



# School Food Ambassador Report 2012



**Leeds**  
CITY COUNCIL

Empowering Leeds students to engage in  
monitoring and improving food in schools

## Background to its inspiration and creation

Following the Government's introduction of nutritional standards for school meals (2005), the issue of school food has occupied an increasingly prominent position on the public health agenda.

Since the launch of the [Leeds school meal strategy](#) in 2007, a range of innovative initiatives have been designed, underpinned by local research, that aim to increase the uptake of school meals and ultimately improve nutrition. Evidence illustrating the impact of poor nutrition on learning, behaviour and attendance is well documented, presenting how the effects on the pupil and the family are substantial. It is widely acknowledged that poor health disproportionately affects disadvantaged children<sup>i</sup>, having strong links between poor nutrition and behavioural and attendance problems<sup>ii</sup>, irrespective of individual ability and willingness to learn<sup>iii</sup>.

The Leeds School Food Ambassador (SFA) programme is an example of innovation that aims to champion the voice of young people, by providing an opportunity for greater account to be taken of children's views and increasing levels of participation in decision-making in the food in school policy.

It provides ambassadors with a powerful role in contract management and helping to improve outcomes for young



People, as set out in the [Leeds Children and Young People Plan](#) and its Child Poverty Action Plan.

This follow-up research was conducted specifically to gather evidence to inform and influence headteacher discretion, to implement and embed the SFA programme in their school. The evidence makes clear that Leeds students want to be ambassadors, and to help make their school a better place for them and their peers, now and in the future.



*'Children's Services are keen to make sure every young person in the city has access to healthy and tasty food which they can eat in a happy and safe environment. Nutritious school meals are an important part of the school day so it is vital that every child has access to them, which is why we have made increasing free school meal take-up a key priority. The result should be more of our disadvantaged children eating a nutritious and tasty meal every day which will help with their learning, concentration levels and overall emotional health and well-being.'*

**Nigel Richardson**  
Director of Children Services

*'The Child Poverty Steering Group of the Children's Trust Board has made the take-up of free school meals its key priority in tackling inequalities across the city. In Leeds 20,000 pupils are entitled to receive a free school meal, but of these over 4,000 do not take a meal every day. For pupils who live in some of our poorer communities, having a healthy meal each day can be of great value, and in addition to potential health benefits there is evidence that this can also improve the educational attainment of pupils.'*

**Councillor Judith Blake**  
Chair Executive Board  
Leader Children's Services

<sup>i</sup>School Food Trust [www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdkfs/publication/ndns0809appendix.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdkfs/publication/ndns0809appendix.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Gesch B et al (2002), 'Influence of Supplementary Vitamins, Minerals and Essential Fatty Acids on the Anti-Social Behaviour of Young Prisoners', British Journal of Psychiatry, 181: 22-28. See also the Natural Justice website, [www.naturaljustice.org.uk](http://www.naturaljustice.org.uk)

<sup>iii</sup> Marmot inequalities review (2010) - Fair society healthy lives. <http://www.marmotreview.org>



## Abstract

**C**reating a student-led programme to improve school food.

For Leeds, the issue of children's participation in decision making is now an essential aspect of promoting a child friendly city. In addition, the issue of school food has also occupied an increasingly prominent position on the public health agenda and has resulted in developing new approaches to addressing rising levels of childhood obesity and more recently child poverty, and academic achievement through the provision of improving access to a healthy school lunch. Local research found poor quality of food, the dining experience and the lack of monitoring as key barriers to school meal take-up, which inspired the concept of a pupil-led monitoring function. The SFA programme champions the voice of the child, taking greater account of their views and role in decision-making and actions, to help improve access to a healthier school meal. Their role is legitimised by the opportunity to engage in national child-focused healthy public policy reforms to improve school food. It provides them with the skills to influence their own, and their peers, ability to make informed choices about school lunch. In doing so it negates the need for local authority or Ofsted inspectors,

*'My first thoughts of the SFA were that it would involve more interference, and possibly result in a loss of control, you know 'too many cooks' But it's been good for me as I built up a relationship with the students and the school and enabled better communication. Now the ambassadors are more likely to ask questions (than the rest of the pupils). I also noticed the ambassadors brought other students to speak to the head cook if they had any problems, and felt it enabled students to approach cook to talk things through'.*

**Secondary Catering Manager**



by taking ownership of their own catering contract.

The concept described in this report provides a new way of working to improve school meal take-up based on a restorative<sup>i</sup> model that fosters strong partnerships between students, (the client), the headteacher, governors and the kitchen to establish a sustained school meal service. The programme pulls together the new school meal toolkits and resources developed locally to deliver the Leeds school meal strategy.

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/whatisrp.pdf>

The process involves pupils becoming elected as food ambassadors; they lead on monitoring school meals by conducting blind audits on school menus, speaking to their peers about the food, their overall dining experience and environment. Informed by their action and observations, the pupil prepares a report to provide evidence and recommendations for the senior leadership team to consider and take forward together. This report captures what the ambassadors, the leadership teams and the school cooks had to say, and most importantly showcases the amazing impact they had on improving their school food and dining experience.

