

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25th January 2008

Scrutiny Review of the School Meals Service in North Yorkshire

Purpose of Report

This report asks the Committee to note the information in the report attached at Annex A and the recommendations set out on page 14 of that report .

Background

2. The Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee agreed, with the support of the Catering Board and the Executive Member, to undertake an objective review of the School Meals Catering Service to ensure that children and their families are receiving good quality nutritionally balanced school meals which represent value for money.

The focus of this review has been to look at the pressures on the service, consider a number of service provision options and to take the opportunity to visit a number of primary schools and talk to children, parents, head teachers and catering staff.

This review has identified that the in house catering service provides a good all round service against a number of growing pressures. The findings and recommendations of the Task Group are set out in the report attached at annex A.

Recommendation

1. The Committee is asked to note the information in the report attached at Annex A and the recommendations set out on page 14 of that report

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17th January 2008

YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL MEALS SERVICE

Report of the Task Group

The Government has an ambitious programme to transform school food in the wider drive, both locally and nationally, to improve the health and well-being of our children and to tackle the increasing problem of child obesity.

The Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee agreed, with the support of the Catering Board and the Executive Member, to undertake an objective review of the School Meal Catering Service to ensure that children and their families are receiving good quality nutritionally balanced school meals which represent value for money.

North Yorkshire adopted a healthy eating strategy in September 2004. This move saw an increase in the purchase of fresh produce, sourced where possible from local producers, increased labour costs associated with the preparation and cooking of fresh produce, improved access to suitable staff training programmes and appropriately equipped kitchens.

The Task Group considered there were three potential areas affecting the provision of a school meals service. The first being the increase in food costs, both at a local and national level, secondly the implementation of the Government's school food nutritional standards and thirdly, the impact of job evaluation.

Focusing on these three areas the Task Group agreed to consider a number of service provision options. These options are:

- i) Maintain the current service
- ii) Increase the number of transported meals
- iii) Explore the option of regenerated frozen meals
- iv) Pass responsibility to schools

In addition the Task Group agreed to:

- Consider strategies and initiatives to increase the up-take of school meals.
- Visit a number of Primary Schools to sample a school meal
- Consult with children, parents and teachers at the Primary Schools visited
- Consult with other local authorities

Every Child Matters key outcomes significant to this review are: Be healthy
Enjoying & Achieving

North Yorkshire Children & Young Peoples Plan - Objective 1.4

- Support parents/carers and families to promote and choose healthy choices for their children and young people.

Corporate Objectives relevant to this Review:

- Growing up prepared for the future

The Current Service Provider

North Yorkshire County Caterers has been the provider of the School Meals service for sometime. They provide a good professional service in a very rural County and feedback from schools and parents is generally positive. During this time the Service has been part of a Best Value Review; Deloitte Touche Report and other reports which have analysed the financial and structural aspects of the service all of which confirmed that the In House Catering Service offers value for money and is the best method of service delivery.

The scope of operation in North Yorkshire is: 316 Primary Schools, 31 Secondary Schools

Total meal numbers produced for the academic year 2006/07 = 3,415,200 (42%)

Meals produced per North Yorkshire Primary Schools Area:

1	Scarborough/Ryedale	976,283
2	Richmond/Hambleton	772,210
3	Harrogate/Craven	815,778
4	Selby/Harrogate	828,129

School Meal price comparisons with other local authorities, pre job evaluation, are:

- Cheshire £1.80 (average),
- Cumbria £1.60 to £2.46,
- Durham £1.80 (externalised service and subsidised by 20p per meal by Durham CC).

