



Child Poverty and Free School Meals

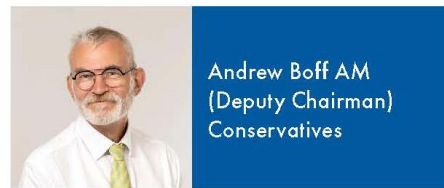
Economy Committee

LONDON ASSEMBLY

Economy Committee



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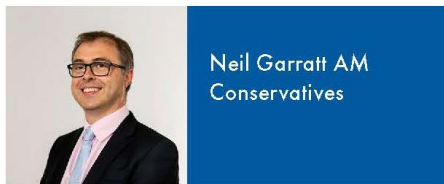
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Foreword



Marina Ahmad AM
Chair of the Economy Committee

London is one of the wealthiest cities in the world. It is therefore shocking that a third of children in the capital grow up in poverty.

Rising inflation, and in particular the increasing costs of household essentials such as food and energy bills, have made it even harder for many Londoners to make ends meet. There is increased media and political attention to financial hardship and the ‘cost-of-living crisis’. But for the poorest families in the capital, this is not a new phenomenon. Sadly, many Londoners have struggled to feed and clothe their children and heat their homes for years.

The drivers of child poverty are varied and complex. The Committee heard that low pay and insecure work, the benefits system and the high cost of housing in London all play their part. In this context, there are limits to what role the Mayor of London and local authorities can play to fundamentally transform the situation. But there is crucial action that the Mayor can take which is reflected in the Committee’s recommendations, such as continuing to promote the London Living Wage and Living Hours, and developing a child poverty strategy for London, which addresses the causes and not just the symptoms of child poverty.

As part of our investigation, the Economy Committee explored the policy of free school meals, including carrying out scrutiny of the Mayor’s programme of universal free school meals for primary school children. Free school meals are vital levers in alleviating the impact of child poverty, and have been shown to have wide-ranging benefits for children and families. It is clear that the Mayor’s programme has been well-received by schools, parents and children. But whilst this programme is welcome, London needs a long-term funding settlement for universal free school meals to ensure that every child has a hot, nutritious meal every day at school, regardless of their family circumstances. This is essential for addressing the scourge of child poverty in London.

Executive summary

As part of its 2023–24 work programme, the Economy Committee agreed to carry out an investigation into child poverty and free school meals in London. The Committee set out to investigate the scale and causes of child poverty in London; how it differs across London; which groups are disproportionately impacted; and the impact of growing up in poverty on children in London. It also set out to understand the role of free school meals in supporting children living in poverty. This included a focus on the impact of the Mayor’s new universal free school meals programme for 2023–24 to date, and how the GLA has worked with schools and local authorities to implement the programme.

As part of the investigation, the Committee held two meetings in City Hall. The first was held on 17 October 2023, which coincided with London Challenge Poverty Week, and explored the drivers, scale and impact of child poverty in London. The second meeting was held on 9 November 2023, and focused specifically on free school meals, including the Mayor’s programme for 2023–24.

The Committee reached several key findings as part of our investigation, which are summarised below:

- London is one of the wealthiest cities in the world. But a third of children in the capital grow up in poverty, and parts of London have some of the highest child poverty rates in the country.
- Data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) suggests that child poverty rates in London have fallen since 2019. However, the most recent data is from 2021–22, and therefore does not capture recent rises in inflation and the cost of living. Poorer households spend a greater share of their income on basic services such as food and energy, and have therefore been disproportionately impacted by rises in inflation.
- Rates of child poverty differ considerably across demographic groups, with children of single parents, children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups and children living in a family where someone is disabled, more likely to be living in poverty than other groups.
- There are multiple drivers of child poverty in London. They include low pay and insecure work, the benefits system, the cost of housing in London and additional costs such as childcare. Growing up in poverty can have detrimental effects on a broad range of indicators, including in relation to mental and physical health, education, housing and crime.
- Work is not a guaranteed route out of poverty in London, due to the prevalence of low pay and insecure work. The London Living Wage and Living Hours standards are critical in driving up pay and working conditions, and in tackling poverty in London.

- The Mayor has introduced several programmes designed to address poverty and the rising cost of living in London, including the Cost of Living Hub, the Holiday Meals Programme, the Advice in Community Settings Programme, and additional funding for London's advice sector. The Committee welcomes these initiatives, but requests that the Mayor shares the latest available information with the Committee on the impact these programmes are having, to ensure that they are providing value for money and helping to support children and families experiencing poverty in London.
- There are wide-ranging benefits of providing children with free school meals. They are particularly important for children living in poverty, ensuring that these children receive a nutritious meal at school every day, and alleviating pressure on household budgets. They have also been found to have health and educational benefits, as well as a wider economic benefit.
- The current eligibility threshold for the Government's free school meals programme means that not all children living in poverty receive free school meals. One option would be to extend universality to all school-aged children. Another would be to extend the eligibility threshold for free school meals, for example to all children whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit.
- The Mayor is funding free school meals for all primary-aged children in London in 2023-24 and 2024-25 who are not registered for the Government's free school meals programme. The evidence received by the Committee suggests that the programme has been broadly welcomed by schools, parents and children.
- When the Mayor's programme was first announced, some schools and boroughs expressed concerns about potential challenges relating to the implementation of the programme. The evidence received by the Committee suggests that these issues have largely been overcome. However, some schools have faced both logistical and financial challenges in rolling out the programme. The Committee welcomes the increased funding rate of £3 per meal for the 2024-25 school year.
- There is a risk that universal free school meals provision, including the Mayor's programme, could lead to a loss of pupil premium funding, as pupil premium relies on families registering for free school meals. One way of overcoming this challenge would be for national or local government to introduce a system of automatic enrolment for free school meals and pupil premium, whereby families are not required to register.
- The Mayor's additional funding to provide a universal free school meals programme is welcome. However, funding is not guaranteed in the long-term. London needs a long-term funding settlement for universal free school meals provision for primary school children.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Mayor should continue to lobby the Government to remove the two-child limit on benefits.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should continue to work with both public and private sector employers in London to encourage and incentivise them to become London Living Wage employers. In response to this report, he should also set out how he plans to advocate for more employers to become Living Hours employers, and to ensure existing employers on the scheme continue to pay their employees the London Living Wage. He should also monitor the number of employers signing up to the London Living Wage, and those dropping off from the scheme, and report back to the Committee on this.

Recommendation 3

In response to this report, the Mayor should provide the Committee with a summary of the latest available information about the impact that the following programmes have had, including the number of Londoners reached, and set out his future plans for funding the programmes in 2024-25:

- Cost of Living Hub
- The Holiday Meals Programme
- Advice in Community Settings Programme
- Support for London's advice sector by providing funds to Citizens Advice and the London Legal Support Trust

The Mayor should also write to the Committee annually with an update on the number of unique page views for the Cost of Living Hub, and the impact that this has had.

Recommendation 4

In response to this report, the Mayor should share with the Committee what progress has been made by the GLA and London Councils in developing an evaluation framework for local welfare assistance in London. Once the framework has been developed, he should share it with the Committee.

Recommendation 5

The Mayor, working in conjunction with local authorities and the voluntary sector, should publish a child poverty strategy for London in 2024-25.

Recommendation 6

As part of the Mayor's universal free school meals programme for 2024-25, the GLA should investigate the need for providing additional support for capital expenditure in schools, as recommended by the Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) for the programme.

Recommendation 7

The Mayor should use his convening role to assist London boroughs to implement auto-enrolment processes for free school meals and pupil premium. This will ensure that schools can claim the full amount of pupil premium they are entitled to and, in situations where provision is not universal, ensure that all eligible pupils receive free school meals.

Recommendation 8

In response to this report, the Mayor should share with the Committee a summary of the initial insights that have been collected on the impact of his universal free school meals programme, and share further findings from the evaluation and monitoring activity as and when they are completed.

Recommendation 9

The Mayor should use the findings of the evaluation into his universal free school meals programme as an evidence base for a long-term funding settlement from the Government for universal free school meals for all school children in London.

