

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

Task Group Final Report

Review of School Meals Service provided by City Catering

15 March 2011

“Children up and down the country are going to sleep at night in homes with no heating, without eating a proper meal and without proper school uniforms to put on in the morning,”

Sally Copley, Save the Children's head of UK policy, February 2011

“Task Group fully endorse the nutritional benefits of a good school meal and believe that this is best discharged through the provision of a hot meal in a welcoming setting. Task Group are of the view that not only does this contribute to nutritional well-being but emotional and behavioural development.”

Children and Young Peoples Services Scrutiny Task Group, 2011, p.15

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1. Statutory Obligations

The LA has a duty to ensure appropriate arrangements are in place for the delivery of FSM and for meals for those who wish to pay.

In Leicester school meals funding has been delegated therefore schools have a statutory duty to provide:

- Free School Meals to all children who are entitled. This does not have to be a hot meal.
- Paid School Meals for any other children whose parents request that a meal is provided. This does not have to be a hot meal.
- Facilities to eat packed lunches, at no charge.

Legislative Compliance

With the exception of all new Academy Schools, school meal providers currently need to comply with legislation relating to:

- Nutritional Standards.

All school meal providers must also comply with legislation relating to:

- Food Safety legislation – school catering facilities are inspected by Environmental Health Officers.
- Health and Safety legislation.

Recognised Good Practice

The current main priority of all City school meal providers is:

- To provide a hot school meal offering a choice to pupils and, where possible, meet all cultural and medical dietary needs.
- To continually invest in training to meet changing needs and make service improvements.
- To work in partnership with schools to educate children and young people about healthier eating choices.

National examples of good practice can be found at www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk. and these may also be found in Leicester schools. Local examples can be found on the City Catering website www.leicester.gov.uk/school-meals.

2. Commissioning of School Meals Services

Schools can commission a school meals service via the following routes.

- A buy back service from the Authority's in house catering provider, City Catering. In Leicester a Joint Service Agreement (JSA) is made between the individual school and City Catering.
- Provide the service in house and employ their own catering team directly.(Upon transfer from the LA under current legislation TUPE will apply to the staff currently employed by City Catering)
- Seek an external provider by competitive tendering.

Current Arrangements in Leicester

The budget for school meals has been delegated and the governing body of each school has the responsibility to ensure that schools meet statutory obligations, comply with relevant legislation and evidence best practice.

Ninety six schools have a JSA with City Catering in place and City Catering deliver 2.6 million school meals a year.

Madani High School have now awarded a catering contract to a commercial provider and City of Leicester College have recently started the tendering process for their catering service.

11 schools operate their own in house catering service:

Judgemeadow CC * denotes a special school.
Babington CC
English Martyrs RC
Moat CC
Hope Hamilton
Ellesmere College*
Millgate Special School*
Keyham Lodge*
Netherhall*
Samworth Academy; and
Madani High School.

Many of these schools buy back services however from City Catering particularly staff training.

5 of the above schools have purchased City Catering menus and a standard recipe file.

Food Hygiene updates are legally required every 3 years, and have been carried out by City Catering in 5 of the above schools.

The following training sessions have been purchased from City Catering since 2009.

Millgate Special school - 3 training sessions.
Ellesmere College. - 9 training sessions.
Keyham Lodge - 3 training sessions.
Hope Hamilton - 1 session
Netherhall Special School- 2 sessions.

Total training purchased from City Catering

- 5 Food Hygiene training updates
- 18 training sessions on varying topics.

Current and possible alternative delivery models

The service in 53 primary schools and 3 special schools is delivered via a traditional meal cooked on site which is in line with government aspirations. In a further 25 schools because of the lack of a production kitchen hot meals are transported from a nearby school. All 13 secondary schools have meals cooked on site.

There are alternative methods of producing meals which are used by a handful of local authority providers. These are largely cook/freeze or cook/chill systems where food is produced centrally or purchased from a commercial producer and regenerated (reheated) on site. This can reduce labour costs but significantly increase food costs. A significant investment would be required in terms of specialist equipment if this model were to be implemented in Leicester. Redundancy costs would also be a factor. The cook freeze method was trialled in a small number of city schools a few years ago but there was little increase in uptake.

Task Group acknowledge that City Catering performs well against benchmark authorities.

3. Performance Management

City Catering's current performance is managed largely through take up data (NI52) and income collection against financial targets.

Annual Quality audits are carried out for each individual school and customer satisfaction surveys are completed.

City Catering submit performance data as part of the annual survey compiled by the School Food Trust and the Local Authority Caterers Association (LACA). A copy of these survey outcomes is available on the SFT website (see above for url) and provides valuable benchmark information about LA benchmark performance.

4. Value for Money

City Catering provide 14,000 school meals a day – 22.6 million meals a year. There is a strong emphasis on providing a value-for-money, nutritionally balanced meals with choices that appeal to children.

