

Meeting of:	SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1
Date of Meeting:	4 DECEMBER 2023
Report Title:	UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS (UPFSM) AND OPERATIONAL ISSUES WITHIN THE CATERING SERVICE
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Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There is no effect on policy framework or procedure rules.
Executive Summary:	The report provides an update on the implementation of universal primary free school meals (UPFSM) across Bridgend schools. The report also identifies how the UPFSM offer is currently impacting on the Catering Service and schools and provides a general update on some of the difficulties faced by the Catering Service and schools in respect of progressing full implementation by September 2024.

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 (SOSC1) with an update on progress in respect of the implementation of Welsh Government's universal primary free school meals (UPFSM) initiative and to identify the main associated operational issues within the Catering Service.

2. Background

- 2.1 The implementation of the roll-out of Welsh Government's commitment to UPFSM started in September 2021. Welsh Government's expectation is that all primary school-age pupils will have the option to benefit from a free school meal by September 2024. However, each local authority has been allowed to determine the phasing of implementation, based on the acknowledgement that each local authority's position is unique.
- 2.2 Following Welsh Government's Cabinet statement released by Jeremy Miles MS (Minister for Education and Welsh Language) on 17 December 2021, regarding the roll-out of UPFSM, officers immediately started work to ensure that adequate school kitchen and dining facilities would be in place in time for implementation of the first phase in September 2022. Surveys of kitchens were commissioned across all primary and special schools to help identify where changes to spaces, equipment,

services, and storage were required. When the surveys were complete, the Catering Service arranged to meet with each school during March 2022 to discuss the results of the surveys and plan a way forward. This work contributed to each school being 'kitchen ready' to deliver the UPFSM offer.

- 2.3 However, it was acknowledged at the time, that there may be other non-catering issues, specific to individual schools. Questions were developed, which each school was asked to respond to, to act as an aide memoire in identifying relevant issues, and to allow schools to start planning for any changes that would likely be needed in order to fully implement UPFSM.
- 2.4 Principally, these 'school ready' questions related to:
 - The possible impact on the school timetable and the overall timing of the school day.
 - The requirements for adequate lunchtime support/supervision.
 - The adequacy of dining facilities/access.
 - The administration of the offer in each school.
- 2.5 It is important to note that, at this time, the pandemic was ongoing and there were additional considerations regarding COVID-19-related controls and risk assessments that further complicated the needs of each school to plan for implementation of UPFSM.
- 2.6 It is apparent, from the implementation journey to date, that the situation in each school is unique, not least due to the mix of old and new school buildings and general access to facilities and resources, both physical and human, across each school. Furthermore, the impact on schools should not be underestimated, with schools having varying levels of support staff available to them, with the requirements for supervision of the dining facilities, an important additional burden on schools. No additional revenue funding has been provided by Welsh Government to support schools implement this initiative. However, significant capital grant has been provided and this is identified later in this report.
- 2.7 The socio-economic mix of pupils varies from school to school and in some schools a large percentage of pupils are already eligible for free school meals (eFSM) due to socio-economic circumstances. Therefore, the introduction of UPFSM in these schools is likely to have less impact operationally, as a larger proportion of pupils are already eligible for free school meals. At the end of the summer term 2022-2023, in August 2023, there were 3,755 primary-school age eFSM pupils from 12,866 in total (that is, 29.1%).
- 2.8 Furthermore, in some schools, the uptake of school meals (whether paid or due to eFSM) is relatively low. In others, the overall uptake is high. This means there are varying challenges across schools to absorb the likely additional numbers of pupils eligible for a free meal, under the UPFSM offer.

3. Current situation/proposal

UPFSM

- 3.1 As already identified, the implementation of UPFSM is challenging. Table 1 below shows the current (January 2023) population of primary school pupils in Bridgend.

