



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2023-24

EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13TH MARCH 2024

UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Scrutiny on the roll-out of Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) in Rhondda Cynon Taf. The report considers how we have utilised Welsh Government funding to support this initiative.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Acknowledge the contents of the report and note the impact of the introduction of Universal Primary Free School Meals as well as next steps.
- 2.2 Consider whether there are any aspects of the report that the Committee wish to scrutinise in greater depth.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Universal Primary Free School Meal policy is part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, which will see free school meals extended to all primary school pupils over a three-year period.
- 3.2 The commitment is in response to the rising cost-of-living pressure on families and the shared ambition of tackling child poverty and ensuring no child goes hungry in school.
- 3.3 This ambition is informed by Welsh Government's understanding that younger children are more likely to be living in relative income poverty. The commitment represents a transformational intervention and an important further step to tackling

child poverty and ensuring that children have at least one meal every school day. This is crucial in the current context of the increasing cost of living.

- 3.4 There are also wider benefits of free school meals, including promoting healthy eating across the school, reducing health inequalities, increasing the variety of food our young learners can eat, improving social skills at mealtimes, as well as improving behaviour and attainment.

The policy also supports Welsh Government’s aim of supporting local, sustainable food production, increasing the supply of Welsh food onto the school plate, and helping to strengthen Wales’s Foundational Economy.

- 3.5 Welsh Government require the rollout to be delivered in a phased approach, which started in September 2022 with reception pupils, with the offer being extended to years 1 and 2 no later than the start of the summer term, April 2023. The roll out to older age groups is to be completed by September 2024.

- 3.6 Phased implementation of the offer is needed as all school catering facilities are different. Some primary schools need time to prepare and arrange the advance work needed to build catering capacity. Work is continuing in a few remaining primary schools so that kitchens can cater for a significant greater number of children to receive school meals.

- 3.7 The Council has received funding from Welsh Government to facilitate the roll-out of Universal Primary Free School Meals, as detailed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Welsh Government Universal Primary Free School Meal Funding					
	2021/22 (£)	2022/23 (£)	2023/24 (£)	2024/25 (£)	Total (£)
Revenue Funding	94,423	1,767,061	2,773,903	TBC	4,635,387
Capital Funding	2,026,096	2,836,535	2,470,000	360,000	7,692,631
Total	2,120,519	4,603,596	5,243,903	360,000	12,328,018

- 3.8 The Welsh Government 2022/23 revenue allocation used PLASC 21 data and was based on expansion numbers, 190 school days per year, £2.90 meal unit rate and 86% uptake. Claims are demand led. It also included a 6% fixed value administration fee. The 2022/23 capital allocation was based on pupil numbers for the ages 3 to 18 and the number of schools in 2020. The funding was apportioned by pupil numbers (70%) and school numbers (30%). This calculated an amount per school and per pupil, which has been applied to the number of pupils and schools in RCT.

- 3.9 The Welsh Government 2023/24 revenue allocation is based on the data detailed in 3.8, however, Welsh Government completed a meal unit rate review during 2023/24 and increased the meal unit rate to £3.20, with effect from 1st January 2024. Backdated additional revenue funding of £206,587, for the period April 2023 to December 2023, was received in January 2024. Capital funding was only allocated for 2021/22 and 2022/23. However, additional capital funding of £2,830,000 was awarded in 2023/24 (of which £360,000 was profiled into 2024/25) following the submission of a capital bid to Welsh Government.

3.10 In its draft 2024/25 settlement issued 20th December 2023, Welsh Government indicated continued revenue grant funding of £93.5M on an all-Wales basis aligned to its ambitious UPFSM roll out programme for 2024/25.

3.11 Within Rhondda Cynon Taf, the Council programme of rolling out Universal Free School Meals is as follows:

- from 5th September 2022, all reception aged pupils have been offered a Universal Primary Free School Meal
- from January 2023, the offer has been extended to include year 1 pupils and eligible nursery pupils
- from April 2023, the offer has been extended to include year 2 pupils and eligible nursery pupils
- from September 2023, the offer has been extended to include year 3 and 4 pupils and eligible nursery pupils
- From January 2024, the offer has been extended to include eligible nursery pupils
- from April 2024, the offer will be extended to year 5 & 6 pupils and eligible nursery pupils
- From September 2024, the offer will be extended to eligible nursery pupils.

3.12 Eligible nursery pupils are those who attend local authority nursery provision on a full-time basis (morning and afternoon sessions) in accordance with the Council's admissions policy:

- All pupils aged 4 years, between 1st September 2022 and 31st December 2022, will be eligible for a free school meal from January 2023.
- All pupils aged 4 years, between 1st January 2023 and 31st March 2023, will be eligible for a free school meal from April 2023.
- All pupils aged 4 years, between 1st April 2023 and 31st August 2023, will be eligible for a free school meal from September 2023.
- All pupils aged 4 years, between 1st September 2023 and 31st December 2023, will be eligible for a free school meal from January 2024.
- All pupils aged 4 years, between 1st January 2024 and 31st March 2024, will be eligible for a free school meal from April 2024.
- All pupils aged 4 years, between 1st April 2024 and 31st August 2024, will be eligible for a free school meal from September 2024.

