

# CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## Agenda Item 16

Brighton & Hove City Council

**Subject:** Barriers to the take up of school meals  
**Date of Meeting:** 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009  
**Report of:** Director of Children's Services  
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**Wards Affected:** All

### FOR GENERAL RELEASE

#### 1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 The provision of school meals is a valuable means of promoting healthy eating habits and forms part of a wider process in our schools of supporting a healthy lifestyle for all pupils. Increasing the take up of school meals, whether paid meals or pupils entitled to free school meals, will contribute towards improving the life chances of pupils and to the Council's childhood obesity targets. The availability of a nutritious midday meal also helps pupils make the most of their school day, aids concentration and helps their full participation in school activities.
- 1.2 A packed lunch provided by a parent or carer can also meet high nutritional standards and provide the benefits described above. However, in some cases pupils with a packed lunch will not be provided with the nutritionally balanced midday meal they need. It is also more difficult for schools to monitor whether the lunch provided will sustain the pupil through the school day. The Council seeks to increase the number of school meals taken by paying customers and to ensure that those entitled to a free school meal take it.
- 1.3 Appendix 1 is the response provided by Public Health to the two remaining Councillor questions on health inequalities and possible sources on funding trail free-school meal pilot projects.

#### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the factors influencing the level of take up for school meals, including the information supplied in Appendix 1.
- 2.2 That the Committee notes the measures being taken to increase the level of take up for paid and free meals.

- 2.3 That the Committee determines whether it should take any further action with regard to the take up of school meals.

### **3. RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION/CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS:**

- 3.1 School meals take up within the Brighton & Hove primary schools is currently 33.7%. Secondary numbers are at 21%. However, these are taken for NI (National Indicator) 52 for 2008 -2009 published 9 July 2009 which does not take into account pupil absences, examination leave, snow closures or other factors affecting the possible take up of school meals. Nonetheless there is clearly room to build meals numbers. The primary figure is above average for the South East (27.9%), our neighbouring authorities reported the following primary school uptake figures – East Sussex (32%), Kent (31.4%) and West Sussex (10.8%) but below the 43% National uptake figure. The take up at secondary is significantly below the SE average which is 30.4%. E. Sussex (28.6%), Kent (30.6%), West Sussex (26.3%), National figure 38%. However, a significant proportion of secondary children eat at morning break time, and this is not taken into account in NI52 which only records lunch time service. On the basis of the same indicator the proportion of entitled pupils taking free meals in Brighton & Hove is 73% in primary and 71% in secondary. Again, these figures do not take into account pupil absence or other reasons they might not be in school to take a meal.
- 3.2 Meals numbers locally have not fully recovered from the fall that took place in 2005 following Jamie Oliver's television series and the subsequent national media attention. Since that time the Government has introduced prescribed nutritional standards for school meals, and locally the cost of producing school meals has increased through the introduction of more fresh ingredients and a reduction in the use of processed foods. This together with above inflation food costs has increased school meal costs considerably. The current selling price per meal to parents for a primary school meal (£1.90, increased to £2 in September) does not cover the full cost of providing a meal; the difference is currently met using the School Lunch Grant. The grant is confirmed for the next two academic years, beyond that its future is not yet known. If it was withdrawn by the Government then the Council would need either to increase the price of a school meal to parents or find alternative funding to maintain the subsidy. Such an increase would also impact on the free school meals budget which the Council must provide to cover the costs of free school meals.
- 3.3 At present all primary and special schools meals are provided as part of a contract with Chartwells, part of the Compass Group. The recently extended contract is due to finish 31 July 2011. Schools may choose to buy into the contract or make their own school meals arrangements. From September 2009 six secondary schools will provide meals, including free meals to entitled pupils, through their own individually negotiated contracts. The three schools within the PFI contract have their meals supplied as part of the PFI contractual arrangements.