Introduction

Child poverty rates in London

London is one of the wealthiest cities in the world. But a third of children in the capital grow up in poverty, and parts of London have some of the highest child poverty rates in the country.

Data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) suggests that child poverty rates in London have fallen since 2019. However, the most recent data is from 2021-22, and therefore does not capture recent rises in inflation and the cost of living. Poorer households spend a greater share of their income on basic services such as food and energy, and have therefore been disproportionately impacted by rises in inflation.

According to analysis carried out in 2023 by consultants Henley & Partners, London is the fourth wealthiest city in the world.¹ But a third of children in London grow up in poverty, and parts of London have some of the highest child poverty rates in the UK.² The percentage of children living in relative poverty after housing costs (AHC) in London in 2019-10 - 2021-22 was 33 per cent, which amounts to around 700,000 children.³ The local authority with the highest rate of child poverty in England in 2021/22 was Tower Hamlets, where almost half of children were growing up in poverty (47.5 per cent).⁴ Newham, Hackney, and Barking and Dagenham also feature in the 20 local authorities with the highest child poverty rates in the UK.⁵

¹ Henley & Partners, [World's Wealthiest Cities Report 2023](#), 18 April 2023

² Juliet Stone at the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, [Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2021/22](#), June 2023

³ London Datastore, [Poverty in London 2021/22](#), March 2023

⁴ Action for Children, [Where is child poverty increasing in the UK?](#), June 2023

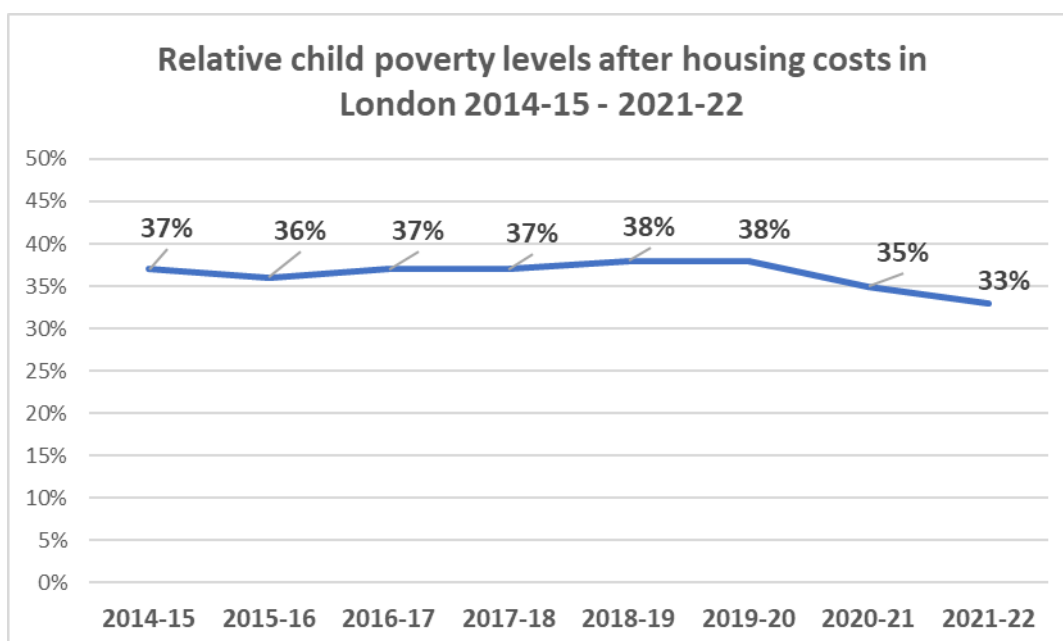
⁵ Juliet Stone at the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, [Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2021/22](#), June 2023

Definitions of child poverty

A child is defined as living in poverty if they live in a household whose net disposable income falls below a given threshold. In the UK, there are two definitions of that threshold:

- The threshold for relative poverty is set at 60 per cent of the average (median) net household income in the year in question. This threshold can fluctuate from one year to the next.
- The threshold for absolute poverty is set at 60 per cent of the average (median) net household income in 2010-11 after being adjusted for inflation. This threshold does not fluctuate over time.⁶

These thresholds can be considered both before housing costs (BHC) and after housing costs (AHC). Poverty rates AHC are based on levels of net disposable income after housing costs are taken into account. There are therefore four different measures of child poverty each year. This report will predominantly refer to levels of relative child poverty AHC, as this is the measure used by most organisations and charities carrying out research into the issue.⁷



Source: [Action for Children – Where is child poverty increasing in the UK?](#)

⁶ Children’s Commissioner, [Fact checking claims about child poverty](#)

⁷ For example, see analysis of the data by [Action for Children](#) and [Trust for London](#)

London's child poverty rate has fallen from a high of 37.3 per cent in 2014-15.⁸ However, the most recent data published by the DWP comes from 2021-22, and therefore pre-dates recent increases in inflation and cost-of-living pressures. This data is also likely to reflect the impact of the pandemic and measures introduced during the pandemic, and the DWP has advised exercising caution when interpreting this data and making comparisons with previous years.⁹

Katherine Hill, Strategic Project Manager at 4in10, a campaigning network of 400 London organisations working to improve the lives of children living in poverty across the capital, told the Committee that "there is a significant lag on that data... It covers a period where there was additional social security protection in place through the £20 uplift [to Universal Credit during the pandemic] and does not cover the real force of the impact of inflation".¹⁰ Tom Lee, Senior Policy Analyst at the charity Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), advised that "you have to look at the longer term as opposed to just the year-on-year fluctuations".¹¹

Analysis from the Resolution Foundation think tank found that, between September 2021 and September 2023, the overall cost of living (as measured by the Consumer Prices Index) rose by 17.4 per cent. The Resolution Foundation calculates that the cost of living has risen 18.8 per cent for the poorest households, as the "consumption patterns [of these households] are more weighted to basic goods and services like food and energy where prices have surged the most".¹² At the Committee's meeting in October 2023, Klara Skrivankova, Director of Grants at the charitable organisation Trust for London, alluded to the "so-called poverty premium", whereby "the less money you have, the more money you often need for essentials".¹³

Characteristics of families and children in poverty in London

Rates of child poverty differ considerably across demographic groups, with children of single parents, children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups and children living in a family where someone is disabled, more likely to be living in poverty than other groups.

Klara Skrivankova told the Committee that ethnic minority groups, disabled Londoners and single-parent households "tend to be most affected by child poverty".¹⁴ In the UK as a whole, children from Black and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be in poverty: according to

⁸ Juliet Stone at the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, [Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2021/22](#), June 2023

⁹ Department for Work and Pensions, [Children in low income families: local area statistics, financial year ending 2022](#), 23 March 2023

¹⁰ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

¹¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

¹² Resolution Foundation, [Calculating the Real Living Wage for London and the rest of the UK: 2023](#), October 2023

¹³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

¹⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

CPAG analysis of DWP data, 48 per cent of children from these backgrounds are now in poverty, compared with 25 per cent of children in White British families.¹⁵ Children from Bangladeshi and Pakistani households are the most likely to live in poverty and material deprivation out of all ethnic groups, while children in Indian households are the least likely.¹⁶

Analysis by Trust for London has found that single parents with children are more likely to be in poverty than any other type of household. It found that 45 per cent of single parents in 2021-22 in London were in poverty, compared to 24 per cent of couples with children.¹⁷ According to Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), “lone parents face a higher risk of poverty due to the lack of an additional earner, low rates of maintenance payments, gender inequality in employment and pay, and childcare costs.”¹⁸

Klara Skrivankova also told the Committee that costs are higher “in households where there are disabled parents or children that are disabled”.¹⁹ In the UK in 2021-22, children living in a family where someone was disabled had a poverty rate of 36 per cent after housing costs, compared with 25 per cent for children living in families where no one is disabled.²⁰ For children who themselves have a disability in London, the estimated child poverty rate is 35 per cent, compared to an estimated 32.8 per cent for children without a disability.²¹

Drivers of child poverty in London

There are multiple drivers of child poverty in London. They include low pay and insecure work, the benefits system, the cost of housing in London and additional costs such as childcare.

