

APSE Summer Series Roundtable – Priorities for Education Catering

To: All members contacts in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

1. Context

Following the general election on the 4 July 2024 and the change in government, this roundtable session was convened for APSE Members with responsibility for education catering, to examine the proposals set out in the King's Speech and the potential impact on local authority catering services.

This briefing provides a summary of the current position, and overview of the roundtable discussion, and outlines the key asks of the new government.

2. Current position

The provision of school food is a devolved matter and as such, since 1999 there has been a divergence in policy and the funding position. The below highlights the policy position regarding school meals in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

2.1 Free school meals

Local authorities in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have a duty to provide a free school meal to children that meet the eligibility criteria which is based on the benefits that the family are in receipt of as detailed below:-

- Income support
- Income-based jobseeker's allowance
- The guaranteed element of pension credit
- Income-related employment and support allowance
- Working tax credit run-on – paid for four weeks after stopping work
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Child tax credit, if the family do not also receive working tax credit and earn no more than £16,190 for England and Wales and £17,005 in Scotland. In Scotland, families are eligible to free meals school meals, if the family is in receipt of child tax credit and working tax credit, but must be earning less than £7,920

- Universal credit (UC), if someone applied since April 2018 and their income is less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including benefits). If someone applied for UC before then, there is no income threshold. In Scotland, the monthly earned income at UC must be lower than £660. In Northern Ireland, the threshold is almost twice that of England and Scotland at £14,000.

For children that are eligible for free school meals due to being a claimant of UC, there is provision under a transitional arrangement that enables the child to continue to be eligible for a free school meal until the end of the phase of their current education if they no longer meet the eligibility criteria.

The transitional arrangement was put in place until the full rollout of UC had been completed and the arrangement is scheduled to end in March 2025.

Eligible families are required to opt in to receive the meal as there is not a mechanism in place for auto-enrolment. However, various local authorities have adopted or are piloting an auto-enrollment approach, including Sheffield, York and Middlesbrough.

2.2 Universal free school meals

Universal free school meal provision is not means tested and the eligibility criteria is based on the age of the child.

In England (except for London), all children in reception, year one and year two are guaranteed a free lunch as part of the universal infant free school meals scheme.

In London, free meals will be provided in all primary schools across London for the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 academic years and this is funded by the Mayor of London.

In Scotland, children at local council schools can get free lunches during term-time in primary one to five. The Scottish government has also committed to a phased approach to expanding universal free school meals to all children in primary school. The next phase of the expansion of school meals in Scotland is that all primary six and seven pupils in receipt of the Scottish child payment will get free lunches from February 2025.

The Welsh government has announced that all children in primary school will receive free meals by September 2024 under the Universal Free School Meal Programme.

Universal Meals are not currently offered in Northern Ireland, but discussions have been held with the Northern Ireland government regarding introducing the provision.

3. Breakfast provision

In England, a National Schools Breakfast Club Programme was introduced in 2018 for an initial period of two years, the key points of the programme are as follows:

- Around 12% of state schools provide the provision
- 75% of the provision is subsidised by government for food and delivery
- Funding is committed until July 2025
- School contributes 25%
- The provision is in disadvantaged areas with 40% of pupils in band A-F income deprivation
- Food must meet school food standards
- Magic Breakfast and Family Action have been commissioned to run the programme over the time of the initiative.

In Wales, a Free Breakfast initiative was introduced in September 2004, the key points of the initiative are as follows:-

- All maintained schools can have the free breakfast
- The provision is funded through the Revenue Support Grant
- It is up to the school whether they provide it
- All LA's must provide the food unless it is unreasonable
- Schools can charge for childcare but not the food

4. School Food Standards

In England there is a set of school food standards that school caterers are expected to meet. The role of ensuring that the standards are met sits with the school's governing body, but there is not an effective monitoring regime in place to ensure that caterers are compliant with these standards.

The Food Standards Agency developed a pilot for Environmental Health Officers to assess whether the standards were being met in school. Phase one of the pilot has been undertaken, but no further progress has been reported.

In Northern Ireland, the Department for Education, through the Education and Training Inspectorate evaluate compliance to the nutritional standards in schools and examine schools' general approaches to promoting healthy eating.

In Scotland, the School Food Standards were updated and implemented in 2021, with an emphasis on reducing salt, sugar and processed food. Health and Nutrition Inspectors (HNIs) are permanent staff members of Education Scotland, and their role is to monitor the fulfilment of statutory duties with the schools Health Promotion and Nutrition Act 2007 for all schools to be health-promoting and comply with nutritional regulations.

In Wales, the Welsh Government's Food in Schools Managers monitor compliance and issues annual Certificates of Compliance to catering services that submit accurate and compliant evidence and have their provision checked by the responsible council or school governing body.

5. Funding

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that the government in England is spending about £1 billion on free school meals in an academic year.

The cost of funding a free school meal, per meal, is £2.58 in England, £2.60 in Northern Ireland, £3.33 in Scotland, and £3.20 in Wales.

6. The King's Speech

The proposal of a Children's Wellbeing Bill has the potential to impact on local authority catering services. In particular, requiring free breakfast clubs in every primary school that applies to England only.

Currently there are no details around the delivery model and how this will be rolled out. The Labour Party Manifesto committed to a spend of £315 million on breakfast clubs for 2028/29.

