

Minutes from the Cross-Parliamentary Group on School Food

Wednesday 8th June 2022, 12:00 – 13:30

Present:

Jenny Rathbone MS, Cardiff Central; **Peter Fox MS**, Monmouth; **Sioned Williams MS**, S. Wales West; **Suan John**, Office of Cefin Campbell MS; **Kirsty Rees**, Office of Mike Hedges MS, Swansea East; **Emilia Douglas**, Office of Laura Ann Jones MS;

In attendance:

Judith Gregory, LACA; **Jason Rawbone**, Powys CC; **Mark Lawton**, Harlech Food Service; **Matt Lewis**, Castell Howell; **Rhys James**, **Emily Ball**, Caerphilly CC; **Bryn Hamer**, **Hannah Caswell**, **Laura Chan**, Soil Association; **Jen Griffiths** Flintshire CC; **Kevin Rahman-Daultrey**, Size of Wales; **Pearl Costello**, Food Cardiff; **Clare Sain-Ley-Berry**, Cynnal Cymru; **Professor Kevin Morgan**; **Libby Davies**, Farmers' Union of Wales; **Holly Tomlinson**, **Jonathan Hughes**, Blas Gwent; **Gareth Thomas**, **Cara Mai Lewis**, WLGA; **Katie Palmer**, Food Sense Wales; **Caroline Campbell** Gwynedd; **Edward Morgan** CHFoods; **Ian Evans** Caerphilly; **Sarah Hopkins** Cynnal Cymru

Apologies:

Laura Ann Jones MS, S. Wales East; **Heledd Fychan MS**, S. Wales Central; **Carolyn Thomas MS**, N. Wales; **Cefin Campbell MS**, Mid and West Wales; **Luke Fletcher MS**, S. Wales West

Agreement of the Minutes from the meeting 30th March 2022

Minutes were agreed.

Presentation Notes:

- **Judith Gregory**, Chair, LACA Cymru:
 - o Local Authorities have received a small amount of capital funding for the kitchen audit and a further sum for equipment however funding is not sufficient and more is to be expected.
 - o Welsh Government have not yet defined 'youngest learners' so there is uncertainty on how many students will be receiving free school meals in September. The meal unit cost has also not been confirmed so caterers do not know what the revenue funding will be for the roll out.
 - o There are three challenge areas: 1) infrastructure, 2) food, 3) staff.
 - o Infrastructure – there is a shortage of kitchen and dining room equipment. The short time scales mean that it is hard to procure equipment. There are a limited number of suppliers in the industry and the demand from all 22 local authorities is adding pressure. For example, a supplier of combi-ovens has said that they can not deliver current orders until January 2023 and have closed their books for new orders due to a microchip shortage caused by the invasion of Ukraine, where the microchips are manufactured.
 - o Food – inflation and the rising cost of food is a problem. Caterers want to maintain their home cooked standards which are compliant to healthy eating regulations. If food is going to be locally sourced, this will add additional cost which needs to be factored in.
 - o Staff – staffing issues in hospitality are ongoing. Many staff don't want to extend their hours and it is difficult to recruit. Menus need to be quick and easy.
- **Jason Rawbone**, Senior Universal Primary Free School Meals Implementation Manager, Welsh Government (and Powys LEA):
 - o The challenges faced include:
 - Some schools won't be able to cover 100% of reception class meals due to capacity/equipment
 - Supplier timelines to get equipment in are too long

- Some kitchen audits found that some schools will need to upgrade electricity supply. This will require a tender process and capital funding to enable the installation.
 - Welsh Government are looking at how they can help with staffing problems.
- The current school meal unit rate is between £2.10 - £2.85 depending on local authority. The unit rate is still to be approved and signed off by the minister but is to be set at the highest level to reflect the inflationary food price increases.

JenR: So some schools can't cover reception classes, what is the government opinion and what is being put in place?

JasR: We are looking at alternatives. For example a voucher scheme, but this would be a last option. Some schools have meals transported in if they don't have a kitchen. Kitchen pods are an option but require planning permission.

- Matt Lewis:
 - This is a good opportunity for local and Welsh produce. Public sector food is a significant proportion of turnover (10%, approximately £16million p.a.) Currently 14% of the basket is procured from Welsh companies which increases to 30% if in-house manufactured products are included.
 - Food inflation is the biggest problem.
 - Labour costs are also a problem. Pay has had to increase, for example deliver driver salaries have increased 25%.
 - Costs have to be passed through the supply chain otherwise it is unattractive and some businesses risk pulling out because it's not viable.
 - Timescales are also a problem, Castell Howell ordered new delivery vehicles just in time but if ordered now there is an 18month – 2 year delivery wait.
 - Manufacturers are struggling to get the basic food items and are investing in stock.
- Mark Lawton:
 - It is a good opportunity for Welsh produce and shortening supply chains.
 - Wales is able to supply beef, lamb and dairy but are weak in pork and poultry.
 - It is not easy to find the right volumes
 - We are looking at ways to get more Welsh produce on the menu, for example replacing English/EU beef with Welsh beef.
 - We are also increasing the delivery schedule into large schools.
 - There needs to be long term support for the Welsh food sector and support for rural communities
 - *More information can be found in the presentation from the meeting see attached to accompanying email*

Discussion

JenR: How can we develop strategy and menus to support healthy eating? How do we adjust menus and what do we do to ensure reception students are getting a healthy meal in the current situation?

GT: School meals are healthy as they are.

KM [in comments]: It is complacent to assume the existing offer is at a high point of health

GT [in comments]: There is some room for improvement to some of the Healthy Eating in Schools Regulations and their implementation. I was trying to clarify the question, which sounded like we were starting from an unhealthy point currently.