The high cost of housing in London has a greater impact on poverty rates in the capital than in many other parts of the country. Katherine Hill told the Committee that “when we put housing costs into the figures, that is when London shoots to the top of the league table of child poverty”.²² The child poverty rate for London before housing costs (BHC) is 17 per cent compared to 33 per cent after housing costs (AHC).²³ Analysis by Trust for London finds that the child poverty rate at least doubles when housing costs are accounted for in 20 of the 33 boroughs.²⁴

¹⁵ Child Poverty Action Group, [Child poverty facts and figures](#)

¹⁶ ONS, [Child poverty and education outcomes by ethnicity](#), 25 February 2020

¹⁷ Trust for London, [Children: Poverty and family structure](#)

¹⁸ Child Poverty Action Group, [Child poverty facts and figures](#)

¹⁹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

²⁰ Stone, Juliet, [Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2021/22](#), June 2023

²¹ Stone, Juliet, [Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2021/22](#), June 2023

²² London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

²³ London Datastore, [Poverty in London 2021/22](#), March 2023

²⁴ Trust for London, [Children in poverty by borough, before and after housing costs](#)

Guests at the Committee's first meeting also cited childcare costs as a contributing factor to child poverty. This is an issue that the Committee has explored at length in its report 'Early years childcare in London', which was published in January 2023.²⁵

Guests at the Committee's meeting highlighted benefit payments as another driver of poverty levels. Tom Lee told the Committee that "London is disproportionately affected by the two-child limit", and argued that the benefit cap is "a key contributor" to "deep poverty".²⁶ The Committee heard that the £20 uplift in Universal Credit, which was temporarily introduced during the pandemic, had a positive impact on child poverty levels. Chris Price, Chief Executive Officer of Peckham-based charity Pecan, told the Committee that "when the extra £20 a week was given to people on benefits during that time, we saw our referrals drop at that point. When that got scrapped, we saw our referrals go up again".²⁷

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), the fall in poverty levels during the pandemic was "largely due to changes in benefits policy, in particular the (temporary) £20 universal credit uplift and (permanent) changes to the universal credit taper rate and work allowances, which allow workers to keep more of the benefit as their earnings rise".²⁸ The £20 uplift to Universal Credit was brought to an end in October 2021.²⁹

The Government has introduced additional measures to support families on low incomes during the recent rise in the cost of living. It introduced temporary Cost of Living Payments for households on means-tested benefits in 2022-23 and 2023-24.³⁰ The Government has estimated that these payments will benefit 1,187,000 households in London, 15 per cent of the capital's population.³¹ In April 2023, the benefit cap levels rose from £23,000 to £25,323 for families with children in London, while levels for single households without children rose from £15,410 to £16,967 in London.³² Tom Lee told the Committee that these rises had been "helpful", but noted that the overall rise in inflation during this period was greater than the increases in benefit levels.³³

Low pay and insecure work are also key contributors to child poverty. These issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

Recommendation 1

The Mayor should continue to lobby the Government to remove the two-child limit on benefits.

²⁵ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Early years childcare in London report](#), 16 January 2024

²⁶ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

²⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

²⁸ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Poverty](#), 13 July 2023

²⁹ House of Lords Library, [Universal credit: an end to the uplift](#), 3 September 2021

³⁰ HM Treasury, [Cost of living support Factsheet](#), 21 November 2022

³¹ DWP, [Over 8 million families in the UK to receive new Cost of Living Payment this Spring](#), 7 February 2023

³² HM Treasury, [Cost of living support Factsheet](#), 21 November 2022

³³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

Impacts on children of growing up in poverty

Growing up in poverty can have detrimental effects on a broad range of indicators, including in relation to mental and physical health, education, housing and crime.

As Tom Lee said to the Committee, “pick any metric you want really and children growing up in poverty will fare worse than their peers”.³⁴ The Joseph Rowntree Foundation lists a number of potential consequences of growing up in poverty, including health problems, housing problems, being a victim or perpetrator of crime, drug or alcohol problems, lower educational achievement, homelessness and relationship and family problems.³⁵

Guests at the Committee’s first meeting emphasised the impact that growing up in poverty has on a child’s mental and physical health. Chris Price noted that “the cheapest food is the most unhealthy food”, which means that children living in poverty are more likely to eat less healthy food than those growing up in higher-income households.³⁶ Guests also discussed the impact that poverty has on the mental health of both parents and children. Katherine Hill told the Committee that “the impact on child and parental health, both mental health and physical health, is very clear”.³⁷

Growing up in poverty also impacts a child’s education and development. Chris Price noted that school absence is likely to be greater amongst children in low-income households, which has a “short-term impact on socialising”, but also a “long-term impact on their ability to thrive later in life as well”.³⁸

³⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

³⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [What is poverty?](#), 7 December 2019

³⁶ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

³⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

³⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

Addressing child poverty in London

Pay, insecure work and working hours

Work is not a guaranteed route out of poverty in London, due to the prevalence of low pay and insecure work. The London Living Wage and Living Hours standards are critical in driving up pay and working conditions, and in tackling poverty in London.

In 2021-22, poverty rates were higher in families where no one was in work compared to families where someone was in work (52 per cent versus 19 per cent).³⁹ However, data also shows that the number of children in poverty in working families in London has increased. In 2011-12, 390,000 children in working families were growing up in poverty, which had increased to 510,000 children by 2021-22.⁴⁰ Across the UK, 71 per cent of children growing up in poverty live in a household where at least one person works.⁴¹ In June 2023, 38 per cent of people on Universal Credit were in work.⁴²

Guests at the Committee's first meeting spoke about the role of the London Living Wage as a way of addressing poverty and child poverty. The Living Wage is an hourly pay rate that is higher than Government-set minimum wage, and is based on what families need to get by. Employers can voluntarily choose to pay this higher rate. It is calculated by the Resolution Foundation think tank, and overseen by the Living Wage Commission on behalf of the Living Wage Foundation, a campaign organisation. London has a higher rate than the rest of the country and, in October 2023, the London Living Wage rose by 10 per cent to £13.15.⁴³ The Government also announced a rise in the minimum wage in November 2023; from April 2024, it will rise by 9.8 per cent to £11.44 for those over the age of 21.⁴⁴

The Mayor of London has said that, throughout his Mayoralty, he has "championed the real Living Wage publicly, while leading by example".⁴⁵ The GLA and other organisations within the GLA Group are Living Wage employers, and the Mayor has said that "the Living Wage is promoted and monitored across our supply chains, sending a clear signal to employers across the capital".⁴⁶

Klara Skrivankova told the Committee that "there are a number of boroughs in London who are accredited [London Living Wage employers] and what we would want to see is more of those because that then impacts on procurement decisions and that impacts on local jobs".⁴⁷

³⁹ Trust for London, [Poverty for London adults, children and pensioners, by family work status](#)

⁴⁰ Trust for London, [Poverty for London adults, children and pensioners, by family work status](#)

⁴¹ Child Poverty Action Group, [Child poverty facts and figures](#)

⁴² Department for Work and Pensions, [Universal Credit: 29 April 2013 to 13 July 2023](#), 15 August 2023

⁴³ Resolution Foundation, [Calculating the Real Living Wage for London and the rest of the UK: 2023](#), 24 October 2023

⁴⁴ Low Pay Commission, [Largest ever cash increase to the minimum wage](#), 21 November 2023

⁴⁵ GLA, [MQT Ref 2023/4158: London Living Wage](#), 16 November 2023

⁴⁶ GLA, [MQT Ref 2023/4158: London Living Wage](#), 16 November 2023

⁴⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

Insecure work is another contributory factor to families and children living in poverty. Klara Skrivankova told the Committee that “insecure working conditions or job insecurity is a big part of not being or being resilient to shocks”.⁴⁸ Tom Lee noted that paying the London Living Wage is “one piece of the puzzle”, but “a key issue for child poverty in particular is the number of hours that families can work”.⁴⁹

Klara Skrivankova highlighted the role of ‘Living Hours’, an additional standard from the Living Wage Foundation which guarantees minimum hours for employees, advanced notice of shifts and a contract to reflect hours worked, which enables people to plan and manage their finances unlike under a zero hours contract.⁵⁰ She argued that both the London Living Wage and Living Hours are standards that local authorities can “commit to themselves but also promote to businesses in their local area to put more money into people’s pockets”.⁵¹ The GLA has recently become a Living Hours employer.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should continue to work with both public and private sector employers in London to encourage and incentivise them to become London Living Wage employers. In response to this report, he should also set out how he plans to advocate for more employers to become Living Hours employers, and to ensure existing employers on the scheme continue to pay their employees the London Living Wage. He should also monitor the number of employers signing up to the London Living Wage, and those dropping off from the scheme, and report back to the Committee on this.

