

Newham Council – proposal to alter Eat for Free consultation document

Definitions

Benefits related Free School Meals (FSM) – central government provides funding for all state funded schools to offer free school meals to pupils who meet the Government's benefits-related eligibility criteria, from Reception to Year 11. Free School Meals are not affected by any of the proposals in this consultation.

Eat for Free (EFF) – Newham council provides funding for all state funded schools to offer free meals to Key Stage 2 aged children (Year 3 – Year 6) pupils who are not entitled to benefits-related Free School Meals.

Introduction – Newham's budget challenge

1. During the past decade, Newham has lost around £250m from its budget due to government cuts, increasing costs of – and demand for – services, and now the impact of Covid-19.
2. The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on Newham Council's finances, with a forecast cost of approximately £75million. The Government has failed to fulfil the commitment it made to ensuring local authorities would not be left out of pocket.
3. While we remain committed to spending our resources in the best way to support local communities, the scale of funding cuts we face leaves us forced to make very difficult decisions in order to deliver a balanced budget. The council is considering whether to alter the Eat for Free scheme with the aim of achieving a saving of up to £1.9 million, whilst ensuring that support continues to be provided to families at this challenging time.
4. We want to hear your views through this consultation before decisions are made on the council's budget. Any changes to Eat for Free would be made no earlier than September 2021.
5. We are also engaging with residents on a range of other budget proposals for 2021/22 before decisions are made in February 2021. The proposals can be viewed [here](#) and we want to hear your views.

Background information - public health and food poverty

6. Food Poverty is a major issue in Newham and the number of families experiencing financial difficulties has increased significantly and is likely to continue to increase as economic conditions worsen. Alongside Eat For Free, the council delivers the following work to support children and families experiencing food poverty:
 - Working in partnership with the voluntary, community and faith sector, through the Well Newham programme, the council supports the [Newham Food Alliance](#) - a network of over 30 community food banks and hubs providing direct food support to those who need it. By early December 2020, 230,000 parcels of support had been distributed by #HelpNewham and the Newham Food Alliance together. #HelpNewham has reached 8,000 households.
 - A supermarket vouchers and emergency loans scheme that supports those with food, fuel and essentials. This programme has been expanded as part of the council's ongoing Covid relief programme.
7. The council recently launched *50 Steps to a Healthier Newham*, our health and wellbeing strategy, which sets out the main ways in which we will support people to lead healthier lifestyles and stay healthy for longer. The Eat For Free grant currently delivers an impact across several steps in the plan including:
 - Step 8 - Enable schools, youth zones and other young people settings to be health promoting environments.
 - Step 11 - Support children and families in Newham to maintain healthy weight
 - Step 26 - Positively Shaping Food Culture In The Borough
 - Step 27 - Tackling Food Poverty
 - Step 49 - Maximise the reach of the London Living Wage in the borough

Background information - the Eat for Free scheme

8. Currently, all primary age pupils attending schools in Newham receive free meals from Years Reception to 6. Nationally, all pupils in Years Reception, 1 and 2 receive free meals. Ensuring that all Years 3 – 6 pupils receive free meals, regardless of their family income or entitlement to certain benefits, is known as Eat for Free.
9. Providing free meals to pupils in Years 3 to 6 is a discretionary service which means we are not required by law to provide it, and we are one of only four local authorities to offer a similar scheme. It costs the council around £6 million per year. Just under 14,000 children are currently eligible for Eat for Free.

10. The scheme was originally introduced in Newham by the Department for Education in 2009. In 2012 the council decided to fund the scheme, as we acknowledged there were a significant number of families living in poverty, but who did not qualify for benefits related Free School Meals, which are funded by government. Around three in ten of children in Newham are currently eligible for benefits related (statutory) Free School Meals, which would not be affected by any of the proposals in this consultation.
11. During the previous political administration in Newham, the approach to funding Eat for Free meant that, over time, schools picked up part of the cost of the meals without this arrangement being fully transparent. In 2017 the Council took the decision to increase funding to Eat for Free to address this issue.
12. The Eat for Free scheme delivers a range of benefits:
 - High take up of school meals at Years 3 to 6 in primary school (around 90%) compared to take up in boroughs without a similar scheme of around 60%. This high take up brings the direct health benefits of more children getting a healthier meal and educational benefits to children's learning. These benefits were evidenced in a study undertaken by the Institute of Education in 2009¹.
 - Economic benefits to the local economy through an increase in primary school meal uptake rate in schools, which creates additional catering jobs in the borough. Juniper Ventures, a local authority trading company, supplies almost 75% of Newham primary schools and is the fifth largest employer in Newham, with 86% of its employees residing in borough.
 - A grant funding condition which requires all participating schools to contract only with caterers who will pay all their staff the London Living Wage and offer Local Government Pensions (or equivalent).
13. Cabinet members are currently working with backbench councillors, as part of a working group, to review the Eat for Free scheme as part of a budget consultation process which is underway.

Proposals

14. We are running this consultation to understand more about the potential impact of making changes to Eat for Free in order to reduce the cost to the council, and we would like to hear a wide range of views about two different options. This includes

¹DfE, 2011, Evaluation of the Free School Meals Pilot,
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf

hearing from parents, residents, schools, other organisations who work with children in Newham, and anyone else who has an interest in this area.

15. Note that any changes we propose or make to the scheme will not affect:

- A child’s eligibility/receipt of a benefits related Free School Meal.
- Any national or local initiatives designed to address issues of ‘Holiday Hunger’ provision of support outside of school term-time which may be targeted for specific groups of children.

16. The total cost of a primary school meal offered by Juniper Ventures in financial year 2021/22 is expected to be around £2.42, which is the price necessary to ensure that catering staff can be paid the London Living Wage, and ensure food is nutritionally balanced.

17. These are the two proposals we have been considering:

A. Parents make a contribution towards the cost of meals

This would only apply to pupils in Years 3 to 6 who are not eligible for benefits related Free School Meals.

Pupils who are not eligible for benefits related Free School Meals would pay part of the cost of the school meal, and the council would pay the remainder of the cost.

The money that could be saved would depend on how much parents were charged:

- If parents were charged £0.60 per meal this would save us around £1.3million annually
- If parents were charged £1 per meal this would save us around £2.3million annually
- If parents were charged £1.42 per meal this would save us around £3.2million annually

Parent cost	Council cost	Saving to Council	Cost to parent per child, per year
£0.60	£1.82	£1.3m	£114.00
£1.00	£1.42	£2.3m	£190.00
£1.42	£1.00	£3.2m	£269.80

B. Exclude children who do not live in Newham

Eat for Free is funded by residents who live in Newham and pay Council Tax in Newham. This proposal would mean that children in Years 3 to 6 that do not live in Newham would have to pay for school meals, unless they are eligible for benefits related Free School Meals. This currently applies to around 650 pupils and would save around £300,000 annually.

In order to achieve the saving target of £1.9million we could decide to combine options A and B.

18. Please note that both options A and B would require primary schools to introduce systems to charge some parents for part or all of the cost of meals. If the proposals are agreed, the council would work with schools to support them in developing charging systems.

Take part in the consultation

We want to know what you think about these proposals. Please fill in the online survey: <https://wh1.snapsurveys.com/s.asp?k=160759369313>

The survey will be open until **Sunday 17th January 2021**.

Paper copies of the survey are available in libraries.

You can send any questions or comments to EatForFree>Returns@newham.gov.uk. Please note this inbox won't be monitored between 25th December and 4th January.