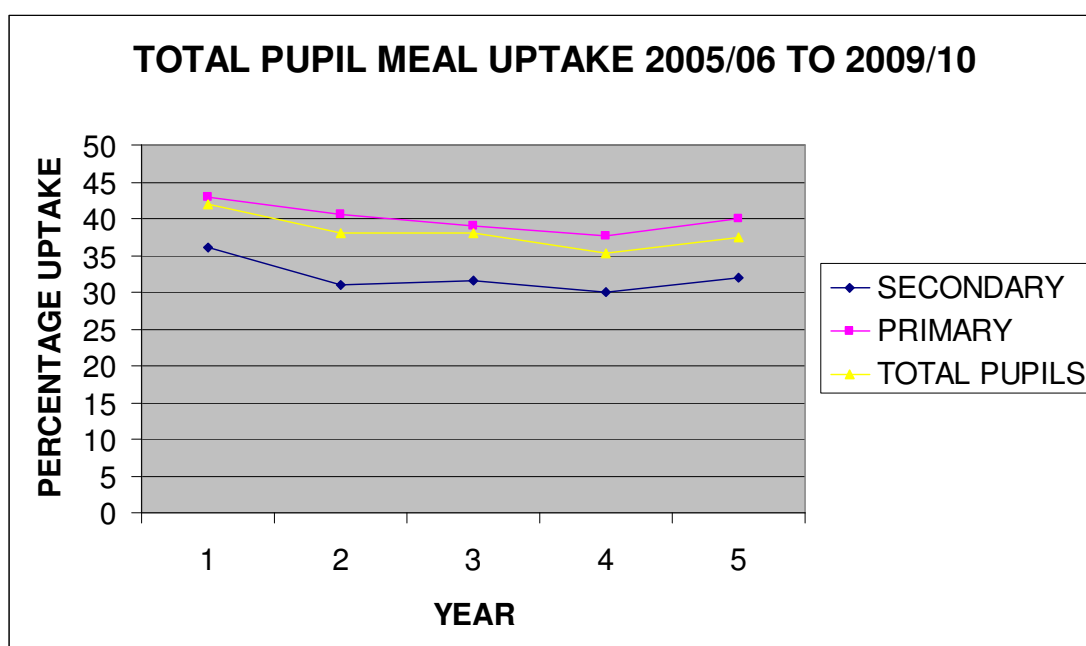
Value for money is largely measured by the uptake of meals and cash income and by regular comparison with the prices charged by other authorities. A comparison with benchmark authorities is detailed at Section 6 below.

5. Take Up of School Meals

The following information is extracted from the most recently available benchmarking exercise of the Local Authority Catering Network (LACN, in 2009.)

Total Uptake

The graph below shows the take of all school meals both paid and free.



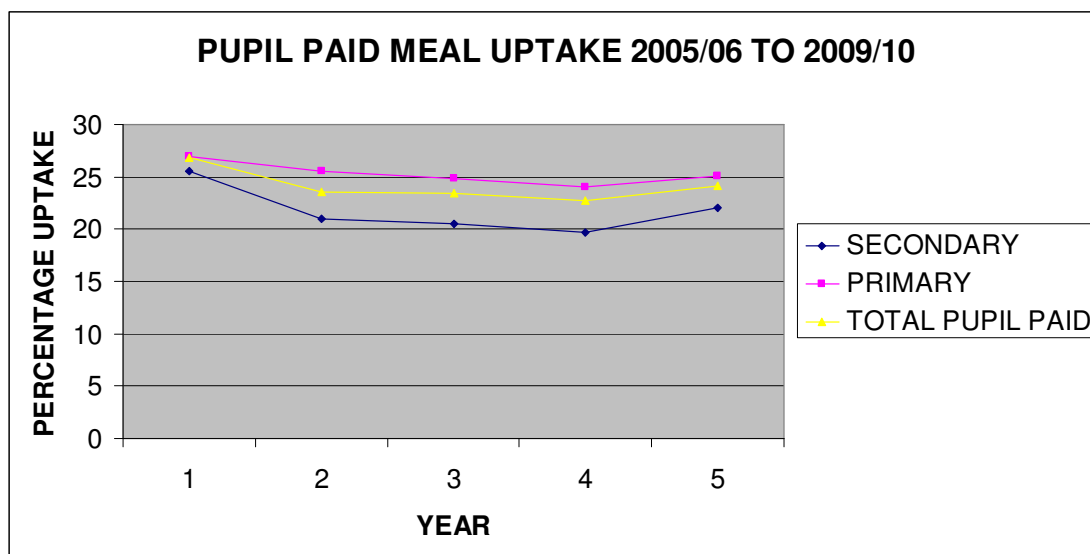
Over 2005-10, there has been a total increase of 2.03% across all schools.

Total take up in the primary sector is 40% and slightly lower than the national average of 41.4%.

In the secondary sector total (i.e. paid and free) take up is 32% compared to the national average of 35.8%

Paid Meals

During 2009-10 only 25.5% of all pupils bought (i.e. paid for) their meal. This is however an increase of 2.9% on the previous year.



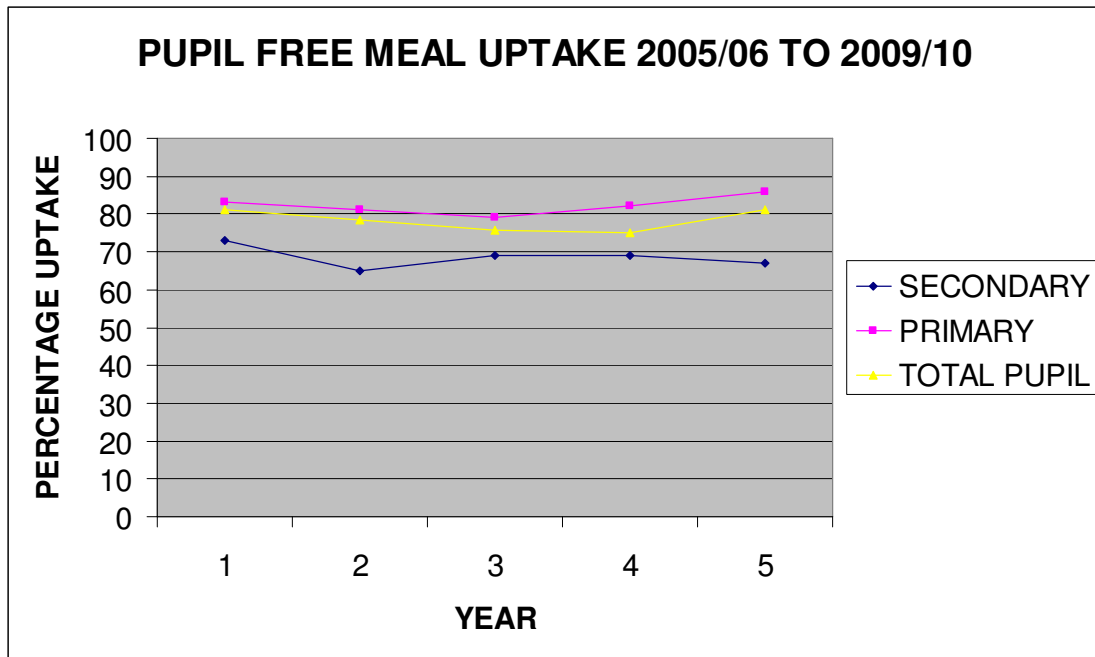
Free School Meals

In 2009-10, the overall uptake of free school meals increased by 4.34%.

