

minutes



Meeting INCREASING TAKE-UP OF PRIMARY SCHOOL MEALS
SELECT COMMITTEE

Date Monday, 6 April 2009 (commencing at 2.00 pm)

Membership

Persons absent are marked with `A`

COUNCILLORS

John Knight (Chair)
Brian Wombwell (Vice-Chair)

	Peter Barnes	A	Sheila Place
	Richard Butler		Lynn Sykes
	Vincent Dobson		Parry Tsimbiridis
A	Paul Henshaw		

STATUTORY CO-OPTED MEMBERS

A Edward Hayes
John Rudd
James Parry
David Richards

MINUTES

The minutes of the last meeting held on 16 February 2009 were confirmed and signed by the Chair.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Paul Henshaw and Sheila Place.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no declarations of interest by members or officers.

PRESENTATION BY SUSAN HARRIS, CHILDREN'S SERVICES CATERING

Susan Harris, Client Manager - Catering, Children and Young People's Department gave a presentation on the role of her team in providing advice to all schools, regardless of their catering provider.

In reply to Councillor Knight, Ms Harris said that if the team identified problem areas at a school through one of their audits, they would discuss this with the school and the meals provider. In reply to Mr Rudd, she stated that accountability for the take-up of meals rested with the school in the first place, and then with the provider and with her team. The school's governing body had responsibility for meeting the statutory nutritional standards.

Councillor Barnes observed that at St Peter's Primary School, East Bridgford, there was a good take-up of free school meals compared with other schools. He questioned whether parents elsewhere understood the system so well. Ms Harris replied that the free school meals service was administered by a team at Meadow House, Mansfield. She understood that they would be undertaking some promotional work. She referred to the whole school approach taken by St Peter's, which could be more difficult for outside contractors to adopt.

Kay Collinson, Head Teacher at Ernehale Infants School, indicated at her previous school the rule had been that children eligible for free school meals had to have them, and could not bring sandwiches. At her current school, only two children were entitled to free school meals. Councillor Wombwell asked whether Ms Harris's team collated information and looked at the reasons for low take-up. Ms Harris stated that schools and students could make comments during audits, and although they did not collate findings, they did collate actions, eg training. She also stated that numbers were holding well or increasing in self-managed schools, where for example teachers ate with the pupils. Pip Harris, Healthy Eating Adviser, Children and Young People's Services, pointed out that the Department of Children, Schools and Families hub was encouraging the take-up of free school meals by linking with the Department of Work and Pensions database. She said that she targeted schools where take-up was low, and tried to link with the work of school improvement teams.

Mr Parry referred to the stigma which parents still associated with free school meals. Although there may be efforts to make the service anonymous, Mr Richards pointed out that children paying for their meal would be identified when they handed the money over each week. He indicated that all eight of the schools he had visited had praised the school meals service, encouraged take-up, and sat teachers with children at meal times. Ms Harris commented that it would be useful to have positive messages linking school meals with attainment.

Mr Rudd pointed out that the majority of children paid for their meals. He wondered what made them decide to buy a meal. He had spoken to 6 to 8 year olds, who had indicated that they made a decision on the basis of that day's menu. He saw a need to look at which menus were popular, and believed that the nutritional standards would discourage take-up. He also believed that the different parts of the County Council dealing with school meals should be integrated and made more accountable. Ms Harris referred to the choice which schools had, and to the impartial advice which her team gave.

FEEDBACK FROM SCHOOL VISITS

Councillor Knight opened discussion by observing that the standard of school meals no longer seemed to be at issue, although the standard of presentation (eg where food was served on plastic trays) or lack of social atmosphere might be. Kevin McKay, Head of Service for Catering, Cleaning and Landscape, Communities

Department, explained that the advantage of trays was that they enabled children to go to the counter only once. He pointed out that some schools had used section 105 moneys to provide crockery. Helen Fifoot, Operations Manager, Primary School Catering, said that the service would like to encourage a social, restaurant-style atmosphere. Ms Collinson, referred to children learning from the experience of eating and use of cutlery. She was present every lunchtime, and believed that family service worked best. Councillor Knight observed that meal time was an opportunity for children to learn manners. Ms Collinson said that many schools were doing this, and that she felt she could achieve more when working alongside the catering service. Ms Harris pointed out that schools often used DCSF funding to return to family service, which improved take-up.

Mr Richards had visited two infant schools, at each of which the children had a good social experience. Westdale School used a computerised payment system. He saw the cost of the meal as being important, especially for families with more than one child. Some comments had been made about portions not being large enough for older children. He pointed out that menus were chosen by adults, not children. In relation to packed lunches, he commented that some older junior chose their own packed lunches, and that children had more free time at lunchtime if they did not have a sit-down meal.

Bridget Newmarch, Cook Supervisor at Netherfield Primary School, explained that hers was a new school which had family service meals. Take up had, however, gone down. She emphasised the importance of the head teacher being committed to school meals; that children had to be taught to eat properly; that they should be given child-friendly food; and that they would not eat school meals if they did not like the menu. Councillor Knight commented that children would not develop a palate if they were always given a choice. Mrs Newmarch liked the idea of family service, and pointed out that there were 15 midday supervisors at her school.

Pip Harris observed that children became used to family service if they had it from the start. Ms Fifoot stated that KS2 children had a choice which KS1 children did not. Ms Collinson felt she had a duty to provide a solid foundation, and saw a need for continued good provision in KS3 and KS4. Councillor Knight suggested that a possible recommendation from the review might be free school meals for KS1 children. He did not envisage stopping children having packed lunches, but he believed that the system would have failed if children chose to have a packed lunch. Mr Rudd agreed that it would be good for all children to have a free school meal to start with, but they should not be forced to have one. Councillor Knight saw a need to make packed lunches fashionable. Ms Collinson pointed out that at the linked secondary school, there was no facility for every child to have a school meal. Sue Harris indicated that there was a statutory requirement for schools to provide accommodation at no charge where children could eat their packed lunch.

Pip Harris expressed the view that there would never be 100% take-up. Mr Parry stated that he had found 50% take-up at a school which took a whole-school approach. In reply to Councillor Knight, Ms Collinson explained that teachers could not be compelled to sit with children at meal time. Ms Fifoot believed that more use could be made of midday supervisors.

Councillor Knight stated that views expressed during the meeting would be borne in mind during preparation of the recommendations from the review.

WORK PROGRAMME

It was noted that the final report and recommendations would be agreed at the next meeting on 27 April 2009.

The meeting closed at 3.15 pm.

CHAIR