

Meeting of Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1

4 December 2023

Recommendations/Actions

Following detailed consideration and discussions with Officers and Cabinet Members, the Committee made the following observations and Recommendations:

Funding and Time for Learning

1. The Committee asked that the implications of UPFSM on time for learning be looked at as a matter of urgency given that Headteachers are already highlighting this as a concern which will only be exacerbated with the further rollout of UPFSM to Nursery years and Years 5 – 6. The Committee were of the view that this could have a significant negative affect on primary school pupil's education.

Officers Response

The current planned roll-out of the Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) initiative is not predicted at this time to have a significant negative impact on primary school education. However, some schools may need to revise the timing of the school day and consider the impact of the roll-out of UPFSM on available teaching time and the length of lunchtime sessions, including supervision.

Free School Meals (eFSM) and Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM)

2. Concerns were raised over the potential impact of UPFSM on those who could potentially be entitled to eFSM. Headteachers at the meeting reported that there had been a drop in eFSM recently which could possibly be attributed to the introduction of UPFSM. Whilst pupils would still receive a meal in both cases, pupils could be put at a disadvantage by losing out on the extra support they would be entitled to under eFSM. This includes a School Essentials Grant each year to help towards the cost of things like uniform and school supplies. It also had an impact on the amount of funding schools received to support eFSM pupils. The Committee therefore **recommend** that Primary schools and the Local Authority ensure parents are appropriately informed of the difference between the two and that the benefits of eFSM over UPFSM be advertised as widely as possible to encourage take-up and ensure no child is invertedly disadvantaged.

Officers Response

There is considerable ongoing work to advise parents/cares of the eligibility of pupils for a free school meal (eFSM). In collaboration with the local authority's Benefits Team, the Education and Family Support Directorate will provide relevant communication on the availability and benefits of eFSM to parents/carers in due course.

Menu Choices

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3. Whilst appreciating that there is a priority to rollout UPFSM, the Committee expressed strong concerns around the value for money provided with free school meals, given the menu stipulated for all schools and how suited it was to their pupils. Information viewed in school visits and gathered from Headteachers suggest that at times, the menu choices result in a lot of food wastage and also, more worryingly, instances where children are not being appropriately fed as they do not like the choices available. Acknowledging that the menus have to take account of Healthy Eating in Schools regulations, Nutritional Food Standards and are devised using the Saffron system for nutritional analysis, the Committee support the view expressed by some Headteachers that the menu choices need tweaking to address these concerns and take more account of pupil's views in the choices available to them. Members **recommend** that this be looked at as soon as possible to reduce wastage, ensure pupils are being fed appropriately, and in order that that the new UPFSM provision is effective and achieves its overall aim.

Officers Response

Catering Services will undertake a survey with pupils, cooks and headteachers in this spring term 2023-2024 to gain feedback on pupil menu preference and food wastage. All pupils are currently appropriately offered the provision of a healthy menu that has been analysed to ensure provision of the 13 key nutrients required by primary school pupils for growth and development. However, it should be noted that the full acceptance of pupil preference could potentially result in non-compliance with the Healthy Eating in Schools Regulations. It should also be noted that the Catering Service has received very positive feedback on the equitable inclusion of vegan and vegetarian options on the current menu. Furthermore, the vegetarian and vegan options already fulfil most of the medical special diet requirements, and therefore minimise the additional workload for cooks in providing this growing requirement because of UPFSM.

Staffing and Contracts

4. Concerns were expressed over the high number of vacancies reported relating to UPFSM provision and how the Authority would fill these. The Committee **recommend** that the Directorate look at what other Local Authorities may be doing to recruit to this service area to see if there are some innovative methods and ways of advertising that could be utilised in Bridgend, including any incentives that could be considered.

Officer's response

Local authority Catering Managers meet monthly to discuss issues around UPFSM and recruitment. The recruitment issue is not unique to Bridgend with all other local authorities report that this is also an issue for them also. All local authorities have

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discussed and implemented the same ways of advertising and the creative use of social media in recruitment campaigns with similar levels of success.

5. The Committee also **recommend** that the Local Authority explore, along with Headteachers and the Catering Service, how schools in close proximity to one another could potentially work together to assist with the provision of UPFSM, particularly with meeting staffing requirements given the high number of vacancies reported. Members proposed that schools could consider how staff could be shared across schools, particularly where there are low hour contracts, thereby providing more working hours, with the aim of attracting people into these positions.

Officer's response

Catering Services, schools and the Corporate Cleaning Service already work together to maximise staff working hours across schools in close proximity to assist in the provision of UPFSM and have done so since September 2022.

6. It was further **recommended** that information be sought from HR as to whether staff contracts could be combined and strengthened for those staff who may hold multiple smaller roles in schools, such as support, catering, lunchtime cover etc, and thereby multiple contracts.