Table 1

Primary school-age population (January 2023 - Pupil Level Annual School Census)

Age Range	Year Group	Primary Schools	Special Schools	Pupil Referral Unit	Total Pupils
2 - 3	Nursery	261	0	0	261
3 - 4	Nursery	1,419	0	0	1,419
4 - 5	Reception	1,491	12	0	1,503
5 - 6	Year 1	1,554	13	0	1,567
6 - 7	Year 2	1,594	13	1	1,608
7 - 8	Year 3	1,597	18	0	1,615
8 - 9	Year 4	1,576	19	0	1,595
9 - 10	Year 5	1,676	24	0	1,700
10 - 11	Year 6	1,698	35	1	1,734
Total		12,866	134	2	13,002

- 3.2 With Welsh Government's expectation that all primary school-age pupils are eligible for a free school meal, based on the current cohort of pupils, 13,002 pupils will be eligible from September 2024.
- 3.3 The implementation of UPFSM across primary school year groups has been broken down into several phases. It is important to note that planned timescales as shown in Table 2 below, are not committed and are subject to several dependencies, in particular, the completion of significant capital investment across many schools.

Table 2

Current status of the implementation of UPFSM for each primary school year group (November 2023)

Year group	Planned implementation	Status	Current daily cost of a school meal
Nursery	January 2024	Planned	£2.20
Reception	September 2022	Implemented	Free
Year 1	April 2023	Implemented	Free
Year 2	April 2023	Implemented	Free
Year 3	September 2023	Implemented	Free
Year 4	April 2024	Planned	£2.20
Year 5	September 2024	Planned	£2.20
Year 6	September 2024	Planned	£2.20

- 3.4 Therefore, 6,293 pupils are currently eligible for UPFSM. For those primary school-age pupils not currently eligible, there is currently a daily charge of £2.20 for a school meal.
- 3.5 The cost of a school meal in Bridgend for primary school pupils has been static since the last increase in 2017-2018.
- 3.6 It is also important to note that it is only those pupils currently identified as 'planned' in Table 2 above that are currently required to pay for school meals and also who are not otherwise eFSM.
- 3.7 As referenced above, there are a number of dependencies and constraints that are currently impacting the implementation strategy. These are as follows:
- Each school's ability to absorb the additional eligibility beyond the number of means-tested eFSM pupils.
 - Catering Service provision.
 - Capital investment requirements.
 - Roll-out strategy.
 - Funding, in particular, arrangements for Nursery pupils.
- 3.8 There are currently a number of risks associated with the further roll-out of UPFSM in line with Table 2 above as follows:

UPFSM meal cost

- 3.9 The current cost of producing a primary school unit (meal) by the Catering Service is £3.69 (based on summer term 2022-2023 information) excluding overheads for utilities (in particular, energy costs), as there is currently no way of separating these costs between school buildings and kitchens. The local authority charges £2.20 per day for pupils not yet eligible for UPFSM or eFSM as paying pupils. For UPFSM pupils, Welsh Government provides £2.90 per day. Therefore, the local authority is currently subsidising the cost of primary paid and UPFSM provision at £1.49 and £0.79 per meal respectively.
- 3.10 Welsh Government is currently reviewing the £2.90 per meal rate and therefore this may increase or decrease in the future.

Capital grants

- 3.11 Table 3 below details Welsh Government's provision of capital grants to support the roll-out and implementation of UPFSM. A grant of £59,211 was also provided as part of the Local Authority Education Grant 2021-2022 which the local authority used to support the initial surveys of kitchens to identify likely capital investment requirements.

Table 3

UPFSM capital grants awarded to the local authority since 2021

Capital grant 1 (school meal infrastructure)	£1,162,705
Capital grant 2 (school meal infrastructure)	£1,627,787
Capital grant 3 (business case – see para. 3.15)	£1,035,076
Total grant	£3,825,568

Capital requirements

3.12 At the launch of the UPFSM initiative, Welsh Government acknowledged the need to provide capital investment. Of the 60 schools (including The Bridge Alternative Provision) in Bridgend, 51 would require some level of investment to support UPFSM implementation (that is, 48 primary schools, 2 special schools and 1 pupil referral unit). The capital grant money (provided in stages) was provided to support the following:

- purchasing new equipment;
- upgrading existing equipment;
- upgrading existing kitchen/dining facilities; and
- works to increase the capacity of school meal infrastructure.

