



# **The new national indicator set for local government:**

## **National Indicator 52 – Take up of school lunches**

This briefing provides details of APSE's response to the new National Indicator 52 on take up of school lunches. It is provided to Council Leaders, Chief Executives and Education Catering contacts in English authorities and to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland contacts for information.

### **Key issues**

1. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 received Royal Assent on the 30 October 2007
2. The Act paves the way for the reform of Best Value and as a direct consequence of the Local Government White Paper first published in October 2006, transforms the inspection processes that will apply to local authorities
3. A number of new national indicators on local authority performance have been introduced and this includes a new indicator on take up of school meals

### **1. Introduction**

APSE briefing 07/66 and 07/69 deals with the reform of Best Value and with the new requirements for Comprehensive Area Assessments and the new national indicator (NI) set. Whilst local authorities have previously collected data on school meal uptake, and continue to do so through APSE's performance networks service, the national indicator set contains a new requirement, NI 52, to collate and report information on the take up of school lunches for English authorities. The objective behind this new NI is to ensure that Government commitments to reducing obesity and improving health are targeted towards children and young people. Take up levels of school lunches is considered to be an excellent way of ensuring that these objectives are met.

However, on behalf of member authorities APSE has raised concerns about the methodology for calculating the new NI. Firstly the new NI does not seek to collect important data on the take up levels of free school meals and secondly it could penalise those authorities, that despite hard work in the school meals service, still have a figure that under-reports progress on school meals as a result of other factors, such as poor school attendance levels due to multiple socio-economic factors.

## **2. Replicated below is APSE's response to NI 52 - Take up of School Lunches**

### ***Response from the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE ) to The Department for Communities and Local Government***

"I write to comment on the definition of NI 52 (Take up of school lunches).

APSE is an organisation that works with over 250 local authorities throughout the UK and operates on a not for profit basis promoting excellence in public services. We also run the UK's largest voluntary benchmarking network, **APSE performance networks**, and included within this network is the service area of education catering. This network has calculated the take up pf school lunches over the last nine years.

Our comments on NI 52 are as follows:-

### **Rationale**

The rationale for the indictor '*to assess the increase in healthy eating amongst children and young people.....*' reflects the priority given to the fight against rising obesity levels and the financial investment in school meals, first announced by the then Education Secretary Ruth Kelly in 2006. These moves have been welcomed by APSE and by our member authorities. We support the introduction of this new indicator.

## Definition

We have concerns about the suggested definition. The definition of school lunch take up effectively clouds the difference between paid and free meal uptake figures as the definition relates to an **all meal uptake whether paid or as a free school meal**. In terms of the eligibility for free school meals and the prevalence of diseases linked to obesity, such as type II diabetes and heart disease the national patterns that have emerged over recent years show a very clear correlation to deprivation indicators. In other words poverty linked to ill health. If therefore the rationale is to assess the increase in healthy eating amongst children and young people (and by default therefore to support the overall aims of promoting healthy communities) then it is surely sensible to measure both free and paid meal uptake separately? This change would not need to alter the actual NI itself (although this would be a preferable option it is noted that the consultation restricts comment to the definitions) but it would be capable of providing Government with a better assessment of its success in promoting healthy eating, and tackling ill health, as a result. In particular it would provide Government with the capability at a national level to look at the take up of free school meals as a key tool in tackling ill health, and in particular those aspects that relate to poverty.

## Formula

The formula definition includes use of the following as a numerator:-

**'Of the children on the school roll, the number who eat a lunch at school that is provided by the school or local authority (including those in receipt of a free school meal)'**

This is a flawed method of calculation since it relies on school roll numbers. School roll numbers assumes that there is 100% attendance but for many authorities, despite best efforts, this remains an elusive figure. For example for those authorities who suffer from the effects of a transient population ( with non-settled migrant communities) and poor school attendance (linked to socio-economic factors) the 100% figure, used as the assumption, could be much lower but will not be reflected in the annualised school roll numbers.

A more accurate figure would include the average attendance figures.

Using your own worked example as follows:

If 500 children on school roll 350 have a school lunch than  $350/500 = 70\%$  take up.

But if there is poor attendance and of say 500 children on school roll attendance is actually at say 90% then the figure of 350 for take up would in fact be as follows :-

If 500 on school roll but attendance at 90% then  $350 / 450 = 78\%$ .

If the above calculation is reversed of course it would mean that of possible take up levels of school meals the figure could be **under reported** due to the flaws of school roll take up numbers, on this sample calculation this would be under reported by 8%.

However the real element of unfairness in this calculation is that it could make some of the best performing councils on school meal take up figures look like poor performers because it is within an area suffering from the impact of multiple deprivation indicators, including high absence levels in school attendance terms. As this NI is reflecting the aims of the Government on healthy eating it is almost akin to applying a penalty to councils who have in fact made great strides in the school meals service but nevertheless find school attendance figures will skew their results on NI 52.

APSE assumes is not the intention of the Department, nor the Secretary of State, to penalise those authorities that have responded well to the national agenda on school meals? However if the definition and formula remain as drafted this would be, without doubt, the impact.

### **Concluding comments**

The draft statutory guidance recently issued by DCLG 'Creating strong, safe and prosperous communities' makes great strides towards all partners and stakeholders being involved in the development of Local Government as a 'place shaper'. The school meals service, often provided by local authority direct service organisations, is, APSE believes, a key stakeholder in the promotion of healthy eating amongst young people.

Therefore to issue a definition and formula under the new National Indicator set, that risks alienating those Local Government services that have worked hard towards supporting national policy developments from elsewhere within DCLG, and the broader policy framework towards healthy communities, is unfavourable.

APSE would therefore request on behalf of our member authorities amendments to the definitions and formula reflecting the concerns outlined in this response.”

## **APSE comment**

Additional briefings relating to school meals are available on the APSE website at [www.apse.org.uk](http://www.apse.org.uk) The outcomes of the consultation exercise on the new National Indicator set will be published in late February. Whilst welcoming the inclusion of this new NI APSE remains disappointed that Government has not reflected the broader issues that relate to school meals in the draft definitions and, despite moves towards outcome based measurements of performance, has nevertheless introduced a very narrowly defined indicator that does not reflect the important health and social issues, particularly the take up of free school meals, as part of the process.

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