SWOT Analysis of Catering Service

Strengths

- nutritionally balanced meals
- positive feedback from parents and schools
- positive publicity
- locally sourced produce
- +ve Best Value Review
- Deloitte Touch report re future provision of service
- price in line with neighbouring authorities
- job evaluation complete

Weaknesses

- increasing price
Sept 2006 £1.54 to £1.62 (5%)
Sept 2007 £1.62 to £1.80 (11%)
Sept 2008 potential increase
£1.80 - £2.00
- low meal up take
- low free meal up take
- marketing strategy
- relationship with schools
- small schools

Opportunities

- new IT system
- contracted until 2009
- relationship with schools
- marketing strategy
- low free meal take up
- low meal take up

Threats

- schools could declare UDI
- small schools
- price increases lead to reduced meal uptake
- increases in price of fuel
- increase in price of wheat
- rising food costs
- reduced YPO dividend

Pressures identified on the current service:

1. National Standards for Primary and Secondary School Meals

In May 2006 the Government announced new standards for school food. There are three parts, to be phased in by September 2009.

The new standards	Timetable for meeting the new standards
Interim food based standards for school lunches	All schools from September 2008
Food-based standards for school food other than lunch	All schools by September 2007(schools are recommended to adopt these from September 2006)
Nutrient-based standards and new food-based standards (i.e. not interim) for school lunches	Primary schools by September 2008 at the latest Secondary schools by September 2009 at the latest

Catering Service has continually sought to improve the quality of the meal produced utilising fresh meat and vegetables sourced from local suppliers. The Nutritional Standards for Primary and Secondary Meals reinforces the work already undertaken by the Catering Service and sets a path for future development. However, a consequence of improved healthier option menus is the increase in the cost of food purchased.

2. Job Evaluation

The work on evaluating all of the jobs in NYCC is complete and resulting changes implemented in April 2007. The payroll costs for the catering service have increased by £1.1m per annum on the primary school contract. For the academic year 2007/08 the effect of this increase has been significantly offset by a one off subsidy resulting in the price currently being pegged at £1.80 (the true cost is now estimated at £2.06 on the assumption that up take remains the same).

3. Meal Up Take

The meal up take for the first two periods of the current academic year is 41.8%. The catering service is looking at ways to help improve these figures. The main driver being to increase the number of pupils receiving a daily nutritionally balanced meal although it is acknowledged that a secondary effect of this work would be to reduce the cost of a school meal.

Efforts by the Catering Service in their drive to increase meal up take have been to focus on a number of Primary Schools from each of the 4 areas. The twenty schools chosen provided a cross section of schools in rural or town areas and different socio-economic groups, some with low meal up take which had the potential to increase. Figures suggest that a slight increase in meal numbers were seen in these schools.

In addition to the original targeted schools and at a later date a further twenty larger schools, chosen from across the four areas, were included into the targeted schools group. The purpose being to see if a better return could be achieved against the effort put in.

The selection of targeted Primary Schools from across the four areas does not appear to follow any set criteria other than a cross section of schools from each area. The length of time these schools are targeted for is also not clear or what monitoring intervals are in place. There would not appear to be any evidence to suggest that an evaluation of the strategies and/or initiatives used for each school to increase meal up take is undertaken.

In their view NY County Caterers consider that the most effective marketing tool in increasing meal numbers over the long term is talking to parents, providing information, answering questions and providing taster sessions (undertaken in as many schools as possible). Another important factor is the involvement of the Head Teacher and the school in increasing meal uptake; without this support County Caterers consider their efforts are limited.

As previously mentioned the current up take is approximately 42%. However the School Food Trust has set a target to increase school lunch take up to 46.5% by March 2008; and 52.5% by March 2009. From the information received it was not clear what plans the Catering Service have to deliver against this target.

It is the Task Groups view that marketing should be a more formalised practise and firmly believe in the development of a Marketing Strategy. The added pressure from rising food costs are a concern for the service, together with rising fuel costs. It would seem relevant therefore to develop a strategy that monitors the effectiveness of initiatives, promotions and parent taster sessions to evaluate the effort put in against the return i.e. increased meal up take.

Options:

Option One: Maintain Current Service in its present format:
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Service provided to: 316 NY Primary Schools and 31 Secondary Schools

School Meal Production is either:

Primary/Production Kitchen	-	Tradition Kitchen
Dining Centre	-	Meals prepared at Production Kitchen and transported hot to Dining Centre
Regeneration Kitchens	-	Frozen produce purchased direct from suppliers and regenerated at the school. Preparation and cooking of fresh vegetables and bread also undertaken.
Special Schools	-	Includes special dietary requirements and increased levels of supervision.

