

National School Breakfast Programme: Innovation Project 1

Lessons Learned

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Executive summary

In this short report, we outline at a high-level the journey of the National School Breakfast Programme innovation pilot, from its original aims to its decision to terminate early. We then offer a number of The Behavioural Insights Team's (BIT) reflections from working on the project, that aim to be helpful in considering future innovation pilots. Our main recommendations are as follows.

Key recommendations

1. Develop and test innovations on a relatively consistent and stable programme model in order to ensure that an appropriate innovation target can be chosen.
2. Keep an open innovation target; avoid narrowing down the target behaviour you want to influence until exploratory work has been completed.
3. Recruit participants that are already implementing the programme. Recruiting both to a programme/intervention and an innovation study simultaneously can cause tensions.
4. Ensure that an adequate number of schools could benefit from and resource any proposed innovation that you intend to test.
5. Ensure alignment in purpose and avoid competing interests between organisations involved.

Context

What we set out to do

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) were commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to carry out research on an innovation pilot proposed and funded by the Department for Education (DfE) as part of the £26 million National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP). The pilot's initial aim was to look at how to improve parent and carer engagement with, and therefore pupil attendance at, Breakfast Clubs delivered as part of the NSBP, by Family Action and Magic Breakfast (FAMB). This aim followed on from one of the conclusions from a previous EEF-funded evaluation of Magic Breakfast's Breakfast Club offering – namely, that attendance was low and promoting it to parents was hypothesised to be a way of increasing take-up. The project was due to be delivered in three phases:

1. an exploratory phase involving FAMB and schools in order to inform and collect ideas for the most appropriate solutions to test;
2. a development and testing phase that aimed for an individual or cluster randomised controlled trial(s), complemented by a light-touch qualitative evaluation to look at the impacts of selected innovation ideas;
3. and a final phase to assess learnings and make recommendations about which innovations should be incorporated into the main programme or tested at larger scale.

BIT successfully delivered the first phase, which involved completing exploratory research, focused on understanding the parental barriers and facilitators to primary school children attending school breakfast provision. The research involved a survey of school staff, as well as interviews with school staff, parents, and Magic Breakfast staff involved in delivering the NSBP. We outlined our findings in the separate Explore Report.¹

Through this exploratory research, we long-listed a number of potential interventions and assessed them by potential for impact and feasibility before working with FAMB staff to select one to trial as planned.²

However, a combination of the exploratory research findings combined with our experience of recruiting schools to participate in trials, led us to conclude that continuing may not lead to the DfE's desired outcome of having rigorous experimental findings regarding effective parent engagement with breakfast provision. This was primarily due to our concern that FAMB may be unable to recruit enough eligible schools to yield sufficient statistical power, even for a pilot test. We felt that the pool would be insufficient for several reasons.

- 1) *Newly added extended reach models did not require parental engagement to facilitate uptake of breakfast provision.*

In our study set-up meeting, we learned that breakfast was not just being provided in the traditional "Breakfast Club" model, which involved free universal provision before school. NSBP had also started implementing three alternative "extended reach" models. Two of these models are "Classroom Bagels", where provision is given in the classroom, and "Grab-and-Go Bagels", which are provided to children as they enter the school or during break time. In both of these models, parents only need to drop their children off for school on time in order for the child to access breakfast. These models appear to be

¹ See National School Breakfast Programme: Innovation Project 1 Explore Report [Accessible from: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/national-school-breakfast-programme/>]

² See National School Breakfast Programme: Innovation Project 1 Explore Report, Appendix A for the full list of innovation ideas generated and coding framework.

good potential solutions to the parent engagement challenge, but schools running them would not likely see an increase in take-up due to a parent engagement innovation.

This finding reduced our sample to those schools that were implementing models that *would* benefit from increased parent engagement – the traditional before-school Breakfast Club model and “Playground Bagels”, where children have the option to take a bagel before school starts out on the playground.

The prevalence of the various models did not become clear until we began the recruitment phase for the testing. The initial sample data included 409 eligible primary schools and the model(s) of breakfast provision they were offering. In this extract, we identified 159 schools that only offered Breakfast Club or Playground bagels, however we decided to exclude the 69 that offered both, as we hypothesised this would make it difficult to implement and test our innovation. This left us with only 91 potential schools to recruit from with an aim to sign-on 48 schools to participate in the trials.

- 2) *Some schools did not have sufficient staffing or funding to handle increased take-up or offer universal provision for the traditional Breakfast Club model.*

In our exploratory work, some school staff expressed concerns that they would not have sufficient staffing resources to handle more students attending Breakfast Club. Some were also already operating at a loss and were wary of making the financial situation worse.

