

Purpose

1. To provide the findings of a working group convened by the Education Standing Committee to consider the two services that have an involvement in the provision of meals in schools.

Information

2. On 28 September 2009 the Education Standing Committee received a response to recommendations of the Increasing Take-up of School Meals Review which was completed in April 2009.
3. There were a number of recommendations from the review which members of the Select Committee agreed would improve the low take-up of schools meals in Nottinghamshire primary schools. The committee considered the range of different factors that discouraged parents from choosing a school meal including cost and quality of meals. During the course of the review it was unclear which County Council department had overall responsibility for encouraging and supporting schools to increase demand.
4. It was recognised that it was important to establish clear lines of responsibility for increasing take-up and that benefits and efficiency savings could possibly be made by combining the two services. It was felt that this could promote a more coordinated approach in supporting governors and head teachers to increase take-up and enhance the lunch time experience. The committee made a number of recommendations including:

Combine all activities associated with school food service into one area providing increased accountability and a single point of contact.

5. In response to this recommendation the Cabinet Members for Children & Young People's Services and Personnel and Performance, requested that further examination of the issue be undertaken to determine the effects of combining the service and what benefits, if any, could result.

Current Arrangements

6. From April 2000 school budgets were delegated to the governing bodies of schools for the provision of school meals. Schools have the option to:
 - self manage their own service
 - employ a private catering contractor
 - use the County Council's Schools Catering Service managed by the Communities Department.
7. The Schools Catering Service located in the Catering Cleaning and Landscape Division of the Communities Department manages and delivers a meal service for those schools that choose to 'buy' the service. This includes designing the menu, sourcing and procuring produce, providing school catering staff, monitoring standards, training staff, maintaining and replacing of equipment and marketing the service.
8. The section also delivers customised solutions to meet individual school requirements. Secondary schools do this on an individual school basis. Primary and special schools are part of the group arrangement bought via the Management Choices catalogue of the services sold by departments to schools. Currently 315 schools out of a total of 343 schools choose to use the school catering service.
9. Funding for this service is from:
 - free school meal income
 - sale of meals
 - Government grant (2008-2011)
 - funding for equipment repair and replacement.
10. The Children Services catering team based in Children and Young People's Services provides schools and the authority with an independent advisory role and monitoring function. The section offers a number of different options for schools to buy, including auditing and support and also helps schools that have bought the service to maintain their catering premises. Schools choosing to self manage can obtain support from the section which includes menu design, nutritional analysis and staff training.
11. Currently there are 12 primary and special schools out of a total of 298 who opt not to use the service provided by Communities. Of 45 secondary schools, 15 opt out, 3 use a private contractor and 12 self manage their provision. Schools that choose not to use the Communities provision have the option to choose auditing and support services via the Management Choices catalogue. Some schools that use the Communities provision also purchase services from Children and Young People's Services catering options.

This service is funded by:

- i. services sold via the Management Choices options to schools
- ii. free school meal budget allocated by the Local Management of Schools Team in Children and Young People. The free school meals allocation is distributed against entitlement to opt out schools and remaining budget is top sliced to fund this service with the balance for use by the Schools catering service in Communities.

In addition, a Healthy Eating Advisor based within the healthy schools team of Children and Young People's Services, supports work on healthy eating, personal development and learning within schools. Schools with low take up of school meals often have problems with attendance, behaviour and attainment and the team is developing links with the school improvement service to develop a joint approach to raising standards in schools.

Findings

12. Members considered that all resources should be combined and focused on increasing pupils having a healthy nutritious meal and consolidating services into one unit would assist with this goal.
13. Combining services would give one strategic lead for the provision of meals in schools improving coordination to help increase the numbers of pupils using the school meals service.
14. Members could identify no other County Council traded service which is inspected by another departmental service. The Communities Department also provides cleaning services to schools and delivers their own inspection and auditing service for them.
15. Some schools seemed unclear who had responsibility for providing which services evidenced by some schools buying back services from the Children and Young People's Services which are already included in the meal provision they purchased from Communities.
16. A single point of contact for schools would clarify lines of responsibility for:
 - increasing take up
 - training of mid day supervisors
 - complaints
 - special diets
 - health and safety and hygiene issues
 - developing a whole school approach
 - auditing and monitoring services.
17. By combining all activities, duplication of services could be minimised.

Areas of duplication include:

- advice on service design and improvements
 - menu planning and nutritional advice
 - hygiene and health and safety advice
 - monitoring meal numbers
 - equipment purchasing
 - training – catering staff and mid day supervisors
 - advice to architects and designers for school catering premises, currently provided by the Children and Young People's Services. However in the majority of cases it will be the Communities Department that is using these facilities and would have a better idea of the facilities required.
18. When merging the two services opt out schools would not lose access to support. The auditing and advisory services available to these schools could continue as a traded service with the costs being met by the opt out schools without using the free school meals income. All free school meals income would then be allocated direct to schools.
19. The focus of a combined service would be to maximise take up for what ever option the school chooses and by combining advisory and support service best practice, equipment purchasing, food provision and nutritional and menu guidance could be shared between all schools regardless of provider. By combining these services into one unit economies of scale and efficiency gains could be made. The advice given by a provider to a school wishing to self manage their catering provision could be mitigated by income generated from selling services including technical advice and auditing. Services that are currently sold to opt out schools could have a bias towards schools not using the school meals provider service as they are able to sell more of their 'independent 'service.
20. Issues around premises management would require further consultation with schools. Currently Communities has a system in place for equipment breakdowns and repairs and manages a preventative management plan for gas and electricity installations. This resource could possibly be enlarged to provide assistance with kitchen premises concerns for all schools.
21. Members recognised the valuable role of the Healthy Schools Advisor in supporting schools improve the health and wellbeing of pupils by encouraging healthy eating and developing school food and packed lunch policies.

Recommendation

All activities associated with the provision of food in schools should be combined into one unit. This would require a restructure of the services with the aim of simplifying delivery, providing schools with a more transparent line of accountability, and eliminating duplication of services.

This new unit should be located in the Communities Department to minimise disruption to schools.

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