- Food served meets nutritional standards as required. All recipes are analysed by nutritionist to ensure that the nutritional content meets statutory guidance.
- Cooks are well skilled in the preparation of fresh produce
- Service can provide additional levels of supervision, furniture moving and cleaning
- Through the marketing officer, primary school head teachers can arrange for parent tasting sessions, food information and new starter packs.
- Cooks can play an important role in encouraging children to try or taste new foods
- Interestingly, some urban schools have seen a drop in school meal take up possibly due to unfamiliar foods. This does not seem to be the case in rural schools.

Traditional Kitchen - food cooked on site is the preferred option of nearly all NY primary schools. Lack of adequate kitchen facilities is an issue for a number of schools

Dining Centre - transported hot meal from production kitchen is not a favoured option by teachers, children and parents. This is an established method of service provision for 45 out of the 316 primary schools.

Perceptions are that this is a lesser service and comments received relate to loss of meal quality and temperature during transportation.

Regenerated Frozen Meals - Method of service provision for 7 primary schools currently. There is some freshly prepared and cooked produce undertaken at the school to compliment the regenerated frozen meal.

Special Schools – special diets catered for and increased levels of supervision provided.

The current catering service is well thought of by schools and parents across North Yorkshire, is careful and thoughtful in the sourcing and purchasing of fresh local produce and provides a good all round school meals service.

Option Two - Increase the number of transported meals

This option looked at whether better use could be made of existing production kitchens, as there are a number of traditional kitchens that serve less than 60 meals per day.

Transported hot meals are an established method of service provision for 45 NY schools currently.

Increasing this option would involve significant daily transport costs and would move the priority from the 'front end' of the service i.e. food and labour to increased transport costs.

Further costs would be incurred to remove obsolete equipment from production kitchens and converting these into Dining Centres.

The remaining Production Kitchens would also require additional equipment to adequately cope with the increase meal provision.

Concerns were raised at the deskilling of cooks with possible consequential redundancies and future recruitment and retention issues.

This option would, in the Task Group's opinion, be a costly retrograde step away from the freshly prepared and cooked produce. It is not a favoured option judging by the comments received from head teachers or parents during visits to Primary Schools.

The preferred option of those primary schools visited is to have their own traditional kitchen but the Task Group acknowledge that this is not a feasible option for every primary school in North Yorkshire.

Option Three - Regenerated Frozen Meal option

This option looked at the possibility of moving to regenerated meals, similar to the service adopted by the NHS Acute Hospital Trusts and Primary Care Trusts.

Unlike the Acute Hospital Trusts and Primary Care Trusts North Yorkshire's large rural County involves a vast amount of travelling. Hospitals have larger captive audiences i.e. patients on the wards, large numbers of staff working shift patterns, out patient appointments and visitors.

The South Tees Trust James Cook Hospital, Middlesbrough has a Central Unit where they produce chilled and frozen meals for regeneration. Frozen or chilled meals are then distributed to the hospital wards and regenerated in mobile 'ovens'. In addition to their own hospital wards, James Cook provides frozen meals which are distributed to the Friarage Hospital in Northallerton and several other sites.

It is worth mentioning that a recent survey undertaken on NHS meals has however, not had a good response from patients.

Regenerated food is not a new option as schools in the early 1990's were regeneration kitchens.

Changing to this option would involve the purchase of frozen food from a supplier and there would be no guarantee that any produce would be locally sourced. This option would increase the cost of the food element of a meal which currently stands at approximately 54p per meal. Any savings made in labour would be off set by the increase in food costs.

Regenerated food needs less production space but heavy costs would be incurred in the removal of obsolete equipment and the purchasing and installation of regeneration 'ovens'. This is a comparatively easy to operate service but would probably mean the end of production kitchens. Concerns were again raised around the deskilling of some of the existing workforce which could lead to redundancy and future recruitment and retention issues.

