

## Candidate Information

<b>Position:</b>	Research Assistant
<b>School/Department:</b>	Centre for Public Health
<b>Reference:</b>	23/110650
<b>Closing Date:</b>	Monday 6 March 2023
<b>Salary:</b>	£29,619 - £32,348 per annum, pro rata
<b>Anticipated Interview Date:</b>	Wednesday 22 March 2023
<b>Duration:</b>	Fixed term available for up to two years or until 30 June 2025, whichever is soonest

### JOB PURPOSE:

This position will allow the successful candidate to work on a study funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research exploring Free School Meals, Diet Quality and Food Insecurity in Secondary School Pupils using mixed methods.

The programme of research is focused on investigating the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the current free school meal policy in secondary schools. This particular post holder will assist the team in the recruitment of secondary schools in Northern Ireland and data collection from schools, pupils and parents. A brief overview of the rationale for the project and methods is provided below.

### MAJOR DUTIES:

1. Working with the FSM in secondary schools study team, assist with the recruitment of schools, pupils and parents at the Northern Ireland site.
2. Assist with quantitative and qualitative data collection in secondary schools.
3. Support the research team with data management and analysis.
4. Support the project team with routine administrative duties as requested (e.g. liaising with schools, arranging research group meetings, helping organise travel, reporting to funder etc.)
5. Assist in the development and maintenance of the project website and social media account, and keeping them up-to-date with research materials and project publications.
6. Work with other members of the research team in delivering a detailed project plan for the research, in accordance with Case for Support funded by the NIHR grant.
7. Assist in the coordination of project activities with the research team and stakeholders.
8. Assist with the development of regular progress reports to members of the research group, other groups within the Centre/University, external audiences nationally and internationally and external bodies to disseminate and publicize research findings.
9. Assist with the preparation, often in consultation with supervisors, material for publication in national and international journals and presentations at international conferences.
10. Read academic papers, journals and textbooks to keep abreast of developments in own specialism and related disciplines and engage in technical training as needed.
11. Participate and in some cases lead outreach activities on behalf of the group/Centre.

### ESSENTIAL CRITERIA:

1. A relevant primary degree (1st or 2:1 classification) related to the duties of the post such as nutrition, public health, or epidemiology.
2. At least two years' relevant experience of management, co-ordination and analysis of diet or health-related research involving recruitment and/or data collection with human participants.
3. Specific research experience and skills relevant to this project (schools-based research).
4. Excellent IT skills (e.g. Microsoft Office suite).
5. Excellent leadership skills.

6. Excellent organisational skills.
7. Excellent inter-personal skills.
8. Excellent oral and written communication skills.
9. Evidence of ability to write reports and meet deadlines.
10. Evidence of ability to deal competently with administrative tasks.
11. Ability to communicate complex information clearly.
12. Good team working skills in multiple team settings.
13. Excellent problem-solving skills and able to use own initiative.
14. Must have a UK driving licence and be willing and able to travel for data collection purposes or ability to meet the mobility requirements for the post.
15. Irregular hours, including weekend working, might be a component of the research at times.

**DESIRABLE CRITERIA:**

1. Have a PhD in a nutrition related subject such as nutrition, food and nutrition, public health, or epidemiology.
2. Proven ability to work in a multi-disciplinary environment as part of a research team.
3. Experience of conducting qualitative or mixed methods research.
4. Proven ability to participate in collaborative research.
5. Experience of public engagement activities and disseminating research to non-academic audiences.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

Food insecurity is common in children; 19% of UK children aged <15 y live in moderate-severely food insecure households, and food insecurity is consistently linked with poor health outcomes. Free school meal (FSM) provision is a government-implemented means-tested strategy intended to improve food insecurity and nutrition and reduce dietary inequalities. FSM eligibility is increasing, with concerns that food insecure children are not always eligible for FSM based on current criteria. FSM uptake is also variable, with 20% of eligible secondary pupils not taking FSM.

Little research has examined the impact of the current means-tested FSM policy on food intake, diet quality and food insecurity, particularly at secondary level. Evidence of effectiveness of the current FSM policy is essential to support the status quo, but also to inform recently proposed changes. In addition, little is known about what influences whether FSM-eligible children take these up.

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the current means-tested FSM policy in UK secondary schools on diet and food insecurity outcomes, understand what factors affect uptake, and generate a robust evidence base for proposed policy change to be tested.

An observational study will be undertaken (n=32 secondary schools; n=1440 pupils in Years 7 and 10; two sites – West Midlands and Northern Ireland) utilising the variation in the proportion of eligible pupils taking up FSM. Pupil- (dietary intake using INTAKE24, school food choices, FSM eligibility and uptake, food insecurity) and parent-level outcomes (FSM eligibility and uptake, food insecurity and school food views and experiences) will be collected alongside school-level data and factors. Multi-level modelling will evaluate the association between school-level FSM uptake and fruit and vegetable intake, overall diet quality, and food insecurity in all pupils, irrespective of FSM status, also exploring aggregated attendance and educational attainment data.

FSM eligible pupils who take FSM versus FSM eligible pupils who do not take FSM will also be compared to assess the effect of FSM uptake at an individual level on FV intake, diet quality, and food insecurity. Economic analysis of FSM uptake will be conducted using a cost-utility approach. Proposed policy changes to extend FSM eligibility and uptake will be modelled to explore effects on FV intake, overall diet quality and food insecurity. Finally, a mixed methods study in a representative subset of the recruited schools (n=6-8) will include conducting focus groups and interviews with key school staff, parents and pupils to assess barriers and facilitators and characterise schools with different levels of FSM uptake.

The study will take 30 months (from January 2023), with timelines being aligned with school terms to maximise data collection efficiency.

Workshops will be conducted to gain stakeholder views on factors to optimise FSM uptake and guide future interventions. Findings will be communicated to school food stakeholders including the government, school catering, parents and pupils and to scientific audiences. The proposed study will guide optimisation of the current FSM policy, inform proposed changes and ultimately improve nutrition in lower income families, reduce food insecurity and inequalities in health.

The successful candidate will become a member of the QUB Nutrition Research Group in the Centre for Public Health working with Professor Jayne Woodside and Professor Michelle McKinley along with Dr Desiree Schliemann and Dr Sarah Moore.