Some schools do offer, and directly fund, a full-time nursery place from their own school budget; in this case, pupils are not eligible to receive a Universal Primary Free School Meal as per Welsh Government grant conditions.

3.13 Rollout of the offer has been challenging and is highly dependent on being able to fully staff the offer and comply with all the relevant health and safety and legislative requirements.

4. CURRENT POSITION OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS

- 4.1 The Council has successfully rolled out Universal Primary Free School Meals to all eligible nursery pupils, reception pupils and years 1 to 4 pupils.
- 4.2 Table 2 below summarises the average percentage uptake of Universal Primary Free School Meals for the 2023 autumn term, by school year group (no nursery age pupils were eligible in the autumn term).

Table 2: Universal Primary Free School Meal Percentage Uptake, by School Year Group					
Week Commencing	Reception %	Year 1 %	Year 2 %	Year 3 %	Year 4 %
22/09/2023	59.0	62.6	60.1	60.5	59.2
20/10/2023	63.3	65.8	64.5	65.7	64.3
17/11/2023	64.6	66.7	65.8	65.3	64.3
15/12/2023	61.5	65.7	63.8	65.0	63.6

- 4.3 To encourage take up of the offer, the Education Catering Service has utilised Welsh Government marketing resources, to generate a visible presence on social media channels and other digital platforms, the RCT Communications Team has delivered a school meals marketing campaign. Promotion of Universal Primary Free School Meals for eligible year groups, and encouragement of applications for those eligible for eFSM and Schools Essential Grants, remain the current focus. Primary schools have reinforced the campaign by sharing communications with parents/carers.
- 4.4 Currently, additional catering staff costs of £0.417M are projected since the roll out started in September 2022 to January 2024. It is anticipated that these additional costs will increase as recruitment continues to progress. In addition, central catering, accountancy, and data staff costs of £0.125M are projected, totalling £0.542M.
- 4.5 In house technical officer from Corporate Estates and Catering Services continue to project manage the capital works. To date work has been completed in 63 schools and the remaining 38 schools are programmed for completion by September 2024. The majority of the outstanding works are electrical upgrades.
- 4.6 The rollout of Universal Primary Free School Meals has resulted in an increase in the requests for medically prescribed diets. Daily, Catering Services currently prepares and serves 383 such meals (with 87 different combinations) to primary age pupils. The current trend indicates that demand for such menus will continue to increase as the offer is extended to older year groups. To qualify for a medically prescribed diet, the request must be supported by appropriate medical evidence.
- 4.7 Monthly revenue grant claims continue to be submitted to Welsh Government using a business intelligence tool called PowerBI. The software provides management information such as trend analysis, which can be used to target schools with low take up levels as well as being the core source of information for grant claims.
- 4.8 The Council's Digital Improvement Office continue to support Catering Services through the delivery of a bespoke package of IT Solutions. Every school kitchen

uses a digital device to access Microsoft Teams, emails and other digital platforms, improving communication and collaboration opportunities.

- 4.9 All the food and drink provided in maintained schools must meet the Health Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements) (Wales) Regulations 2013 ('Regulations'). These Regulations are based on the previous Appetite for Life guidelines and form part of the wider Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009 ('Measure').

A choice of two hot main meals is offered daily, including a vegetarian option, and cold alternatives are available to extend the variety and menu choice, i.e. salads and filled rolls with salad. The variety on offer is influenced by supply availability, price, permitted cooking processes/equipment and acceptance by pupils. Menus were reviewed and changed at the end of summer 2023, as opposed to the traditional start of the September term, to ensure that the appropriate supplies could be procured in sufficient quantities and catering staff were familiar with the provision. Medically prescribed menus are re-created every time the menu changes and the current menu has been created with the aim of mitigating the risk of error.

The school lunch aims to provide a nutritional balance with vegetables and carbohydrates in specific portion sizes, alongside appropriate protein and dairy items. Despite positive reinforcement at the service point, and through the school curriculum, many children will resist the uptake or waste the elements of the meal that are most beneficial in terms of health and wellbeing. Where this happens, or the child does not like any of the choices on the menu, it will have a negative impact on the uptake of the Universal Primary Free School Meal and a packed lunch may be provided by the parent/carer. Schools continue to encourage parents to provide a 'healthy' packed lunch.

