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Cllr Anntionette Bramble,
Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Education,
Young People and Children's Social Care

Dear Antionette,

Childhood Food Poverty and Free School Meals

At its meeting on 31st October 2022, the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission reviewed childhood food poverty and the role that schools play in supporting children and families in need. In particular, the Commission focused on:

- Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement and how Hackney Education and local schools promote and support uptake;
- The provision of Breakfast Clubs in schools and how these targeted and supported children and families in need;
- How schools connect to and work with wider food poverty programmes and networks to support children and families.

As well as hearing from the officers from Hackney Education, four head teachers from local primary and secondary schools spoke to the Commission about food poverty and their experiences developing access to FSM in their respective schools. In addition, ahead of the meeting, members of the Commission visited a further secondary and three primary schools to discuss FSM arrangements and also met with officers from a local youth food project. A [video](#) recording together with the [minutes](#) of the meeting provide a detailed public account of proceedings.

The Commission welcomes the establishment of the task force to help bring together schools and other local stakeholders to further support the role of schools in tackling childhood poverty. The Commission hopes that the key learning and outcomes from its work, which are summarised below, will guide and inform the work of the task force and further support the work of schools to extend FSM provision and tackle childhood food poverty across Hackney.

Rising levels of need and food insecurity

Rising numbers of children eligible for FSM is a clear indicator of the level of poverty and food insecurity within the local community. FSM eligibility in Hackney has grown

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significantly over the past 5 years where the proportion of children in state funded education eligible for FSM has risen from 27.7% in 2017/18 to 38.8% in 2021/22. These most recent figures indicate that over 13,300 local children are now entitled to free daily lunchtime meals in school. The rate of FSM eligibility in Hackney is also far higher than both national (22.5%) and regional (24.6%) averages, and is the 7th highest among all English local authorities.

A FSM eligibility rate of 38.8% for Hackney as a whole masks wide variations of eligibility among local schools and other educational settings. The Commission's research noted that:

- Among primary schools FSM eligibility ranged from 6% through to 68%, and in 14 schools the FSM eligibility rate was 50% or higher;
- Among secondary schools FSM eligibility ranged from 3% to 68% and in 11 of the 17 local schools was 40% or higher;
- In local special schools and the PRU, 63% and 47% of children were respectively entitled to FSM.¹

FSM Eligibility

School meals are provided free of charge to *all* children in years 1 and 2 in state funded primary education. Pupils are entitled to FSM beyond years 1 and 2 if their parents meet the [set eligibility criteria](#), which is now predominantly centred upon Universal Credit entitlement with an income threshold £7,400 per annum.

From visiting local schools, it was apparent to the Commission that the relatively low income eligibility threshold for FSM qualification meant that a significant number of local families who were struggling financially but who nonetheless did not qualify for FSM. All the schools the Commission visited or heard from noted that a significant number of such parents struggled to find money to pay for school meals (on average between £10-11 per week) and sometimes got into arrears with payments and in some cases debts had been accrued. Whilst it was emphasised that no children were denied access to school meals where there were outstanding debts, schools had to devote increasing amounts of administrative time and resources to review, monitor and collect outstanding monies.

Universal FSM provision in schools

Through its work the Commission noted that in response to high levels of needs, a number of local schools across both primary and secondary settings had developed a universal offer of FSM to all pupils within their school. Universal FSM provision was closely associated with the numbers of children who were already entitled to FSM, as the costs of extending FSM provision decreased where rates of FSM were higher.

¹ It is noted that all children attending the PRU and other alternative provision settings are provided with a free lunchtime meal.

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Financial data provided by two primary schools where FSM eligibility was between 50-60% indicated that the cost of extending FSM to all pupils at these schools ranged from £17,000-£20,000 per annum.