In the secondary sector free meal uptake has unfortunately decreased since nutritional standards were introduced in 2009.

Total free school meal uptake (both primary and secondary) against those assessed as eligible for this benefit is 80%. This means that 20% of children assessed as eligible do not take up their entitlement to a free meal. In the primary sector however the uptake figure is higher than the national average and for those authorities within Leicester's benchmark group.

The criteria for eligibility is discussed later in this report.



A copy of the LACN 2009 benchmarking data has been made available to Task Group members.

In summary, Leicester City has a higher than average percentage take up of free school meals by those assessed as eligible and a lower than average uptake of paid school meals.

This data reflects the demographic and socio-economic make up of the city, highlights some clear social policy imperatives and presents some of the key challenges for the delivery of the service into the future.

6. Current Prices

The following prices are charged in the 96 schools operated by City Catering.

- Primary Pupil Meal Price (including Free School Meal Value) - £1.65
- Secondary School pupil(including Free School Meal Value) - £1.95
- Special School Pupils -£1.40
- Duty Meal Allowance £1.95
- Staff and visitor paid meals £2.29 plus VAT.

Task Group has determined that a comparison of school meals prices was carried out by LACN in September 2010. The comparison below shows that Leicester City's meal price in the primary sector was the second cheapest of all the authorities benchmarked.

Authority	Primary Schools		Secondary Schools	
	Previously and date	Price Sept 2010	Previously and date	Price Sept 2010
Derbyshire	£1.85	£1.85 increase	£1.90	£1.90
Doncaster	April 2010 £1.70	No increase	April 2010 £1.80	No increase
Staffordshire	April 2010 £2.10	No increase	April 2010 £2.20	No increase
Cambridge	Sept 2009 £2.00	No increase	Sept 2009 £2.15	£2.15
Coventry	No data	£1.85	No data	£2.50
Dudley	No data	£1.75	No data	£1.75
Telford	No data	£1.85	No data	£2.00
Shropshire	Sept 2008 £1.80	£1.85	Sept 2008 £1.95	£2.00
North Lincs	Sept 09 £1.90	No increase	Sept 09 £2.00	No increase
Leicester City	Sept 08 £1.60	£1.65	Sept 08 £1.90	£1.95
Notts County	£1.95	£2.00	£2.00	No increase
Notts City	£1.55	Oct 10 £1.60	£1.60	Oct 10 £1.65
Sandwell	£1.70	£1.80	£1.75	£1.85

Task Group note the fact that meal charges are lower in Nottingham City as a result of subsidy and priority action by the City Council. In 2009/10 Leicester took a decision to restrict the price increase, by allocating DSG to cover the increased food / production costs.

Task Group note that Leicester City is second only to Nottingham however in the recorded incidence of Child Poverty and recommend that similar action and commitment may be appropriate for Leicester.

Task Group note the lower price charged for meals in the special school sector and have ascertained that this is largely a legacy issue that needs to be addressed. In view of this disparity and the financial imperatives detailed at Section 16 below, Task Group recommend that this matter be investigated further.

7. Costs of Producing School Meals

The costs associated with producing meals in the 96 schools serviced by City Catering during 2009/10 are shown below.

SPLIT OF SCHOOL MEAL COST 2009/10			
	COST	COST PER MEAL	% OF TOTAL COST
	£	£	%
LABOUR	2,737,700	1.02	51%
FOOD	1,743,800	0.65	33%
DIRECT KITCHEN COST	119,800	0.04	2%
OVERHEAD	761,700	0.29	14%
TOTAL	5,363,000	2.00	

Task Group have determined that the average cost of producing a school meal in Leicester is £2.00. Currently, this cost is partially subsidised by the Governments School Lunch Grant (£497k). The bulk of the school food lunch grant is used towards the cost of food. Further funding will be available in 2011/12 as part of the Direct Schools Grant. This will not be ring fenced, however Schools Forum have recommended that it will be distributed as in previous years.

Task Group endorse this approach and, in the light of benchmark data on charges above recommend that further subsidy is provided from the DSG to maintain unit charges at a level that is affordable to those in need in Leicester to combat family poverty.

8. Menu and Breadth of Provision

Primary Schools

City Catering currently produce four standard menus for use within primary schools. Each menu is rotated on a four week cycle

- A "European" fixed price choice menu.
- A "European" non choice menu.
- A "European" / Halal menu.
- A "European" / Asian vegetarian menu.

Task Group have determined that Menus are adapted to meet individual school requirements as required.

New menus are introduced on a regular basis throughout the school year. Two weeks of the four week cycle are renewed at anyone time, this is to facilitate some familiar dishes remaining on the menu and primary school children are not faced with a totally new menu of unfamiliar dishes. This system works well.

Scrutiny members have had opportunity to sample all of these menus in a variety of settings and have determined that these offer quality in terms of both content and quantity.

A programme of visits is included later in this report.

Task Group members have noted how the environment and layout of dining rooms contributes to the lunchtime experience. Pupils, teachers and other adults in the Schools visited have also commented on this. The provision of tablecloths, flowers, ready cut fresh fruit (as an alternative to more traditional puddings) in some settings have encouraged children to eat and socialise whilst learning appropriate motor skills such as the use of cutlery.

Secondary Schools

All secondary schools offer a two-course set menu (for £1.95) which complies with nutritional standards and meets the requirements of the free school meal provision. A cash cafeteria style service is also offered in all secondary schools that allows for further choice.