5. CHALLENGES OF ROLLING OUT UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS

- 5.1 The roll out of Universal Primary Free School Meals has not been without challenge; while mitigation is being sought at every stage, Catering Services continue to experience challenges such as:-

- 5.1.1 **Staffing** – the recruitment and retention of catering staff has proved difficult and service delivery has been impacted by staff sickness, vacant posts, and the inability to recruit staff. The service is working closely with Human Resources and Communication colleagues to create recruit staff and this work continues with campaigns, job fairs, etc. A staffing agency has been engaged to recruit catering staff and in particular areas, where recruitment is an issue, primary schools have shared recruitment information directly with parents/carers.

To attract more applicants to apply for jobs, Catering Services has collaborated with Human Resources to simplify the application form/process and explore new ways of advertising posts, such as on various social media platforms and meet regularly with them to streamline the process. An ongoing advert for casual general kitchen assistants is on the Council's website and regular interview days have been held. As the rollout of UPFSM continues to increase the demand for school meals, there is a real risk that contingency plans may need to be implemented to ensure service continuity to the existing level of pupils. If not resolved, staffing deficits provide a potential threat to the plans to final roll out the UPFSM offer to years 5 and 6.

5.1.2 **Capital Works** – at the outset of the roll out of the offer and anticipating approval of the Universal Primary Free School Meal initiative by Welsh Government, Catering Services engaged early with relevant parties, including Corporate Estates, Procurement and catering equipment suppliers. Equipment has been delivered and installed but some other installations have been delayed due to long delivery lead-in times or because it has been dependant on the completion of capital works. Several school sites also need electrical upgrades before any additional equipment can be installed.

Receiving tenders for some building and adaptation works continues to be challenging together with, increasing material and labour costs are also constraining the budget.

5.1.3 **Medically Prescribed Diets** – the process of tailoring a menu to support a medically prescribed dietary requirement is complex and intricate detail and attention is required. While food manufacturers are obliged to ‘declare’ 14 specific ingredients, recognised as common allergens, dietary requests are becoming increasingly complex with many requiring more than one ingredient to be absent/restricted from the meal. Furthermore, carbohydrate counting for diabetic diets, and other conditions, are increasing in demand. Some pupils will have food allergies based on ingredient consumption only, whereas others may be more sensitive to ingredients in the environment. If the allergy in question does not form a part of the 14 mandatory allergens, each product specification must be scrutinised individually. Some allergens are represented in product specification by common name, whereas others may be known by formulary names, which may be recognised by a person who has studied high level dietetics but not necessarily a person who has less knowledge and experience. Dieticians’ advice is sought for some complex diets, but their availability to support is low. With demand and complexity increasing, the service will need the full-time support of an expert in this field.

5.1.4 **Product Availability/Substitution** - the food supply chain has become increasingly volatile with popular products becoming unavailable with no warning. Some product non-availability is short-term whereas others are permanent. The service has had to accept 45 substitutions since January 2022 (others have been declined with existing menu items being repeated to account for the shortage, but this method runs a risk of conflicting with the Food Based Standards as determined by Healthy Eating in Maintained Schools). Additionally, food prices are rising sharply and whilst the Council’s Procurement team work hard to ensure contractual compliance, the current global position has taken away some of the previously held influence. Historically, price increases would have been anticipated and could be carried until the next menu change but when products are now rising by up to 35%, given the volume of purchases, the service has no choice but to source an alternative product. These situations present major challenges, and while every effort is made to source representative products, this is not always possible, and the impact on menus, parent/guardian/pupil expectations and special diets must be managed.

5.1.5 **Funding Constraints** – revenue funding has been received for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24. In its draft 2024/25 settlement issued 20th December 2023, Welsh Government indicated continued revenue grant funding on an all-Wales basis aligned to its ambitious UPFSM roll out programme for 2024/25.

Capital funding has been received in 2021/22 and 2022/23 and there was no third year of funding. However, a bid for additional capital funding for 2023/24 was submitted to Welsh Government and subsequently approved. A further capital bid was submitted in February 2024. If this bid is unsuccessful, then the works will have to be funded by the Council.

5.1.6 **Managing Parents/Guardians Expectations** – by September 2024, every primary school pupil in Wales will be entitled to receive a Universal Primary Free School meal. Welsh Government recognised that the delivery challenges would differ for each local authority and, as such, allowed each one to set their own phased rollout timetable. Although early media messages did not commit each local authority to immediate delivery for all year groups, some parents/guardians expected their child(ren) to be fed immediately under the initiative.

5.1.7 **Meal Sitings** - extra sittings and/or time are needed to facilitate increased uptake in meals. The seating capacity within many dining facilities cannot be increased and, in some sites, those in receipt of a packed lunch may have to consume their food in alternative areas within the school, which would not be suitable for a seated lunch service. Furthermore, the actual service of food takes longer with more pupils, and in younger age groups, the consumption of the food is far slower. All these factors will impact on the next sitting; food needs to be cooked in batches to optimise quality, tables need to be sanitised in between use and pupils need to be supervised. The result is not only increased time required for catering staff but also for the supervisory staff provided by the school.