We also found that many schools charged a fee for Breakfast Club attendance, while also offering unlimited free placements for Pupil Premium students. This presented a challenge to increasing attendance through parental engagement, as there were issues around potentially stigmatising pupils and parents from disadvantaged groups. Any attempt to transparently publicise the service, would require explicitly drawing attention to the fact that it is free to students who meet certain criteria that define them as disadvantaged, whilst comes at a cost to others. This runs the risk of either putting off students and parents from wanting to attend, or arguably worse, emphasising a stereotype threat that could have a negative impact in other ways (e.g. reduce parental engagement in general, or academic outcomes). This would be especially undesirable given that we theorised increased parental engagement would be driven by interaction between teachers, students, and parents (as seen in our logic model for the intervention in Appendix A), which would then have to take into account this differential pricing model.

Thus, we concluded that before innovative engagement could take place, an increase in funding should happen first in order to provide free breakfast for all students and ensure there would be sufficient staffing to accommodate all students who wished to partake in the provision.

- 3) *During the recruitment process, many of the schools were not deemed to be suitable for involvement in the innovation research or declined to take part in the research.*

As the recruitment process continued, FAMB reported that some schools changed their provision or added another provision. This most often included offering extended reach models that did not require parental engagement, thus making them no longer suitable to take part in the project. In addition, FAMB also identified additional reasons why schools were not suitable, including insufficient engagement in implementing the breakfast provision or other practical considerations (such as building works temporarily restricting the school’s ability to offer Breakfast Club).

Finally, some schools declined the offer citing concerns about not having the time to fully engage, school leadership changes, other research already taking place within the school, and preparations for Ofsted.

The three reasons set out above reduced our recruitment pool significantly. We deemed it highly unlikely that FAMB would be able to recruit the 48 schools needed to meet their grant requirements set out by the DfE, and thus the trial would be severely underpowered.

After sharing this information with the DfE, they decided to terminate the project after the development stage, and it was agreed that BIT would finalise and hand over the intervention materials to NSBP for future use. Further, we agreed with the EEF to produce a report to document the lessons to be taken away that may be helpful to those considering funding or delivering innovation pilots in the future. These are detailed in the next section.

Learnings

Develop and test innovations on a consistent and stable model

Both developing an innovation that will work in a large number of settings and being able to evaluate the effectiveness of that innovation, are much more likely to be successful if the programme model the innovation is being built upon is consistently delivered and is stable over time.

When a consistent model is offered across multiple settings, it allows for a greater chance that a chosen target (in this case, improving engagement amongst parents and carers with Breakfast Provision), and any exploratory work done to inform that target, will be beneficial to a higher proportion of those delivering the model.

In this instance, NSBP were offering a range of models and allowing schools to deliver the elements that they felt would work best in their context. This is absolutely not a bad thing in-and-of-itself and may well lead to significant benefits. For example, there is good reason to assume that allowing schools to offer extended reach models will increase the number of pupils who eat breakfast.

However, it did mean that the chosen target was not one that would lead to the overarching desired benefit of increasing take-up with breakfast provision in the majority of schools involved in NSBP.

In terms of stability, if a model is changing over time, it is not always clear that the identified target, or conducted exploratory work, will remain the right one to address or have an impact as the model changes. In this instance, the target of improving parental engagement was determined prior to our exploratory work, based on a barrier that was identified (parent and carer engagement) to the previous model of breakfast provision that was delivered and evaluated (namely a universally provided Breakfast Club offered before school). However, when it came to actually innovating on the models being delivered in practice, there was no longer a theoretical basis for assuming parental engagement would still be a significant barrier to take-up of breakfast for schools offering other models (Classroom Bagels and Grab and Go Bagels), or was a viable target for other schools who had staffing and funding constraints.

Keep an open target

It can be beneficial to keep the behaviour you seek to target undefined until sufficient exploratory work has been done to allow you to understand all potential mechanisms for driving change. This is especially true if the model's stability or consistency is not guaranteed. Through pre-determining a target behaviour to influence, especially if it is a mediating mechanism rather than the ultimate outcome of interest (as in this case, with parental engagement being a mediating mechanism for attendance), we risk narrowing our focus at the expense of ensuring relevance of the chosen target.

In this case, the target had been pre-determined as increasing breakfast take-up through increasing parent and carer engagement as part of the tendering process for the delivery of NSBP. This meant that our exploratory work limited its remit to focus on this. With a more open approach, we may have identified other potentially impactful mechanisms to increase breakfast take-up across all of the models, while also observing that parent engagement was only important for some models of provision.