JasR: Local authorities need to know the unit rate and then menus can be planned. The estimated take up of meals is 86%. All catering managers have the ambition to provide healthy meals.

KP: The school food regulations are going to be revised and must include current production, targets, climate as well as nutrition, capability and net zero. There is an opportunity to max out on health and bring all of this together.

RJ: meals are healthy now. We can buy what caterers want but there is a lot of red tape around producing menus, it takes a long time. There needs to be flexibility to include local and seasonal. For example, buying Welsh lamb in October when the price point is low and freezing for use later.

JenR: The NFU have said the agricultural sector can produce anything if they know in advance.

ML: We know the volumes but it's hard to get hold of produce into the public sector as retail is prioritised and wholesale takes second place.

JH: Scaling up now, in June, for September is not possible. We put the seed in in March to provide for September so this will affect menu planning.

PF: There is no silver bullet, increasing supply will take a long time. The key is capacity in local authorities to deliver a meal and aspire to the best quality. The 30% quality to 70% price ratio needs to be reversed to 70% quality and 30% price. But how can we do this within a budget? With the current pressures, even if the unit price was set at the higher level of £2.85, what could it be? Things are going to get harder before they get easier. Serving meals is the first priority. This needs capital investment and fundamental challenges which the government must address. There is not much time until September. Local food must be the goal but realistically capacity comes first.

SH: Has there been exploration on partnership with local catering organisations, other public sector kitchens or private kitchens?

CSLB: (reiterated question above) NESTA is working on increasing healthiness. Portion size is another consideration.

ML: Food safety is an issue.

JasR: Not aware of any 3rd party sectors providing meals to schools

JG: Not aware of any either. Food safety is a problem as is the transported food scenario where quality is lost through transportation. The suppliers would need payment and the unit cost is unlikely to be sufficient to cover the cost.

JasR: The provider would have to comply with the standards including salt and sugar reduction.

CSLB: It could be an option if kitchen facilities are available.

ML: There has been a local level conversation between Hywel Dda and NPT to look into this but the challenges are the same, lack of equipment and staffing.

SW: Collaboration is an interesting option. The roll out of free school meals should be seen as a new service, not an upscaling. It is important to look at it as a whole.

JenR: It is uncharted territory and Welsh government needs to step up to the plate.

ML: We are exploring local manufacturing for kitchens that don't have all the facilities to help plug the gaps. This includes frozen, regened food that can be used at an appropriate time.

JenR: Does anyone who works with children have any comments, including around the obesity issue?

KP: The education piece is important. The Food and Fun Trial focussed on courgettes and worked with children and dieticians to bring together food nutrition and education. The last thing you want is a school meal that the child doesn't eat or doesn't meet the nutrition requirements. 80% of households in Wales are food insecure.

JasR: We send out surveys and local authority caterers can attend SNAG (School Nutrition and Action Groups). Food and Fund gets great feedback and improves each year. Schools are already doing lots of work in the background.

GT: Menus were reviewed to reduce sugar content which led to a change in desserts but why would caterers need to make any further changes to menus? Hot school meals meet the standards and this is hard to do with cold meals.

HT: How many portions of veg are required?

GT: At least 1 portion of veg and 1 portion of fruit on offer.

HT: If this is going to be the main meal of the day, this isn't enough. Should this be reconsidered in the update?

JG: At least 1 portion is required but many do provide more and include a salad bar.

JenR: How can we minimise food waste? That is a cost and ethical issue.

JasR: It has been discussed and will be in the new regulations. There is ongoing work in this area.

ML: We work with local authorities on online ordering to help reduce waste.

JG: The preorder system allows parents in primary schools to select meals so caterers only cook to the required number of meals.

JenR: Which local authorities do that? Could it be linked to attendance registers?

JG: It's not linked to school registers, it is a cashless system to remove stigma. Can't say who is or isn't using this system. However, this system does provide better data on which child has had a meal to look at numbers. We encourage parents to sit with the child to order so the child will like it and they know what they are going to eat. Over time a food order pattern builds up which makes it easier for suppliers.

JaR: most local authorities pre-order at home or in the classroom. Some authorities don't have a cashless system but the intention is to have them but this needs to go through the tender process.

JenR: But universal free school meals doesn't need a cashless system.

JaR: The system also supports the pre-ordering system too which keeps developing. There is no standard system but in the south, the same supplier tends to be used.

JenR: How good are caterers at using surplus?

JasR: Caterers are good at it as long as it is safe to do so.

RJ: We can't make progress, or know how to move forward until we know the budget for September.

PC: ML wholesales need weeks lead in time.

JenR: Growers too, they are planting now for winter and need quantities.

GT: Is it feasible for catering services to gather and practically use local? For example potatoes are often bought in pre-peeled and carrots have already been skinned. Staff time and cost is an issue.

HT: We are part of a pilot project looking at some of these things. There are challenges to producers, for example the admin challenges to small scale producers. The grants for small scale producers are welcome.

RJ: The shift has always been away from on site preparation as budgets have been reduced and equipment taken out. To shift back, staff time will increase and it will increase the food cost. It's going to be a struggle especially with produce that isn't pre-prepared.

JeR: The sites with no catering facilities show how the importance of school meals has slipped off the agenda.

Thank you to all four speakers talking about the challenges faced. We need to ensure there are radical and practical solutions. This is the only meal of the day for many and we must respond to that.

Actions

- Jenny to send a note to Jeremy Miles to publish information on which school year groups will receive free school meals in September and also the budget so everyone in the chain can start working on it.

Additional Information

- Since the meeting further information has been forthcoming from Welsh Government please see following link <https://gov.wales/universal-free-school-meals-roll-out-commence-september>