Task Group have found the quality of offer variable in the secondary sector but have commended the set two-course meal as offering value for money.

Task Group have identified potential problems with:

- duration of lunch-break.
- ability of children to leave school sites.
- variation of quality of eating environment (within school control).
- Barriers to uptake due to peer pressure and payments mechanisms.

Having reflected upon the current menu offer Task Group are of the view that:

- There should continue to be a hot meal offer as it is clear that this is, in some instances, the only hot meal a child will possibly have
- Consideration should be given to offering only a hot main course only menu offer (with appropriate choice) to reduce costs and encourage take up.
- Consideration should be given to potentially reverting to former food based standards at parts of the year to allow for greater variety and more traditional meals to encourage greater take up.

9. Comparison with Other providers

It is clear from the comparative information provided to Scrutiny as part of this review there is a high degree of commonality in menu content across local authority providers.

Local authority providers prepare their meal offers on a cyclical basis the duration of which may vary from 2 to 4 weeks duration.

City Catering is unaware of any other local authority provider who currently operates on a shorter or longer cycle.

10. Cultural Provision

Most authorities make provision for cultural preferences and this is indeed the case in Leicester.

Twenty five schools have requested and receive Halal options (1600 meals per day). Halal meat is procured under an ESPO contract with appropriate certification relating to authenticity and traceability.

European vegetarian meals always feature on the menu, and Asian vegetarian meals are provided where appropriate.

In Leicester major cultural festivals/ events are marked by specific menu changes on key dates a wide range of promotional materials are produced to ensure awareness of these. Copies of these materials and alternate menus have been made available to scrutiny members during the course of the review.

Task Group recommend that further work with school, young people and parents be undertaken to ensure greater awareness of these and active participation in design. In addition Task Group recommend that consideration be given to the provision of one course set price meals if this is a child/ family preference.

11. Promotion and Marketing activities

City Catering undertake various activities to raise the profile and encourage increased uptake of school meals. These activities include

- Special menus for the celebration of religious and cultural festivals eg. Eid, Diwali, Christmas, Easter.
- *Fun Fridays*, schools deviate from the standard menu and serve one of the children's favourite dishes e.g. Pizza, chicken fricassee.
- *Theme Day* menus, to link with school curriculum, school activities, local and national events e.g. the World Cup, an Italian day.
- *Meal Deals* and Special Offers.
- Promotion of individual dishes or products.
- National School Meals Week – A national event led by the Local Authority Caterers Association (LACA) including competitions and special menus.
- *Food tasting sessions* at parents evenings and other appropriate events allowing parental input into menu design.
- Attendance at various events e.g. Leicester Market Food Fayre, Beaumont Leys Market Food Fayre, Leicester at Play event in Town Hall Square.
- Recipe booklets have been produced for parents to try school meal recipes at home, and parents are encouraged to share their own recipes for schools to try.
- Attractive menu leaflets are produced for schools, and photographs of all dishes are displayed in primary school dining rooms so that children can see what a dish looks like and what is in it before they make their choice.
- City Catering in conjunction with healthy schools run an annual Student Chef of the Year Competition for young people age 14 to 16 years. The winners of the competition are then encouraged to produce the winning dish at their own school.
- Catering staff are invited to take part in LACA's National School Chef of the Year competition and entrants have reached regional finals on several occasions.
- An annual Awards afternoon is held at the Town Hall to acknowledge the achievements of catering staff, this includes inviting Head Teachers to nominate their catering staff for special recognition.

12. Health and Wellbeing

Task Group have determined school meals make a major contribution to the 'Every Child Matters' agenda specifically the outcome

Being healthy: Enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle.

There are also direct links with the 'One Leicester' agenda. The vision within the 'New Prosperity' section of the document is

People are healthy and active.

People will enjoy good health and long life expectancy across the city and will have healthy active lives.

In November Dr Catherine Pritchard- Public Health consultant NHS Leicester City and Aileen Smith, Senior Specialist Dietitian, Children's Weight Management, gave a presentation to Scrutiny members. The presentation focused on the health implications of diet and the contribution that a school meal can make to a child's development.

In summary, the benefits of improved school food, especially lunch are

- Improved long term health.
- Help address obesity, prevention and reduction.
- Improve learning and concentration
- Improve well-being and interaction.

Task Group fully endorse the nutritional benefits of a good school meal and believe that this is best discharged through the provision of a hot meal in a welcoming setting. Task Group are of the view that not only does this contribute to nutritional well-being but emotional and behavioural development.

13. The link between School meals, health inequality and poverty

Task Group note strong links between health inequalities, poverty and the desirability of providing a good nutritious school meal for those in need.

With increasing unemployment and cuts in welfare payments, a recent report by Save the Children (23 February 2011) has highlighted fears that even more children will be forced into severe poverty in the coming months without urgent and concerted action. Task Group note the view that :

“Children up and down the country are going to sleep at night in homes with no heating, without eating a proper meal and without proper school uniforms to put on in the morning,”

Sally Copley, Save the Children's head of UK policy, February 2011

The current national definition of child poverty is based upon the “Proportion of children in families in receipt of out of work benefits, or in receipt of tax credits where their reported income is less than 60 percent median income.

The relevant National Indicator (NI 116) income threshold used to define child poverty is £12,570 per year. In Leicester this currently equates to 35% (27,000) of Leicester’s children.

The recent analysis by Save the Children has sought to define severe child poverty as a lone-parent family with one child aged under 14 living on an income of less than £7,000 and a couple with two children under 14 on less than £12,500.

