fruit in other areas, as were local shops. Some authorities used a combination of suppliers. In nearly all cases the supplier of the fruit also distributed the fruit to schools, although in two areas another organisation was responsible for distribution. In the majority of local authority areas the fruit supplier and distributor were chosen by the local authority alone. In four areas, schools also had some input into the choice of supplier. Three of these were in rural and remote areas, suggesting that these areas required a bit more flexibility in terms of implementing the scheme. In one area it was said that the primary schools alone chose who supplied their fruit.

Where there any differences in the supply of fruit?

In the school survey, there was a difference noted between fruit and vegetable deliveries to urban and rural schools, with 34% of large urban schools compared with 3% of remote rural schools receiving fruit deliveries on at least four days per week. The size of the school roll also seemed to have some impact on school deliveries, with those with low school rolls more likely to receive weekly deliveries, although urban schools tended to have a higher school roll.

A wide range of fruits and vegetables was reported as being distributed in each area. Not unexpectedly, apples, bananas, grapes, melon and oranges were supplied to most schools. However, local authority respondents stated that vegetables including carrots, peppers and celery, and more exotic fruits such as mango and star fruit, were being supplied in a minority of areas. Although there had been initial problems in ascertaining how much fruit to distribute to schools in each area, at the time of the local authority survey almost every respondent perceived that the quantity of fruit delivered to the schools as part of the initiative was at least quite sufficient.

Respondents in almost all of the local authorities expressed that they were at least quite satisfied with the quality of fruit delivered to their schools. In some areas it was said that there had been problems with the quality of fruit initially, but when this was raised with the supplier the problems were quickly resolved. Only a few respondents still perceived that the fruit quality was, or could be, poor. However, respondents from nine areas reported that there could be problems related to the ripeness of the fruit delivered; this was mostly due to fruit being not ripe enough at the time of delivery. Although it was said that some areas were able to save the unripe fruit this was not an option for schools in all areas, presumably in the main because of inadequate storage facilities, and

it had on occasion to be sent back to the supplier. Respondents from several authorities mentioned that, although they were not unhappy with the quality of the fruit they were currently supplied with, they were continually looking at other potential suppliers to see if they could improve on quality.

The respondents were mostly satisfied with the variety of the fruit delivered to schools in their areas. In three authorities some of the respondents felt that the variety of fruit on offer needed to be widened. It was also stated in a few cases that the lack of variety in fruit available was as a result of budget restrictions.

Respondents in the majority of local authorities said that they were at least quite satisfied with the performance of their fruit suppliers, as would be expected given the generally positive views expressed above. There were only two areas where staff stated that they were not satisfied, for example, because of irregular deliveries. Also, some respondents, although they were largely satisfied with their supplier, did want to make changes to the arrangements and planned to do this in the near future. As has been said, in many cases the suppliers of fruit also distributed it to schools and therefore, not surprisingly, the level of satisfaction with the distribution of fruit was similarly high. Respondents from only one area reported that they were not very satisfied with their fruit distributor. Remote schools did pose challenges in some authorities, and arguably island authorities experienced particular problems, but the consensus was that initial distribution difficulties had been resolved.

Almost one-third of schools were very satisfied with the quality of fruit delivered to them, with only 12% of school respondents expressing some form of dissatisfaction. Those responding from remote rural schools were almost twice as likely to be very satisfied with the fruit on offer compared with large urban schools (39% versus 21%). Respondents from urban schools did seem to be more dissatisfied on the whole, which might reflect individual variation within local authority practice or the difficulty of catering for a larger school roll. The minority of school staff members who expressed dissatisfaction added that the fruit was often of variable quality, was often under- or overripe, could arrive at school in a damaged condition and was sometimes of such poor quality that it had to be returned to the suppliers, as was also pointed out in the local authority survey. In relation to the quantity of fruit delivered to schools, informants from only 13 schools thought that they were not being supplied with enough fruit as part of the initiative.

Implementation of the national free fruit initiative in schools

It was reported that the Free Fruit Initiative had been implemented in all primary schools in Scotland, although most recent Scottish Executive figures suggest that all but four local authorities have achieved full coverage, fieldwork for this statistical collection was conducted before the Free Fruit Evaluation took place.¹ Most areas had also implemented the scheme in all of the special schools in their area, and although nursery and secondary schools were outwith the Free Fruit initiative, a quarter of authorities had some form of free fruit provision in nursery schools.

Respondents in two local authority areas said that their primary schools gave free fruit to pupils in every primary year. In six local authority areas all children in schools with a small pupil roll received free fruit. In the majority of local authorities the pupils were given one portion of fruit three times a week, in accordance with the aims of the Scottish Executive initiative, but a few areas distributed free fruit on a daily basis.