Officer's response

Having sought clarity from HR, in general, terms and conditions are the same across most 'NJC' contracts, with some job specific differences such as location, grade, and so on. This gives part-time workers who have multiple posts a clear breakdown of conditions for each role. There is often movement between part-time roles for part-time employees who have multiple posts, the current process provides clear information on each contract of employment.

Additional Information

Following detailed consideration and discussions with Officers and Cabinet Members, the Committee requested:

7. Further information as to whether notification from parents at the beginning of the week whether children would be taking up their free school meal each day of that week would assist schools with planning and reducing waste. Members recall that this used to be the standard method for most schools and wondered whether reverting back to this would provide benefits, even in so much as planning for staff cover as well as dining hall space and the number of meal sittings required.

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The local authority does not have an electronic pre-order system in place to allow parents to inform the school when their child will be requiring provision of a daily meal and what option of food they require. Most schools report that they do not have the resources in school to capture this information. Some local authorities who do have pre-order system have reported higher food wastage because the pupils do not necessarily want to eat what their parents order for them.

Cooks are trained to manage daily food production in line with meals ordered by the school. However, there are regular occurrences when due to school resources and human error, the meal numbers are not correct, which can result in some additional food wastage. Nevertheless, Cooks are trained to record meals ordered, count out required plates and batch cook throughout the lunch service to try and ensure equitable meal choice to the end of service. This greatly reduces production waste.

Catering Service staff have no control over pupil plate wastage, as under the rights of the child, pupils can choose not to eat the meal provided to them.

8. Clarification on the current projected overspend for Catering Services for 2023-24 as well as a breakdown of this overspend.

Officer's response

The current (period 8) financial position is £114,760 surplus at year end. This change of position includes the recovery of £236,747 held in an external account associated with the provision of free school meal payment vouchers during and post pandemic and includes the recently announced increase in the price of a UPFSM by 30p per meal from £2.90 to £3.20 which will be backdated by Welsh Government to April 2023.

9. The Committee welcomed the offer from Headteacher, Mr Chris Jones of Llangynwyd Primary School to receive a copy of the information gathered via a short survey sent to fellow colleagues in primary schools across the County Borough.

Officer's response

Arrangements will be made to provide this information to committee members in due course.

10. Clarification on whether there would be any potential legal or financial penalties levied on Local Authorities if they were unable to deliver UPFSM in full for whatever reasons, whether this be lack of staffing or kitchen facilities for example, given the fact that this is now a statutory service.

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The local authority is currently not aware of any penalties that may be imposed by Welsh Government on the basis of inability to deliver UPFSM in line with expectations.

11. Either an information report or a briefing session be arranged as soon as possible on the subject of Secondary School meal provision, given reports by one school that they have not got the capacity to feed all the pupils that request it and are therefore being sent into the local town to buy lunch instead. To further explore this issue Members have requested more visits to schools, focusing on secondary school meal provision in this instance, and the capacity of the catering service to meet this need.

Officer's response

It is important to note that three of the nine secondary schools in Bridgend (that is, Porthcawl Comprehensive School, Pencoed Comprehensive School and Maesteg School) act independently of the local authority in the provision of school meals. Catering Services would be happy to arrange a visit in the spring term to any of the six secondary schools where cafeteria style meals are provided by the local authority's Catering Service.

Forward Work Programme Requests

- a. The Committee asked for clarification as to when the WG review of healthy eating in schools would be completed and out for consultation, in order that they could add it to their forward work programme and provide their own response.

Officer's response

Clarification has been sought from Welsh Government officials (that is the week commencing 8 December 2023) around the timescales of the review of the Healthy Eating in Schools Regulations. However, no consultation or completion date could be provided. Welsh Government officials have advised that the review is not going to be rushed and it could take up to two years to complete. This was originally started prior to the pandemic but was then delayed.

- b. The Committee also agreed to revisit and review the item of UPFSM on their FWP once it was fully rolled out to all ages, however they also requested that a potential interim update be provided in May/June 2024 to determine the position of the rollout and the financial situation.

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Future updates on the provision of the UPFSM roll-out will be provided at each milestone until the end of the implementation.

- c. As part of any future consideration by the Committee on UPFSM, Members requested that evidence and views be invited from pupils in order to inform the Committee's deliberations.

Officer's response

The Catering Service will look to survey pupils during spring term 2023-2024 if resources allow.

- d. As a result of discussions around delays with school extensions due to specific surveys being required, the Committee requested that when considering School Modernisation on its FWP, they be provided with an update on the Corporate Landlord report in order to consider the current situation with the whole school estate.

Officer's response

The responsibility for the delivery of the kitchen extensions and pods rests with the School Modernisation Team rather than with Corporate Landlord. The provision of these enhanced kitchen facilities is distinct from the role of Corporate Landlord in respect of the upkeep of the current building stock. Corporate Landlord can be requested independently to provide information on the assessed condition of any of the schools in Bridgend and the Committee may wish for this information to be provided as a separate report in the future.