Save the Children have identified ten local authority areas with the highest levels of severe child poverty, they are in rank order:

- 1 Manchester 27%
- 2 Tower Hamlets 27%
- 3 Newham 25%
- 4 Leicester 24%
- 5 Westminster 24%
- 6 Nottingham 23%
- 7 Liverpool 23%
- 8 Birmingham 23%
- 9 Blackpool 22%
- 10 Hackney 22%

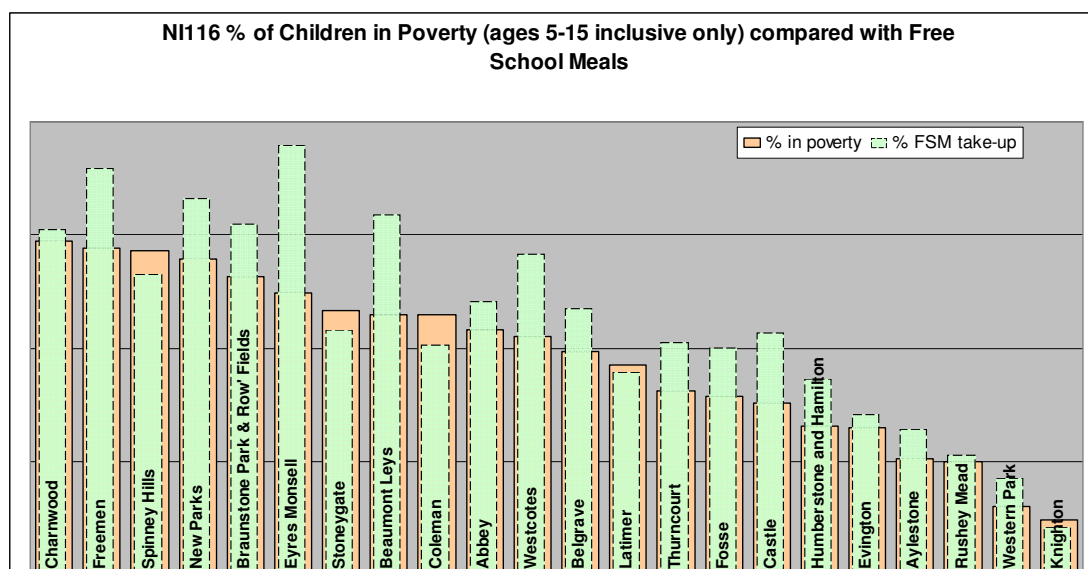
At fourth position Leicester therefore faces one of the greatest social policy challenges in mitigating and overcoming the challenges presented by child poverty. This includes securing the very well being of children in greatest need including meeting their immediate nutritional requirements and longer term health outcomes. The scale of this challenge is also evident in the joint strategic needs analysis recently undertaken and adopted by the Leicester Children's Trust Board.

Regardless of threshold used to define child poverty there is therefore a significant number of families in Leicester whose income is between £12,570 and £16,190 who, although not living 'in poverty', are poor enough to qualify for FSM.

Using the current government definition of child poverty the following chart shows free school meal (FSM) take up against number of children (ages 5-15) in poverty by electoral ward.

Where take-up exceeds poverty we might infer that most people eligible for FSM are claiming it.

Where take-up matches or is less than poverty, we might infer that there are some people who are eligible who are not claiming.



Following the above principles Task Group derive a list of target wards and schools for future focused activity. These are detailed below:

	Ward	School	Notes
Group 1	Spinney Hill	Charnwood Primary Coleman Primary Crown Hills CC Highfields Primary Moat CC Spinney Hill Primary School & CC Taylor Road Primary Uplands Infant Uplands Junior	Provides own catering
	Stoneygate	Evington Valley Primary Madani High School & CC (VA) Mayflower Primary Medway Community Primary Sparkenhoe Community Primary	Provides own catering
	Coleman	Rowlatts Hill Primary St Barnabas CofE Primary	
	Latimer	Abbey Primary Catherine Infant Catherine Junior	
	Knighton	The Lancaster School & Specialist Sports & Arts College Overdale Infant Overdale Junior Sir Jonathan North CC St Thomas More Catholic Primary	

	Ward	School	Notes
Group 2	Charnwood	Bridge Junior Green Lane Infant Merrydale Infant Merrydale Junior Northfield House Primary Sacred Heart Catholic Primary Shenton Primary	
	Evington	Ash Field The City of Leicester College Judgemeadow CC Linden Primary Oaklands School St Paul's Catholic Whitehall Primary	Currently going out to tender Provides own catering.
	Rushey Mead	Herrick Primary Mellor Community Primary Rushey Mead School – Sports & Science College Sandfield Close Primary Soar Valley College Wyvern Primary	
<p>Group 1 = Wards where poverty exceeds FSM take up Group 2 = Wards where poverty matches FSM take up</p>			

Task Group recommend that officers develop a clear and focused programme of activity in the above target schools to increase FSM registration and take up.

Tackling family poverty through the provision of a free school meal

Free school meals are currently available to children whose parents receive one or more of the following benefits:

- Income Support
- Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance
- Employment and Support Allowance (Income Related)
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Families in receipt of Child Tax Credit will also qualify provided that:
 - They are NOT entitled to Working Tax Credit (that they do not do paid work for more than 16 hours per week on average)
 - Their annual income does NOT exceed £16,190

The income threshold for FSM is £16,190 per year (gross family income).

In Leicester we wish to increase Free School Meals registration and take up for a number of reasons:

1. To promote healthy eating and well being
2. To combat child poverty
3. Secure increased funding for City individual schools via the payment of the new pupil premium. (In 2011/12 this will equate to £430 per child registered for free school meals).

Strategies

1. A City wide leaflet and poster campaign, "Are You Missing Out?" was undertaken in all city schools in 2008 and 2009 to draw parents' attention to the entitlement to free school meals. It is proposed to run a similar campaign across the City during the second half of the Spring Term and Summer Term making clear the entitlement, the health and well being benefits and the fact that this will generate another £400 per new registration for schools.
2. Issue awareness materials to all households in receipt of Housing Benefit across the City
3. In the absence of a definitive data set explore the use of the City Council Housing benefit Database to identify low income households with children resident within them to enable further targeted work.
4. Brief City wide media (print/ radio) and seek their active participation in the above campaigns.
5. All admissions notifications issued to parental addresses on National Award Dates (Primary – 18.4.11 ; Secondary 1.3.11) will carry FSM promotional materials as will all other general admission offers.
6. Undertake focused activity in target wards and schools in partnership with governing bodies and school leadership teams *.