Whilst the cost of extending FSM to all pupils was clearly not an insubstantial sum, schools noted that this was more relatively more achievable within school budgets than had been anticipated. In addition, when the wider benefits were factored in the provision of universal free school meals represented a provided a number of significant benefits for this investment, which included:

- It reduced stigma and ensured that access to food and nutrition was not seen as a barrier to pupil engagement and learning;
- It was central to a wider wraparound offer to support families in need which included additional help through breakfast clubs and after-school provision;
- It provided help to struggling and in need families but who were above income thresholds for FSM entitlement;
- It enabled schools to shift resources from administrating the FSM system (collecting monies and chasing up arrears) to supporting parents to apply for FSM (and thereby reduce costs to the school).

There are two key points to note from the experiences of schools in developing a universal free school meal offer. Firstly, a number of schools the Commission consulted were located on the border with neighbouring boroughs (Islington and Tower Hamlets) and because both of which have a universal FSM offer to all primary school aged children this contributed to cross border flows of pupils. Therefore in some of these schools, a move to a universal FSM offer was seen to be integral to a wider school strategy to help maintain school rolls by ensuring that their pupil and family support offer remained attractive to parents (compared to schools in neighbouring boroughs). How the local authority supports such similarly located schools should not be overlooked in relation to school admissions processes and wider School Estates Strategy.

Secondly, those schools that operated a universal FSM scheme were able to divert time and resources away from administration (i.e. collecting monies) to a more active approach to helping parents to apply for FSM. Teachers that the Commission spoke to were firmly of the view that such a proactive approach, which positively supported parents to apply for FSM, was effective in increasing applications and uptake which in turn helped reduce costs for universal provision. This learning may have wider implications for the authority when considering proactive approaches to increase FSM eligibility and uptake across Hackney.

Through the course of this brief enquiry, it was apparent that universal FSM provision within local schools was more extensive than previously understood by the Commission and by the local authority. There is clearly much to be learnt from the

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experiences of these schools, and it is hoped that the work of the task force will provide an opportunity for local schools not only to share good practice, but also help to support collaboration across the sector in extending FSM provision to local children and families.

FSM eligibility and Pupil Premium

Pupil Premium funding is provided centrally to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and is triggered by a child's eligibility for FSM. In this scheme, schools receive an annual Pupil Premium payment of £1,385 for primary school aged children and £985 for secondary school aged children. Therefore, ensuring that children and families who are entitled to FSM are encouraged to apply is not only important to ensure that children have access to healthy and nutritious food each day, it can also provide an important contribution to school budgets through Pupil Premium funding.

The financial contribution of Pupil Premium funding (through FSM eligibility) has for the local education sector is significant. Based on the current number of pupils eligible for FSM in Hackney (13,352), local primary schools benefit to the value of an additional £9.7m of funding through the Pupil Premium funding and secondary schools a further £6.2m. Given the scale of such contributions to local education, there is clearly a need for a more strategic view of FSM eligibility and the need to share learning across the sector on those strategies which are effective in supporting parental applications and uptake.

Increasing FSM uptake within the Orthodox Jewish Community

The Commission's work also highlighted concerns around accessibility and uptake of FSM within the Orthodox Jewish community in Hackney. Local data indicates that FSM eligibility in maintained Orthodox Jewish schools was approximately 6% compared to a borough wide average of 38%. On the assumption that parents within the orthodox Jewish community are likely to be experiencing similar levels of food poverty and insecurity as the broader Hackney population, this would suggest that there may be specific barriers to the uptake of FSM and that children from this community may be missing out on possible entitlements.

Further still, most children from the Orthodox Jewish community will miss out on any form of state subsidised meals (regardless of their eligibility) as overwhelmingly they attend schools within the independent sector where FSM is unavailable.

Understanding this and the low uptake of FSM in the maintained school sector, it is clear that further engagement is needed with local Orthodox Jewish schools and community leaders to further understand the barriers to FSM uptake and to ensure that local food poverty networks and programmes continue to connect to and reach into the Orthodox Jewish Community.