Recruit participants that are already implementing the programme

It can be difficult to recruit schools to take part in research projects at the best of times. It can be an especially hard sell when schools are asked to support innovation research, while also in the initial stages of setting up a new programme. As such we would advise that when considering recruiting schools to take part in an innovation project, begin with schools that have been implementing the programme for some amount of time already. This increases the likelihood that the programme is stable and any observed impact can be attributed to the innovation, not a change to the programme while it is still bedding in. It will also then be possible to ascertain from the outset whether there is a sufficient pool of schools to recruit from, rather than depending on unpredictable recruitment of new schools.

In this instance, FAMB had the task of recruiting and delivering the programme to a huge number of schools - 1,770 in total - in a short space of time. Operating in this challenging context, having to also recruit a number of schools to partake in an innovation pilot at the same time, poses a number of challenges. FAMB were understandably very cautious of upsetting relationships with schools, or overburdening them with requests to take part, especially if there was a chance the school may later not be suitable. Further, newly recruited schools changed the models they offered in some instances, which changed their eligibility to participate in the trial and made establishing our true sample size quite challenging.

The combination of these challenges meant that school recruitment was quite a slow process, and initial estimates of the population to draw from proved overly optimistic.

Ensure that schools have the capacity for improvement

In aiming to increase parent engagement, there was an implicit assumption that this is something that would and could lead to increased take-up of Breakfast Club. However, what was not accounted for, was the fact that attendance at Breakfast Clubs requires schools to resource it. In practice, some schools reported that they did not have the available resources (either in terms of finances or available staff) to be able to provide Breakfast Club to more students. This means that while a necessary condition for increasing attendance at Breakfast Club (as per the original pre-school model) may be parental engagement, it is not a sufficient condition. As a result, some schools did not want to increase parent engagement with Breakfast Clubs, as they would not be able to meet the increased demand.

This relates to the previous point about keeping an open target. If we had conducted exploratory research prior to the target being decided, we would have identified that addressing parental engagement alone would not be an effective way of driving increased take-up. Other systemic supports would need to be in place for some schools to serve more pupils.

Ensure alignment in purpose and avoid competing interests

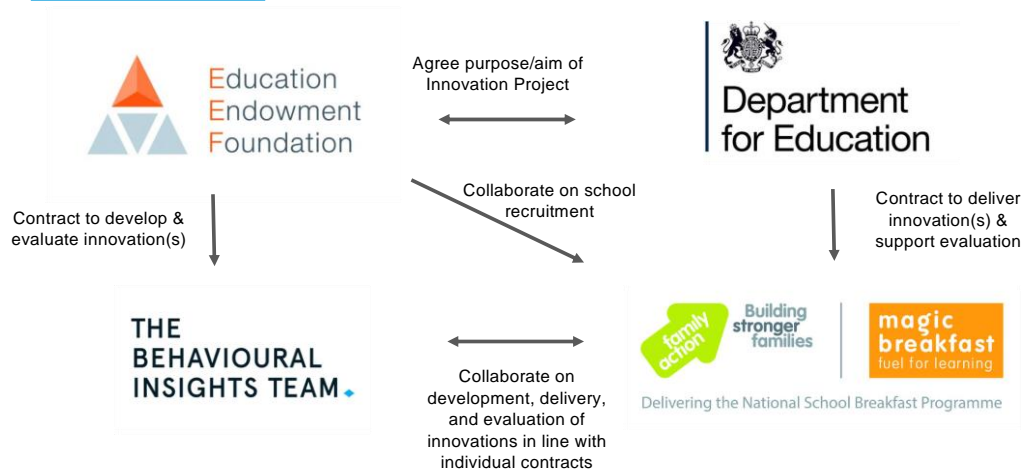
In any project, it is important for there to be an alignment of purpose, and that this purpose is clearly and unambiguously set out, along with priorities and timescales. The more stakeholders, the more challenging this can be. Not having this set out early between all parties (intervention deliverers, funders, and researchers) can lead to confusion, slow down the project, and reduce its chance of yielding useful findings.

In this instance, Family Action and Magic Breakfast were joint delivery partners for the NSBP, which was receiving funding from the DfE. The DfE also funded the delivery of the innovation project, through a direct relationship with FAMB, while the EEF funded the development and testing of the innovation and contracted BIT to conduct this work. However, the DfE also made it a contractual requirement for FAMB to support the development and testing of an innovation in a certain number of schools (while not holding a direct relationship with BIT – who were delivering it).