*'Pupil led school lunches have led to a direct uptake of free school meals and improved lunch times for all our children. The project has had an overwhelming impact on our afternoon lessons providing a smoother transition from dining to learning. The project is simple and easy to organise with significant results, just hand it all to the children and off you go!'*

**Primary Headteacher**



**“ I love being a School Food Ambassador. It is really fun and I feel proud to help our school. ”**

In January 2011, Leeds launched the School Food Ambassador programme informed by local pilots in primary and secondary schools. The programme was rolled out across Leeds in partnership with the Leeds Healthy Schools and Wellbeing service, who delivered a number of training events across the city. The training was adapted from the 'How to ...' guidance and toolkit.

*'A significant outcome of the project so far is that it has enabled us to have much better links with our catering providers and we now work in partnership with them in making decisions and changes to our provision. The catering manager and the school cook now attend key school council meetings where food is on the agenda and take time to listen to children's' views. Getting the children involved has given them a voice and they know that their opinions are listened to. The results of the summer term project were very positive.'*

**Primary Deputy Head and Programme Lead Officer**



This report summarises findings from both the preliminary pilot conducted in 2008 and the 2012 follow-up study investigating the impact. The 2012 research adopted a qualitative and quantitative approach using semi-structured interviews to

inform case studies, and self-completed questionnaires to engage with ambassadors, teaching staff, cooks and headteachers in primary and secondary schools.

*'If they show trust in us, and accept the fact that we can make a difference. If students don't think they get the trust of the teachers they will not put themselves forward. But we need to know we are going to get their support, so we are happy to help, and we are able to pass it on when we leave.'*

**Secondary School Food Ambassador**

Collectively, the findings demonstrate how young ambassadors have the potential to be real leaders when it comes to helping their peers make healthy choices about school food. It shows where pupil's opinions are sought, listened to and acted upon by senior leaders; they are motivated to get involved in making their school better. It shows how they are the key resource to contract management and can alleviate pressure on the senior leadership team, in getting the best from their catering provider. The findings clearly show its success is more than improving uptake and the dining environment, it also helped to develop viable business by achieving 12.4% increase in profit for one high school. It also provided headteachers with a

*"I like making the school a better place."*

*Primary School Food Ambassador*

practical methodology to develop pupil's life skills and learning experience, by promoting enjoyability, employability and policy engagement of young people. Based on a culture of empowering and engaging, built on trust and reciprocal practice it means that the programme:

- works to student strengths by allowing them to find out for themselves and decide what needs to be done;
- improves the quality of food, dining experience and increases school meal take-up;
- develops pupils research skills and knowledge in gathering data, analysing and leading on actions from concept to completion;
- inspires and builds trust to develop their own self-esteem, confidence and work-life skills;
- provides a meaningful voice and gives them legitimate powers to make change; and
- affords kudos from peers and headteachers, to share their knowledge and experience with other schools.

*'Leeds City Council Catering Services are delighted to be working in partnership with schools on the School Food Ambassador Programme. This joined up approach is proving hugely successful in changing the lunchtime experience for pupils and in gaining fantastic confidence building skills for those pupils involved. Stakeholder involvement is so important to getting the lunchtime service just right for individual schools and the SFA programme wholly supports this.'*

**Head of Catering and Cleaning Services Commercial Group**



The report also captures how its benefits extend beyond improving school food and the dining environment, because it also:

- develops middle management leadership, teaching skills and confidence;
- develops performance accountability for school catering contracts;
- improves safety and behaviour in school at the lunch time period;
- enhances the lunch time transition period;
- fosters partnerships between pupils, leadership, teachers and catering sectors;
- aligns itself and adds value to established school structures; such as health forums, job squads and the healthy schools programme;
- negates the need for rigorous auditing or Ofsted inspectors to drive the changes, instead its strength is the culture shift established through restorative practice; and
- tackles child poverty, food poverty, childhood obesity and aids learning and performance.



*“ I know more people and I have made more friends. ”*

*Primary School Food Ambassador*

In particular, the importance of the findings reaffirm that its success remains dependant on the headteachers discretion, motivation and commitment to improve the quality of food and the dining experience, by taking a shared responsibility and:

- acknowledge and act upon the ambassadors efforts and provide them with feedback to maintain their momentum and commitment to drive change; and
- allocate a lead officer (member of staff within school) to implement and establish the programme into the schools catering contract monitoring programme.

The data captures evidence that promotes student confidence and social capital, as they make more friends and work on behalf of the school and their peers in a meaningful way, which reflects the Child Friendly Leeds aspirations. However, to ensure its continued success in improving school food it requires a city wide commitment and greater:

- governor engagement to support the ambassador role and champion school food;
- parent engagement to support the ambassador’s administration tasks;
- headteacher engagement to monitor catering contracts against shared performance targets; and

- engagement from Leeds schools to implement the programme to ensure continuity.