¹ See School Meals in Scotland Census, January 2005, available at: (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/06/06172925/29467>)

According to the school survey, only four schools (1%) reported they were not running the initiative, three of these schools had no pupils in the appropriate primary years, the remaining school being a special school. Primary 1 and 2 pupils were indeed the main beneficiaries of the free fruit initiative, as intended. However, 46% of schools gave fruit to primary 3 pupils, with 65% of schools in the low school roll category doing this, presumably because of the influence of composite classes (75% of schools with primary 2 and 3 pupils within the same class offered fruit to both year groups). Over one-quarter of schools distributed free fruit to primary 7 pupils, with a majority of schools in five local authority areas giving free fruit to this year group. About 75% of school respondents reported that the pupils in the relevant years received one free fruit portion on three days of the week, supporting the views of the local authority professionals. However, 29% per cent of schools in the large urban category compared with only 11% of schools in the remote rural category reported giving fruit to pupils on a daily basis, probably reflecting the different approaches adopted by individual local authorities.

Storage, preparation, distribution and consumption of fruit within schools

Who was involved in the preparation and distribution of fruit within schools?

The school survey showed that those most frequently involved in fruit and vegetable distribution within schools were members of catering staff, classroom assistants and primary 1 and 2 teachers. Almost 75% of the sample of schools prepared (as in washed and/or cut up) the fruit and vegetables in the school kitchen. In two-thirds of schools catering staff were involved in preparing the fruit for pupils. However, only 44% of schools in large urban areas had catering staff preparing the fruit and vegetables. Others involved in fruit preparation included classroom assistants, primary 1 and 2 teachers and the fact that fruit came prepared either from the supplier or from other school kitchens. In almost 40% of schools the fruit was cut or packaged in a particular way by suppliers, and in about 59% of schools the school staff also prepared the fruit in such a way (e.g. smaller portions, pick 'n' mix bar) to increase its appeal to pupils.

Those in remote rural schools were much more likely to report storing fruit in refrigerated units compared with respondents in large urban schools (49% vs 25%) – large urban schools were more likely to use boxes and baskets. This might reflect the different deliveries to schools outlined above, with rural schools having to keep fruit for a longer time period before distributing it to the pupils. Eighty percent of schools were reported to have storage facilities that were at least quite adequate, but 25% of schools based in large urban areas said that storage facilities were inadequate. Those who thought that the storage facilities were inadequate tended to say that refrigeration of the fruit was necessary to limit wastage, and certain fruit types were distributed as soon as practicable as they had a greater propensity to decompose. However, many of these schools also said that they managed quite well despite the lack of storage facilities.

Almost one-half of the schools usually gave fruit to the pupils before the morning break. Schools with a large number of pupils were more likely to distribute fruit at this time (61% 'high roll' versus 38% 'low roll'). This might be partly explained by the time of day fruit is supplied to large urban schools which tend to have more pupils, as well as the relative lack of storage facilities in these schools. The next most common time for fruit to be distributed was after lunch, with 35% of respondents reporting that fruit distribution to pupils took place at this time. About one-quarter of schools often gave fruit to pupils during the morning or lunch breaks. Schools reported giving out fruit at different times during the day, presumably to cover different primary years.

Where was fruit consumed?

According to the respondents, over 75% of schools usually had pupils consuming the fruit within the classroom. About 30% of school respondents also thought that the playground was the usual place of fruit consumption. Schools with a high level of school

roll were more likely to allow pupils to eat the fruit in the classroom, and less likely to have pupils eating the free fruit in the dining hall, compared to schools with a low pupil roll. This probably relates to the different distribution patterns within schools described above.

Consumption levels and popularity of fruit types

About 68% of the school respondents reported that over 80% of pupils eligible for free fruit were eating it. In remote rural schools 83% of schools reported this consumption level, as opposed to only 62% of large urban schools. Respondents from only 7 schools perceived that between 21-40% of eligible pupils in their schools consumed the free fruit on offer. Over 90% of school respondents reported that between 0-20% of fruit ended up being discarded as waste. Only two schools reported levels of fruit wastage of over 60%. Again, remote rural and schools with small pupil rolls reported relatively low levels of wastage. A majority of the schools gave any leftover fruit to other pupils within the same school. It was stressed that fruit only ended up as waste occasionally, with fruit being given to those without snacks, for consumption at home, made into fruit "smoothies" and used for compost.

The school respondents said that apples, bananas, grapes, oranges, satsumas, pears, kiwi fruit and melon were most commonly available in primary schools. However, a wide range of fruit and vegetables were reported as being supplied to schools. 89% of respondents reported that they were at least quite satisfied with the variety of fruit provided to schools. However, school respondents in large urban areas were much less likely to be very satisfied with the variety of fruit and vegetables on offer when compared to the remote rural schools (25% versus 58%).

