

20 NOVEMBER 2013

School Catering Update

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr A Harris – Leisure and Culture Portfolio
 Cllr R Andrew – Childrens Portfolio

Executive Summary:

In 2011 Councillors from the Community and Environment and Children’s Scrutiny and Performance Panels met as a joint Working Group to examine the operation, reason and costs of catering in schools. This covered both the in-house operation provided by Catering Services as well as how catering was delivered to other schools elsewhere in the borough.

A comprehensive report was produced and agreed by the Community Services and Environmental Scrutiny and Performance Panel on 14 November 2013 with the ten recommendations being presented to Cabinet on 12 December 2012.

Cabinet agreed that three of the ten recommendations should be developed by Catering Services, these being:-

- School meals should meet the School Food Trust’s standards for Nutrition,
- Take up of free school meals in Walsall should be increased to best in class of similar councils – from 81.9% to 88.25 (Tameside), and
- The “Food Dudes” programme should continue in all appropriate schools.

This paper updates Scrutiny Panel Members on progress.

Reason for scrutiny:

After receiving several reports and proposals for the future of the in-house Catering Service, Cabinet asked the Community and Environment and Childrens' Scrutiny and Performance Panels to form a joint Working Group to look at school catering across the borough.

The full list of ten recommendations, along with a short update paragraph on each is shown below:-

1. School meals should meet the School Food Trust's standards for nutrition;

Meals supplied by the Council's Catering Service do comply with the School Food Trust's food and nutritional based standards, using the Nutmeg food analysis software.

It should be noted that Catering Services has no role in ascertaining nutritional standards in schools who do not receive their catering from the service.

2. Children should eat school meals at a table from a plate with a knife and fork;

Children do use a knife and fork, but not a plate. Airline trays are used on the basis of time, efficiency and cost. Introduced in the late 1970s they do represent a significant cost saving.

A pilot project to introduce the provision of plates and dishes was undertaken at Moorcroft, Delves Infants, Fibbersley Primary, Walsall Wood Primary, Blue Coat Academy and Joseph Leckie Academy. Cost, equipment and time are an issue.

3. School staff, health staff and other professionals should work together to identify hungry and malnourished children and ensure that they receive a school meal;

Catering Services are working closely with Food Dudes, Public Health and Child Poverty staff. Our staff have received an information training session during the summer from Sue Blick, Child Poverty Officer which highlighted what action they should take if concerned.

Projects are currently underway for the provision of meals to pupils during school holidays in recognition that there is an issue with children not receiving adequate meals during these periods.

4. School meals should be produced in the locality of the school where they are served;

Not all meals are produced on-site, although they are made and cooked within the general locality. Any Dining Centres in Walsall receive their meals from the closest possible Production Kitchen. It is worth noting that some schools who are catered for by Shire Services have their meals driven in from Lichfield.

5. Take up of free school meals in Walsall should be increased to best in class of similar councils – from 81.9% to 88.25 (Tameside)

Statistics provided to APSE for 2011/12 indicated 86% for Walsall. This year's results (for the year 2012/13) have yet to be published however they are believed to be consistent with those for 2011/12.

6. Take up of paid schools should increase substantially;

Uptake of paid has remained the same at approx 25% There is no indication that any dramatic increase in uptake is likely. The reasons for low uptake are complex and can involve reasons beyond the control of the Catering Service. Cost is usually the main factor particularly if there is more than one child. This response was clearly made by the Scrutiny Panel.

A variety of improvements have been implemented over the last seven years within the service; a verbal update on these can be given at Scrutiny.

7. In the interests of improving long-term health and educational attainment, school meals should preferably be provided free of charge to all primary school children. If it is not possible to provide them free of charge then the maximum charge for a school meal for primary school children should be £1;

It is understood that figures presented to Scrutiny at the time estimated the cost of a wholly free service to be approximately £12m per annum and the £1 per meal service being in the region of £8m. With the challenges of the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan already being a major concern, such additional costs would be impossible to meet unless large additional savings were made elsewhere in the Council.

During National School Meals Week w/c Monday 4 November 2014 some schools agreed to serve meals to their children for £1 a meal as an added incentive.

It is worthwhile to note that on 18 October 2013 the Deputy Prime Minister announced that from September 2014 all children in Key Stage 1 (Reception, year 1 and year 2) will be offered a free lunchtime meal,

8. In order to reduce costs to make the free or £1 achievable Members would support less meal choices being available to reduce overall costs;

This option can be piloted as part of the Key Stage 1 project. Fewer choices would indeed make it easier to cost, analyse and quicker to serve, however some schools do want additional choice and are prepared to pay extra for this.

9. Strong consideration should be given to investing in school meals as a long term preventative measure against poor health;

Assurance from the Council has been received and communication has gone out to schools letting them know that the in-house service will be supported in the long-term. This ought to reassure Head teachers as this was their single major concern.

10. The 'Food Dudes' programme should continue in all appropriate schools;

Catering Services is the main partner with Food Dudes and Public Health in this project and we currently provide the initiative in 29 schools. Three more will

commence in November 2013.

Recommendations:

That:

- 1. Scrutiny Panel Members are asked to note progress made*

Background papers:

Briefing paper for Councillor R Andrew, 2 October 2013

Resource and legal considerations:

As agreed by Cabinet on 23 January 2013, the new model of achieving full cost recovery for Catering Services from schools is so that there is no financial liability to the Council. This position will however rely on schools continuing to remain with the Council's in-house Catering Service

Citizen impact:

The price of the paid meal has remained at £1.90. There has therefore been no additional impact on the paying customer. RPI inflationary increases will however be necessary shortly

Environmental impact:

There is no environmental impact

Performance management:

The Catering Service has completed the three recommendations from Cabinet on 12 December 2012

Equality Implications:

An equalities impact assessment has been completed and there are no significant Equality implications as a result of the Catering Service achieving full cost recovery. Children entitled to free meals will still obtain the same service as the paid pupil


Consultation:

Consultations have taken place with Head teachers via their Forum to debate the

design and length of the contract and service delivered


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