For the local economy this could also mean a significant loss of business for local producers in North Yorkshire.

The Task Group do not support this option as the change would be a definite move away from the freshly prepared and cooked school lunch service currently adopted by North Yorkshire County Council. All members of the Task Group agreed that this change would not be in the best interests of parents and young people in North Yorkshire.

Option Four - Transfer of responsibility to Schools

At present most of the responsibility for the service rests with the Catering Service and therefore both surpluses and deficits are retained by the service.

An alternative to this model is to transfer much more of the responsibility for the service from the Catering Service to the School. The Catering Service would be responsible for the preparation and presentation of the meal within the School, whilst the school takes responsibility for the number of meals sold. The advantage of this model is that the surplus derived from increased sales of meals is split between the School and the Catering Service giving the school a financial reward/incentive for increased meal take up.

This model would mean entering into a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Schools. "A Service Level Agreement is made between two parties or organisations that sets out how services would be provided and to what standard and how those services will be monitored" I&Dea.

In its simplistic form, the SLA is a negotiated agreement between the School and the Catering Service, whereby the school agrees to purchase meals supplied by the Catering Service. The cost of the meal is determined by reference to a budgeted trading account which would include the direct and indirect costs incurred in the delivery of the service.

An SLA would need to be negotiated with each individual School. Consultations with other local authorities suggest that this can be a difficult and time consuming process.

An SLA for School Catering could be introduced in (at least) two different formats dependant on the allocation of risk.

There are a number of other essential services provided and delivered by the Catering Service e.g. marketing, menu and nutritional planning, management of relief staff, meal take-up monitoring, training and Inspections. Currently the costs of these other services are contained within an overhead charge which is a component part of the school meal price.

All these 'other' services are critical to the running of a safe, efficient and effective service which the Catering Service could continue to provide. However, these would need to be tailored to the individual requirements of the school and would become part of the SLA.

This is the favoured option of the Task Group who also acknowledged concerns around the impact of an SLA on small schools which they considered should not be ignored. Dramatic increases could be seen with meal costs as diseconomies of scale are experienced and serious consideration would need to be given to subsidising the school meal so that it remains accessible to pupils in small schools.

Initiatives to Increase School Meal Up-Take

There are number of initiatives undertaken, supported by the NY County Caterers Marketing Officer. These initiatives are aimed at promoting and increasing school meal numbers, encouraging children to try new foods and expand their knowledge of food. Advice and information is available for parents on the Governments food based nutritional standards and the school meal menu's is available on the School Meal website. There are Parent taster sessions, new school starter packs and competitions all of which are fine examples of promotional activity.

The School Meals website is a useful source of information, but this does not appear to be widely used by parents and some are unaware of its existence. This would appear to be a useful resource for the Catering Service to keep in touch with its customers and encourage feedback to provide the Catering Service with information on the demands and needs of its consumers.

The absence of a Marketing Strategy was a concern to all Members of the Task Group. They consider that this is an area which should be quickly addressed by the Catering Service and an effective strategy developed which monitors performance by specific measures and indicators.

This 'gap' in the service is also evidenced by the cross section process used when targeting Primary Schools chosen from each of the four areas. There is a good rationale behind this process but the selection element needs to be tightened up. A more precise measure or indicator could be developed which flags up the need for a recovery strategy, e.g. when meal up take drops below certain levels, when certain percentage changes are noted in meal up take. What then follows is a focussed and dedicated approach applied for a specific timeframe with acceptable monitoring intervals.

Interestingly, one of the primary schools visited by the Task Group had in fact moved away from the County Caterers menu and developed a menu which better suited their pupils, the outcome of that change resulted in an increase in meal uptake. Presumably this move was supported by the Catering Service who ensured that the meals met nutritional standards.

There may be other schools who have worked with the Catering Service to adapt school menus that more readily 'fit' with the pupils in that school. This is a very proactive development and one that could be shared across the County.

The provision of school meals over the year does fluctuate with the seasons. The highest up take usually being experienced in the autumn/winter months. During the spring and summer months there can be a decrease in the numbers as more children chose to have a packed lunch when the weather is warmer and there are sometimes opportunities to sit outside.

