

School Food Task Group
Thursday 26th February 2009

REPORT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND EDUCATION ON SCHOOL MEALS

Purpose of the report

- 1 To set out the issues involved in developing a new framework for school meal provision in Wiltshire

Background

- 2 The current legal framework governing the provision of meals in schools was established in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. Under this legislation local authorities were obliged to consult with schools on the delegation of responsibilities for the provision of school meals, and for the maintenance of school kitchens, to individual schools. Within Wiltshire the decision was taken that both of these responsibilities should be delegated to all schools from April 2001.
- 3 The decision to delegate funding and responsibilities in this way coincided with the development and tendering of a new contract for facilities management within Wiltshire County Council as a whole, and this was intended to include school meals provision. The proposed contract included provision for investment in and development of the school meals infrastructure as well as the direct provision of meals. The viability of these provisions was dependent upon a sufficiently large number of schools taking up the contract. In the event, only 119 schools of the 180 who initially expressed interest the contract actually took up the option, leading to a re-negotiation and restructuring of the contract conditions.
- 4 Following the corporate decision to extend the original contract with Sodexo for a further two years, the 109 schools in the contract in 2008 were offered the opportunity to remain in the contract until 2010. Only 79 schools chose to do so, with the remainder taking services in house, finding alternative contractors or ceasing to provide school meals.
- 5 In 2005, following well publicised national concerns, the government funded a number of initiatives to improve the quality of school meals. In Wiltshire this enabled a school meals strategy coordinator post to be funded to develop an overall strategy, to establish a broad based partnership group (the School Nutrition Action Group – SNAG), to provide direct support to schools and to coordinate work across a number of different strands. Although this particular funding ended in August 2008, the work of the current coordinator has continued to be funded by NHS Wiltshire.
- 6 A major thrust of current government policy has been the development of statutory nutritional standards for school meals, as well as a new national performance indicator for school meal take up. These standards are also linked to the Healthy Schools and Obesity targets, while there has been some concern to link the actual provision of meals with curricular provision – learning to cook – work with parents and in Children’s centres. Within the Wiltshire Children and Young People’s Plan there is specific reference to the improvement of school meals as part of the Obesity priority.

- 7 A significant emergent issue has been the inconsistent provision of kitchen/servery facilities across the County, reflecting both individual school management decisions and the difficulties of maintaining and equipping increasingly obsolescent buildings and plant. This issue has been recognised nationally, and a major bid for capital funding – including a commitment for 50% funding from the schools involved – has been submitted to the DCSF.
- 8 A further related and more recent issue is that of the long term viability and financial sustainability of the school meals service, particularly in small schools. To some extent this has been masked by the funding and support initiatives of the past few years, but there is now evidence that some of those schools which have embarked on innovative approaches are now finding these difficult to sustain, as changes of personnel and loss of initial enthusiasm begin to impact. These difficulties are compounded by the overall economic pressures on small businesses – particularly catering businesses - who are finding the school market does not provide a sufficient return and in some cases are ceasing to trade

Issues for consideration

- 9 There are thus a number of significant issues which need to be resolved in the near future with regard to the future direction of school meals policy in the authority. These include:
- Clarifying the role of school meal provision within broader approaches to healthy schools, parenting and obesity strategies
 - Developing links between school meals and curriculum provision
 - Determining and monitoring the significance of the performance indicator on school meal take up within the overall performance management frameworks of the Wiltshire Council and the Children and Young People's Trust Board
 - Supporting schools in maintaining services and meeting statutory nutritional guidelines
 - Ensuring the financial sustainability of school meals services
 - Maintaining the viability of the existing physical infrastructure and equipment of school kitchens
 - Developing commissioning and contracting arrangements for school meals services, including clarifying the respective roles of schools and the local authority and, where appropriate, supporting schools in commissioning and contracting
- 10 The Department for Children and Education will be discussing these – and any other relevant issues raised by the Scrutiny Task Group – with strategic partners in NHS Wiltshire, Schools Forum, and the Children and Young People's Trust Board with a view to developing a shared approach to commissioning the school meals service which can inform the tendering process for 2010.

Recommendation

- 11 The Scrutiny Task Group is invited to comment as appropriate on the issues raised in this report.

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