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Catering Framework and support to schools

Although there was insufficient support for the continuation of the catering framework hosted by Hackney Education, among the schools the Commission spoke to it was apparent that there was still an appetite for other collaborative arrangements to support the effective and cost efficient delivery of school meals in Hackney both in term-time and through the holiday period.

Participating schools were keen to develop more collaborative ways of working to help reduce costs associated with school meal provision, in particular the sourcing and purchase of seasonal produce and foodstuffs. In this respect, it was noted that it could be helpful for local schools to have access to a digital platform to help source and bulk-buy produce to help to reduce costs. It was noted here, that a local school food charity, [Chefs in School](#), supports a similar such initiative to participating schools.

The Commission also noted that schools were also collaborating in other ways to share and extend resources across the local education system and the wider community. In one example, a school kitchen opened to prepare hot meals for children attending holiday schemes, not just for their school but for their wider federation of schools. Another example noted how another school kitchen was used to support community food education and food distribution programmes. These examples highlight the importance of having up-to-date school kitchen facilities which can potentially act as a hub for extended school meal provision and wider connection to and support for local food programmes. In this context, Hackney Education may wish to consider how local capital programmes can support the updating of (maintained) school kitchens, especially as this was raised as a potential barrier by a local headteacher.

Diet and Nutrition of School Meals

School meals are required to meet nationally agreed [standards](#) to ensure that children are provided with lunchtime meals which are balanced (in terms of starches and proteins) and nutritious. Whilst the local authority (and partners) clearly has an interest in ensuring that schools meet school food standards (diet and general well being) and has the relevant corporate experience to be able to support this (e.g. Public Health, Food Hygiene) it nonetheless has no responsibility in this matter. Accountability of nutritional standards of school meals is now devolved to local school governing bodies, and many schools now independently commissioned independent assessments to support this.

The Commission also noted the positive relationships that a number of schools had developed with not-for-profit organisations (again, such as Chefs in Schools) to support compliance to nutritional standards. Not only did these organisations provide the expertise to ensure that school food was nutritious, balanced and complied with

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national standards, they also supported schools to positively engage with children and their families to ensure that that menu development resulted in meals which were attractive and desirable to children themselves.

Schools which spoke to the Commission also noted the importance of school meal provision as a healthy and balanced alternative to packed lunches. A number of head teachers had growing concerns around lunches prepared by parents not only in terms of sufficiency, but in the healthiness and range of foodstuffs provided. Teachers noted the regular inclusion of some foodstuffs (e.g. pizza, chocolate bars) which were not only unhealthy but also contributed to excessively high energy levels which impacted on engagement and learning. Teachers, however, understood the financial pressures that parents were under, and were aware that a packed lunch might still be considerably cheaper than paying for school meals. To a number of schools therefore, this further underlined the need to move a universal FSM offer not only to extend access but also to help improve diet and nutrition.

Whilst the local authority may no longer have a direct role in overseeing food standards in schools specifically, there are other arms of local government which have a clear interest such as public health and food hygiene. The Commission hopes that such departments are involved to help identify additional ways in which schools can be supported in improving and maintaining the quality of school meal provision.

Breakfast Club Provision

Through its investigation the Commission noted that most schools offer some form of breakfast club provision, though the scale, nature and focus of such clubs varied widely among local schools. Therefore, whilst some schools targeted support to vulnerable children and families other schools had a more extensive school-wide offer. For a number of schools, breakfast club provision was seen as integral to the schools wraparound support offer for pupils, with additional play, learning and mentoring support also taking place alongside the provision of breakfast.

Schools that contributed to our work noted the importance of support they received from not-for-profit organisations in the delivery of their breakfast clubs, such as [Magic Breakfast](#), who not only provided access to free or low cost breakfast foodstuffs (bagels, cereals, porridge, beans), but also supported access to wider regional food distribution programmes.

Given the increasing numbers of children who were reported to be accessing school without having had breakfast and hungry, schools emphasised the positive impact that breakfast clubs had on pupil engagement in subsequent lessons and classes. Equally important however, schools noted that the earlier start to the school day allowed by breakfast clubs was of great value to working parents or those parents

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whose children attended different schools. In this context, it is important to emphasise the role of Breakfast clubs play in the wraparound care and support of children.