Designing each Terms three weekly rotational menu, is not easy when each meal has to meet the Government's nutritional guidelines, sourced where possible from local produce and within a controlled budget. The menus are varied and the use of seasonal fresh produce is evident.

An area the Task Group did question however, was whether it would be possible to make the menus reflect seasonal variations. For example are the children happy to eat hot dinners such as roast chicken or beef lasagne or a goulash when the weather is really warm and sunny? If children are keen to go outside during the better weather would it be unrealistic to suggest that the Catering Service adopts seasonal variations to meet these needs?

Consultation Visits:

Report on School Meal Visit to North & South Cowton Community Primary School

This school has a very high uptake of meals (regeneration kitchen) it also encourages the children and staff from the Pre-School in the village to come, so usually serves about 36 meals. This allows most of infant new starters in September to have experienced school lunches before they start school.

The dining room has a very good atmosphere and is bright and welcoming.

The food is mainly regenerated but some vegetables, bread and other dishes are cooked in the kitchen. Fresh fruit is served, which many children chose. The food was well cooked and tasted good. The cook was happy with the food and her equipment.

The parents and children chose whether their child would stay for lunch each week, the menu being published in the weekly newsletter. If the children choose they can have a sandwich alternative, 3 were served on the day I attended. The children enjoyed most of the food the most popular being Pizza or fish fingers.

Two parents were present both enjoyed the meals but one felt that cost could be a factor in why some parents chose to send packed lunches. £9 a week is a big cost for some families. She also felt that the portions were a bit small for some of the older children, however they were allowed seconds. The majority of the children ate all their food. She was concerned about the amount of salt in the food. She did not know there was a web site with analysis on it.

Parents did not seem to have an understanding of the breakdown of costs - "Where does the £1.80 go? Does it make a profit?"

The children were very well behaved they sat in family groups and they were very helpful to each other. They also looked after me without being asked and provided cutlery and a chair when I moved tables to talk to different children.

Report on School Meal Visit to Osmotherley Primary School

This school has a Dining Centre service and an uptake of 50%. Overall kitchen and dining facilities are good. Overall impression of the school meal is good – OK. Although they do consider that a certain amount of quality is lost in transportation. Comment was made about the amount of bread available – some children eat bread in preference to food.

Previous Parent Tasting session was popular.

Parents said that they thought the school meals were expensive this term. In terms of quality – vegetables can be mushy which possibly links to transportation again.

Value for money, the dining area facilities were both considered to be very important issues, together with quality of food, availability of healthy food which is nutritionally balanced. The price of a school meal was considered important as this could be difficult for some families to manage.

Parents have a choice of paying weekly or termly – most pay termly. Children can change from packed lunches to dinners and vice versa within a week but they do not have dinner one day and packed lunch the next.

The preferred option of the school is to have their own kitchen and prepare their own food.

Report on School Meal visit to North Rigton Primary School

This school has a high uptake at around 65%.
It has a small production kitchen and the children eat in the main school hall.

The school has worked closely with the school meals service over the past couple of years to improve the quality of the school meals on offer, using all fresh produce.

With the commitment of a peripatetic cook this has been achieved with much success and I saw the children clear their plates of sausages, roast potatoes, cabbage, and ask for more. She gets job satisfaction from preparing food in this way and interacts closely with the children.

The “Family service” is liked by the children, staff and parents alike.

I spoke to the head, the deputy head, the cook, a parent helper and 6-8 children.

A shortage of MSA's has led to several parents acting as volunteer supervisors at lunchtime. This had led to them making good reports to other parents and encouraging them to take up school meals. The parent I spoke to was extremely supportive. One of his own children has food allergies and these are catered for without fuss. He felt the current price is good value and would happily pay £2 plus per day, and only balked when I pushed the potential cost to £2.50.

A vegetarian option is available every day and staff and parents reported good value for money, quality, nutritional balance and healthy food.

