



Free school meals as long as I am mayor says Khan Free 301224

Description



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The Mayor of London has said his policy of free lunch for every pupil at state primary schools in London will continue despite questions about how he will pay for it.

His free lunches for every primary school child scheme was praised by a new independent report that found it had brought “significant benefits” for the capital’s children, parents and schools.

But the London Assembly’s budget committee was told next year’s funding for the scheme was not in place yet.

Sadiq Khan told BBC London: “As long as I am mayor of this great city I will make sure we carry on with this fantastic policy.”

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The scheme provided meals to 287,000 children in its first year, at a cost of £135m. It is currently in its second year, with the cost having risen to £140m.

The policy is currently being budgeted for on a year-by-year basis.

The mayor said: “We will be publishing our budget in due course and setting out confirmation that this policy will carry on next year.”

He added: “My promise to Londoners is for as long as I am mayor, children going to state primary schools will receive this offer of a universal free school meal.”

Khan was re-elected in May and his third term of office ends in May 2028.

Speaking to the London Assembly’s budget committee, Richard Watts, the mayor’s deputy chief of staff, said “the scheme has been enormously successful” and “all the benefits that we hoped we would see based on previous evidence we are now seeing city wide”.

However, he said next year’s funding for the scheme was not in place yet.

He said: “The whole of the mayor’s budget is £130m, we think free school meals will cost £140m next year so even if we canned everything else that we did, universal free school meals will never be met from the GLA (Greater London Authority) mayor budget.

“Therefore we will announce that funding in the group budget papers in due course.”

Khan launched the scheme in 2023 as a one-year emergency measure to help families with the cost of living, paid for using higher than expected business rate receipts.

In January this year, he announced that he had extended it for a further 12 months, to cover the 2024-25 academic year. It was again funded largely using business rate receipts which were “more buoyant than we expected”.

The committee heard that the GLA and mayor would have to wait until next year when the government

is due to set out its multi-year plans for local government funding before setting budgets for the mayor's manifesto pledges.

The mayor's chief of staff David Bellamy told the assembly's budget committee the free school meals scheme was "not something substantively that the GLA mayoral budget has the resources to do, so that is something we will be dealing with in the group budget from the total income sources available to the mayor – we will set that out in the draft budget in January".

'Positive impact'

The research published by Impact on Urban Health, a group which forms part of the Guy's & St Thomas' Foundation, found that "parents, whatever their household income, welcomed the policy and wanted it to continue", as "they felt it countered the effects of the rising cost of living and, in many cases, had a positive impact on family life".

The scheme had also been "valued highly by those working in schools", the report found, with senior leaders saying it had "helped to address the problems of hidden hunger and food insecurity".

According to data collected by City Hall, in a sample of 259 schools – making up 13% of London primary schools – the scheme's average take-up was 89.1% of children across the 2023-2024 academic year.

The research states: "We found the policy had greater benefits for families who were living in poverty or living on low incomes... but more affluent families were also strongly in favour of the policy, as they felt it acted as a leveller at school".

It adds: "School food costs are just one of many costs families face, including increased utilities and housing costs. Families have also noticed other school-related costs continuing to rise. This has diluted the financial effects of the policy for some families."

Looking at the impact on pupils' performance in school, the report says that the policy "appears to be supporting calmer behaviour in the classroom, with school staff reporting afternoon lessons running more smoothly when children have had a hot, healthy meal".

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