Mayoral programmes

The Mayor has introduced several programmes designed to address poverty and the rising cost of living in London, including the Cost of Living Hub, the Holiday Meals Programme, the Advice in Community Settings Programme, and additional funding for London’s advice sector. The Committee welcomes these initiatives, but requests that the Mayor shares the latest available information with the Committee on the impact these programmes are having, to ensure that they are providing value for money and helping to support children and families experiencing poverty in London.

At its first meeting, the Committee asked Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice and Dan Drillsma-Milgrom, Senior Manager – Equality and Fairness, Communities and Social Policy at the GLA, about several GLA programmes designed to tackle the cost of living.

The Cost of Living Hub is hosted on the GLA website, and includes tools and information on how Londoners can maximise their income, including on how to claim benefits and a calculator

⁴⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁴⁹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁵⁰ Living Wage Foundation, [Living Hours](#)

⁵¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

to work out what benefits people are entitled to.⁵² It also links to advice on energy bills, support with paying bills and mental health support. At the Committee's first meeting, Debbie Weekes-Bernard highlighted the outreach work that the GLA has done to notify people of the site, including working with community-based and faith organisations, and with Inclusion London to reach out to deaf and disabled Londoners.⁵³ In a subsequent letter to the Committee, Debbie Weekes-Bernard said that the Cost of Living Hub met its 2022-23 target of 300,000 unique page views by the end of the 2022-23 financial year.⁵⁴

She also told the Committee that, in conjunction with the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI), the GLA has "printed and distributed 110,000 leaflets to those individuals for whom accessing a website would be difficult because they are digitally excluded".⁵⁵ The GLA has recently brought in a translation tool to the Cost of Living Hub and the rest of the london.gov.uk website, which enables users to translate webpages into a wide range of languages.

The Mayor's Free Holiday Meals programme began in the 2023 Easter holidays, and was initially due to run until March 2024. The Mayor has since announced that the programme will continue throughout the 2024-25 financial year.⁵⁶ In the first year of the programme, the GLA, in partnership with charities the Mayor's Fund for London and the Felix Project, is providing up to £3.6m of funding for "support to local community organisations, serving free holiday and weekend meals to the Londoners who need it most."⁵⁷ The GLA has said that "the programme will provide the equivalent of 10 million meals across the year".⁵⁸ The Mayor is providing £3.1 million in grant funding to the Mayor's Fund for London and up to £425,000 to the Felix Project to deliver the programme.⁵⁹ The Mayor is proposing to spend £4 million in his 2024-25 budget to continue the programme.⁶⁰

The GLA's Advice in Community Settings programme funds "advice partnerships" to support Londoners experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship.⁶¹ The GLA initially provides between £5,000 and £7,000 to support partnerships between community settings and providers of advice, and then funds these partnerships to deliver targeted interventions.⁶² Debbie Weekes-Bernard told the Committee that, as part of the Advice in Community Settings programme, "we have advisers based in baby banks, in faith organisations, in community organisations that provide support to refugees and those seeking asylum".⁶³ The evaluation of the first year of the programme found that it reached 6,500 individuals from across around 3,800 households

⁵² GLA, [Help with the cost of living](#)

⁵³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁵⁴ Letter to the London Assembly Economy Committee from Debbie Weekes-Bernard, dated 30 November 2023

⁵⁵ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁵⁶ Mayor of London, [Mayor to extend for another year free holiday meals for London families as cost-of-living crisis continues to hit](#), 18 January 2024

⁵⁷ GLA, [Emergency free holiday meals](#)

⁵⁸ GLA, [Emergency free holiday meals](#)

⁵⁹ GLA, [MD3105 Holiday Hunger Programme](#), 18 May 2023

⁶⁰ Mayor of London, [Mayor to extend for another year free holiday meals for London families as cost-of-living crisis continues to hit](#), 18 January 2024

⁶¹ GLA, [Advice in Community Settings Grant Programme](#)

⁶² GLA, [Advice in Community Settings Grant Programme](#)

⁶³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

regarding debt issues.⁶⁴ An evaluation is in the process of being carried out for the second year of the programme. Debbie Weekes-Bernard noted that “We do not know about funding beyond [the second year of the programme] at this stage. We would like to make sure that we see what the evaluation tells us about how many people we have been able to reach”.⁶⁵

In May 2022, the GLA committed to additional expenditure to support London’s advice sector, by providing funding £1,200,000 in grant funding to Citizens Advice and £1,100,000 to the London Legal Support Trust.⁶⁶ The GLA states that this funding aims to boost adviser capacity, improve community outreach and upskill community-based staff and volunteers. Debbie Weekes-Bernard told the Committee that the programme had reached around 18,000 people by October 2023, when the meeting was held.⁶⁷ However, she observed that London’s advice sector has a funding gap of “around £13 million”, and that the GLA’s funding is “only touching the surface”. She told the Committee, at the time of its meeting, that the funding runs until autumn 2024.⁶⁸ The GLA’s Draft Consolidated Budget 2024-25 includes an additional £4.2 million in funding to extend this scheme.⁶⁹

Recommendation 3

In response to this report, the Mayor should provide the Committee with a summary of the latest available information about the impact that the following programmes have had, including the number of Londoners reached, and set out his future plans for funding the programmes in 2024-25:

- Cost of Living Hub
- The Holiday Meals Programme
- Advice in Community Settings Programme
- Support for London’s advice sector by providing funds to Citizens Advice and the London Legal Support Trust

The Mayor should also write to the Committee annually with an update on the number of unique page views for the Cost of Living Hub, and the impact that this has had.

Local initiatives to address child poverty

Both local authorities and the voluntary sector provide various forms of support to Londoners experiencing poverty. However, many of these initiatives are focused on providing emergency support to those living in poverty, rather than trying to address the root causes of poverty and child poverty in the capital. London would benefit from a more strategic approach to addressing child poverty, which prioritises addressing the causes and not just the symptoms of child poverty.

⁶⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁶⁵ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁶⁶ GLA, [MD2991 Cost of living: support for advice sector 2022-23](#)

⁶⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁶⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁶⁹ GLA, [Draft Consolidated Budget 2024-25: Explanation of Proposals](#), January 2024

There are many initiatives led by local authorities and the voluntary sector in London which aim to alleviate child poverty in London. Chris Price noted the Peckham Pantry scheme which is run by Pecan, and aims to provide food to people for a small charge “based on dignity and choice”.⁷⁰ Katherine Hill referenced Little Village, which runs baby banks for families living in poverty across London.⁷¹ There are many other schemes operating across London and doing similarly vital work.

Guests highlighted the role of local authorities in London in addressing child poverty, in particular through council tax support (which provides households on low incomes with support with council tax payments) and local welfare assistance (LWA) (schemes which provide additional financial support for low income households). Katherine Hill told the Committee that “council tax support is a very direct way of putting money back into people’s pockets that does not involve national Government policy”.⁷² She also noted that this is “the sort of area where the GLA can support more to be looking at the situation, looking at that variation, helping to spread best practice”.⁷³

Debbie Weekes-Bernard told the Committee that the GLA takes action as part of the London Partnership Board to promote best practice in councils on issues such as welfare assistance, but “what we do not know enough about is how that money is being given out to those who need it”.⁷⁴ She referred to work that was underway with London Councils relating to the evaluation of LWA and other support schemes provided by boroughs. In a letter subsequently sent to the Committee, she explained that:

“The work in question is focused on developing and testing an evaluation framework for such schemes and builds upon previous research commissioned by the GLA and London Councils. A key recommendation from this research was the adoption of a standardised evaluation framework for LWA schemes to support consistent monitoring and evaluation”.⁷⁵

Recommendation 4

In response to this report, the Mayor should share with the Committee what progress has been made by the GLA and London Councils in developing an evaluation framework for local welfare assistance in London. Once the framework has been developed, he should share it with the Committee.