Analysis undertaken by the Institute of Fiscal Studies based on the current National School Breakfast Programme estimates that a food cost only model, comes out at £55 per pupil, if a childcare element is added to the provision, the cost doubles to £110 per child.

Based on this analysis, the £315 million would fund a food cost only model, or 60% of the food and childcare model.

Although not directly related to school food, there is reference to academies being required to teach the National Curriculum and Multi-Academy Trusts being brought into the inspection regime, which could signal that the government has a longer-term ambition to ensure there is more parity between maintained schools and academies.

The proposals under the Employment Rights Bill will impact on catering services, either directly or indirectly, such as reinstating the school support staffing negotiating body which has the potential to impact on school budgets. Updating Trade Union legislation may also have an impact on local authorities, private caterers and schools' in-house providers.

7. Current issues in delivering the service

As part of the Roundtable discussion, there were various points raised through the discussed regarding the current issues being experienced in delivering the service and these can be summarised as follows:-

- The funding received from the government to provide free school meals and the universal provision does not reflect the cost of providing the school meal. Although the funding rates are different in the respective countries, concerns were raised that due to the significant increase in the costs of serving a meal the funding has not being increased accordingly resulting in the service being unsustainable.
- It was reported by the attendees from Scotland that although the funding in Scotland is at a higher rate of £3.33, the introduction of the more stringent school food standards, the requirement to serve a three-course meal and the higher Scottish Living Wage, means that the cost of delivery is higher and does not cover the cost of the provision. In addition, the school meal funding in Scotland is based on an uptake of 79%, and for some Scottish Local Authorities the uptake is above this figure resulting in those extra meals not being funded.
- It was further commented by attendees from Scotland that despite the government's commitment to extend free school meals to children in primary school in August 2022, the roll out to P6 and P7 has been delayed due to the funding not being available. Councils have prepared for the extension but are now in limbo, awaiting further announcements as to when the funding will be made available for the roll out.
- In addition, in Scotland, there is uncertainty regarding the families that will be claimants of the Scottish Child payment, meaning that there could be one child or 100 children eligible for the benefit, making it difficult for the local authority to plan for providing the provision.
- Similarly, the attendees from Wales commented that with the introduction of the Universal Free School Meals there was a commitment given that the food would be

sourced from local providers, which is adding additional costs to the overall cost of a school meal.

- Across the four countries there has been a vast increase in the number of special diets requests, this is in part due to the increase in the provision and the number of children with complex needs attending mainstream schools. These meals require additional resources, in terms of menu planning and preparation which is also adding to the cost of providing the service.
- It was commented that for some local authorities in England, the high level of pupil absence is impacting on the catering service as they are not able to recoup the cost for the meals not served due to school absence.
- Concern was expressed that in England, there is a variety of delivery models for providing the provision including services run by an in-house school team, local authority and private sector. The tendering process for school meals has become a race to the bottom, and there is very little transparency as to how the funding is spent, as not all the funding necessarily goes towards the meal and can be used to support school budgets or paying private sector shareholders.

8. Asks for government

Following the discussion regarding the challenges in the sector, the group outlined their key asks for the new government and the main asks were noted as follows:-

- There needs to be a review of the current funding levels for Free School Meals funding across the UK to ensure that the funding reflects the true cost of providing a school meal.
- In England, there needs to be a mechanism for ensuring that the School Food Standards are adhered to by providers.
- The method that caterers in England charge schools for the meals service is very complex and not transparent. Therefore, there needs to be further clarity, guidance and scrutiny regarding how schools are charged.
- The procurement of school food should support local producers and suppliers that pay tax in the UK, to ensure that money from the public purse is enhancing the local economy.

- Food served throughout the school day and during the holidays, needs to be recognised as part of the solution in tackling child poverty, reducing the obesity crisis, provides support for families with the cost of living and the economic benefit for the local community.

APSE Comment

The new governments proposals set out in the King's Speech on 17 July 2024, regarding a focus on child wellbeing is welcomed and the funding for free breakfast provision for all primary school aged children is a step in the right direction, as there is evidence that school breakfasts enhance a child's ability to learn. However, the government need to design a model that reaches the children who are in most need of the provision and learn the lessons from the breakfast programme in Wales and the National School Breakfast Programme in England.

As reflected in the discussion at the roundtable, APSE believes that a school lunchtime meal, breakfast provision, and other food provided throughout the school day and during the holidays, should not be seen as a one or the other, as all elements have a part to play in supporting families and the wellbeing of the next generation.

It is clear to local authority caterers in England, with concern now also growing in Wales that the competitive tendering environment, without the provision of an effective inspection regime, to ensure that school standards are being met, has led to a race to the bottom in terms of provision and has led to private sector providers cherry picking the more profitable schools, leaving rural and smaller school paying more for provision.

APSE supports the campaign for increasing the funding for providing free school meals and the universal provision, especially against the current backdrop of raising costs and supports the extension of free meals provision to more children. However, the increase in funding needs to come with mechanisms for monitoring standards, transparency in how the funding is spent and accurate data regarding uptakes to ensure money from the public purse is reaching the child and improving child wellbeing.

All APSE members can access support on school catering provision through the APSE Advisory Group on Education Catering and can also benchmark school catering provision through [APSE Performance Networks](#). To sign up to receive notices of the Education

Catering group use this [link here](#).

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