Report on School Meal visit to Starbeck Primary School

This school has a low uptake at around 30%, although this fluctuates seasonally. It has a large production kitchen and dining halls in a building separate to the school building.

The facilities are very old and in poor condition – a situation that the governing body is painfully aware of and who petition tirelessly for funds for improvement, to date with little

success. The dining halls location means children have to walk along a narrow windy passageway to get to it.

All of the above are a disincentive to parents to take school meals and contribute to the low take up.

The production kitchen currently produces meals for Sicklinghall (28meals/day) and Follifoot (47 meals/day) schools. They previously served 3 other local schools that have subsequently opened their own kitchens.

I spoke to the head, the cook, her assistant, a parent helper and approx 10 children.

The head is supportive of the meals service, despite the continuing problems with facilities, although no other staff were in evidence in the dining hall. The parent I spoke to was supportive of the quality of the meals, and the current price. An annual price increase was expected but only tolerated if seen to reflect inflation and the price of food. The quality of the packed lunches appeared generally good with lots of fruit in evidence.

The head reported numerous and continuous complaints from parents paying for school meals about both the cost and quality of the food. No vegetarian options are offered and whilst the menus are nutritionally balanced, sometimes the food seems less so e.g. the pasta carbonarra served on the day I was there seemed to be all pasta with very little bacon.

Report on visit to Stokesley CE Primary School

This school has a traditional kitchen where meals are cooked on the premises.

They used to use the menus from County Caterers, but changed to their own as the take up of meals was poor. It has increased significantly since changing the menu. Was less than 100, now well above.

Children who eat a packed meal come into the dining room first and sit at tables. Then those who have a school lunch queue and collect their meal and sit down.

Pupils have to eat in the school hall, which curtails activities just prior to lunch being served. There are two sittings for lunch as the hall is not big enough to accommodate all the pupils on one sitting. Pupils were directed to tables until all spaces were filled up.

It is preferred if pupils pay for their meals per term, then this helps with catering.

The pupils I spoke to enjoyed their lunch, and had their favourite dishes. The pupils could choose what they ate on a Friday, they had to let the cook know soon enough and she would cook it for all pupils. She would add fresh vegetables and/or fruit to the menu. Dinner staff knew what children liked and disliked and all pupils were encouraged to eat a little of all foods. Fresh fruit was available and was cut into quarters (with core removed for apples and pears). This encouraged more pupils to eat fruit.

A Lunchtime Supervisor, who has children at the school, thought that diners were not good value. I did explain how the costs were made up after which she said she had not appreciated how much went into overheads.

The Headteacher did come into the dining room to talk to me and watch the pupils. No staff were seen to be eating with the children.

Report on Visit to Marwood School, Great Ayton

This school is a Dining Centre – meals are brought to them by taxi from Roseberry Primary School.

Classrooms were used for eating lunch, the lunches being served in the reception classroom.

Since the cook had joined the school the numbers had gone up from 18 to about 45 out of 55 pupils taking lunch.

Another lady was there to unload the lunches, serve them, clear away and tidy up afterwards. There were at least two other meal time supervisors who were there to supervise the pupils eating their lunches.

Pupils were encouraged to eat a little of everything and no seconds were available until pupils had eaten the course they wanted more of.

The meal portions seemed appropriately sized for the ages of the pupils being served.

Pupils paid either per term or weekly, and money was given to the secretary, so no embarrassment for those on free dinners. There were 2 vegans, who had a special diet for them. I sat at a table with the youngest, and was impressed with the knowledge of a 4 yr old on the diet of a vegan. The pupils talked readily about the meals and the choices that they had. As the school was a small one, they only had the one choice of meal.

The pupils were sat together at tables for packed lunches and school meals.

The pupils were offered more food if they wanted it, and encouraged to eat all their lunch. They knew how to clear away and tidy up. One young person cleared away my tray as I stood and talked to the staff. All dirty dishes and waste is sent to Roseberry School to be cleaned and sorted.

The head teacher was in the dining room, but did not sit and eat with the pupils, in fact none of the staff did.