Activity by ward members

Ward members should be actively encouraged to speak to families within their wards who are likely to be entitled to take up free school meals but have not yet done so via promotional activity in surgeries, ward and neighbourhood meetings.

Good practice examples in addressing issues arising from deprivation should be shared by Councillors and officers and schools encouraged to adopt them. This might also usefully be extended into the provision of catering at other times of the day such as the provision of breakfast clubs using Extended Services budgets as appropriate.

Reviewing school administration

Ensure each school appoints a lead administrator for free school meals and allocates sufficient time and resources.

Review Entitlement and registration administration.

Introduce robust administration processes to monitor uptake and Entitlement

Raising awareness with parents and carers

Write to parents and carers about easy steps to claiming free school meals

Write to families who are entitled but not claiming

Developing posters illustrating what is on offer

Raising awareness to pupils

Develop Curriculum and assembly ideas

Develop posters

Sustained marketing and promotion

Website articles and newsletters

Include commitments in whole-school food policy

Include reassurances in anti-bullying policy (if applicable)

Promote at parent evenings and transition days

Frequent displays

Menu boards

Posters

Postcards

Text messages (e.g. Leeds/ Southampton/ Tweets e.g. Somerset/ LB of Tower Hamlets)

Use of Bluetooth technology to target pupils mobile phones

(* Source: Education Leeds, 2008)

7. Explore development of the inclusion of FSM assessment within an 'Integrated Benefits Processing System'. (e.g. Leeds uses a single claim form that people can use to claim not only Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit but also FSM entitlement.)

14. Schools Visited by Task Group Members

As part of the scrutiny review task group members visited a number of schools during the lunchtime meal service, the schools were

Beaumont Leys specialist Science School*(production kitchen)
Abbey Primary School *
Herrick Primary School *
Holy Cross Catholic Primary School *
Medway Community Primary School (dining centre)
Imperial Avenue Infant School*
Parks Primary School *
Scraptoft Valley Primary School*
Taylor Road Primary School*

Visits were also offered to St Patricks and Knighton Fields Primary schools, both dining centres but members were unfortunately unable to attend.

At the request of task group further visits were arranged to Crown Hills Community College, Evington Valley Primary School and Hamilton Community College. The visit to Evington Valley did not take place due to issues at the school

Naturally the views of task group members have varied, but the overall feedback from the visits has been positive with members being pleased with the experience and the product on offer.

Task Group have identified potential concerns with school support and input at a local level to the school meals provision in some schools. Where practically possible these are being addressed.

Members also received information regarding the Cunninghams Cashless system, and saw in operation the Gladstones system at Beaumont Leys school, which is the system being used in the new BSF schools.

It was acknowledged that cashless systems reduce the stigma of free school meals, increase the speed of service by reducing queues which in turn helps to increase uptake. This performance has been clearly evidenced at Beaumont Leys School.

Whilst, the long-term benefits of cashless systems seem to be clear, however, Task Group are minded that *over 75% of all meals provided are free school meals and that the reported stigma experienced by FSM pupils may be exaggerated. Undoubtedly, work is required with parents however to address this issue.*

15. On- Line School Meals Survey

Task Group has invited views from parents/carers, children and young people via an on-line survey which was available on the LCC website for six weeks, consultation closed on 3rd December 2010.

The total number of responses received was

Parents /Carers Survey - 30 respondents

Children and young people's survey - 819 respondents

The results from the parents survey are not statistically significant but the comments made by respondents are useful in helping to shape the future of the service. City Catering is acting on issues raised particularly where a quick fix / win is possible.

The survey results may be viewed at
<http://www.cabinet.leicester.gov.uk/uuCoverpage.aspx>

In summary:

Views were invited over a 6 week period via an online questionnaire. This survey was promoted via a number of media and a number of headteachers have clearly actively encouraged pupils to participate in their schools. Consultation closed on 3 December 2010.

A total of 819 responses were received from children and young people from 11 primary and 3 secondary schools (Crown Hills, Madani & Riverside).

Task Group wish to note and thank in particular the staff and children of Mellor Primary, Taylor Road, Queensmead and Uplands Junior for their engagement with this survey.

Task Group noted that all respondents answered all questions. Nevertheless they provided a good indication of pupil views and issues that Task Group needed to consider.

In terms of the overall headline findings:

- 283 respondents had a packed lunch
- 316 stated that they took a school meal
- 98 stated that they took both and 57 others made alternative arrangements i.e. they went home or went off site.

In terms of who decides whether or not the child takes a school lunch the following responses were received:

- 201 stated that both parent and child decided
- 212 children stated that they decided themselves
- 273 stated that their parent or carer decided

621 respondents stated that they did not go off the school site at lunchtime reflected the fact that the greater number of respondents were from the primary sector. 100 respondents stated that they went off site – a number cited sporting activity as the reason for doing so.

Headline comments from the survey are;

Why do you have a school meal or a packed lunch?

Respondents stated that they:

- liked being able to have the food they like.
- liked being able to sit with friends and having more time to play
- appreciated the halal provision and use of fresh foods
- felt that sometimes that there were some strange combinations offered but they liked the food
- felt there was a great varied English/Asian menu at Abbey Primary School.
- liked the meal but would like the fruit cut up.
- appreciated and enjoyed the meal trials and tasting sessions (parents).
- were impressed by the balance and variety of options.

Why is your dining room a nice place to eat?

There were several very positive comments from children at schools which have new dining facilities:

- *“Because it is huge and hygienic.*
- *Because it is big and there are many tables you can sit and talk with friends.*
- *It is big and the teacher there is nice.*
- *Because it is clean and there are cloths and nice flowers, you have a pretty place to sit with your friends.”*

Why is your dining room not a nice place to eat?