Figure 1. Key stakeholders involved in NSBP Innovation Programme



Key Stakeholders



Initially, FAMB preferred an alternative approach to innovation that focused on bespoke consultancy for individual schools, rather than a rigorous testing of one innovation idea. This led to some confusion near the start of the project with some miscommunication to schools about the innovation work. This lack of alignment at the start slowed down some of the elements of the project.

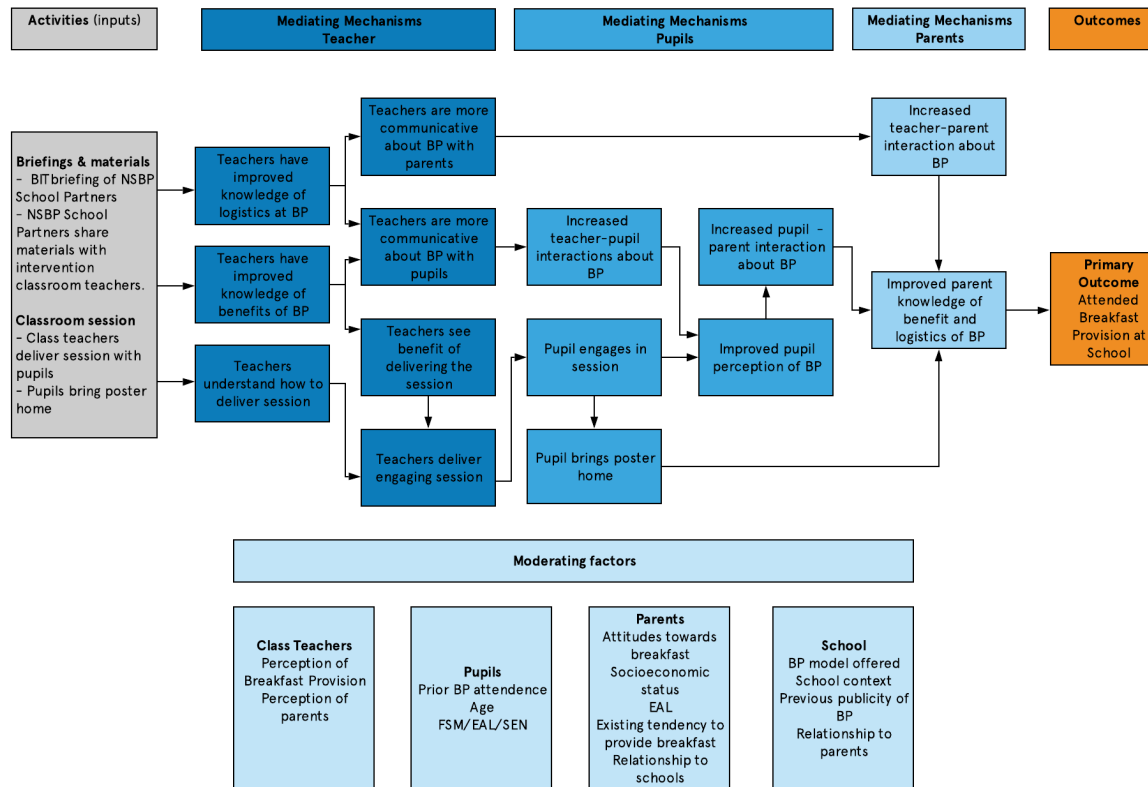
As it became apparent that delivering randomised controlled trials of the innovation may not be feasible (due to the lack of eligible schools), discussions were had to rescope the project, and no longer carry out a randomised controlled trial.

Determining what course of action to follow proved difficult. While the development and testing of the innovation was not funded by the DfE, the fact that FAMB's funding was linked to delivering an innovation project, meant that there was a tension between the EEF wanting to most effectively use their money, whilst also not wanting to negatively impact FAMB's funding. This resulted in significant slow-down in decision making and quite a long delay in informing our most important stakeholders--the schools--about their discontinued participation in the innovation project.

Conclusion

While there are a lot of challenges with running innovation pilots, there is also a clear potential for benefit and social impact. While it proved most prudent for this one to end before achieving its initially stated objectives, we hope that the learnings set out here help lay the groundwork for future innovation pilots to be successful and help contribute to the growing evidence base.

Appendix A – intervention logic model



Logic model glossary:

BIT: Behavioural Insights Team

NSBP: National School Breakfast Programme

BP: breakfast provision



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