The following was taken from a Primary School Ambassador presenting to 300 headteachers at a national headteacher forum:

*“ You really need to stop and listen to us; we are the voice of the pupils and we know what we want, we know it is hard work, but this is what we want. ”*

## Pilot phase:

**S**ummary findings of first pilot study conducted in 2008.

The pilot tested the concept of putting students in charge of monitoring the standards for compliance and improving the quality of food in two primary and three secondary schools. Independent researchers were commissioned to evaluate the process, impact and opinions of: pupils, project lead officers, catering sectors, headteachers, finance managers and school governors to inform next steps. The early findings found that the ambassadors praised the concept and felt they had been given a voice. They recognised that school meals were important to the students, therefore the possibility of ‘making a change’ to the school catering and dining experience (something that affected themselves and friends) was very motivating and ‘worthwhile’.

They also thought that as they were eating the food, they should evaluate it. Some also claimed that as a result of the pilot there were some positive changes towards students making healthier choices. The ambassadors from primary schools said they looked forward to being ambassadors in secondary school, and said that they would ask to be an ambassador as they saw it as an opportunity to meet older student ambassadors. One ambassador said that they could help their friends settle into the new dining arrangements. The students liked being ambassadors and enjoyed fellow students asking them questions about lunch, sharing their concerns and suggestions, and seeking their advice on school food.

**“**  
*If we are asked to keep it going I would say yes. It was good ‘cos it encourage you to eat healthier.*  
**”**

The core benefits identified by the ambassadors were being given a ‘voice’ and a good feeling of ownership and empowerment. The involvement in school meeting and with different people played a valuable role in giving students confidence. The most important finding was students commenting on their satisfaction of seeing change and improvement to school meals.

**“**  
*I feel proud and more confident.*  
**”**  
Primary School Food Ambassador

*‘Children have got an understanding and felt they had power to make changes and make things better in school.’*

**Secondary School Project Leader**

The findings highlighted that its success was dependent on the school leadership team for two key reasons:

- valuing the SFA role and using the information collected to make changes so that students feel their efforts are worthwhile; and
- allocating time to a lead officer to co-ordinate and make sure the monitoring takes place, findings are issued to the senior leadership team for action, and feedback is given to the ambassadors.

**“**  
*I like being an ambassador; I feel like I am making changes for my kid sister when she comes to this school.*  
**”**

Secondary School Project Leader

These were integral to sustain the programme and maintain student involvement and momentum. The Leeds catering providers (council, private and independent) welcomed the ambassador programme and said they enjoyed working with the students to develop a new way of working together to improve the dining environment and the school food service.



*‘It’s good for the children; what they get out of it, they’ll pass on to other children. It makes the children feel better when they’re involved.’*

**Cook, Primary School**

The findings informed a practical ‘How to guidance and toolkit’ and games (Yes, No, Sometimes Game), which was checked by the Leeds City Council Youth Council (LCCYC) for simplicity in understanding and implementation. The resources are available on the Leeds City Council website: [www.leeds.gov.uk/schoolmeals](http://www.leeds.gov.uk/schoolmeals)

The LCCYC recommended that all schools implemented the programme and provided additional ideas; they also recommended that ambassadors should be recruited separately from the school council and interviewed by their peers.

## Follow up study

**S**ummary report 2012. Since its launch over 100 schools have been trained by the Leeds Healthy Schools and Wellbeing Service, while other schools have utilised the practical guidance and implemented the programme.

In February 2012, a follow up study was conducted to evaluate the programme and assess the impact on improving the quality of food and dining experience. The study aimed to capture why schools chose to implement the programme, what the young people think and the impact of their efforts so far. The methodology included self-completed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to inform the case studies.

## Methodology

**A**ll schools that attended the training were invited to engage in the study by email.

The data collection included: semi-structured telephone interviews, self-completed questionnaires for both ambassadors and lead officers, and in-depth interviews to inform case studies engaging headteachers, project lead officers, young ambassadors, catering managers and school cooks. A total of eleven schools responded; eight primary, two secondary and one special school, from which data was



captured from 15 direct interviews, 14 questionnaires, approximately 30 ambassadors and 10 lead officers. Of those, three took part in in-depth case studies, four in telephone interviews, six completed questionnaires and two completed a questionnaire and a case study. A number of schools explained they were in the process of, or planning, implementation and were looking forward to having the programme in place for September 2012.

**“**  
*We have written a report to the school council, the headteacher, and the cook, also the PFI people.*  
**”**

*Primary School Food Ambassador*

## Findings

**W**hy did the school decide to implement the School Food Ambassador programme?

The main reasons given for implementing the ambassador programme were to increase school meal take up, improve quality of school food, and improve the dining environment and social experience. The schools recognised the powerful role and impact of pupil voice

**“**  
*I think it is good that we get a say in our school food.*

**”**  
*Primary School Food Ambassador*

and contribution when given the opportunity and support from the school. They described how they wanted to make the dining environment more pupil-centred, give greater responsibility to students and gather pupils' perceptions to inform future school food improvement plans.

