



Briefing 08-70 December 2008

Education Catering: Trend analysis

This briefing provides details on the performance information available from APSE's performance networks service looking at performance indicators and current policy issues for councils who deliver education catering services.

Key issues

- School meal paid uptake across the UK appears to have stabilised at 38% of primary school pupils and 36% of those at secondary school.
- The average cost of a meal nationally stands at £2.48 against an average cost to the pupil of £1.59 representing a subsidy of £0.89 per paid meal served.
- By the end of March 2007, over 50% of catering staff had been trained in food nutrition and health
- 42% of Authorities consciously purchased locally grown food to some degree.

Introduction

The APSE performance networks model for education catering provides performance indicators for price, service uptake, key cost indicators, productivity and qualitative measures for the service throughout the UK. The programme also collects a significant amount of management data to support more detailed 'process benchmarking' of the service. This summary, builds on previous briefings over the last four years and aims to provide participating authorities with a picture of what the service trends are, what this infers and what further activity and analysis individual authorities and their benchmarking groups could consider.

The analysis in this briefing is based on service wide averages across all family groups for 2007/08, but also highlights variances on certain KPIs between Scotland, (with its separate investment, support and inspection regime) and England/Wales. Reference is made throughout to previous year's outcomes where clear trends or 'direction of travel' are evident.

Trend analysis

Particular points of interest are as follows:

Meal charges

The average price of a primary (junior) meal and the free meal allowance for secondary pupils were £1.59 and £1.72 respectively for 2007/08, representing increases that have been broadly in line with inflation across the UK in the last year.

These national averages reflect the continued variance in Scotland where the average price of a primary (junior) meal was £1.54 against an average in England/Wales of £1.62. The Secondary free meal allowance in Scotland has however, risen by less than inflation in the last year (£1.70 for 2007/08) and is now marginally lower than the average of £1.73 in England and Wales.

Service uptakes

Having bottomed out at 70% in 2006/07, free meal uptakes have increased to 71% across the UK, made up of a 3 point rise to 74% in England and Wales, offset by a 1 point fall to 66% in Scotland.

After a three year fall, paid meals in the primary sector have shown a very marginal increase on 2006/07 figures, with England and Wales now reporting 38% and Scotland 35% (giving a national average of 37%). Secondary Schools have again shown a 1 point fall on the previous year, to a national average of 36% (37% in England and Wales and 35% in Scotland).

Whilst these figures include data from Welsh and Scottish Authorities, the underlying trends are consistent with those reported in the School Food Trusts third annual survey of meal uptakes in England. As with Scotland's Hungry for Success and the Appetite for life program in Wales, their report welcomes the arrest of a three year falling trend, whilst recognising that regional (and national) meal uptakes have fallen far short of the targets set for this service at the outset of the respective regional campaigns for service investment and improvement.

Key cost indicators

With no significant increase in service uptakes, (and for many, the full implementation of Job Evaluation), Authorities in England and Wales have worked hard to contain rising 'unit' (meal) costs during the last year. Scotland has continued to invest more in this service, evidenced by the following key cost indicators for 2007/08:

The total service cost/meal has risen well above inflation in Scotland to an average of £2.77, the average in England and Wales being broadly in line with last year at £2.43. The average across the UK for 2007/08 now sits at £2.48.

Primary food only costs (excluding drinking milk) has risen only marginally above inflation and averaged 66p in 2007/08. This reflects a 5p increase in Scotland and a 2p increase in England and Wales to 74p and 59p respectively.

Direct costs (food and staff costs) for primary/special schools have risen well above inflation to £1.85 for 2007/08 in England and Wales (implying higher increases in labour costs), and below inflation to £2.04 in Scotland. These represent increases on the previous year of 15p and 5p respectively.

Productivity

Following the sharp fall between 2004 and 2006, productivity (meals served per staff hour in the primary and special sectors) has risen marginally for the second year and now averages 8.09 for 2007/08. Scotland continues to invest more hours in the service, averaging 7.27 meals served per hour against 8.52 in England and Wales. Staffs cost ratios in the secondary sector have fallen by circa 1% in all regions of the UK, the average for 2007/08 being 47.7%

Quality Assurance and stakeholder consultation (QA) and human resources (HR)

Following a consistent rise in the average score for both of these indicators over the last 8 years, they peaked in 2006/07 and have levelled off to the current year figures of 44.2 (QA) and 51.6 (HR).