Conclusions drawn from visits:

Members of the Task Group visited both small and large Primary Schools, rural and urban, traditional kitchen service, dining centres and regenerated meals service.

In general the primary schools visited are supportive of the Catering Service, although they do receive both positive and not so positive feedback. Given the choice most primary schools would prefer to have a traditional kitchen which prepares and cooks their own meals.

Kitchen facilities vary from school to school. Some have very limited facilities available.

Dining facilities are variable: a number of schools use classrooms as dining room for both school meals and packed lunches; others have packed lunches eaten in a classroom leaving the available dining area available for school meal; some apply two sittings to accommodate both packed lunches and school meal diners.

The Task Group did feel that inadequate dining facilities can impact on the up take of school meals as can the separation of packed lunch eaters and school meal diners. Sitting with friends at lunch time is an important part of socialising for young people so when their friends, with packed lunches, are sat elsewhere the parents decision on whether a child has a school meal or packed lunch can be influenced by this.

A few parents have challenged the price of a school meal saying that it is not good value. Interestingly many of the parents members of the Task Group spoke to are unaware of the breakdown of costs in producing a school meal. Some Parents thought that there was a profit made and asked what the profit was spent on, others had no idea what the breakdown of costs covered. The feeling by the Task Group was that this information should be available to parents and that this is an area that could be addressed by North Yorkshire County Caterers.

The consultations undertaken have been with a small number of schools from across the County. The sample of primary schools visited has included all types of provision e.g. traditional kitchens, dining centres and regeneration kitchens. However, this is a very small sample and the Task Group strongly recommend that a full consultation exercise is undertaken to ensure that the needs and demands of the consumer is fully explored.

Consultations with other Local Authorities

Durham Catering Service.

- The Service is externalised to Scholarest using a framework contract for 292 Primary Schools -16 provide their own service, 36 Secondary Schools – 6 provide their own service
- Service Level Agreements exists for Client service
- SLA is not unique to each school
- Price is set by schools under advice from Durham County Council (DCC)
- Prices from Scholarest to schools are £1.60 to primary school and £1.70 to secondary - cost of meal production is averaged across the service
- Price to pupils is £1.80 although subsidy of 20p per meal received from DCC (approx £520k).
- Job evaluation currently has no impact on the service.
- There are no Dining Centres or regeneration kitchens, although they do use some frozen foods, cooked in regen ovens, the majority of the food is fresh.
- No sandwich bars, no fast foods
- Breakfasts and snacks are provided at some schools.
- Meals uptake is 52%
- Payment in Primary schools is made by parents to school secretary
- Initiatives undertaken - A pre order system that overcomes “end of queue choice” and also eliminates waste, meets children’s needs and has had a positive effect on meal take up. This is run by schools admin staff which can prove difficult to coerce.
- Schools have individual menus tailored to school need – also a positive effect on meal take up
- Some dining rooms are well presented – depends on the school
- Not all dining rooms are dedicated
- Phased lunch breaks are used to avoid queues
- Segregation of packed lunches and school meal is perceived as reason for low meal take up – no queuing and therefore more “play time”.
- Packed Lunch pupils also stand in queue before moving to table. Pupils leave dining room at similar times.
- Some schools use “lock ins” this has helped with meal take up
- DCC does not have a marketing strategy – Scholarest have.
- There is no marketing budget or marketing staff
- There is a promotional pack linked to the school curriculum. It is felt to be very important that school meals are seen as part of the curriculum.
- Durham is broken into 3 areas of 100 schools each.

