

Cabinet – 21 March 2007

Walsall Council – Update on the impact of the Government’s New School Food Standards

Portfolio:	Councillor Zahid Ali, Children’s Services
Service:	Leisure, Culture & Lifelong Learning – Catering Service
Wards:	All
Key decisions:	No
Forward plan:	No

Summary of report

The Government introduced regulations in September 2006 that set out new minimum standards for school meals. A report was given to Cabinet on 6th September 2006 outlining how these regulations were expected to affect the Catering Service. This report sets out the actual performance of the school meal sector during the Autumn Term, and the way forward for the service over the coming year.

Recommendations

To further develop the catering service to ensure compliance with the School Food Trust’s new standards, with particular emphasis on marketing the service to increase uptake for both free and paid meals.

Resource and legal considerations

Walsall MBC is legally obliged to provide school meals that meet the new standards defined by the School Food Trust. They are not guidelines, but regulations that will form part of OFSTED inspections in Schools. Failure to comply with the regulations could potentially affect a school’s inspection result.

The new standards are relevant to the Council’s existing policy on tackling childhood obesity as they mean more nourishing food will be served, and foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar are banned or severely restricted.

The Department for Education and Schools' transitional grant has been increased and Walsall's proportion of this has risen to £310,000 per annum, payable until 2011. This funding is specifically to be spent on improving the quality of school meals by supporting additional hours in the kitchen, training for catering staff and to underpin expenditure on ingredients. However it is nationally recognised that this funding is insufficient to cover the actual costs of implementing the new regulations, which has left local Council's to fund the shortfall.

1.0 How the Standards Have Affected the Catering Service

- 1.1 The new standards mean that severe restrictions have been placed on popular dishes including burgers, sausages and chips, and confectionary, crisps and fizzy drinks were forbidden. Whilst this can only be viewed as a positive step forward for children's health it has affected the Catering Services income as pupils can still buy these products from local shops, or bring in restricted items within a packed lunch.
- 1.2 During the Autumn term primary meal uptake remained stable and was comparable with uptake in the summer term. However this was due in part to the fact that uptake in this sector had already dropped during the previous twelve months by 26% for paid meals, and 6% for free meals. The previous reduction was a reaction to the publicity surrounding Jamie Oliver's television series. The introduction of healthier menus in Walsall schools was implemented a year prior to the new regulations, which meant that the menus in Walsall were not radically different in September 2006 to what the pupils were already used to.
- 1.3 The secondary sector however saw a fall in uptake of 13% in the 2005 Autumn term compared with the previous year, and a further 4% reduction in 2006. This was due to the severe restrictions and banning of arguably the most popular products. Although they were offered alternatives to burgers, crisps, fizzy drinks and chips, pupils ultimately shunned the products. The dining rooms were still relatively busy but the spend per head was drastically reduced as they bought the restricted products elsewhere.
- 1.4 The new School Food Trust regulations place school caterers in an extremely difficult position where the Service is restricted from selling certain products, but pupils can still purchase them elsewhere to bring on site, or bring in unhealthy packed lunches.
- 1.5 The Catering Service has steadily improved the quality of the ingredients used for school meals, and the spend per head on ingredients at January 2007 was 60p for the Primary School sector. This already exceeds the Government target of a minimum of 50p per head, an ingredient cost which is almost impossible to achieve and still meet the School Food Trust standards for quality.
- 1.6 A letter was sent by the Executive Director, Neighbourhood Services, to the Local Government Association following the Cabinet report in September 2006, making it clear that adequate resources needed to be made available to Councils to meet the additional costs of the new regulations.

2.0 Budget Implications

2.1 Food costs are set to increase as our menus continue to improve, and poor potato and wheat harvests affect wholesale prices. In addition the requirement to have a range of fresh fruit and salads to be available to every customer on a daily basis means that in the winter our ingredient costs spike as seasonal British produce is not available.

2.2 Usage numbers, or sale of meals, for the Autumn term are shown below. These are compared against the respective years for both 2005 and 2004:-

Sept – Dec 2004	Sept – Dec 2005	Sept – Dec 2006
1,039,501	903,784	869,884

The table shows that there was a considerable reduction in the number of meals sold in the 2005 Autumn term when healthy meals were first introduced and although take-up of meals in 2006 has again fallen it is by a much smaller percentage.

2.3 The continued lower take-up of meals in 2006 for Secondary Schools currently means that the forecast for the year to March 31st 2007 shows a shortfall of £322k against budget.

2.4 There are a number of possible proposals that could be implemented to tackle this short-fall including:-

- Reduced cash collection frequencies from schools
- Revised pricing structure from September 2007
- Co-ordinated marketing programme to parents and children each term
- Procurement of provisions to be reviewed
- Co-ordinated rewards programme linking to pools & Sports Development

3.0 The Way Forward

3.1 The key to attracting pupils back to the lunchtime meal service is a drip feed marketing approach, where both pupils and parents are targeted over a period of time to highlight how good school meals are now. We are making good progress with infant children who are new to the service, but junior and secondary children need persuading. They are more set in their ways and many have become used to a diet of unhealthy food, (often created at home and in the high street) which then affects their willingness to utilise the school meal offer.