3.13 The majority of the additional kitchen equipment has been installed including new cookers, fridges, freezers, and dishwashers and so on. Significant works to increase electrical loading in kitchens has been progressed, as well as other works to ensure kitchens are able to deliver sufficient meals to meet likely take-up of the UPFSM offer. Notable improvements are as follows:

- 37 primary school kitchens have had major works to upgrade electrical supplies for new equipment.
- 20 primary school kitchens have had combination ovens installed.
- 20 primary school kitchens have had dishwashers installed.
- 2 primary schools have had large food planetary mixers installed.
- 39 primary school kitchens have had additional refrigeration installed.
- 8 primary school kitchens have had gas burner ovens or induction hobs installed.

3.14 However, two primary schools are yet to receive their upgraded kitchen equipment.

3.15 Given the unique situation in four schools in Bridgend with limited kitchen and dining facilities, an additional bid via a business case for additional grant (grant 3 in Table 3 above) was successful and an additional £1.035m was provided by Welsh government for:

- Cwmfelin Primary School;
- Newton Primary School;
- Bryntirion Infants School; and
- Trelales Primary School.

3.16 Of the four schools identified above, work has progressed to purchase three modular kitchen/dining pods for Cwmfelin Primary School, Newton Primary School,

and Bryntirion Infants School. There are planning requirements and other issues that will need to be overcome as part of the process. Nevertheless, it is hoped that these will be installed by summer 2024 in readiness for the start of the new school year in September 2024 and Welsh Government's expected implementation deadline.

- 3.17 However, there may be a delay in progressing the proposed extension at Trelales Primary School. An ecological survey has identified the likely presence of bats at the school. Therefore, there is a requirement to undertake surveys during the period May to September 2024 and, if present, to introduce mitigation measures. This will result in construction commencing later than planned. Works could potentially start in January 2025 and finish in May 2025. Therefore, the local authority is currently working to identify and implement an interim solution to ensure that the UPFSM offer is available at the school from September 2024, in line with other schools in Bridgend, even though the capital work will at this time, likely be unfinished.

Catering Service - current situation/issues

- 3.18 There are currently 490 core-funded posts within the Catering Service. The core expenditure budget is £1,541,720 (2023-2024). Additional income is generated from schools via service level agreements between individual schools and the Catering Service to provide school meals. Therefore, the total budget for the service (including the service level agreement income from schools) is £3,408,501 (2023-2024). However, there was a projected overspend of £390k at quarter 2 in 2023-2024. Therefore, there are significant financial pressures on the service, principally due to staffing costs.
- 3.19 It is important to note that as well as the provision of meals in Bridgend schools which is increasing in line with the phased implementation of UPFSM, there is a statutory requirement for school meal provision in all schools. However, schools can determine independently whether they wish to accept via a service level agreement (SLA), the local authority's offer to provide meals via the Catering Service, or to act independently. Of the 60 schools in Bridgend, all primary and special schools are part of the local authority SLA. Of the 9 secondary schools in Bridgend, 6 are part of the local authority SLA and 3 provide school meals independently. Those schools are Pencoed Comprehensive School, Maesteg School and Porthcawl Comprehensive School.
- 3.20 Although there is no statutory provision to provide meals, at home, for vulnerable older persons, the Catering Service, on behalf of the Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate, provides the Meals-at-Home Service, which delivers meals to approximately 100 clients at home in the community, with approximately 50 to 60 meals a day. Similarly, the Catering Service provides meal provision for clients at Bridgend Resource Centre on behalf of the Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate and provides free breakfast provision to primary and special schools.

