

City Intelligence analysis of Arbor meals data 2023-24

December 2024

Introduction

Collection of take up data from the GLA

Data is not routinely collected by the GLA on the take-up of meals offered through the London scheme. This decision was taken because it was felt to be too great an additional burden for schools in the context of a rapid roll out.

Instead, GLA have sought to understand levels of take-up through a number of different sources (see annex for details). This has included work with the management information systems (MIS) provider Arbor, insights gathered through discussions with boroughs and where schools have claimed funding over the initial 90% allocations. These sources have shown a range of uptake levels, from around 58% up to 100%.

Arbor Data

[Arbor](#) provides Management Information Systems (MIS) to over 6,000 schools across the country. They kindly offered to provide data from the schools they support in London, so that the GLA can gain a picture of what [Universal Primary Free School Meals \(UFSM\)](#) 'uptake' levels are, and how it may differ for different groups of pupils and areas.

Arbor agreed to share their anonymised data with the GLA at no cost and developed a dashboard for GLA, as pro-bono work. Restricted access to the data is granted through Arbor's [secure website](#), which allows City Intelligence at the GLA to analyse the data and relay the insights. The data sharing agreement set up between the two organisations places restrictions on the data that is able to be accessed and published i.e. only the aggregated, anonymised data and never any data on names, students or schools.

Though the GLA did attempt to obtain meals data from other school MIS providers, no other providers shared meals data with the GLA in 2023-24, due to issues like their own respective data sharing agreements with their school customers. School composition

Arbor provides MIS to around 13% of primary schools in London. There were 1,801 primary schools in London in 2022-23 ([most recent data](#)).

This corresponds to 259 schools in Arbor's school sample in the Summer term 2023-24 that utilise the Meals module fully. There are a total of 49,003 pupils in Arbor's school sample in the Summer term 2023-24 (covering Years 3 to 6). This is 11% of the [total school population in Year 3 to 6 \(388,605\)](#).

Methodology

Most of the analysis performed was on London-wide data i.e. all schools in Arbor's data in London, across Years 3 to 6. The key metric analysed was 'uptake', defined as:

% meals taken by Mayor funded pupils

This is the proportion of the Mayor funded meals that have been taken by pupils who are not eligible for FSM. Pupils eligible for FSM would be funded by the government, not through the Mayor's scheme. City Intelligence also carried out analysis of uptake by FSM-eligible pupils, which is outlined later in this note.

The analysis focuses on average uptake throughout the first three terms of the 2023-24 academic year and the full academic year 2023-24:

- Autumn term: 4 September 2023 to 21 December 2023
- Spring term: 8 January 2024 to 28 March 2024
- Summer term: 15 April 2024 to 24 July 2024
- Full academic year 2023-24: 4 September 2023 to 24 July 2024

It should be noted that the analysis uses term dates based on City Intelligence judgement and what was believed that most schools in London used in 2023-24. Local authorities set their own term dates, and they may differ from the dates used in this report.

Averages are determined by the number of meals offered by the school to Mayor funded eligible pupils over each term.

As Arbor's data shows the number of meals taken by pupils in the schools they support with different characteristics, uptake was analysed among these different groups, namely gender, SEN status, ethnicity, religion, year group and dietary requirement, where numbers allowed.

Caveats

The insights in this report are based on Arbor's data only, which is only around 13% of the number of schools delivering UFSM in London, so only provides a partial picture.

Furthermore, there are three boroughs where there is no data from Arbor: City of London, Hillingdon and Ealing.

For data protection purposes, Arbor suppressed data on individual characteristics if the pupil count is less than 10. This means that some students may be missed from the analysis.

Finally, it is not known whether pupils in schools using Arbor’s MIS are systematically different from pupils in schools using other MIS, so it is difficult to say whether Arbor’s data is representative of all schools delivering UFSM in London. However, City Intelligence analysis comparing some key characteristics in the Arbor school sample against all London primary schools in July 2023, suggested that the Arbor school sample was similar to London primary schools on some key metrics.

Results

1. Proportion of meals taken by Mayor funded pupils (not eligible for FSM)

Across all boroughs in London in the Arbor sample, the uptake of meals by Mayor funded pupils in the Summer term was 90.0%, marginally greater than the Autumn and Spring term uptakes of 87.9% and 89.3% respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Proportion of meals taken by Mayor funded pupils, 2023-24

Term	Number of schools	Total students	Uptake by Mayor funded pupils
Autumn 23-24	215	41,560	87.9%
Spring 23-24	234	43,976	89.3%
Summer 23-24	259	49,003	90.0%
Academic year 23-24	262	51,861	89.1%

When excluding the five boroughs offering UFSM prior to 2023-24 (Islington, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, and Westminster), the uptake of meals by Mayor funded pupils in Summer term drops slightly to 88.6%.

Looking at the full academic year 2023-24 the uptake was on average 89.1%. Uptake has increased from Autumn to Summer term 2023-24.

The uptake estimate of 89.1% is based on the Arbor dataset, which may not be fully representative of all schools delivering UFSM in London, as mentioned earlier. In order to estimate uptake across all schools delivering UFSM in London, City Intelligence has taken this figure and applied a conservative judgment, taking into account this uncertainty, to say that uptake has consistently been above 85%.

2. Proportion of meals taken by Mayor funded pupils, with different characteristics

Analysis of uptake for different groups of pupils was conducted on Summer term’s data only. In the Summer term 2023-24, it was seen that:

- Uptake decreases in higher year groups (Year 6 compared with Year 3);
- Uptake was lower among pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), compared with pupils without SEND;
- Uptake was higher among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic pupils, compared with White pupils; and
- Uptake was lowest among those with no religion, compared with pupils who declared having a religion.

Uptake has increased marginally across all groups (year groups, gender, SEND status, ethnicity) from Autumn to Summer term.

3. Proportion of meals taken by central government funded pupils (FSM eligible)

Arbor's data also covered the period when the UFSM programme was not in place, so there is data from the 2022-23 academic year on meal uptake. Using this data, City Intelligence was able to see any changes in uptake among government funded pupils i.e. those eligible for FSM.

Amongst FSM eligible pupils, meal uptake has increased. In Autumn 2022-23 (the academic year prior to the Mayor's scheme) meal uptake was 88%. Over one year later in the Spring term 2023-24 uptake is 94%. Greater uptake is seen across all year groups in 2023-24 compared to 2022-23. This shows the wider positive impact of the universal offer.

Annex

Borough engagement on take-up

The GLA invited all boroughs to three review meetings in the first year of the policy to monitor implementation and support them with rollout. These meetings were conducted by a member of the GLA UFSM team with borough officers. Each borough review meeting followed a script, where questions were asked on implementation challenges and successes. As part of this review process, in the Spring 2024 meetings, boroughs were asked to share their uptake levels, where known. 16 boroughs shared details on their uptake levels, ranging between 58 – 93%. There was not a single approach to collecting uptake data by boroughs and not all had a system in place that they could report on.

School claims for top-up funding

Funding for meals was allocated to boroughs based on 90% take-up. To ensure that no school was out of pocket, the GLA asked schools who wished to claim additional funds to provide snapshot data on school meal uptake at two points in 2024. The GLA received top-up claims from 12% of all London state primary schools (N=236) in the first year of the programme. The take-up reported by schools which did claim ranged from 91% to 100%.

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