3.4 Experience shows that pupils choose whether or not to have lunch based on a number of different reasons. The key determinants are identified below:

- a) Do they like the meal which is on offer? Evidence from the Hull free meals experiment showed even when all meals are provided free of charge children will not eat what they do not like.
- b) Do customers recognise the food on offer? The School Food Trust nutrient based standards require more traditional style meals to meet the nutrient target. There is a lack of confidence/knowledge of some food items by pupils.
- c) Price of the meal. High prices and large increases will deter pupils and their parents especially larger families.
- d) Methods of payment. Ease and speed of payment may encourage take up as the child's lunch time is not then all taken up over the meal. An online cashless pre-payment system is likely to improve take up by making the system more convenient for parents and carers. Potentially it can also provide detailed information on the pattern of meals take up and even pupil level data.
- e) The layout and seating of the dining room. Can children sit with their friends? Are pupils segregated by lunch choice e.g. packed lunches on one table and school meals on others?
- f) The dining room environment and the length of the lunch break. Are children expected to rush through a meal? Do they spend a long time queuing?
- g) Support and encouragement from lunch time supervisory staff. Do they assist children in taking their meal or is their time taken up dealing with administrative tasks or other duties?
- h) Are packed lunchers allowed to eat outside in the summer months?
- i) The levels of noise in the dining room.

3.5 The Council's responses to these issues are:

- a) Extensive work is taking place in partnership with the contractor for primary schools in order to deliver a popular menu which nonetheless delivers on prescribed nutritional standards. This is made harder by the inevitability that some children have a preference for food which less healthy. Schools, the Healthy Schools Team and the School Meals Team are working together with schools to promote healthy menus and have recently launched an incentive scheme which encourage children to eat fruit and vegetables.
- b) Schools, the Healthy Schools Team and the School Meals Team are also working with pupils to develop their knowledge of food items and their

willingness to try them. In many schools this includes taking part in growing and preparing fruit and vegetables, the identification of foods to pupils verbally and encouragement from cooks to try new things

- c) The actual cost of supplying a school meal is already subsidised by 13-23p per meal or approximately £150 - £200k annually (this is income collected over payment made and does not include any other costs). If the School Lunch Grant does not continue beyond 2011 the cost of supplying a meal will rise. If the full cost is passed on to parents this could reduce the take up of meals. The Council will need to identify this as a budget pressure if the grant is discontinued and it wishes to maintain an element of subsidy.
- d) The Council has assessed a number of cashless systems which allow online payment or payment via Pay Point. It has looked at the back office systems and at the need for tills which can capture data at point of sale. A pilot of around six schools is scheduled for November 2009. If successful this would be rolled out, subject to funding, to all primary schools. A cashless system would also ensure that free meals pupils would not be identifiable to others through payment systems.
- e) The School Meals Manager has already visited a number of schools and worked in partnership with schools and the contractor with the overall aim of improving children's dining experience. This process also includes;
  - Assessing the length of the lunch break, is sufficient time allowed for pupils to queue and eat; recommendations have included the provision of new servery equipment, a move from flight trays to proper trays, china plates and bowls, a change in queuing arrangements to remove identification of free school meal pupils, and changes in the way that tables and chairs are laid out and ensuring that they are not put away whilst pupils are eating.
  - Visits have also resulted in; analysis of how the time of midday supervisory staff can best be used, moving where possible away from administrative tasks and towards helping children in the dining room.
  - Whilst allowing children with packed lunches to eat outside is a decision for individual schools they must be aware of the potential impact on meals take up. The decision may be affected by space constraints.
  - Noise levels are affected by the building in which meals are served, pupil numbers and the expectations and pupil management of individual schools. A calm dining room environment should be encouraged and can be supported by the availability of midday supervisory staff, effective room layout and clear behavioural expectations.
- f) The School Meals Manager is undertaking a review of the Free School Meal claims process to identify ways to ensure that those entitled to claim free meals register their eligibility and also once received, claims are dealt with efficiently and entitlement confirmed to schools within 5 days.

## **4. CONSULTATION**

- 4.1 Primary and special schools are consulted during the contract lifecycle as to whether they wish to be part of the corporate school meals contract, and if they choose not to participate they would need to make their own arrangements.