Green grapes, and to a lesser extent red grapes, as well as apples, bananas and melon were perceived as being most popular with the pupils. However, apples and bananas also had relatively high percentages of respondents stating that these were least popular with their pupils. This probably reflects the fact that apples and bananas are supplied more frequently to schools, and therefore may have a higher chance of inclusion in both the best and least popular lists. Strawberries and fruit juices, only available in some localities, were popular and not thought to be disliked by the pupils. On the other hand, cherry tomatoes, oranges, pears and kiwi fruit appeared to be more disliked than liked, according to the informants. On the whole, the perceptions expressed by the school respondents were shared by the local authority professionals.

Perceptions of impact of the free fruit initiative

Almost all (45) of the local authority respondents said that fruit consumption had increased among pupils as a result of the initiative. Only two respondents stated that there was no evidence for such an increase, but in both cases another respondent from the same authority indicated that fruit consumption had increased. Reasons given to support the claim that fruit consumption had increased included the results of formal evaluations in the local schools, feedback received from school staff, parents and pupils, direct observation during school visits and an increased demand for fruit and vegetables from school tuck shops and for school lunches.

Only one local authority respondent thought that the initiative had no place in promoting healthy eating more generally in school pupils. Every other respondent thought that the initiative did have this wider role, the general consensus being that the awareness of fruit and its relationship to healthy eating had increased, pupils who had never tried fruit or were only aware of a limited range of types were enjoying new

What happened to any wastage?

What was the perceived impact of the initiative?

tastes, links with the curriculum and health promoting schools had been forged, and the combined impact with other related initiatives, such as Hungry for Success as a whole, was changing the eating habits of children for the better.

Almost 60% of the school respondents thought that the pupils were now eating more fruit and vegetables as part of their school lunch. The consumption of fruit and vegetables for school lunches was said to have decreased in only six schools. 67% of respondents from high entitlement schools, compared with 54% of those in low entitlement schools, perceived that the pupils were eating more fruit and vegetables at lunchtime. Also, over 40% of respondents thought that pupils were now more likely to bring fruit in to school for lunch or a snack. In addition, in 11% of schools it was reported that sales of fruit from the school tuck shop had increased as a result of the initiative, with only 12 schools reporting a decrease in sales. However, over two-thirds of schools either had no tuck shops or did not sell fruit from tuck shops.

About 88% of schools said that links had been made between the taught curriculum and the free fruit initiative. The links identified included the initiative being mentioned as part of health education topics, environmental studies or personal and social development teaching, as well as being referred to when health projects were being addressed. It was also argued that the initiative was part of the health promoting school ethos and thus the whole school was promoting healthy eating and choices. The scheme, and healthy eating in general, was addressed in subjects as diverse as maths, science or geography.

Almost 90% of school respondents said that schools had not experienced major disruption as a result of implementing and running the free fruit scheme. However, 16% of schools with a high school roll compared with 7% of schools with low pupil numbers did report that the initiative had been quite disruptive. The vast majority of respondents supported the view put forward by the local authority professionals that the initiative might have caused problems in its early phases, but had become bedded in as part of the school routine, and tended to run very smoothly. Some respondents did stress that this was due to the good will of school staff, but that it was a worthwhile initiative and worth the extra effort. Those who had said that the scheme had been disruptive spoke of the time lost in an already overloaded curriculum, as well as the problems in getting staff to prepare and distribute the fruit, and clear up any waste.

The vast majority of school staff members reported that the free fruit scheme had resulted in both overall increased fruit consumption in pupils eligible for the initiative (95% of respondents) and a general improvement in their healthy eating habits (90% of respondents). It was said that many pupils who did not eat fruit were now requesting it, peer pressure resulted in most children eating fruit, there was evidence of healthier snacks being brought into school and an increased awareness of healthy eating as a whole.

Respondents' perceptions of the overall impact of the free fruit initiative are very positive. However, it must be stressed that the views of parents and pupils were not sought as part of the evaluation. The Free Fruit Initiative was implemented alongside Hungry for Success, and it is likely that this and other initiatives have also contributed to the perceived effects. Nevertheless, these positive perceptions elicited in both surveys suggest that the impact of the free fruit initiative has been favourable in terms of the healthy eating practices of pupils more generally.