Guests at the Committee’s meeting argued that London lacks a strategic approach to addressing child poverty. Katherine Hill told the Committee that there are “great initiatives going on... across the GLA and that the Mayor takes up, but they are not always seen through

⁷⁰ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁷¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁷² London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁷³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁷⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁷⁵ Letter sent to the Chair of the Economy Committee by Debbie Weekes-Bernard, dated 29 November 2023

the lens of addressing child poverty”.⁷⁶ She argued that these initiatives should be more “joined up together as a strategic response to child poverty in our city”. Klara Skrivankova argued that civil society organisations are in “constant fire-fighting mode and there is not the luxury to have long-term thinking”.⁷⁷

The Committee recognises that many of these challenges are beyond the power of the Mayor and local authorities in London alone to solve. However, the GLA and boroughs could play an important role in developing a more strategic approach to addressing child poverty in London, which takes account of the key drivers of poverty, including low pay, housing and childcare.

The Mayor of London publishes seven statutory strategies, including the Transport Strategy, Health Inequalities Strategy and Economic Development Strategy.⁷⁸ He also publishes non-statutory strategies, such as the London Food Strategy.⁷⁹ Given the critical importance of child poverty in London, a city where a third of children grow up in poverty, the Committee believes that the Mayor should develop a child poverty strategy, which seeks to address the causes and not just the symptoms of child poverty.

“What I would advocate for, very much in addition to the initiatives that are already on-going, is that we need to see a wider strategic plan about addressing child poverty in the city. The key guiding principle of that needs to be about taking ourselves further upstream... and really trying to tackle those root causes as well as addressing the symptoms.”⁸⁰

Katharine Hill,
Strategic Project Manager, 4in10

Recommendation 5

The Mayor, working in conjunction with local authorities and the voluntary sector, should publish a child poverty strategy for London in 2024-25.

⁷⁶ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁷⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁷⁸ Mayor of London, [Mayor of London Strategies and Plans](#)

⁷⁹ Mayor of London, [London Food Strategy](#)

⁸⁰ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

Free school meals

The benefits of free school meals

There are wide-ranging benefits of providing children with free school meals. They are particularly important for children living in poverty, ensuring that these children receive a nutritious meal at school every day, and alleviating pressure on household budgets. They have also been found to have health and educational benefits, as well as a wider economic benefit.

Free school meals (FSM) play a critical role in alleviating the impact of child poverty. Katharine Vincent, Director of Reconnect London, told the Committee that “for many lower-income households, the cost of preparing a hot, healthy, nutritious evening meal is extremely difficult, particularly for families with several young children, making provision of FSM even more important”.⁸¹ Barbara Crowther, Campaign Coordinator for the Children's Food Campaign at Sustain, highlighted research from the University of Essex on universal FSM, which found that families save approximately £37 per month in total on food spending, based on a household with two adults and two primary-aged children.⁸² Barbara Crowther noted that this can result in “freeing up budget to buy better-quality food, therefore better school food can lead to better-quality food at home.”⁸³

“I will start by saying that FSM has significant and wide-ranging benefits for young Londoners and their families. They help ensure that all children can flourish and thrive, regardless of the circumstances in which they or their families are living. They also have long-lasting benefits into adulthood in relation to educational outcomes as well as social, financial, and health benefits, both for individuals and for wider society.”⁸⁴

Katharine Vincent
Director, Reconnect London

Free school meals have also been shown to have health benefits for children. The research from the University of Essex found that universal free primary school meals have been associated

⁸¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

⁸² Holford, Angus and Rabe, Birgitta, [Impacts of local authority Universal Free School Meal schemes on child obesity and household food expenditure](#), September 2022

⁸³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

⁸⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

with a reduction in childhood obesity.⁸⁵ This research was carried out in relation to the universal FSM programmes in Southwark, Newham, Islington and Tower Hamlets, and found that receiving universal free school meals reduced prevalence of obesity by 9.3 per cent among Reception children and 5.6 per cent among Year 6 children on average.⁸⁶ In its submission to the Committee, the charity Chefs in Schools stated that: “We hear time and time again from Headteachers across the country, that access to nutritious food at schools directly impacts behaviour, wellbeing and attainment in schools”.⁸⁷

There is also evidence of wider economic benefits of free school meals. At the Committee’s second meeting, Daniel Kebede, General Secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), highlighted research carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) for Impact on Urban Health, which involved a cost benefit analysis of free school meals.⁸⁸ The research modelled two scenarios for the expansion of free school meals in England. Under the first scenario, with free school meals expanded to all pupils whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit, it was estimated that every £1 invested would generate £1.38 in core benefits. Under the second scenario, with free school meals expanded to all pupils in state-funded schools, it was estimated that every £1 invested would generate £1.71 in core benefits.⁸⁹ Taking the wider economic benefits into account, the research suggests that an additional £58.2 billion could be generated in the economy under the second scenario.⁹⁰

Free School Meals provision in London

The current eligibility threshold for the Government’s free school meals programme means that not all children living in poverty receive free school meals. One option would be to extend universality to all school-aged children. Another would be to extend the eligibility threshold for free school meals, for example to all children whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit.

⁸⁵ Holford, Angus and Rabe, Birgitta, [Impacts of local authority Universal Free School Meal schemes on child obesity and household food expenditure](#), September 2022

⁸⁶ Holford, Angus and Rabe, Birgitta, [Impacts of local authority Universal Free School Meal schemes on child obesity and household food expenditure](#), September 2022

⁸⁷ Evidence submitted to the London Assembly Economy Committee by Chefs in Schools

⁸⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 – Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

⁸⁹ Impact on Urban Health, [Expanding free school meals: a cost benefit analysis](#), October 2022. Core benefits refer to those benefits arising directly from the children in receipt of free school meals, for example improved health and educational attainment, rather than wider indirect benefits for the economy and supply chain.

⁹⁰ Feed the Future, [The Superpowers of Free School Meals](#), Autumn 2022

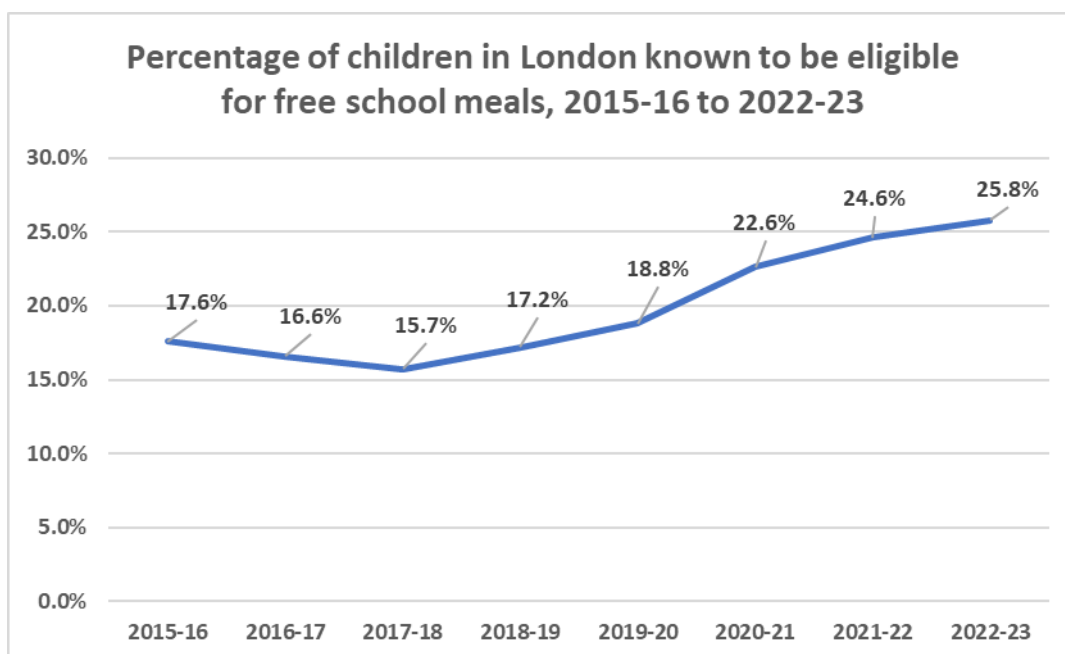
Free School Meals provision in London

In England, means-tested free school meals (FSM) are available to pupils in state-funded primary and secondary schools that meet the Government’s eligibility criteria and whose parents or carers make an application.⁹¹

Since 2014, the Government has funded free school meals for all infant school pupils (Reception, Year 1, and Year 2) in state-funded schools.⁹² This programme is known as Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM).