Nutrition and healthy eating

In the last year, the number of staff trained in food nutrition and health and across all authorities has reached 50.1%, an 18% increase on 2006/07 figures. The number of Authorities reporting that all (or close to 100%) of staff have received this training has nearly doubled in the last year, representing over 20% of all Authorities making a return in 2007/08.

The percentage of schools holding the regional variations of a 'Healthy Schools' award was 46% in 2005/06, 60% in 2006/07 and has now increased to 74.3% in 2007/08. The number of authorities reporting this attainment by all schools has increased from 5% to 18% over the same period.

Sustainable procurement and the environment

Now in the second year of data collection, sufficient returns have been made to report some key outcomes relating to sustainable procurement and the environment. These include the fact that 42% of Authorities report using regional SME suppliers for between 10% and 95% of their total food purchases, the average across these Authorities being 41%.

From all Authority returns in 2007/08, 48% of their schools no longer use disposable cutlery/crockery in their service and 22% of Authorities report that none of their schools use disposables. Only 2 Authorities currently report having a specific energy/ water

conservation policy operating in all schools but some report that such a policy now exists within a small number of individual schools which they operate.

Other PIs and related profile data will be generated from the 2007/08 returns, which will be used as a base line for progress measurement in subsequent years.

Interpretation of data

Analysis of these trends and other data tends to support the following key observations:

Operating costs continue to rise more sharply than parental charges, giving rise to increasing subsidies in Scotland and Wales and the targeting of the 2008 – 2011 'Standards Grant' in England to bridge this gap.

Targeted increases in meal uptakes (for both child health and unit cost containment) have not been realised over the last 4 years and early government indications that parents should make a larger contribution to the child health agenda have been superseded by consideration of 'affordability' and the importance of 'engagement' with them (and their children) on food, diet and health issues.

Investment in food, staff hours and other 'service improvement' areas has largely levelled out in the last year, the cost increases being more closely related to other staff cost and inflationary pressures on food and service overheads.

Further assistance is available to individual authorities by way of direction of travel statements showing 5 year trends against the service average for cost, quality and customer satisfaction, all available through the APSE performance networks web portal

Future focus

Last year, we reported that:

'There is a growing body of opinion that the quality of food alone will not reverse this trend {decline in meal uptake} and many service providers would wish to see a greater awareness of this fact by corporate and national strategic stakeholders, particularly in the light of current proposals on the future targeting of grant aid in England.'

For many agencies and observers in the School Meals and related child health arena, 2008 was indeed a year of realisation that investment in food, nutrition and service 'standards' may not in itself have been a key driver in improving meal uptakes. Indeed, many catering providers and informed observers have been of the view that the application of 'nutritional balance' within school menus has and will continue to dissuade many pupils from using the service and that this requirement must be accompanied by a greater focus on 'affordability' and a better level of engagement with pupils (and parents) within and beyond current curriculum and marketing activity. Whilst APSE has some concerns over the speed of

implementation, we remain committed to supporting higher nutritional standards in school meals.

In this respect, 'affordability' undoubtedly plays a significant part for many families and the free meal pilot in Scotland (and a similar plan for England) is an indication of the importance still being placed on school meals within the wider child health and obesity agenda. Further, both Scotland's 'Curriculum for Excellence' and the current DCSF/Ofsted consultation on inspection proposals for child wellbeing outcomes under the national curriculum, are set to make the linkage between food in schools and physical and mental health education more tangible, and recognises the need for 'engagement' with pupils and parents, to better understand what barriers exist for them in both a practical and social context.

Therefore, whilst APSE will continue to focus on the collection and analysis of relevant data to enable the development of new service wide 'outcome based' performance indicators, it will also continue to work with national bodies and agencies engaged with or who can impact upon this service at a strategic level and at the cross over with the health, fitness and lifestyle of younger people.

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