- 4.2 A Best Value school meals forum acts as a consultative group on primary school meals related issues. Its membership includes school headteachers, the School Meals Manager and a Healthy Schools Team representative.
- 4.3 The School Meals manager is carrying out a rolling programme of school visits to assess both meal and service quality in primary schools. This programme and the regular monitoring visits include discussion with pupils to identify their views on how meals are served, food likes and dislikes and any other comments.
- 4.4 Product taster session will be introduced during the next academic year to enable pupils to sample new foods prior to their inclusion on the menu cycle; we will also work with schools to trial – “Invite an adult to lunch” days to enable parents to taste meals provided, change perception and to help support pupils in knife and fork skills
- 4.5 The School Meals Team has updated the school meals pages on the Brighton & Hove website ([www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/schoolmeals](http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/schoolmeals)) and set up an open e-mail address for enquiries and comments relating to school meals, [schoolmeals@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:schoolmeals@brighton-hove.gov.uk) which is available to pupils, parents and others wishing to comment.
- 4.6 Information relating to Free School Meals is now clearly linked on the web pages and a [freeschoolmeals@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:freeschoolmeals@brighton-hove.gov.uk) email address has been set up to enable schools, parents or carers to contact us with regards free school meals

## **5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:**

### Financial Implications:

- 5.1 It is not possible to quantify the financial impact of any change in the level of take up in meals at this stage, which could in fact result in an increase in costs to the Council if the number of free meals increases or indeed a reduction in costs if the number of paid-for meals increases. It will be necessary to continue to monitor the number of meals being taken with a view to identifying a trend that can then be costed. However, any net increase in costs to the Council will be offset by the use of the School Lunch Grant, which for 2009/10 is £310,000 with £120,000 already allocated to secondary schools leaving £190,000 as yet uncommitted. This grant is only confirmed until 2010/11 and it is not yet known if there will be any ongoing funding. If the funding ends the City Council will need to make provision through its own resources to cover the increased cost of free meals. It may also wish to consider supporting the cost of paid meals so that meals take up is maintained at a sustainable level should the grant be withdrawn in 2011.

The cost of the pilot test of the cashless tills is estimated to be £25,000 and can be funded by existing budgets and/or use of the School Lunch Grant. Should this be successful it would be necessary to identify the costs and funding of introducing the system to all primary schools “

*Finance Officer Consulted: Michelle Herington Date: 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009*

Legal Implications:

- 5.2 The Council has the power to provide paid school meals by virtue of the Education Act 1996, as amended. The Council also has a duty to provide free meals to those who qualify on low income grounds. The Council must also ensure that school meals meet the Government's prescribed nutritional standards.

*Lawyer Consulted: Serena Kynaston*

*Date: 28<sup>th</sup> July 2009*

Equalities Implications:

- 5.3 The provision of a free healthy lunchtime meal for those pupils who are entitled through low family income will have a direct and positive impact on their performance in school. In providing school meals the Council must be mindful of the dietary implications arising from religious affiliation and philosophical convictions such as vegetarianism.

Sustainability Implications:

- 5.4 The Council is committed to improving the sustainability of the school meals service through encouraging the use wherever possible of local suppliers and sustainable sourcing including food miles, food provenance and the use of seasonal ingredients. Alongside this the school meals team are assessing energy efficiency when procuring replacement equipment and plan to work with the Carbon Officer, where possible, to reduce energy usage within kitchens

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.5 There are no direct implications for crime and disorder.

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.6 The role of school food in promoting children's nutrition, growth and development and health is clear. The provision of good quality food and drink within schools will contribute to the Council's targets on healthy lifestyles and tackling childhood obesity. This positive impact will be spread through increased take up of school meals.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 5.7 Increased take up of school meals together with improved nutritional standards in school meals and the partnership working with the Healthy Schools team will positively contribute to the current and future well being of children attending the City's schools.
- 5.8 Increased take up of school meals improves the city's economic well-being through employment opportunity in schools and also local supply companies.

## **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

### **Appendices:**

1. Response from the NHS Brighton and Hove and Brighton and Hove City Council Public Health Directorate.

**Documents in Members' Rooms:** None

**Background Documents:** None