*'We felt it was a brilliant opportunity to get our pupils involved and interested in school food provision and to ensure that they had a voice and some influence with regard to school meals. We also wanted to forge better links with our catering provider.'*

**Primary School Teacher  
- Lead Officer**

The majority of schools already had some type of structure in place that aimed to engage pupils in school-life, such as a





## How were the Ambassadors recruited?

Some schools utilised the toolkit to advertise, recruit and interview the ambassadors through their peers; other schools decided to hand pick students to help get the project off the ground.

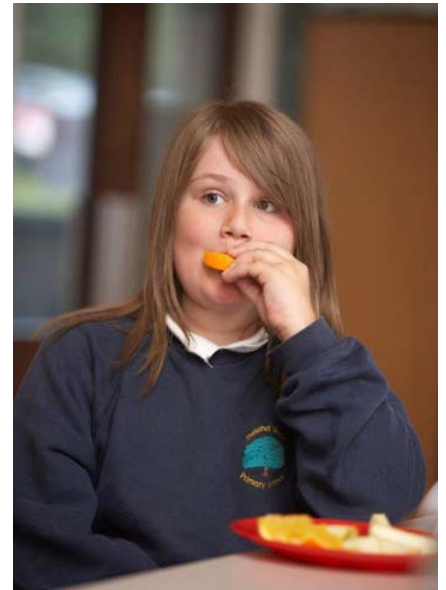
## What have the ambassadors been engaged in?

Ambassadors have been involved in conducting a school food e-survey of 350 students, designing dining halls, coaching students, interviewing their peers, applying for jobs, conducting blind audits over

school council; they saw this programme had a good fit and felt it would add value to their efforts and were certain that the pupils would embrace it themselves. They described how it made strong links to restorative practice, by working to the strengths of the pupil to find solutions and help develop other transferable skills such as analysis and pragmatism.

*'I picked a group of lads and lasses who I knew would get the job done but would never join the School Council because they want something that was focused.'*

**Secondary School Teacher and Lead Officer**



*'The ambassadors voice can validate what the school believes are the outcomes for the pupils, and it can help improve behaviour and prepare a readiness to learn at transition points from lunch time to afternoon learning.'*

**Primary School Head**



various time frames (ranging from every day to every half-term to cover the three week menu cycle), checking menus, engaging with and speaking to catering staff, interviewing pupils in dinner queues, monitoring and weighing food waste on plates, observing student behaviour, monitoring and informing packed lunch content and developing policy, preparing and submitting audit reports to headteachers for action, and delivering the findings and recommendations for action. This variety of activities evidences the flexibility of the model and how different schools have utilised and adapted the key principles from the guidance, to ensure that the SFA model meets the needs of each school.

Unexpectedly, the programme has been adopted by some schools into their nursery education and in special education centres with equal success. A special inclusive learning centre for children with special learning and education needs said,

*'The children were invited to apply using the job application forms and were then interviewed.'*

**Primary School Teacher and Lead Officer**

*'We are always looking for new ways to improve our school and give our pupils more opportunities in being involved in decisions and making a difference within our school.'*

**"I was shocked, I didn't think I'd get it if I applied."**

*Primary School Food Ambassador*



## Why did the students decide to get involved?

When asked why they wanted to be an ambassador, the majority explained that they wanted to make a difference and make school lunch times better for them and their friends.

### Primary and High School interviewees said:

“

*I noticed nobody liked the food and wanted to dedicate time to help do it better.*

*I thought the food was not good, and my friends complained, so I decided to become an ambassador to help do something about it.*

*I chose because I wanted to play a part in school to make it better.*

*Because they will be healthier, and it could help you to learn better.*

*Because we help other children and do a rota about packed lunches and school meals and give advice on healthy eating.*

*It was something to do and it was different.*

*I want to help others make healthier lunch instead of lots of chocolate.*

”

*“ If they show trust in us, and accept the fact that we can make a difference. If students don't think they get the trust of the teachers they will not put themselves forward. But we need to know we are going to get their support, so we are happy to help, and we are able to pass it on when we leave.*

Secondary School Food Ambassador

”

The pupils believed they would be supported by the headteacher, and for this reason agreed to be an ambassador.



An interview with a secondary school captured how a commitment was made to the Year 7, 8, 9 10 and 11 ambassadors. They were assured that they would be supported by the leadership team. It was explained that if they took this on board and helped to make it a success, any profit would be re-invested informed by them. Students were informed how their work would help to increase free school meal (FSM) uptake and make a difference for all students now and in the future. One lead officer described how the programme gave a new focus with clear tasks which helped to engage pupils who would not normally engage in school council type roles.

## How do they feel about being ambassadors?

Students either applied for the post or were invited to take on the role by the school. This meant that they were only involved because they wanted to be. All responses were very positive saying how they felt privileged and enjoyed the experience.