Respondents did not like their dining room because:

- it is the same room in which they have assemblies, do PE, and have Christmas plays etc.
- they felt dining rooms are not big enough, they are overcrowded, people shout and they are noisy places.
- people throw food and there are lots of sandwiches on the floor.
- they feel that the dining room is dull, boring and not modern.
- they would like to see better furniture and crockery which they think would improve the dining room.

Why do you not have a school lunch?

Respondents prefer to bring a packed lunch because they:

- like to bring their own food as they do not like what is served.
- feel food is expensive when there is more than one child and meals have to be paid for.
- feel peer pressure and the influence of friends is a factor.
- do not like queuing.
- think a packed lunch is cheaper.
- they like to participate in sports activities or be with peers.

In terms of the active marketing of the school meals service 409 respondents stated that they were aware that the school meal service did special meals on special days – 216 respondents stated that they did not. 394 respondents stated that they did have a special meal on a special day. 331 stated that they did not. This suggests that there may be a need to review marketing in this areas or review the efficacy of such menus.

With regard to the immediate environment 374 respondents stated that they had a nice place to eat their lunch, 140 disagreed and 213 did not know.

As with parental responses headline statistics need to be seen in context and accompanying narrative and Task Group believe that these provide valuable insights into young people's perceptions and "buyer behaviour"!

16. Emerging Issues

• Single status implementation

The implementation of new pay rates as a result of the current Job Evaluation implementation, will present City Catering and any other new external entrants to the market with significant financial challenges:

Although some contingency funds from the Dedicated Schools Grant have previously been set aside by Schools Forum to assist in this matter in the current year (£500k) it is estimated that £800k will need to be found in this and subsequent years.

This increased contribution might come from:

- price increases to paid meals
- management saving the hours employed by frontline staff increased charges, subsidy or indeed a combination of approaches.

- **Increasing the cost of paid school meals**

Given the increase in labour charges detailed above School meal prices cannot be sustained at their current levels.

Task Group note the views of officers that there is an urgent need to consider raising the price of a school meal as part of a broader strategy of securing the financial viability of the service. Task Group are of the view however that any price rise should not become a barrier to increased take up and must have a sound basis.

(For example, a price increase of 20p to all meals or 43p to paid meals could cover £600k of the costs, but Task Group are of the clear view that this would be unreasonable and a reduction in take up would be inevitable following such a significant price rise.

It was made clear to therefore that any cost cutting exercises would most likely need to be a combination of all of the measures in this section to achieve savings.

Task Group recommend that further modelling be undertaken as part of the Council's ongoing budget building for 2011/12 and the recommendations as a result of the work undertaken by the School Meals Scrutiny Committee Task Group informs future decisions of individual schools and the Schools Forum.

Although in recent years the national interest in the provision of school meals and the introduction of nutritional standards have changed the focus of the service City Catering continues to operate as a traded service and therefore needs to recover all costs. Usually in the commercial sector when costs rise this is reflected in a price increase to the customer. A significant increase in the price of school meals is not in its entirety a valid option as this would inevitably lead to a severe drop in demand.

The implementation of the Single Status agreement has significant financial challenges for City Catering, and a way forward regarding how the costs associated with this needs to be established.

In order to meet the increased labour costs of £800,000, significant changes in the way the service is delivered need to be explored.

Task Group were advised that outsourcing the service through a tendering exercise could be considered, however, the significant increase in labour costs incurred as a result of single status could prove unattractive to commercial providers who would be required to make a profit and a return to shareholders. TUPE requires staff to transfer on their existing conditions. Under TUPE regulations a provider would eventually be able to reduce rates of pay and make a reduction in staffing levels but this would result in a reduction in standards. This option would also have a negative impact on the large female work force currently employed by City Catering many of whose earnings help to supplement low income families within the city.

Leicestershire County Council subjected the service to voluntary competitive tendering several years ago and recently bought it back in house as schools were not satisfied with the service from the commercial provider. The service is now subsidised in a drive to retrieve the loss in uptake during this time. That said there are a number of successful commercial companies operating local authority contracts elsewhere in the country.

A further option of devolving all responsibility for the catering function direct to schools, and have a small client / advisory team to monitor standards could also be considered. Schools could then decide for themselves if they wanted to self operate the service or put it out top tender.

The following strategies could be explored to find the necessary savings and are typical ways of reducing costs in a catering environment.

- Increase the selling price of meals.
- Reduce labour costs in kitchens
- Review management structure.
- Abolish cleaning day at start of the autumn term.
- Review delivery model of the service, close some production kitchens, and introduce more transported meals.
- Rationalise the number of Unit Catering managers employed and replace with assistant cooks
- Reduce food costs
- Reduce central overheads to reflect losses in other areas. The current contribution to central overheads would be lost if the service went to a commercial provider.

17. SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

All reports produced as part of the task group review of school meals are available at

<http://www.cabinet.leicester.gov.uk/uuCoverpage.aspx>

From the information contained in these reports and discussed at meetings it is recommended that Scrutiny members give consideration to the following issues:

Statutory Obligations

1. *Task Group endorse the continued use of national nutritional and environmental health standards.*

Commissioning a school meals service

2. *Consideration should be given to the future commissioning of the school meals service, and whether the current direct service provision by City Catering (as in the majority of schools) is appropriate for the future.*

There are other commissioning options but Task Group judge that the barriers to new entrants as a result of TUPE revisions are high and operational challenges are many. This is reflected in the small number of schools who have decided to self manage their service.