Staffing

- 3.21 The main issues related to staffing within the Catering Service are as follows:
- Significant pressure on limited staff resources within the Catering Service.

- Reliance on Catering Service staff working overtime daily to deliver the current required service.
- With the increase of eligible pupils in primary schools, the Catering Service is delivering meals, on average, to 6,900 pupils daily. Together with the requirements to also provide staffing to secondary schools, there is considerable fatigue within the staffing base. This is compounded by the significant number of vacancies within the service as follows:
 - 129 vacancies in primary schools.
 - 19 vacancies in secondary schools.
 - 19 vacancies in 'breakfast clubs. This excludes Coety Primary School, Trelales Primary School and Brackla Primary School as these schools have been unable to reopen their breakfast clubs for some time, due to insufficient staff being available, even though there have been numerous recruitment exercises.
 - There are 2 vacancies at Bridgend Resource Centre.
 - Currently, there are only 2 permanent Meals-at-Home Service drivers, even though 6 are required to run the service. Therefore, there is an ongoing reliance on relief staff, although their availability cannot be guaranteed.
 - There is also sickness across the service that cannot be absorbed and must be covered by relief staff, in particular, cooks and assistant cooks.
 - In general, there is an ageing workforce with a significant proportion of staff having reached the age of 60.
- With the implementation of UPFSM, there is a need to recruit additional staff into the Catering Service as the offer expands. For example, three additional cooks will be required when the new kitchen facilities are built for Newton Primary School, Trelales Primary School, and Bryntirion Infants School.
- Pencoed Comprehensive School has expressed an interest in returning to the local authority's Catering Service from April 2024. There will be additional staffing implications if this is progressed.
- The six area supervisors in the service are routinely covering daily absences in kitchens and for at least half of their contracted hours.
- Due to the working time directive and case law, Catering Service staff can accrue annual leave during sickness or maternity/paternity leave. For staff who are absent due to sickness or maternity/paternity leave during a school holiday, or part of a school holiday, annual leave and bank holidays will continue to accrue and will need to be taken prior to returning to work. Therefore, managing the impact of staff taking leave before they return to work, adds additional pressure on the service.

Food inflation

3.22 In March 2021, food inflation in the UK was -1.4%. Since then, the impact of the pandemic and in particular the war in Ukraine has seen food inflation increase significantly. In March 2023, food inflation nationally stood at 19.1% (source: Office for National Statistics).

3.23 In September 2023, food inflation stood at 12.2%. The current trend is that food inflation is reducing. However, the ongoing impact of significant high wholesale food prices is having a marked impact on cost to the service for the provision of school meals. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are no plans to compromise on the quality of school meals because of increased food costs due to inflation and support is provided from the central price inflation budget. This is particularly important in respect of the local authority's statutory duty to ensure that school meals meet required nutritional standards as identified in the [Healthy Eating in Schools \(Wales\) Measure 2009](#) and [The Healthy Eating in Schools \(Nutritional Standards and Requirements\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2013](#).

Waste management

3.24 Currently, the Catering Service only provides kitchen refuse collections in primary schools and special schools. In secondary schools, kitchen refuse is the responsibility of the school. There is no kitchen recycling available in primary schools. Food waste recycling across all schools has previously been considered but has been discounted due to high costs. The current budget for waste management for 2023-2024 is £49k. The current projected spend for 2023-2024, due primarily to the current and projected uptake of UPFSM, is approximately £60k. This does not consider the new refuse regulations that come into force in April 2024 that are discussed below.

New refuse regulations April 2024

3.25 The legal requirements to separate waste will affect all workplaces (businesses, the public and third sector) from April 2024.

3.26 The following materials will need to be separated for collection, and then collected separately:

- food (this relates to premises that produce more than 5kg of food waste a week).
- paper and card;
- glass; and
- metal, plastic, and cartons and other fibre-plastic composite packaging of a similar composition.