### A sample summary of their responses is below:

“

*Good - it allows us to make change.*

*Think it's good that we get a say.*

*It's orite!*

*I feel good, I like being included, and there nothing really bad about it.*

*It's important and good for looking after the school.*

*Privileged.*

*Good and proud.*

*Actually I am more confidence.*

*Proud of what I am.'*

*Proud and more confident.*

*I love being a SFA.*

*I like making the school a better place.*

*I love the importance.*

*Fantastic.*

*I love being a School Food Ambassador. It is really fun and I feel proud to help our school.*

”



*“ The school believed we can make a difference – they trusted us. ”*

*Primary School Food Ambassador*

The pupils explained how their role is more than just about checking food menus, but it includes giving other pupils advice, and expressed how they were pleased to be chosen saying:

*“ Sir asked me, and I felt dead proud. ”*

*Secondary School Food Ambassador*

**H**ave the ambassadors seen any changes made that their audits identified and have requested?

Students could see the impact of their efforts and felt satisfied. One particular secondary school saw a shift from a deficit to a profitable service; in return the school awarded the ambassadors with £1,000 and the freedom to decide how to re-invest it back into the school catering business. The pupils said they appreciated the offer and felt their work was valued by the school.

The pupils described a range of tasks that they had been involved in including: monitoring the implementation of a new system; talking to the school council; making sure everyone

gets what they want and stopping the school running out of food. They have monitored food choices and packed lunches to help inform school policy saying (unprompted):

*“ It’s important to restrict chocolate, because it’s not fair that children can have it for lunch. ”*

*I have been an ambassador for six months and so far we have been consulting other students and looking at free school meals - we have looked at the design of the dining hall and the queuing system and menu ideas.*

*We changed things we don’t like and we turned the upside down frown to happy. ”*

**Primary Ambassadors**

**H**ow has the ambassador role influenced students?

Schools described how they had seen a positive shift in student confidence, especially when the ambassadors realised how significant their role had been and the lasting impact they were having on the school as a whole.

Ambassadors were asked if taking part had developed their confidence.

*“ Sometimes other students ask us to talk to the dinner ladies about their school meal, and I feel confident to talk to the cook, she’s a nice lady and she listens to us, now we have a laugh with the dinner ladies. ”*

**Primary Ambassador**

They said they felt more confident because they are talking to others. They explained how it helped them as a person with doing jobs, and are now more confident with their responsibilities, as they felt it was an important role.

Fourteen students who completed the questionnaire were asked to rank questions using a scale 1 to 5 and don’t know (DK); marking 5 as a high score. The questions focused on establishing how confident they felt when doing their duty, monitoring and talking to other students. They were also asked to rank how much support they received from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the kitchen staff. Table 1 illustrates how the majority felt very confident.

Question	Score					
	5	4	3	2	1	DK
Doing your duty	6	7				4
Monitoring menus	6	4	3			1
Talking to students	10	1		1	1	1
Support from SLT	7	3				4
Support from kitchen	2	5	5	1		1

Table 1: Score results on sub section of ambassador questionnaire



Evidence shows that self-elected students are confident; as such this result may not be unexpected. However some students were nominated for their capacity to get things done, not necessarily as communicators or researchers, and were not self-nominated. Students also described how they had noticed a positive change in other pupils' behaviour during lunch time in the dining hall and had noticed less litter – when asked why their response was:

“  
...perhaps it's how the process is student led and other students believe things will get done, whereas when teachers are explaining processes students 'switch off'.”

Year 11 Ambassador

**W**hat impact has the programme made on the school?

Pupils and lead officers were asked to state and describe if they had seen any changes that they believed to be solely due to the role of the ambassadors. The following captures a summary of comments:

“  
The food has looked healthier and is tastier.  
The eating area has visibly improved.  
The queuing has improved.  
There is an improvement on less waste most of the time.  
Changed the unhealthy options to healthy.  
Increased use of the dining hall, less litter and improved behaviour.  
Resolved emerging issues, and areas scrutinised by the SFA's are running well.”

The findings show extensive changes have been made, ranging from increased profile for importance of healthy school food, to improved menus and better dining arrangements. The following is taken from a lead officer questionnaire.

*'A significant outcome of the project so far is that it has enabled us to have much better links with our catering providers and we now work in partnership with them in making decisions and changes to our provision. The catering manager and the school cook now attend key school council meetings where food is on the agenda and take time to listen to children's' views. Getting the children involved has given them a voice and they know that their opinions are listened to. The results of the summer term project were very positive, although some dishes did run out before the end of service. This information was passed to the school cook, who then knew to make more of that particular choice. The outcome of the autumn term project was to identify the more popular dishes and the least popular. This information has been used by the catering manager in the forthcoming new menu; the least popular dishes have now been removed.'*

Primary School Deputy Head

**W**hat did they like and dislike about being an ambassador?

The pupils were asked what they liked most and least about the programme and taking part.