Again, comparatively little is known about the extent and nature of school breakfast clubs in Hackney; which children these support, what activities take place and how these are financially supported within school budgets. It is hoped that the work of the task force will provide an opportunity to also share learning and understanding to help develop and extend breakfast club provision locally.

Schools connections to local food programmes and networks

Given the scale of local needs schools cannot respond to food poverty issues alone, and where appropriate should engage with broader food programmes and networks to support children and families. During the Commission's visits to local schools and from the testimonies of head teachers, it was apparent that many (if not all) devote some considerable time to engage with philanthropic organisations to source free or discounted meals and food to support children and families in need. The Commission heard about a number of really positive associations that schools had developed with local and regional charities which supplied ready made meals and foodstuffs which the school could then distribute to local families in need.

These charitable donations are greatly valued by local schools and undoubtedly provide much needed assistance to local children and families experiencing food insecurity. The Commission did note however, that such provision varied from school to school and primarily depended on the individual contacts and relationships that teaching staff, governors and PTA's were able to develop with potential benefactors and donors. As such, the nature and volume of charitable donations for local families through schools varied significantly across schools.

Members of the Commission also spoke to a local food charity which worked with young people, often supplying them with after school meals and food parcels for their parents. From the discussions the Commission had with this organisation and from visits to neighbouring schools, it was apparent that schools connections to wider food programmes and networks may be underdeveloped. Based on what the Commission heard in this brief review, the Commission felt that the connection of schools to local food networks and programmes could be improved, a point which was illustrated by the fact that schools (head teachers) are unable to refer families in need to the local food bank network. Given the special insight that schools have into the needs of local children and families, the Commission hopes that the work of the childhood food poverty task force will assess how schools are engaged and involved in local food programmes and networks as part of a Hackney wide response to addressing food poverty.

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Household Support Grant and Holiday Activity Fund

Finally, participating schools noted the importance of additional food provided through both the *Household Support Grant (HSG)* and *Holiday Activity Fund* in supporting children and families in need. The Household Support fund is administered by the Council provisioning £2.8m of support to local families needing help with food, energy, clothing and housing. This scheme includes the distribution of supermarket vouchers to those local children who are entitled to FSM, and local schools spoke very highly and positively about this scheme as it gave families the opportunity to prioritise and plan their own purchases (as opposed to charitable donations). The Commission notes that with the government intending to continue funding for the HSG into 2023 to the value of £1billion, it is hoped that the local voucher scheme can be similarly continued.

The *Holiday Activity Fund* was also similarly valued by local schools, as this provided additional help to vulnerable and in need families over the school holiday periods. As well as play and learning based activities, this scheme provided funding to support meal provision to participating pupils which was greatly valued by schools. Holiday schemes helped to keep children engaged with the school and ensured that children in need continued to have access to free meal provision over the holiday period when other sources of help were more limited.

From its brief work on this policy area, the Commission was greatly impressed by the range of support that schools were providing to children and families in need which included universal FSM provision, breakfast clubs, after school clubs as well as more opportunistic arrangements for the distribution of charitable donations of food to local families. From this work the Commission can conclude that there is a wealth of experiences and knowledge in the local community to address food poverty and insecurity, not only in our schools but in our local voluntary and not-for-profit sector and council supported programmes. The Commission hopes that the work of the food poverty task force will harness the experience and knowledge of schools and other interested local stakeholders to develop and improve our ongoing support to children and families in need across Hackney.

Yours faithfully

Cllr Sophie Conway

Chair, Children and Young People Scrutiny
Commission

Cllr Margaret Gordon

Vice Chair, Children and Young People
Scrutiny Commission

Cc:

- Jacquie Burke, Group Director Children and Education
- Paul Senior, Director of Education and Inclusion
- Ben Bradley, Head of Mayor and Cabinet Office