However, the benchmarking data supplied to Task Group shows that City Catering has a higher than average take up of free school meals and a slightly lower than average uptake of paid meals. *The price charged for meals is lower than many other authorities, whilst the below average take up of paid meals reflects the demographic and socio-economic make up of the city. This provides a good foundation for future service development.*

3. With the exception of new Academies, all schools are required to comply with national nutritional standards set by the government and City Catering need to be able to evidence that all menus have been analysed and comply to these standards. *Task Group endorse the continued use of nutritional standards but feel that there may be merit in exploring menu offers based upon "Food Standards" on a pilot/trial basis.*

In the primary sector where the meal price is set this is achievable using the current delivery model.

In the secondary sector which has a mixed economy there are compliance issues and many are given the opportunity to go off site and purchase food which is non compliant and in some cases extremely unhealthy particularly when consumed on a daily basis.

All secondary schools will have new dining facilities by 2016 as part of the Building Schools for the Future Programme. Some secondary schools have indicated that when these facilities are available they may wish to pursue providing the catering service in house or subjecting the service to voluntary competitive tendering in the hope of generating income through the catering provision.

Consideration should be given to whether the same delivery model remains appropriate for all sectors. Task Group is of the view that cook/chill (regeneration) does not offer a viable alternative without significant capital investment.

Cost of meals

5. *Task Group note the lower price charged for meals in the special school sector and have ascertained that this is largely a legacy issue that needs to be addressed. In view of this disparity and the financial imperatives detailed at Section 16 below, Task Group recommend that this matter be investigated further.*

6. *In the light of benchmark data on charges made by other authorities Task Group recommend that further subsidy is provided from the DSG to maintain unit charges at a level that is affordable to those in need in Leicester to combat family poverty.*

Meal and Menu Content

In both the primary and secondary sector the authority could opt to meet only the minimum requirement of a cold meal for those entitled to free meals, however, *Task Group do not consider this a suitable solution given the needs of children and young people evaluated in the needs assessment undertaken by the Children's Trust Board.*

7. *In some authorities in order to make maximum savings all schools are being made to take responsibility for their own individual provision with the in house providers being disbanded and contracts with commercial providers not being renewed. Task Group favour continuation of hot meal provision whatever the delivery model.*

Currently a hot school meal is available to all children and young people in Leicester and in some cases this is known to be the only hot meal a child has.

The stringent nutritional standards set by the government in 2009 have not been repealed by the coalition, and whilst a school meal does not have to be a hot cooked meal it would be difficult to meet these standards if a cold meal were the only option.

8. *Task Group members wish to see healthier options promoted through 'Grab bag' style services offered at secondary locations with deli bars / salad bars.*

The current primary and senior menus operate on a four week cycle, and offer a range of choices.

9. *Task Group recommend that a pilot be undertaken to determine whether or not more frequent presentations of “favourites” has an impact on “take-up”.*

Health and Wellbeing

It has been highlighted to Task Group members that there is a strong link between health inequalities and poverty, and that there are a significant number of families in Leicester who although not living in poverty (an income of below £12,570 per year) qualify for free school meals. Statistical information provided shows that there are some wards where the take up of free school meals matches the eligibility and some wards where take up is below eligibility.

Research shows that the benefits of a school meal contribute to the concentration and learning of children as well as their well being and longer term health.

10. *Task Group support the continued work that City Catering do with various partners to encourage families to take up their eligibility for free school meals.*

11. *Task Group wish to encourage schools to give consideration to introducing staggered lunchtimes to reduce queuing and give children time to enjoy and digest a meal, and to make investment into some of the dining rooms around the city. Schools may wish to encourage more adult presence in dining halls across the city which encourages children to eat and promotes good behaviour creating a better dining environment.*

- Tackling Family Poverty through the provision of a School Meal

12. *Task Group recommend that officers develop a clear and focused programme of activity in the above target schools to increase FSM registration and take up.*

Cultural and Dietary Needs

13. *Task Group are satisfied that City Catering provide a variety of menu styles and options to meet the majority of the city’s cultural needs, but recommend that awareness of the offer and provenance of food stuffs is actively promoted.*

14. City Catering employs a dietitian for one half day a week to work with catering staff, schools, and families to ensure as many medical diets as possible can be catered for. *Task Group recommend that partnership working with NHS colleagues continue particularly in the current climate.*

Market Challenges

Whilst the uptake of free school meals from those assessed as eligible in Leicester is higher than average individual schools need to secure increased registration funding through the payment of the new pupil premium. Therefore it is important that all families who are entitled register for free meals.

15. Equally the sale of paid meals (which is lower than average) needs to be increased for the service to be sustainable in the future.

In the survey carried out as part of this review the majority of parents who responded felt that whilst they thought the meal provision was good, the price of the meals was too expensive especially when there is more than one child in the family, as the demographics of the city are such that there are many families who are just above the threshold to claim free school meals.

16. Task Group endorse this approach and, in the light of benchmark data on charges above recommend that further subsidy is provided from the DSG to maintain unit charges at a level that is affordable to those in need in Leicester to combat family poverty.

Marketing

17. Task Group have been informed about the range of marketing activities that City Catering undertake to try and increase the uptake of both paid and free meals, but wish to see some changes which could promote further interest and awareness in the service – the use of social networks that may offer a way ahead further.

18. The results of the pupil survey have been useful to further inform scrutiny what children and young people like and dislike about school meals. The responses show that only approximately half of the respondents are aware that special meals or theme days are offered, which evidences a need to review marketing in this area. *Task Group recommend that a fundamental review of marketing is undertaken with particular regard to reaching low income families who are eligible for free meals.*

Other responses show that whilst there are some very positive responses from pupils at schools which have a new dining room, in other schools they do not like eating in a multi purpose hall where they do other activities as well as eat. Some of the older dining rooms are referred to as being dull and boring, overcrowded and noisy.

19. Schools are recommended to review their environments to encourage increased take up.

This Scrutiny Review, while necessarily touching on the future implications of Single Status, has concentrated on the “School Meal” itself and has not looked at staffing issues in detail or numbers. Therefore while we hope that our findings will be useful when looking at the school catering service as a whole, this will be a separate piece of work outside the remit of this Scrutiny Review.