**Likes:** The replies included issues about having the influence to make the school better for others: they liked how they got a say and to choose things, they valued the opportunity to make decisions, they enjoyed making more friends and feeling more involved, and they felt valued by their peers as the following indicates:

“  
I know more people and I have made more friends.  
I like the fact that people look up to you and respect your role.  
It gives you something to do, not just hanging out in the playground, sometimes lunch time is too much time.  
I was able to put my point across.  
Because I don't want to go out, and I get to stay inside.  
I like being praised by pupils and Miss Armitage.”



**Dislikes:** The replies included issues about time consumption around exams, that they don't get an 'add-on' such as a free sandwich, that they felt they should get to go to front of queue and that it takes up break time.

“  
*We should get a reward like free food and first in the queue.*”

### Secondary Ambassador

Students described how one ambassador had dropped out because she wanted to be with her friends. Even though the students had these issues they did not want to give up the position, instead they asked the school to recruit more ambassadors and share the task.

**D**o ambassadors believe that all Leeds schools should implement the programme?

They were asked if, and why, other schools should introduce the ambassador programme in to their school, the majority said 'yes' explaining:

“  
*It felt really good and I was happy.*”

*I will be interviewing Year 5, and I'm really excited and it helps my confidence.*”

They also described how they want the opportunity to pass on and share their experiences with the new ambassadors, and become champions to promote it to other schools and students. Both primary and secondary ambassadors said they liked the

idea of leaving a legacy; the secondary school ambassadors described how it is spread across the years so that younger ambassadors can see what is being done and then it can be 'passed on' when the older ones leave school. The students were asked about the future and they said:

“  
*We would like to visit our local primary schools and present the process to the children, or have them come to the school to 'tell em' how SFA can make a difference, and so they know secondary school is not as bad as they think, and they are not the bottom of the food chain – and their opinions do count.*”

### Year 11 Ambassador

**T**he future role of young ambassadors in Leeds

Some of the young ambassadors have since become champions in the city and have been invited to speak at other schools, training events and a national conference for primary school headteachers. They have welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences and explained to others how:

“  
*Helping others to eat better and eat well so they learn better.*”

*Primary School Food Ambassador*



The following quote was taken from a young ambassador presentation to 300 headteachers explaining why school food is important. Unscripted, at the end of the presentation the group asked heads to think about implementing the programme in their school saying:

“  
*You really need to stop and listen to us; we are the voice of the pupils and we know what we want, we know it is hard work, but this is what we want.*”

### Primary Ambassador

The ambassadors described how being an ambassador had developed their confidence in public speaking and their communication skills - for some ambassadors English is not their first language. They all said they were looking forward to going to secondary school next year and felt confident enough to knock on the headteacher's door and request to be an ambassador, and to ask the school to implement the programme if it is not already in place. They understood how they can take their learning to the school and felt that it would help them settle in and meet new friends.



They also said it was:

“  
Because we would like to help improve packed lunches, and make sure there are no dirty plates or cutlery.”

They stated that they are prepared to keep it going – even though it’s tough, saying:

“  
You have to be in it – to win it.”

**A collective harmony of Young Ambassadors, giggling!**

Pupils were asked if they would be willing to conduct blind audits for their pending secondary school and report back to their primary school on their findings. They agreed and hoped that schools would allow this to take place.

A group of Yr 11 senior ambassadors (aged 16) were asked if they would have appreciated conducting a blind audit to help them settle into secondary school when they were in Yr 7. They were unanimous in agreeing that this would help. This finding demonstrates how the

programme has the potential to support pupils and help to desensitise the often traumatic period of transition from school to school and the dining experience in secondary schools.

## New ideas inspired by the ambassadors

The ambassadors identified new ideas for the guidance document and developed resources for other schools to take advantage of, including:

- the introduction of a visitors / guest book to be completed by customers in the dining hall;
- pupils designing school food surveys;
- providing rewards such as a free lunch;
- engaging more ambassadors and rotating the monitoring system; and
- recruiting enough ambassadors to share the privilege and tasks, to give more ambassadors the opportunity.

## What did the Cooks have to say?

Interviews with head cooks and catering managers found that they had initial concerns, but as the programme became established they felt it was good for both them and the school. They felt it had improved communications and relationships, and that they felt more involved with the school. The following quotes capture the spirit of the responses and the progress so far. Many reflect the quotes taken from the young ambassadors.

*‘I was not happy about it, it was ridiculous and that they would be checking up on me, but as it’s gone on its working pretty well; I have seen a change of opinion and the children get more involved’. The audits help flag things up, and give me chance to sort things out.’*

*‘I have always had a close relationship with the school, so nothing has really changed except I like the feedback, and I find out what they like and don’t like, I enjoy the respect and the reports for the feedback from the kids and the notes help inform changes, I like that it focuses on school dinners not pack-up.’*

*‘We like being able to voice our opinions to the catering staff, and getting feedback from the catering team explaining what is feasible and what is not, and why - and we pass this on to the others.’*

**Primary Head Cooks**



The guidance recommends that the catering service are involved from the beginning; some schools engaged the cook from the start, others at a later date, and both methods had a positive result.

