

School Meals Scrutiny Review - Interim Report

Purpose of Report

1. This report presents further information in support of the ongoing scrutiny review of school meals, being undertaken by a Task Group from the Learning and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Review Background

2. At a meeting in June 2013, this Committee considered an introductory briefing provided by the Head of School Services & Directorate Support on the take up of school meals in general, and the take up of free school meals (FSM). The Committee agreed the topic was suitable for a scrutiny review and requested a scoping report for their July 2013 meeting.
3. In July 2013, the Committee received an introductory paper on the current provision of school meals and FSM in York, and considered a proposed timetable for carrying out the review. Based on the information provided, the Committee agreed the review remit detailed below, and set up a Task Group to carry out the review on their behalf.

Review Remit

4. Aim: To improve the take-up of school meals and free school meals
5. Objectives:
 - To explore reasons for the relatively small increase in take-up of school meals across all York schools.
 - To investigate why some parents/carers who are entitled, do not register and claim for free school meals and consider how the Local Authority (LA) working with partners can encourage them to do so.

- To investigate the reasons why significant numbers of entitled pupils whose parents/carers **have** registered and claimed, do not take up the offer of a free school meal.
- To look at the effectiveness of cashless payment systems for school meals and their impact on school meal take-up.

Review Terminology:

6. Entitled to FSM – Pupils are entitled to receive a FSM if they live in households claiming qualifying benefits
7. Registered and claiming FSM – This relates to those who meet the entitlement criteria and register with the LA to claim FSM. This is what is reported by the School Census and described in publications as ‘known to be eligible for and claiming FSM’
8. Taking FSM – This relates to how many of the pupils registered to claim FSM actually take the meal on any given day.
9. Pupil Premium – Additional Government funding of £653 per pupil per year for every pupil registered for free school meals

Consultation & Timetable for Review

10. In August 2013 the Task Group agreed a timetable for the review detailing the work they would carry out and the consultation they would undertake - see Annex A.

Information Gathered to Date

11. An interim report was presented to the full Learning & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 20 November 2013 detailing in full the information gathered to date in support of this review.

Additional Information Gathered

12. Cost & Take-up
Based on information provided by the Local Authority’s current provider of school meals (ISS), the Task Group noted that the cost in York was the highest in their portfolio, but recognised that their cost prices for each LA were based on what was included in each contract.

13. Taking into account all of the information provided in regard to cost and take-up, the Task Group agreed that the cost of a school meal in York was a prohibitive factor in increasing take-up. They noted the cost in other Local Authority areas where take-up was good (£1.80-£2) and queried what level of take-up would be required in York in order to bring down the price in York schools to £2 (without needing to raise the Local Authority subsidy). The Head of School Services confirmed that ISS had estimated an increase in take-up to approximately 55% (currently 38%) would be required to reduce the selling price to £2.

Free School Meals & Application Process

14. The Task Group were pleased to note the work recently undertaken by the Schools Services and Benefits teams to bring the application process for FSM in York in line with other LA areas exhibiting best practice and high take-up levels. They also acknowledged there was likely to be a number of reasons for none take-up of FSM in York, including the stigma of being on free school meals, quality, type and variety of food being served, the preference in York for a packed lunch, as well as pupils being absent from school and choosing not to take a meal.
15. Having considered the data collected by the Schools Services Team (see paragraph 23 above), they agreed that further research was required and queried whether it would be possible to identify all of the parents/carers of those pupils entitled to free school meals who had not registered and claimed.
16. As a result, the School Services Team has completed a piece of work in conjunction with the Benefits Team, to identify those parents/carers, and all were written to, encouraging them to apply.
17. To date approximately 180 families have responded to the contact which was made with them. Of those 132 families were eligible and are now claiming free school meals for their children whilst work is being done with the other families to identify whether they are still on benefits which qualify them for free school meals.
18. Of those 132 families many will have more than one child within school. It is estimated that as a result of this exercise 160 pupils have now applied and qualified for free school meals. This means that as a result of this exercise an additional £144k of funding has now become available for York schools.

19. School Visits

As part of the review the Task Group agreed they would like to carry out a number of visits to schools. In September 2013 the Head of School Services was asked to approach the 8 schools listed below to arrange visits in November. They also decided which members should visit which schools:

- i. Carr Junior School: Cllr Potter and Andrew Pennington
- ii. Westfield School: Cllr Fitzpatrick and Cllr Brooks
- iii. Joseph Rowntree: Cllr Potter and Andrew Pennington
- iv. York High: Cllr Fitzpatrick and Cllr Brooks
- v. Woodthorpe Primary: Cllr Fitzpatrick and Cllr Brooks
- vi. Burton Green: Cllr Potter and Andrew Pennington
- vii. Elvington: Cllr Brooks and Andrew Pennington
- viii. Robert Wilkinson: Cllr Fitzpatrick and Cllr Brooks

20. The Task Group members will be attending during the lunchtime period and have produced a brief survey to aid them in their discussions with pupils, school staff and catering staff.
21. To date, members of the Task Group have visited York High School and Robert Wilkinson Primary School. Those members will provide verbal feedback on those visits at this meeting.
22. Once all the visits have taken place the feedback will be collated and fed into the draft final report for this review.
23. Free School Meals for Infants
In light of a recent Government announcement on their plans to provide free school meals for infant school children (school years 1-3), the Task Group recognised this would lead to a substantial increase in the numbers receiving a school meal, and requested additional information to understand the knock on effects of this on the Local Authorities current contract with ISS.
24. The Head of School Services held a recent meeting with ISS to discuss this and feedback on that meeting is shown at exempt Annex B. In support, a representative from ISS will be present at this meeting to answer any questions the Task Group may have.
25. The Task Group will also need to consider the knock on effects of the forthcoming changes on the provision of school meals and FSM to children in Years 4+.

Completing the Work on this Review

26. Two further meetings of the Task Group will be required:

Meeting 1 – To consider the feedback from all the school visits and identify their review conclusions and draft recommendations

Meeting 2 – To consider the review draft final report before its presentation to the full Learning & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its next scheduled meeting on 22 January 2014.

Implications

27. **Financial** – The report does refer to the following areas which may have implications on resources:

- the current cost of subsidising the price of school meals
- the potential increase in funding to schools by increasing the number of parents/carers applying for free school meals
- The cost of installing and running costs for cashless school meals systems
- **Human Resources (HR)** – There are no HR implications
- **Equalities** - There are no equalities implications
- **Legal** – There are no legal implications

Council Plan 2011-15

28. Protect vulnerable people – by increasing free school meal take up will enable more low income families children to access a daily healthy meal.

Risk Management

29. The risks in not conducting this review are:

- Schools could lose out on additional funding which is provided to them for every child on their roll who qualifies for free school meals;
- Pupils entitled to free school meals miss out on eating a free meal every school day.

Recommendations

30. Having considered the information provided within this report the Task Group is recommended to:

- i. Note the new information provided in support of this review as shown in paragraphs 17 & 18 above and at exempt Annex B, and identify any further additional information required.
- ii. Agree two further meeting dates to conclude the work on this review.

Reason: To ensure compliance with scrutiny procedures, protocols and workplans.

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For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: None

Annexes

Annex A – Review Timetable

Annex B – Information from ISS on Effects of Recent Government's
Announcement (Exempt)