3.27 Due to the impact of this legislation, there will be significant additional costs as well as operational practicalities within each school kitchen for sorting recyclable waste. Furthermore, there will likely be increased vehicular movements on school sites for the additional multiple collections for each of the above-mentioned categories of waste.

3.28 There will also be a ban on the following:

- sending food waste to sewers; and
- separately collected waste going to incineration plants and landfills and ban all wood waste going to landfill.

3.29 With the increased number of meals being produced because of the UPFSM offer, it is likely that refuse charges will increase significantly due to the requirement for the

sorting, segregation and recycling of waste and recycling of waste, in particular food waste. This will therefore place additional financial pressure on an already strained budget.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

- 4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty, and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales, the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services, and functions. This is an information report. Therefore, it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment in the production of this report. Furthermore, it is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

- 5.1 The well-being goals and principles prescribed for within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 connect directly to the approach to supporting children, young people, vulnerable older people, and families. The approach is consistent with the five ways of working as defined within the sustainable development principle and more specifically as follows:

Long term

The Catering Service focuses on meeting the needs of children, young people, and vulnerable older persons and consequently, their families.

Prevention

While the Catering Service does not directly support prevention in the provision of school meals, it provides meals to vulnerable older persons in their own home via the Meals-at-Home Service, who would otherwise require alternative service provision, possibly outside of their own home.

Integration

The approach of the Catering Service services addresses the need for a coherent delivery of economic, social, environmental, and cultural outcomes in particular working closely with the Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate to provide the Meals-at-Home Service.

Collaboration

A fundamental principal of the approach to the delivery of meals by Catering Services is to improve collaboration and creating a unified system.

Involvement

A fundamental principal of the approach to the way the Catering Service involves pupils in decision making, in particular, is through the provision of the development of school meals menus, via dynamic engagement with school councils.

5.2 The work of the Catering Service aligns with corporate objectives 1-7, as identified in the council's Corporate Plan 'Delivering Together' 2023-2028, as follows:

1. Protecting our most vulnerable
2. Fair work, skilled, jobs and thriving towns
3. Creating thriving valleys communities
4. Helping people meet their potential
5. Responding to the climate and nature emergency
6. Making people feel valued, heard and part of their community
7. Supporting people to be healthy and happy

5.3 It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable impacts upon the achievement of well-being goals or corporate wellbeing objectives as a result of this report.

6. Climate change implications

6.1 There are no climate change implications resulting from this report. However, the Catering Service, as a significant provider of food to children, young people, and vulnerable older persons, is committed principally through the procurement of goods and ancillary support services, to supporting the implementation of the local authority's 'Bridgend 2030 – Net Zero Carbon Strategy' and Welsh Government's carbon reduction commitments.

7. Safeguarding and corporate parent implications

7.1 There are no safeguarding or corporate parenting implications as the result of this report.

8. Financial implications

8.1 Significant capital investment has been required to bring school kitchens up to a required standard and of sufficient capacity to deliver UPFSM. Welsh Government has allocated grants of £3,825,568 since 2021 for this purpose.

8.2 There are financial pressures on the service, primarily due to staffing costs, with a projected overspend of £390k at quarter 2 in 2023-2024.

8.3 In addition, the local authority is currently subsidising the cost of primary paid and UPFSM provision at £1.49 and £0.79 per meal respectively reflecting the shortfall in the price per meal/income from Welsh Government compared with the actual cost of provision per meal.

8.4 Food inflation rates have increased from -1.4% in March 2021 to a high of 19.1% in March 2023. While they have decreased to 12.2% in September 2023, there has still

been pressure placed on the central price inflation budget to support these increased costs.

8.5 New legal requirements being introduced in April 2024 to separate waste will further impact on the catering services budget.

9. Recommendations

9.1 It is recommended that the Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1:

- considers the contents of the report; and
- makes any comments on the implementation of UPFSM, or the wider Catering Service, as it sees fit.

Background documents

None