*'My first thoughts of the SFA were that it would involve more interference, and possibly result in a loss of control, you know 'too many cooks'. But it's been good for me as I built up a relationship with the students and the school and enabled better communication. Now the ambassadors are more likely to ask questions (than the rest of the pupils). I also noticed the ambassadors brought other students to speak to the head cook if they had any problems, and felt it enabled students to approach cook to talk things through.'*

**Secondary Catering Manager**

One secondary school catering manager described how they had tried other interventions which had helped increase sales, but had not been maintained, and that they felt the ambassadors were the key to sustaining the increased sales. Another said that the process would be helpful for cooks who are not confident to speak up or be engaged with school, and felt that the programme gave them a voice too.

*'I am a confident person and I'll speak up, but if a cook is quiet, this will give them the confidence and feel safe, they don't want confrontation, with this they can go through somebody else, and it's not about checking up on you.'*

## What was the role of the Senior Leadership Team?

The role of the senior leadership team was found to be critical in the first pilot and this finding was borne out in the follow up study. It reaffirmed how the success of the programme needs a lead officer, appointed by the headteacher, with allocated time and support to get it off the ground. Their role is critical in facilitating and fostering strong links between the ambassadors, the leadership team and the cook. This feedback mechanism provided pupils with evidence and reassurance that their efforts and opinions count, they were being listened to and their recommendations were being acted upon and were not tokenistic. They also valued the feedback explaining why some things cannot take place and a compromise can be negotiated.

*“ Teachers need to accept students can make a difference – not teacher going on and on and not to restrict or be authoritative – and we are not going to get on with it – it's a two way thing. ”*

**Secondary Ambassador**



Not all headteachers worked closely with the ambassadors, even though they supported the lead officer and felt they should have had more direct feedback from the head.

*“ We would welcome the opportunity to talk to the head of the school, we have not had the opportunity, but if we did have it would give us more confidence and we would know we are being listened too. ”*

**Secondary Ambassador**

The project lead officer enjoyed participating; they explained how the children had enjoyed the process immensely and said it had developed many skills, such as confidence, problem solving and presenting information to different audiences.

## Why the Senior Leadership Team value the programme?

An interview with a headteacher described how the SFA linked to their established 'you can shine job squad' which aims to give skills for life and treat the children like an employee - they have to apply for jobs and have references. Even though the school had already decided to improve the dining arrangements and the quality of the school food, they were keen to make sure the children's voice was integral to the process and not just bolted-on and felt this programme did just that. Plus, it linked to the school programme that aims to raise attainment and made direct links to the family and the community, such as the local Mosque. All schools involved in the case studies were also working to increase school meal uptake as



part of the Healthy Schools programme in Leeds.

The headteacher explained how the reports had helped students to develop writing and reflective skills and their ability to articulate their needs. She described how the report's findings informed performance monitoring and discussions with their catering provider, gave clout and legitimacy to improvements and helped move things on. The Head acknowledged how lunchtime can impact on behaviour and safety, and as such the programme had become integral in the school's raising attainment plan. She acknowledged how the success of the programme was dependent on her role as the enabler and how it utilised the 'quadrant 4' model of leadership; acknowledging now it draws on the principles of restorative practice; on the premise of,

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*Letting mistakes happen so that children can learn from them*

”

by seeking to resolve and understand what needs to be done differently to get the desired outcome through empowering the school together and preparing students to adopt responsible behaviour and make informed decisions.

One primary head commented that they now felt in a position to extend the programme to their nursery pupils and also to recruit younger ambassadors, with Year 6 ambassadors as 'buddies'; this would develop their skills and confidence to be future ambassadors, with the long term aim to improve behaviour, safety and learning outcomes for everyone.



## How has it supported the lead officers professional development and given job satisfaction?

The lead officer role was conducted by a range of teaching staff, including senior staff members such as deputy heads, and without exception they all valued the programme and their role.

They all felt the guidance document and toolkit were really helpful both practically and logistically in providing a structured approach to 'getting things done' and helping drive improvements; and believed the concept and Government legislation gave credibility and legitimacy to their role and that of the ambassadors. One described how the task seemed onerous at the start, but now feels it has developed hers and the students' confidence, and enabled them to get things done that had been needed for a long time.

*'Putting diet on the whole schools agenda, the redesigning of the canteen making it more friendly, and a nice educational environment, making a very worthwhile and enjoyable project.'*

**Primary Project Lead Officer**

*'The guidance and toolkit enabled me to get on with implementing it without the need of an expert to guide me, but the training was really helpful, and if I hadn't gone on the training, I don't think I would have done it.'*

**Primary Project Lead Officer**

One lead officer described how the programme had helped her own professional development, with a long term view to middle-management and taking on more responsibility as a key stage leader; and felt that the experience had helped to develop her leadership skills and confidence to teach older children in future. Even though the programme had needed investment of her time during start-up, the officer suggested Leeds Children's Services implement a city wide network of lead officers to share their ideas, lessons learnt and experiences. The headteacher of this officer has approved this role on behalf of the city.