Some London boroughs run their own universal free school meals programmes for all primary school aged children.⁹³ Islington, Newham, Southwark and Tower Hamlets have run UIFSM programmes since the early 2010s, while Westminster introduced its own programme for an 18 month period beginning in January 2023.⁹⁴

In London, 25.8 per cent of children were eligible for the Government’s FSM scheme in January 2023.⁹⁵ This figure has increased year-on-year since 2018-19, which reflects the national trend.



Source: Department for Education (DfE), [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

⁹¹ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

⁹² House of Commons Library, [School Meals and Nutritional Standards \(England\)](#), 23 February 2023

⁹³ Sustain, [Good Food for All Londoners 2022](#), April 2023

⁹⁴ Sustain, [Good Food for All Londoners 2022](#), April 2023

⁹⁵ House of Commons Library, [Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals](#), 24 August 2023

Despite this rise in the number of eligible children, some guests at the Committee's meetings argued that the current means-tested threshold for FSM is too low, highlighting research showing that many children living in poverty are not receiving FSM. Tom Lee, citing analysis carried out by CPAG, told the Committee that "the means-tested threshold is far too low. We know that there are 900,000 children across England who miss out and 180,000 in London".⁹⁶ Katharine Vincent told the Committee that "there are quite a lot of children living in poverty and living in low-income families who currently are not getting FSM. That is partly because the threshold for eligibility has been frozen since 2018 while inflation and wages have been rising".⁹⁷

Universal schemes, such as the Government's Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) programme and the Mayor's programme for 2023-24 and 2024-25, ensure that all children living in poverty in the relevant age group receive FSM. Richard Watts, Deputy Chief of Staff at the Mayor's Office, also argued that universal provision addresses the issue that "there are many families who do qualify [for FSM] who for whatever reason - fear of official forms, language issues, whatever it is - choose not to claim".⁹⁸

At both of the Committee's meetings, there were discussions about the role of stigma in the provision of means-tested FSM, and the potential role of universal FSM to alleviate this. Barbara Crowther told the Committee that "schools go to great extent to try to avoid children in receipt of FSM being singled out" and that "in many schools they try to manage it incredibly well".⁹⁹ However she also argued that there are circumstances in which singling out children in receipt of FSM is "quite hard to avoid", for example on school trips or when "schools need to bring forward children in receipt of FSM in order to send additional information home to parents".¹⁰⁰

Katherine Hill told the Committee that there are "lots of quite subtle ways in which the distinction was still very visible".¹⁰¹ This can include the spending limit on the account of children receiving FSM, and examples of children being asked to put food back because they had overspent. Daniel Kebede argued that "poverty creates its own stigma", which universal provision helps to mitigate against.¹⁰²

Another solution to the problem of children living in poverty but not receiving FSM would be to extend the eligibility threshold for free school meals. Katharine Vincent told the Committee that

⁹⁶ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

⁹⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

⁹⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

⁹⁹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁰⁰ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁰¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

¹⁰² London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

“the idea of increasing eligibility to encompass all families who receive universal credit could be an alternative if universality was felt not to be affordable. One reason that seems sensible is because it uses an existing mechanism for means testing”.¹⁰³

Research carried out by the IFS in 2023 explored “options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England”.¹⁰⁴ It notes that expanding eligibility to all children whose families claim universal credit could cost an additional £1 billion a year in the longer term, a 70 per cent increase in spending on free school meals. Offering free school meals to all primary and secondary pupils (up to Year 11) would cost an extra £2.5 billion a year.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁰⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England](#), 29 March 2023

¹⁰⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England](#), 29 March 2023

The Mayor's Free School Meals programme

Background

The Mayor is funding free school meals for all primary-aged children in London in 2023-24 and 2024-25 who are not registered for the Government's free school meals programme. The evidence received by the Committee suggests that the programme has been broadly welcomed by schools, parents and children.

On 20 February 2023, the Mayor announced a £130 million programme to provide free school meals to every child in state-funded primary schools during the 2023-24 school year.¹⁰⁶ The funding will pay for meals for Key Stage 2 (years 3-6) pupils, as the Government already funds meals for pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 under the UIFSM programme.¹⁰⁷ Boroughs that already run universal FSM programmes in primary schools also receive the Mayor's funding, and some of these boroughs have used the additional funding to provide FSM across other school years.¹⁰⁸ On 9 January 2024, the Mayor announced that the programme would continue during the 2024-25 school year.¹⁰⁹

Guests at both of the Committee's meetings were highly supportive of the Mayor's programme. Daniel Kebede said that the programme "was welcomed with open arms broadly by the profession".¹¹⁰ Katharine Vincent said that "what schools are saying to us is that the scheme is very welcomed by children and families in their school because many of them are facing very difficult financial circumstances".¹¹¹ In its evidence submitted to the Committee, Chefs in Schools stated that "we have heard almost universal support from school leaders, teachers and chefs on the roll out of universal free primary school meals".¹¹²

"[The Mayor's programme] has made a tremendous difference to people's levels of anxiety as one less thing to worry about in finding the dinner money. It can only be welcomed and I really commend the Mayor for his boldness in laying down the gauntlet in this way to show that it

¹⁰⁶ Mayor of London, [Mayor announces every London primary schoolchild to receive free school meals](#), 20 February 2023

¹⁰⁷ GLA, [MD3146 Primary School Universal Free Schools Meal Provision 2023-2024](#), 13 July 2023

¹⁰⁸ Southwark Council, [Southwark Council funds emergency free school meals in secondary schools for low-income families](#), 24 February 2023; Tower Hamlets Council, [Free school meals](#); Westminster Council, [Westminster rolls out free school meals to 14,000 children in huge expansion of lunch scheme](#), 8 March 2023

¹⁰⁹ Mayor of London, [Mayor to continue funding groundbreaking universal free school meals policy next academic year \(2024/ 2025\) saving London families up to £1,000 per child as cost-of-living continues to badly hit families across the country](#), 9 January 2024

¹¹⁰ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹¹¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹¹² Evidence submitted to the London Assembly Economy Committee by Chefs in Schools

can be done. The questions about how it can continue to be done remain."¹¹³

Katherine Hill,
Strategic Project Manager, 4in10

Implementation of the programme

When the Mayor's programme was first announced, some schools and boroughs expressed concerns about potential challenges relating to the implementation of the programme. The evidence received by the Committee suggests that these issues have largely been overcome. However, some schools have faced both logistical and financial challenges in rolling out the programme. The Committee welcomes the increased funding rate of £3 per meal for the 2024-25 school year.