3.2 Leisure, Culture & Lifelong Learning has recently re-organised its marketing function to tie in catering to physical activity, health and healthy eating. The remit of the new section will be to increase the uptake of both paid and free school meals, whilst linking good diet to improved health and lifestyle.

- 3.3 The healthy eating reward scheme in primary schools was re launched in December 2006 following a successful pilot, and we already have fifteen schools who have begun the scheme with another five due to start in March. The scheme offers free swimming or use of the kidz gyms, through Sports and Leisure Management, when pupils choose at least two portions of fruit, vegetables and salad with their school lunch recorded on their reward card.
- 3.4 The Catering Service and Serco have increased the remit of the “Food in Schools” strategy group to cover links to activity which helps Schools with the development of the Healthy Schools Programme. The group, which also includes representatives from Schools, and Walsall tPCT presented its action plan to the Headteachers’ Forum in December, which was widely endorsed. Links will also be made with the Council’s Sport & Leisure Development service which has a health co-ordination role, as does the Creative Development Team.

4.0 Training Requirements to meet the Standards

- 4.1 After successful training for all senior cooks in 2006 to train them on the School Food Trust’s new standards, further group training on “Craft Skills” took place in February 2007 half term. Craft Skills is a programme of improving skills needs, such as healthy cooking and use of seasonal foods. They will be essential to meet the even more stringent requirements as the new standards become stricter during 2008. Twenty cooks have also participated in a School Food Trust seminar held at Aston Villa Football Stadium in February.
- 4.2 The Craft Skills training is being carried out in a school kitchen which, with the permission of the school, and the input of extra resources, we hope to turn into a fully equipped training kitchen where cooks can attend for a week of intensive training on a rolling programme, either individually or in a very small group.

Citizen Impact

Evidence has shown that a healthier diet helps pupils to concentrate and perform better at school. In addition, by cutting down on the types of food that provide “empty” calories (such as processed food that is high in fat, salt and sugar) it can significantly improve behaviour.

The ultimate goal of the new standards is to move children onto balanced meals containing sources of protein and starch, accompanied by plenty of fresh vegetables, salad and fruit.

Community safety

Pupils who stay on site to have a school meal will be in a safe and monitored environment, and a better diet will lead to improved behaviour.

Environmental impact

The catering service is working in partnership with its suppliers to look at reducing food miles by sourcing fresh produce from local suppliers and offering seasonal menus to reflect growing seasons wherever possible.

Performance and risk management issues

The risks arising from the implications of this report are that the catering service will not balance its budget as food costs and labour costs have risen, and a reduction in the take up of meals due to the more popular dishes and products being banned has over the past 12 months resulted in a drop in income. Promotional campaigns are being put in place to encourage greater take up.

Since September 2006 the new standards have formed part of a school's OFSTED inspection. Failure to comply with the standards could potentially affect the overall result of the inspection. Likewise full compliance and an obvious whole school approach to implementing the standards could improve the inspection result.

The catering service participates in the Association of Public Excellence benchmarking scheme. The Council's effectiveness at implementing the standards will be measured through various indicators including its food cost per meal ratios, training performance and costs, and labour per meal ratios, as well as paid and free meal take up.

Equality implications

The new standards do not make specific reference to cultural and medical preferences and needs, and in some cases the standards will reduce the choice that Catering Services are able to offer.

The choice of dishes available for all ethnic minorities is an issue that the catering service is trying to address with the formation of a working group to consider this issue in more detail. A visit to Bradford City Council has already been undertaken to view their halal central production unit, and extra resources permitting a partnership with Bradford could be considered.

Consultation

Consultation has been taken forward with Serco and head teachers through the Food in Schools strategy group, and through individual meetings with head teachers, Governing bodies and school nutrition action groups.

In addition the catering service consults with Walsall tPCT through the Obesity Management Group and through joint work being undertaken with the Children's Fund on healthy eating in schools.

Vision 2008

This report supports the vision to “Make our schools great” and “Make Walsall a healthy and caring place” by ensuring the children of Walsall who have a school meal are provided with the most nutritious meals possible.

It also supports “Transform Walsall into an excellent Authority” because of the inclusion of the standards within OSTED inspections.

Background papers

DFES (2006) Nutritional Standards for School Lunches and other school food.

School Meals Review Panel (2005) Turning the Tables: Transforming School Food Main report.

DFES School Meals Funding for 2005 – 2006

Author

Chris Holliday
Head of Leisure & Culture
☎ 650339
✉ hollidayc@walsall.gov.uk

Kathryn Waite
Service Manager – Catering Service
☎ 653968
✉ waitekv@walsall.gov.uk



Jamie Morris
Executive Director

12 March 2007



Councillor Zahid Ali
Portfolio Holder

12 March 2007