*'It gave me a sense of pride to see things working and taking effect: you feel, oh wow - we really are getting somewhere here.'*

**Primary School Teacher**



There was a general agreement by all lead officers speaking on behalf of the school leadership team that there was a sense of 'getting things done, that have been needed for a long time'.

*'Things have changed for the better by everyone and it has helped children to learn about policy and campaigning for change.'*

#### Primary Project Lead Officer

One school explained that although pupil attainment was low in the school, the programme supported the move away from things being done to children, to children doing things for themselves; and described how the process had encouraged and aided ambassadors.

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*To take bits from the SFA guidance and translate it how they want to do it.*

”

Lead officers were asked about future plans; all were very positive and committed to making sure it became integral to school business and ethos.

*'It is embedded and work will continue - the pupils want it to continue.'*

*'I intend to keep the SFA initiative going. Next steps will be to engage a parent governor'.*

*'Yes, we will definitely continue. We plan to recruit new SFA's in the summer term and to ask our current Year 6 SFAs to train the new recruits from Year 5.'*

*'Very proud of the children – it's the best project ever for pupil voice, and it' made a huge impact.'*

Schools seem motivated to develop new ideas because they know that the pupils will engage now that the framework is established. Some have begun to inform long term plans that include improving leisure activities and play arrangements in response to ambassador's aspirations and their requests for 'what next!'

## Engaging parents as School Food Ambassadors?

Schools were asked if they would consider implementing and engaging parent ambassadors as a support function to the ambassador role; such as writing up findings and general administration tasks. The process will provide ambassadors with an opportunity to interview adults, and work with adults. They acknowledged that engaging parents is nothing new to them; however this programme gave a positive opportunity for parents to get involved in school life and their children's education, and this role was a natural progression.



## Other

### National and international interest in the Leeds programme

Since the programme was launched, other local authorities have sought information, attended training and there have been numerous calls for permission to implement the programme in their authority using the guidance and toolkit.

The following are quotes from local authorities:

- **York** – *'the design is simple and brilliant – it's amazing no one has thought of it before'.* The city has since requested further training for city wide dissemination.
- **Blackpool** – *'it's brilliant and we look forward putting it into place, the training was expertly delivered and we are very impressed with the guide.'* The system will help provide structure to monitoring school meals in Blackpool, and as a result the authority has undertaken a commitment to ensure all schools implement the programme.

### Added value to catering providers

Major catering providers have expressed an interest in gaining deeper understanding of the SFA programme, and its capacity to foster partnerships and positively engage the catering sector with the schools leadership and the client.



## Conclusion

This report shows how young ambassadors have the potential to be real leaders when it comes to helping their peers make healthy choices about school meals.

It shows that when pupils are asked, their opinions listened to and acted upon by senior leaders and they can see the impact of their efforts, then they are motivated to get involved in making their school their own. School food ambassadors strongly support the desire for Leeds to become a child friendly city. The SFA programme is not just about food; it provides a meaningful opportunity to develop life skills to promote enjoy-ability, employability and encourage a meaningful policy engagement of young people.

Nationally, there are other pupil-led programmes where pupils have a say in school food such as school nutrition action groups. However, this programme shows that the SFA model is different, because it gives pupils real powers, and true and meaningful engagement to influence policy and their peers.

This report also provides strategic decision makers reassurance to continue to invest in the programme as a valued model for engaging students and their families in education, and in improving school food and the dining experience.

Critically, the SFA programme brings together all the school

meal resources developed to improve nutrition in Leeds since 2007. These are underpinned by local research and best practice to deliver the aims of the Leeds school meal strategy and establish a school meal service that meets the needs of children and young people – the client - making Leeds a genuinely [child friendly city](#).

## Recommendations

The findings of this report show the SFA programme to be a great success with all involved, and has scope to be further improved by building on these strong foundations:

- **Governors:** to support their role in improving school food and the dining experience to aid learning outcomes;
- **Parents:** to help reduce administration burden of lead officers;
- **Headteachers:** to improve contract catering performance and accountability;
- **Community groups:** such as faith groups, voluntary sector to support and endorse improvements; and
- **School partnerships:** to allow Year 6 ambassadors to conduct blind audits in their future secondary schools, to aid transition to Year 7.

## Acknowledgements

Children's Services would like to thank all schools who participated in the pilot and this follow up study.

## Resources and Training

The guidance and toolkit can be downloaded free from [www.leeds.gov.uk/schoolmeals](http://www.leeds.gov.uk/schoolmeals) or [click here](#) to go direct to the resource page.

The School Food Ambassador programme is supported by a fun 'Yes, No, Sometimes' game that helps students understand the standards; this can also be used in community settings and with families to promote positive healthy eating messages.

Training is available from the Leeds Healthy Schools and Well Being team for individual schools, clusters of schools and local authorities. For more information on training visit <http://www.schoolwellbeing.co.uk> The website includes two videos of School Food Ambassadors taken at Harehills Primary School, Leeds.

**The School Food Ambassador programme was created by Rosemary Molinari on behalf of Leeds City Council.**