Before the start of the school year, some schools and boroughs expressed concerns about potential challenges relating to the implementation of the programme. These related to both the level of funding provided and logistical challenges, such as a potential lack of capacity and infrastructure in schools to deliver the programme at relatively short notice.¹¹⁴

In the 2023-24 school year, the GLA is providing funding of £2.65 per meal, which is higher than the current government rate of £2.53. Guests at the Committee's second meeting welcomed this increase, but some also expressed concerns that this rate still may not cover the full cost of a meal. In evidence submitted to the Committee, Chefs in Schools said that "the additional funding has been welcome, and the additional uptake has allowed for economies of scale".¹¹⁵ Katharine Vincent told the Committee that "schools - and academy trusts to some extent - have been having to subsidise this, while nonetheless appreciating that the funding rate they are receiving from the Mayor is higher than the national rate".¹¹⁶ Barbara Crowther highlighted research from the IFS which has found that, since 2014, the Government's per-meal funding rate has lost 16 per cent of its value in real terms, and that if it had increased in line with inflation, it would now be £2.87.¹¹⁷

Representatives of the GLA highlighted the fact that it is providing sufficient funding for 90 per cent of children to receive FSM, and the GLA does not expect all schools to reach this rate of uptake. Richard Watts argued that the GLA is "deliberately overfunding this programme by paying for more pupils per borough than are eligible for funding and by having a very high

¹¹³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

¹¹⁴ Schools Week, [Schools left to pick up the tab for London free meals scheme](#), 12 June 2023

¹¹⁵ Evidence submitted to the London Assembly Economy Committee by Chefs in Schools

¹¹⁶ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London - Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹¹⁷ Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), [The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England](#), 29 March 2023

assumption of take-up, in order to deliberately to put more money into the system".¹¹⁸ He explained that any school exceeding the 90 per cent take-up rate would be able to claim additional expenses. He also stated that "it has not been flagged to us... that any borough is leaving its schools out of pocket because of the cost of individual meals".¹¹⁹

Emma Pawson, Programme Director for Free School Meals at the GLA, also highlighted the additional funding that the GLA is providing for meals for children with specific dietary requirements for religious reasons and with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) dietary requirements.¹²⁰ The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) for the programme identified concerns over the price point of £2.65 per child and whether this was sufficient to cater for the dietary needs of certain faith groups, including Halal meals for the Muslim community and Kosher meals for the Jewish community.¹²¹ The EqIA also identified concerns over the dietary needs and requirements and price point for meals for children with SEND and SEND schools. In response to these concerns, the Mayor has set aside £5 million as a contingency fund, for any additional costs associated with providing meals for children with specific dietary requirements for religious reasons or related to SEND.¹²²

On 9 January 2024, the Mayor announced that boroughs would be funded at £3 per meal for the 2024-25 programme.¹²³ The Committee welcomes this higher funding rate.

The Committee asked guests at its second meeting about the logistical challenges involved in delivering an increased number of school meals. Katharine Vincent told the Committee that:

"The anecdotal evidence that we have gathered so far suggests that many of the anticipated infrastructure challenges were successfully overcome by schools and academy trusts and that they had a lot of support from the GLA in relation to overcoming those".¹²⁴

Emma Pawson told the Committee that "at the start we were getting concerns coming through, but that has not really been seen in fruition".¹²⁵ She highlighted the work that the GLA is doing to support schools in implementing the programme, such as sharing information and best practice from the five boroughs that previously ran universal FSM programmes.

¹¹⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹¹⁹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹²⁰ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹²¹ GLA, [MD3146 Primary School Universal Free Schools Meal Provision 2023-2024](#), 13 July 2023

¹²² GLA, [MD3146 Primary School Universal Free Schools Meal Provision 2023-2024](#), 13 July 2023

¹²³ Mayor of London, [Mayor to continue funding groundbreaking universal free school meals policy next academic year \(2024/ 2025\) saving London families up to £1,000 per child as cost-of-living continues to badly hit families across the country](#), 9 January 2024

¹²⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹²⁵ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

However, guests did highlight some challenges that schools have faced in implementing the programme. Katharine Vincent told the Committee that “in some schools... capacity has been an issue”.¹²⁶ She highlighted an example of a school that has had to “pay out from their budget for extra hot serving stations, kitchen equipment, crockery, utensils, and cutlery”, and another that has had to “recruit more midday meal supervisors, which again is an extra cost and difficult to recruit to at the present time”.¹²⁷ She also noted that there were challenges around enabling all children to access the hall at lunch time, but added that “as they always do, schools have made that work”.¹²⁸

In its evidence submitted to the Committee, Chefs in Schools stated:

“There have absolutely been challenges in capacity and infrastructure, primarily around creaking ageing kitchen equipment. There have also been impacts on school days as dining halls cannot always accommodate enough children at one time, so additional sittings had to be accommodate. But we haven’t seen widespread major issues. Schools have coped well.”¹²⁹

The GLA’s Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) for the programme, which was published in November 2023, also identified practical and financial challenges in implementing the programme. The IIA stated:

“The UFSM policy has seen schools rapidly mobilise themselves to deliver school meals by September 2023. However not all schools have felt sufficiently set up to deliver the scheme at such speed. While the GLA strongly encourages the provision of hot meals, the policy has built in flexibility for the provision of cold meals as well as earmarking additional funding where schools are otherwise unable to cope with increased take-up. The GLA has also identified a number of innovative and low-cost solutions to canteens and kitchens by way of a series of good practice webinars with boroughs.”¹³⁰

The IIA went on to state that “given ongoing rising costs, this IIA acknowledges that financial pressures on schools may persist and recommends investigating additional support for capital expenditure if a future iteration of this policy were to be implemented.”¹³¹ Given that the Mayor has now announced an extension of the programme for the 2024-25 school year, it is important that he considers providing this additional support.

¹²⁶ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹²⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹²⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹²⁹ Evidence submitted to the London Assembly Economy Committee by Chefs in Schools

¹³⁰ GLA, [Integrated Impact Assessment Universal Free School Meals](#)

¹³¹ GLA, [Integrated Impact Assessment Universal Free School Meals](#)

Recommendation 6

As part of the Mayor's universal free school meals programme for 2024-25, the GLA should investigate the need for providing additional support for capital expenditure in schools, as recommended by the Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) for the programme.

Pupil premium and auto-enrolment for FSM

There is a risk that universal free school meals provision, including the Mayor's programme, could lead to a loss of pupil premium funding, as pupil premium relies on families registering for the Government's free school meals provision. One way of overcoming this challenge would be to introduce a system of automatic enrolment for free school meals and pupil premium, whereby families are not required to register.

Schools can claim additional 'pupil premium' funding for each pupil eligible and registered for FSM, or who has been eligible and registered in the previous six years.¹³² Pupil premium is designed to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools, and is currently worth £1,455 for each pupil in primary school per year.¹³³ As payment of pupil premium relies on parents registering for the Government's FSM programme, under-registration results in schools receiving less pupil premium funding than they are entitled to.¹³⁴ This has implications for schemes which deliver universal provision, such as the Mayor's programme, as schools could lose pupil premium funding if parents do not need to register to access free school meals.

Guests at the Committee's second meeting expressed concerns about the potential impact that the Mayor's programme could have on pupil premium. Katharine Vincent told the Committee that:

"I would definitely agree that there is concern amongst both primary schools and secondary schools about the potential loss of pupil premium funding. Secondary heads are quite worried about this because if parents are not incentivised to apply for FSM while their children are at primary school, then it could be the case that they enter secondary school and there is a big drop. That worry is understandable, given that about 30 percent of Headteachers reported a drop in pupil premium funding in 2014 after the introduction of universal infant FSM."¹³⁵

It is too early to fully understand any potential impact that the Mayor's programme will have on pupil premium registration, although Emma Pawson noted that the GLA would be monitoring

¹³² Department for Education, [Pupil premium: overview](#), updated 19 December 2023

¹³³ Department for Education, [Pupil premium: overview](#), updated 19 December 2023

¹³⁴ UK Parliament POST, [Child food insecurity and free school meals](#), 31 July 2023

¹³⁵ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

the DfE's registration data over the course of the school year.¹³⁶ She also told the Committee that the GLA has organised webinars in order to share good practice with schools and boroughs to ensure they do not lose out on pupil premium funding, as well as communicating directly with families on the need to register.¹³⁷ In evidence submitted to the Committee, Southwark Council, in reference to its own universal FSM scheme, noted that "there has been no reported decrease in Free School Meal applications in KS2 since the introduction of Universal Free School Meals in 2013".¹³⁸

One way of overcoming this challenge would be to introduce a system of automatic enrolment for FSM and pupil premium, whereby families are not required to register. In its report 'Food Insecurity in London', published in April 2023, the Economy Committee recommended that "The Government should introduce automatic enrolment for free school meals and the Healthy Start scheme using social security records, to ensure that all eligible children receive free school meals".¹³⁹ In his response, the then Schools Minister Nick Gibb stated:

"The Department provides an Eligibility Checking System to make the checking process as quick and straightforward as possible. We continue to use and refine a model registration form to help schools encourage parents to sign up for free school meals. The Department also provides guidance to Jobcentre Plus advisers so that they can make Universal Credit recipients aware that they may also be entitled to wider benefits, including free school meals. We continue to explore the delivery feasibility of introducing automatic enrolment, but there are complex data, systems, and legal implications to such a change."¹⁴⁰

The Committee understands these challenges, but believes that a system of auto-enrolment is crucial to ensuring that eligible children receive FSM and schools receive the correct amount of pupil premium funding. The latter point is particularly important given the growing number of universal schemes in London, including the Mayor's programme, where parents are not required to register for FSM.

