

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday 13 th July 2023
Report Subject	School Meals Service
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure
Report Author	Chief Officer (Education and Youth)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru have made a commitment to ensure all primary school aged children can access a free school meal by 2024.

Implementation of universal primary free school meals (UPFSM) has been phased with the first rollout in Flintshire commencing in September 2022 to Reception aged children, the second phase in April 2023 to Year 1 and 2 aged children, with children in years 3 and 4 due to commence in September 2023 and the then final primary year groups, years 5 & 6 in April 2024.

NEWydd Catering & Cleaning Limited are continuously working to improve the quality of service provided to Flintshire schools. NEWydd also recognises the risk from external commercial competitors in this area. Schools are responsible for the procurement of their school meal provision and are at liberty to go to the open market.

This report provides a progress update on local implementation of UPFSM and the work being carried out to improve the school meals service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Members positively acknowledge the work undertaken by NEWydd, officers and schools to deliver the Welsh Government's strategy for the provision of Universal Free School Meals.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS (UPFSM)
1.01	As part of a Co-operation Agreement, Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru announced plans and funding for all primary school children to be able to have a free school meal by 2024.
1.02	Welsh Government's commitment to Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) is in response to the escalating costs of living and is a strategy to tackle child poverty, whilst ensuring no child goes hungry in school.
1.03	Some families who meet certain criteria, such as those on lower incomes or in receipt of certain benefits, are entitled to receive a free school meal – eligibility tested free school meals (eFSM). The UPFSM Policy does not affect eFSM and families who are eligible for eFSM are being encouraged to continue to use the eFSM application process. This will ensure these families can continue to access other grants and benefits, such as the PDG uniform grant. Eligibility for eFSM is also an determining factor in the provision of funding to schools and to the Council so it is vital that parents who are eligible are encouraged to continue applying.
1.04	Implementation of UPFSM will be phased. Locally, in Flintshire, rollout will mirror the national timetable, as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• September 2022 – Reception aged children offered UPFSM – rollout has been completed• April 2023 – Years 1 and Year 2 aged children offered UPFSM – rollout has been completed• September 2023 – Year 3 and Year 4 aged children offered UPFSM - preparations are ongoing to ensure the rollout for Year 3 and Year 4 are on target for September 2023 implementation date• April 2024 – all primary aged children offered UPFSM
1.05	A significant amount of work has already been completed and continues to be required to ensure that in Flintshire we have the infrastructure, equipment, resource and processes in place to support full implementation of this national policy. It is not just about ensuring a meal can be provided but that eligible children have access to cutlery to eat it with, a place to sit whilst eating, that schools have sufficient lunchtime supervisors for an extended period to enable all children to have a hot lunch and that data is captured on eligibility and meal uptake.
1.06	To oversee implementation of UPFSM in Flintshire, a small cross-portfolio Project Team continues to work on the rollout with representatives from Education and Youth; Finance; Housing and Assets (Benefits); and Capital Programme and Assets. NEWydd Catering and Cleaning Ltd are also part of this Project Team as the Council's main school catering supplier.
1.07	The UPFSM Project Team is supported by a number of task and finish groups, focusing on specific matters such as: implementation in schools;

	communications and engagement; kitchen and dining room audits; application process and data capture; and finance.
1.08	<p>The priorities for the Project Team, and supporting task and finish groups, have included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting kitchen and dining room audits to identify the additional kitchen and dining equipment and works required to deliver full implementation. This has now been completed. • Managing and disseminating information to stakeholders - this has been undertaken regularly and will be ongoing throughout the roll-out. • Procurement of light and heavy equipment to enable delivery of the first phase of implementation in September 2022 and for April 2023. This first stage of procurement has been completed; and • Procurement of any remaining equipment and furniture to enable delivery for the next phase of rollout.
1.09	In addition to the local Project Team, the Council has officer representatives on a number of national groups and forums involved in the development, implementation, delivery and rollout of UPFSM. This ensures Flintshire's views are well represented and important information disseminated quickly to the local project team.
1.10	<p>The implementation of UPFSM, although a positive initiative for Welsh children, will bring with it operational challenges for schools and catering providers.</p> <p>The improvements to infrastructure being delivered through this initiative are detailed in Section 2 below but there will also need to be changes to the delivery model to meet the new demand for meals.</p> <p>NEWydd have already created their Central Kitchen service to mitigate employment and menu standardisation issues in the smaller schools but more changes will be required to ensure that demand for meals can be met and the quality of meals can be maintained and improved.</p>
1.11	<p>Recruitment and retention of catering employees remains a key pressure on all providers within the hospitality sector and NEWydd are not immune to this.</p> <p>Adequately staffing all schools with suitably qualified staff has become a challenge since the pandemic so the move to transported hot meals from the central kitchen has ensured hot meals can continue to be served at all schools on most days.</p> <p>Continuing recruitment throughout the summer months will be key to the success of the UPFSM programme.</p>
1.12	Although all menus are now, and have always been, fully compliant with The Healthy Eating in Schools Regulations in Wales, NEWydd are always seeking to improve the quality of the food on offer.