The future of the free fruit initiative and suggested modifications

Two-thirds of the local authorities rated the free fruit initiative as being very successful, with professionals in seven areas stating that the scheme had been quite successful. In the remaining areas the two respondents gave different opinions, although only one of the 47 respondents said that the initiative had not been successful at all. All of the 47 local authority professionals, including the individual who had expressed more negative views, thought that the free fruit initiative should continue to run in their areas in the future. The fact that the initiative was thought to impact favourably on the diets of young primary school-aged children, and would then have the capacity to produce health benefits for future generations, in combination with other initiatives, was cited. It was stressed that the initiative had been very successful, and should be continued. It was also stated that the initiative was one of the best to be introduced by the Scottish Executive.

A majority of the school respondents (55%) stated that the free fruit initiative had been very successful, with only 3% perceiving that the initiative had not been very successful. Those respondents in schools with a high pupil roll were less likely to say that the initiative had been very successful than those in schools with lower pupil rolls (44% versus 59%), possibly reflecting the greater difficulty and disruption in implementing the scheme in such schools. The 15 schools that perceived the scheme to have been unsuccessful were spread across 11 local authority areas. Almost all of the schools surveyed (99%) wanted the free fruit initiative to continue in the future. Respondents in only five schools, based in different local authorities, reported that the initiative should be stopped, and six other schools were unable to give an opinion. However, it is important to note that almost all schools of different sizes, serving catchment areas from the relatively affluent to the relatively deprived, and from urban to rural settings, wanted the initiative to continue, reflecting the views of the local authority professionals.

The most frequently mentioned change to the running of the free fruit initiative, given its very positive reception among local authority and school-based informants, was to expand the initiative so that children received fruit on 5 days per week and/or pupils in more or all primary years were covered by the scheme. The next most popular proposed change in the school survey was for the variety of fruit and vegetables on offer to children to be increased. About one-quarter of school respondents wanted the storage facilities to be improved and for school staff to be paid for washing and preparing fruit. Again, the fact that most of the requested modifications to the initiative would actually increase its scope emphasises the very positive reaction to the initiative among the local authority and school respondents.

Conclusions

Both local authority professionals and school staff members perceived that the national Free Fruit in Schools initiative had been very successful. Indeed, it was argued that it was one of the most successful initiatives of its kind, and should be continued.

The views of the vast majority of respondents was that the initiative had resulted in an increased consumption of fruit and a improvement in healthy eating practices more generally in pupils attending schools of different sizes, serving catchment areas from the relatively affluent to the relatively deprived, and from urban to rural settings. 90% of school respondents thought that the initiative had brought about an improvement in general eating habits, and almost 60% perceived that pupils were now consuming more fruit and vegetables as part of their school meals.

The most popular suggested modification for the initiative was not for a radical overhaul of its operation, but for its extension to cover more pupils on a more frequent basis.

Similarly, one of the few complaints from a minority of local authority respondents was that the money provided by the Scottish Executive for the initiative was not always adequate, especially in that they wanted to cover more pupil years, or improve other elements of the scheme, such as providing a wider variety of fruit.

A minority of local authority and school respondents held more negative views. It was said that the initiative was disruptive for schools, the fruit supplied to schools was not always of the highest quality, the storage facilities within schools were not always adequate and school staff should be paid to compensate them for preparing and distributing the fruit. However, the overwhelming consensus was that problems were more common in the early phase of the initiative, and that once these difficulties were addressed a routine had been established which allowed the smooth operation of the scheme. In addition, it was also emphasised that such minor difficulties were a price worth paying as the benefits of the initiative far outweighed any negative features. It should be noted that not one local authority respondent thought that the initiative should not continue, and only 5 schools (1%) called for the end of the initiative.

It is important to note that the research only sought the perceptions of local authority and school-based staff, and did not gather the views of pupils and parents or carers. In addition, it was at times difficult to separate the potential impact due to the free fruit initiative and wider policy initiatives, such as Hungry for Success. A minority of respondents argued that the positive effects they had observed were due to a number of factors, and not just the free fruit initiative. Again, though, the broad consensus was that the free fruit initiative had been very successful, and many respondents perceived that the positive impact they observed in relation to the eating behaviour of the pupils was due in no small measure to the initiative alone.

It is clear that no major modifications to the running of the free fruit initiative are necessary. However, the changes suggested by the respondents tended to call for an expansion of the initiative. Therefore, the provision of free fruit to all or more primary years, or the provision of fruit on a more frequent basis, would be supported by a majority of respondents in this study. Obviously most of the suggested changes would have significant cost implications to the Scottish Executive. The evaluation demonstrates, though, that the Free Fruit initiative has been very favourably received by local authority and school staff, it has been thought to be responsible for increasing fruit consumption and encouraging the adoption of more healthy eating practices in children living in communities of different socioeconomic status across Scotland and is valued very highly at both the local authority and school level alike.

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A full web only report accompanies this Insight summary.

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