- Client team are in schools every day and must visit every school every ½ term - 100 schools per “area manager”
- Client unit is seen as a strength. The schools appreciate their independence from the contractor

Cheshire County Council

- Reviewed the Catering Service approximately two years ago.
- Decided on delegating funding to schools (DSG and Standards Fund 105A) whilst entering into an SLA to deliver service. SLA shares risk between school and catering service, the school risk is that of meal uptake whilst the catering is that of meal production (catering pass on increases in food costs to the school)
- Were very conscious of the schools opting out
- 330 schools £1.80 average cost.
- Meal delivery styles much the same as NYCC – Traditional Kitchen, Cash Cafeteria
- Considered a lot of options including Frozen Meals (this turned out to be one of the more expensive options which is inline with our findings)
- Lessons learnt:
 - Difficult process of negotiating SLA with each school. There was a real concern that schools would choose to opt out
 - Actually only lost three schools at the end of the process but is experiencing a small number of schools who are either leaving or joining the service
 - Recognised communication as the key to the process. Held meetings with Schools Forum, Area schools meeting and individual schools
 - Gave managers a number of schools that they were responsible for, so gain and losses were their responsibility not lost in the mass.
 - Educated School Cooks to understand that they were front line staff and representatives of the Catering Service.
 - Ensured visible spend – used surpluses and grants to improve school facilities e.g. creating salad bars in schools to encourage consumption of salad, vegetables and vegetable soup.

The Catering Service claim payment three times per annum. When it became apparent that the schools were encouraging a greater meal take up and the catering service was improving efficiencies they rebated schools in the second & third term in recognition of this.

Cumbria County Council

- Service reviewed in 2004, objective was to cut costs by 10%
- 170 staff made redundant
- Funding delegated to schools
- No meal subsidy
- Reduced areas from 6 to 4
- Current service offers 4 options
 - Multi-choice with salad bar and soup
 - Limited Range with salad bar and soup
 - Dining Centres – regeneration (Oven fresh)
 - Low Cost – galley kitchen – Pizzas etc
- Lost business to competition
- Total schools 242 – 178 retained in house (73%) – 38 schools closed kitchens altogether (no school meals) therefore 64 to in house or to contractors
- Meals cost determined by school £1.60 to £2.46 pre job evaluation

Conclusions

This has been a short and sharp focussed review of the current in-house school meal service and the findings of the Task Group confirm that there is plenty of support for the current service provider.

The meals provided are nutritionally balanced and in the main freshly prepared and cooked in traditional kitchens and against the national trend North Yorkshire has seen a marginal increase in its school meal up take.

Food produce is sourced, where possible, from local producers and around 70 per cent of food served is sourced from local producers. This not only ensures that we are promoting the health of North Yorkshire children but acknowledges that carbon reductions can be made in minimising food travelling unnecessary miles; awards contracts to local producers which is excellent for the local economy.

Having considered each of the four options the Task Groups preferred option is to move forward with the existing Catering Service but that alternative ways of utilising the existing service through Service Level Agreements are fully explored with Schools and the Catering Service.

Increasing the up take in school meals requires the support of both the Catering Service and the School itself and this move would provide an opportunity for a shared approach. Additionally the School would be in a position to choose whichever service offers the best solution for their unique circumstances.

The Task Group consider that a full consultation exercise should be undertaken with schools, parents and pupils and their views sought on a range of options as soon as possible. The Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee would wish to be an integral part of this consultation exercise.

Improving meal uptake requires the development of an effect Marketing Strategy which can be monitored through specific performance indicators. Front-line staff are key to the development of this strategy and their roles should be clearly set out within this document.

In developing this document the Task Group suggest that consideration is given to looking at seasonal menu variations; that parents are made aware of the costs included in the price of a school meal; that the School Lunch website becomes a useful resource of feedback and information and better connects the service which its customers. There may even be an opportunity to set up a structured Users Food Panel.

Members of the Task Group acknowledge that the impact of an SLA could affect their meal costs and therefore recommend that further work is undertaken to ensure that affordable meals are available at small schools.

Recommendations of the School Meals Task Group

1. (a) The preferred option is to move forward with the existing Catering Service but with individual Service Level Agreements (SLA) set up between Schools and the Catering Service.

(b) That further work is undertaken with regard to Small Schools and the impact an SLA could have on the price of a school meal to ensure that affordable meals are available at all North Yorkshire schools

2. A full consultation exercise is undertaken with schools, parents and pupils to hear their views on the range of options as soon as possible.

3. The development of a comprehensive Marketing Strategy which is effectively monitored through specific performance indicators.

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