5.1.8 **Staff Training** - every member of Catering staff is required to undertake a minimum amount of mandatory training in Health and Safety, food safety and Council induction subjects such as Safeguarding and Level 1 Welsh Language skills.

5.2 **Risks Associated with Reduced Applications for Free School Meals**

5.2.1 The number of children eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM) has a direct impact upon Welsh Government core funding of Revenue Support Grant (RSG). eFSM numbers also drive Pupil Development Grant (PDG) received by schools and has also been a factor in other grant distributions. It is therefore important that as a local authority we continue to encourage families to apply to be eligible for free school meals despite being provided with a Universal Free School Meal. To be eligible for an annual payment for PDG Access, families are required to meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals. To minimise the risk of reduced funding, the Catering Service together with Finance colleagues have engaged the Council's social media team to publicise the benefits of continuing to be apply for FSMs even if the learners in the family are in receipt of a UPFSM.

5.3 **Next Steps**

5.3.1 The next phase of the rollout will conclude in April 2024, when the offer will be extended to years 5 and 6 and eligible nursery pupils.

5.3.2 Staffing requirements will be reviewed in line with increases in meals numbers and a rolling programme of recruitment will continue to be undertaken.

5.3.3 Further orders will be placed for kitchen equipment and electrical upgrades. Tenders to be issued for larger capital works for the remaining schools, the majority of which will be undertaken in the summer holidays of 2024.

5.3.4 Dietician to be appointed to manage the increase and complexity of medically prescribed dietary requests and assist with training and education.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

6.1 There are no negative or adverse equality or diversity implications associated with this report.

7. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no negative or adverse Welsh language implications associated with this report.

8. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

8.1 There are no consultation implications aligned to this report.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 As the number of pupils receiving a Universal Primary Free School Meal increase, primary schools will need to provide extra supervisory staff to cover mealtimes. Volumes of meal ingredients will also increase. It is currently assumed that additional costs are met in full by Welsh Government funding. The Catering Services, supported by Finance officers, will continue to monitor this position.

9.2 Additional Catering staff have been recruited and employed to facilitate the roll-out and this will continue until all primary age pupils are in receipt of a Universal Primary Free School Meal.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

10.1 On 1st October 2021, Natasha's Law came into effect, obliging all caterers and manufacturers to consider whether the food they provided was recognised as Preprepared for Direct Sale (PPDS) and to comply with the appropriate allergen labelling, as determined within the legislation.

Other legislative measures which are adhered to during the school lunch provision include: -

- Retained Regulation (EC) No 852/2004
- Food Hygiene (Wales) Regulations 2006
- Food Hygiene Rating (Wales) Act 2013
- Health & Safety at Work etc Act 1974.

All of the above, are measured for compliance when kitchen inspections are conducted by the Environmental Health Team (Public Health, Protection and Community Services).

11. LINKS TO THE COUNCILS CORPORATE PLAN / OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES / WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

- 11.1 The Council's Corporate Plan 2020–2024 highlights the Council's commitment to delivering three main priorities, namely:
- Ensuring People: are independent, healthy and successful;
 - Creating Places: where people are proud to live, work and play;
 - Enabling Prosperity: creating the opportunity for people and businesses to be innovative; be entrepreneurial; and fulfil their potential and prosper.
- 11.2 This report is linked to ensuring that the rollout of Universal Primary Free School Meals supports children to be independent, healthy and successful by receiving a free healthy and nutritional lunch.
- 11.3 Due regard has been made to all seven well-being goals and the Five Ways of Working, as contained in the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which requires the Council to think about the long-term impact of decisions, on communities to prevent consistent issues such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. Universal Primary Free School Meals contributes to achieving the wellbeing goals by:
- Assisting towards a healthier Wales by allowing pupils to access a free healthy lunch.
 - Ensuring the pupils with dietary requirements are treated equally and have access to a lunch provision.
 - Assisting parents to achieve a more prosperous Wales by saving them money.

12. CONCLUSION

- 12.1 The Council has successfully rolled out Universal Primary Free School Meals to all reception age pupils, years 1 to 4 and eligible nursery pupils. The offer has been extended to year 5 and 6 pupils and eligible nursery pupils from April 2024, which will conclude the roll-out.
- 12.2 The rollout will continue to be a key priority for the Council to ensure that all primary children receive the offer within the timescales set-out by Welsh Government, whilst maximising the grant funding and complying with its terms and conditions.
- 12.3 There are several challenges associated with the roll out of Universal Primary Free school Meals and the Catering Service will continue to work with internal departments and Welsh Government to mitigate risks and effectively manage the offer.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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