	In response to more recent concerns raised by schools about the quality of the food offer, NEWydd are looking to return to the home cooked recipes they provided prior to the pandemic and to increase the quantity of fresh produce on offer. NEWydd is aware of that schools are able to procure their school meals service from any source and want to be the local provider of choice.
1.13	<p>One such additional measure being explored during the summer term involves the exploration of a potential partnership between NEWydd and Well-Fed.</p> <p>Well-Fed, a partnership between the Council, ClywdAlyn and Can Cook, already provide catering solutions to the Council as part of our Poverty agenda and a proof of concept aims to explore the synergies between the two companies that might benefit schools in Flintshire in the future. This work is at a very early stage.</p>

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	Welsh Government have committed to fully funding UPFSM Policy with a number of grant funding streams being made available.
2.02	<p>Revenue Funding – Meal Unit Rate Despite Welsh Government committing to fully fund the UPFSM Policy they have set a meal unit price of £2.90, which some Councils, including Flintshire, have already reported will not cover the cost of delivery.</p> <p>Early indications show that this figure does not cover all local service delivery costs, i.e. catering supplier costs, utilities, etc. and work to ensure a fair and accountable split of this funding element is being developed.</p>
2.03	The meal unit rate is now under review by Welsh Government following feedback from all Councils – Flintshire County Council is represented on this working group.
2.04	<p>Local Authority Education Grant – UPFSM Delivery The Council has been allocated capital grant funding, totalling £3,029,201 to support the procurement of equipment and works to enable UPFSM rollout. The Council has realised a total spend of £1,567,976.00 in the rollout of this project to date.</p>
2.05	<p>This funding has enabled infrastructure works to be completed in the majority of kitchens during term time to enable the extra cooking capacity that is required to provide the increased number of meals demanded. Schools have been very supportive in this allowing for temporary changes to the menu for the works to be completed.</p> <p>NEWydd have transported hot meals from other local kitchens or provided a reduced menu for 2 days in order to support the improvements required.</p>

2.06	A small number of schools remain in need of infrastructure works and these have been scheduled for the summer holidays in order to remove any impact on the ability to provide meals on a school day.
2.07	<p>This funding has also been used to improve the seating arrangements in schools by upgrading the equipment making seating more effective, increasing the number of available seats and providing seating solutions which are easier to move and maintain.</p> <p>The capital funding has also enabled the purchase of all light equipment required to deliver the increased meal numbers. These items range from crockery and cutlery through to cooking trays, pans and other kitchen utensils.</p>

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	<p>Procurement</p> <p>The equipment and works required in kitchens and dining rooms to enable UPFSM delivery was initially identified as circa £1.6m.</p> <p>This did have a significant impact on procurement, which was further compounded by the fact that the Council did not originally have established supplier relationships with many suppliers given that school catering is not delivered by the Council in-house.</p> <p>Work to resolve this was swift and with the assistance of NEWydd and their suppliers of catering equipment, along with the Corporate Procurement team direct award contracts were established in order to meet the very tight deadlines set.</p>
3.02	Initial procurement for light equipment to enable delivery to Reception aged children from September 2022 was needed to be made through means of an exception report however.
3.03	<p>Applying for eFSM</p> <p>Whilst UPFSM will be available to all primary aged children from 2024, those who remain eligible for eFSM (eligibility tested) still need to apply. Application does enable parents to access other grant funding, but this is limited.</p>
3.04	<p>eFSM application is also used for funding allocations to the Council and schools. For 2022/23 eFSM application data has been roughly calculated as providing circa £10m grant funding, broken down as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £6.1m in the Education element of the Revenue Support Grant (RSG); • £3.1m in the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) Schools grant; and • £619.5k for the PDG Access grant.
3.05	There are concerns that the universal eligibility of UPFSM will see a marked reduction in the number of parents applying for eFSM, which could potentially have a significant financial impact on both schools and the Council.

3.06	Local communications have continued to reiterate the need for parents to apply for eFSM and this will need to be an ongoing to ensure those who are eligible for eFSM continue to apply in future years.
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4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
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4.01	<p>Parent and Child Survey</p> <p>To help with preparations for UPFSM, to ascertain likely meal uptake, a parent and child survey was undertaken between June and July 2022. This was advertised on the Council's website and primary schools were asked to circulate the link to parents of children attending their school. The information from the surveys was useful to the project team to gauge potential take-up of the UPFSM offer.</p>
4.02	Further surveying work with parents/carers and pupils will be undertaken to assess the impact of the rollout in the summer term.
4.03	<p>School Survey</p> <p>To enable effective planning and to inform procurement requirements, especially to enable delivery to Reception aged children from September 2022, a further survey was developed and launched in July 2022 for completion by schools. The information from the surveys was useful to the project team to gauge the schools' own challenges in relation to delivery of the UPFSM project.</p>
4.04	Further surveying work with schools will be undertaken to assess the impact of the rollout in the summer term.
4.05	<p>Uptake Rates</p> <p>The current uptake rates for children from Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 aged children across Flintshire schools is been 70.3%, a positive result. There is no comparative uptake date available from other Council's at present.</p>

5.00	APPENDICES
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5.01	None.
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6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
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6.01	Welsh Government (2022) <i>Universal Primary Free School Meals</i> , available online: https://gov.wales/universal-primary-free-school-meals-upfsm#:~:text=Registering-Overview,child%20goes%20hungry%20in%20school
	Flintshire County Council (2022) <i>Universal Primary Free School Meals FAQs</i> , available online: https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/Resident/Schools/Free-School-Meals.aspx

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: Steve.W.Jones Telephone: 01352 704039 E-mail: steve.w.jones@newydd.wales

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>Free School Meals (eFSM): eligibility tested free school meals that are available to families who meet certain criteria, such as being on lower incomes or in receipt of certain benefits, making them entitled to receive a free school meal regardless of the UPFSM Policy.</p> <p>Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM): Welsh Government Policy to ensure every primary school aged child will be universally eligible for a free school meal by 2024, regardless of household income.</p> <p>Uptake: the percentage of children who are eligible for a meal who take a meal when offered.</p>