Another alternative to a national auto-enrolment system is a form of auto-enrolment at local authority level. Barbara Crowther highlighted examples of several local authorities, including in London, that are trialling auto-enrolment processes.¹⁴¹ She gave the example of Lewisham Council, which has introduced an opt-out rather than an opt-in process, which has resulted in schools claiming an additional £1.2 million in pupil premium. Joanne McCartney, Deputy Mayor for Children and Families, told the Committee that "this is something that has got to be done at

¹³⁶ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹³⁷ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹³⁸ Evidence submitted to the London Assembly Economy Committee by Southwark Council

¹³⁹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [London needs long-term solution to fix food insecurity](#), 19 April 2023

¹⁴⁰ [Letter from Nick Gibb to London Assembly Economy Committee](#), 22 May 2023

¹⁴¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

a borough level, working with their schools because they know those boroughs best”.¹⁴² Richard Watts said that “the strong advice we gave to boroughs was to run an auto enrolment system and we arranged training and webinars from boroughs like Islington, who have previously run that kind of system”.¹⁴³

Recommendation 7

The Mayor should use his convening role to assist London boroughs to implement auto-enrolment processes for free school meals and pupil premium. This will ensure that schools can claim the full amount of pupil premium they are entitled to and, in situations where provision is not universal, ensure that all eligible pupils receive free school meals.

Evaluation and impact

Guests at the Committee’s meeting stressed that it would take time before the full impact of the Mayor’s programme could be understood. Emma Pawson explained that the GLA’s monitoring and evaluation of the programme contains several different workstreams, including collecting insights over the course of the year of delivery, starting in December 2023.¹⁴⁴ There will also be a longer-term evaluation, which will not be completed until after the first year of the programme has finished. As well as the GLA’s evaluation, the charity the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), a charity, has commissioned an independent impact evaluation of the programme, which will be published in summer 2025.¹⁴⁵

The Mayoral Decision for the programme committed to spending £100,000 on an evaluation for the programme.¹⁴⁶ The objectives of the evaluation are to:

- establish whether the UFSM policy achieved its primary goal of alleviating the pressures that families face from general increases in cost of living, including food-price inflation
- determine the extent to which the guiding principles for the policy were adhered to during implementation
- identify whether UFSM has an effect on the uptake of FSM national government funding in primary school children, and specifically children from the most deprived backgrounds
- undertake an economic evaluation of the policy (potentially a cost benefit analysis) to contribute to the existing evidence base on FSM¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁴³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁴⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁴⁵ Education Endowment Foundation, [Universal Primary Free School Meals in London evaluation](#)

¹⁴⁶ GLA, [MD3146 Primary School Universal Free Schools Meal Provision 2023-2024](#), 13 July 2023

¹⁴⁷ GLA, [MD3146 Primary School Universal Free Schools Meal Provision 2023-2024](#), 13 July 2023

Recommendation 8

In response to this report, the Mayor should share with the Committee a summary of the initial insights that have been collected on the impact of his universal free school meals programme, and share further findings from the evaluation and monitoring activity as and when they are completed.

The future of free school meals provision in London

The Mayor's additional funding to provide a universal free school meals programme is welcome. However, funding is not guaranteed in the long-term. London needs a long-term funding settlement for universal free school meals provision for primary school children.

Some guests at the Committee's meetings expressed concerns that – at the time of the Committee's meetings – the programme was due to run for one year, and it was unclear what would happen once the programme came to an end. As Klara Skrivankova noted, "we will have it for a year. What happens next year?"¹⁴⁸ Daniel Kebede said that "we are all keen to establish is that this is something that lasts beyond one year and has that long-term funding commitment".¹⁴⁹ Barbara Crowther told the Committee that "we would love to see this programme at least extended for another year or two if that is possible whilst we try to push for that broader policy shift".¹⁵⁰

The Mayor subsequently announced an extension of the programme for the 2024-25. Whilst this extension is welcome, it does not address the problem of a lack of a long-term funding settlement for universal free school meals in London.

Guests highlighted the fact that a long-term funding commitment to FSM would enable schools to fully plan for some of the logistical challenges that schools have encountered in implementing a one-year programme. Daniel Kebede told the Committee that "should there be that long-term funding commitment, schools can make those then necessarily long-term logistical commitments to ensure that children have access to not only FSM but really high quality FSM".¹⁵¹

Richard Watts told the Committee that it was not possible for the GLA to commit to a multi-year programme due to the short-term nature of the funding settlement for local and regional government.¹⁵² He said that the GLA needs "two critical bits of information" before being in a

¹⁴⁸ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

¹⁴⁹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁵⁰ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁵¹ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁵² London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

position to make a decision, namely the details of the local government finance settlement for the following year and confirmation of borough returns from business rates and council tax returns.¹⁵³

Barbara Crowther noted that there is now a “postcode lottery across the UK” in the delivery of universal free school meals, and argued that “it is the responsibility of national Government to step in”.¹⁵⁴ GLA representatives at the Committee’s meetings highlighted their lobbying of the Government to fund a universal free school meals programme on a long-term basis. Richard Watts informed the Committee that the Mayor had lobbied the Government to make such a commitment as part of his submission to the Autumn Statement. Debbie Weekes-Bernard told the Committee that:

“What we are hoping is that the rollout of universal free school meals across London and the success that it has and the impact that it has is something which will demonstrate that it is an initiative that needs to be picked up on a national level. We are continuously lobbying Government about picking this up and trying to roll it out nationally”.¹⁵⁵

Recommendation 9

The Mayor should use the findings of the evaluation into his universal free school meals programme as an evidence base for a long-term funding settlement from the Government for universal free school meals for all school children in London.

¹⁵³ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 2](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁵⁴ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁵⁵ London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 7 - Child Poverty in London Part 1](#), 17 October 2023

Committee Activity

The Economy Committee held a meeting on Child Poverty in London on 17 October 2023, with the following invited guests:

- **Katherine Hill**, Strategic Project Manager, 4in10
- **Tom Lee**, Senior Policy Analyst, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)
- **Chris Price**, Chief Executive Officer, Pecan
- **Klara Skrivankova**, Director of Grants, Trust for London
- **Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard**, Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice
- **Dan Drillsma-Milgrom**, Senior Manager – Equality and Fairness, Communities and Social Policy, GLA.

The Committee held a second meeting on 9 November 2023, which focused specifically on free school meals, with the following invited guests:

- **Barbara Crowther**, Campaign Coordinator, Children's Food Campaign, Sustain
- **Daniel Kebede**, General Secretary, National Education Union (NEU)
- **Dr Katharine Vincent**, Director, Reconnect London
- **Joanne McCartney**, Deputy Mayor for Children and Families
- **Richard Watts**, Deputy Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
- **Emma Pawson**, Head of Health and Wellbeing and Programme Director for Free School Meals, GLA.

The Committee also received written evidence from the London Borough of Southwark and Chefs in Schools.

Other formats and languages

If you, or someone you know needs this report in large print or braille, or a copy of the summary and main findings in another language, then please call us on: 020 7983 4100 or email assembly.translations@london.gov.uk

Chinese

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Vietnamese

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Greek

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Punjabi

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Hindi

यदि आपको इस दस्तावेज़ का सारांश अपनी भाषा में चाहिए तो उपर दिये हुए नंबर पर फोन करें या उपर दिये गये डाक पते या ई मेल पते पर हम से संपर्क करें।

Bengali

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Arabic

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Gujarati

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