



BATH & NORTH EAST SOMERSET

Overview & Scrutiny In-Depth Review Report

PRIMARY SCHOOL MEALS REVIEW

**A Review by the Education, Youth, Culture and Leisure
Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

6th June 2005

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Report Structure

Introduction	P2
Context	P2
Overview and Scrutiny Involvement	P2
Purpose of the Overview and Scrutiny Review	P3
Objectives of the Overview and Scrutiny Review	P3
Review Methodology	P3
Findings	P7
- A Vision for the Future of the Primary School Meals Service	P7
- Sourcing of Supplies for Primary School Meals	P10
- Menus and Nutrition	P12
- Staff training and development	P14
- Production and Organisation	P15
- Take-up of primary school meals	P16
- Cost implications	P18
- Next Steps	P19
List of Appendices	P20

Introduction

The Education, Youth, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Panel has undertaken a review of Primary School Meals in Bath and North East Somerset, with a view to recommending improvements to what is already recognised as a good service, and providing a recommended “direction of travel” for the future of Primary School Meals within the local area.

This report sets out the Panel’s approach to the review, its findings and recommendations to the Council’s Executive Member for Children’s Services.

The report is supported by a number of important appendices which provide key background information and evidence for this review, and also reflect the high level of interest generated by this review amongst the local community, and the correspondingly high level of attention given to the issue by the Panel.

Context

The original contract for school meal provision to both secondary and primary schools was tendered in 1997 and won by Commercial Services as an in-house provider for a five year period. Following the introduction in 1999 of the local government “fair funding” policy which allowed school governors to select their own catering contractors, Commercial Services continued to provide catering services to those who chose to remain within the contract.

The catering department of Bath & North East Somerset Commercial Services therefore provides hot meals to 64 out of 68 primary schools. The four remaining primary schools make their own provision. This review therefore considers the 64 schools who opt to have Bath & North East Somerset as their provider, and it should be remembered that schools *choose* to use this service, and that therefore the service needs to remain attractive to schools.

School meal provision is required to comply with a number of statutory requirements and regulations relating to nutritional standards.

Overview and Scrutiny Involvement

In July 2004, the Commercial Services Catering Manager presented a paper to the EYCL O&S Panel about an ongoing internal review of the school meals service and it was agreed that this would benefit from O&S member involvement. Since then, the Panel has received further joint reports from Commercial Services and Education. They have also conducted visits to schools to experience the school meals service first hand, and have consulted widely with parents, governors, schools, and heard from other key contributors such as dieticians and representatives of other Local Authorities.

Purpose of the Overview and Scrutiny Review

The purpose of this review has been to examine the current primary school meals service in Bath and North East Somerset, and to explore and present options for improvement to the service. The Panel has been able to consult widely on this issue, and drawing on all the evidence gathered will now make its recommendations to the Executive Member for Children's Services for consideration, and the Executive Member will make decisions on the recommendations made.

This method of working is classified as the 'overview' role of Overview and Scrutiny, where the Panel is acting in a pathfinder context to support the Executive as it develops policy, formulates plans and makes decisions around important community issues.

Objectives of the Overview and Scrutiny Review

The objectives of the Panel in undertaking this Review have been to recommend action to:

- Improve the quality of primary school meals, including improved nutritional values
- Improve cost-efficiency within the primary school meals service
- Improve the production and delivery of primary school meals
- Improve take-up levels
- Set out a vision for the future of primary school meals

Appendix I provides the full Terms of Reference for this Review.

Review Methodology

The Panel have carried out a number of research and evidence gathering activities in order to inform their decisions in this review.

Reports from the Service

The Panel have received several reports and updates from Commercial Services, and have also received Joint Reports from both Commercial Services and Education, who commission the service.

The information provided by these reports has encompassed issues such as:

- The way in which the service is currently provided
- Updates on continuing changes and improvements made to the Primary School Meals Service
- Statutory regulations and guidelines for the provision of school meals
- A range of alternative options for delivery of the service

The Panel have been able to discuss these issues with the service and this has facilitated them in defining the scope and Terms of Reference for this review.

Commercial Services were also able to commission two internal reports on items within the scope of the review which were submitted to the Panel individually and have formed part of the evidence for this review. These reports, available at Appendix II covered:

- Cashless Payments systems – looking at the viability and desirability of introducing such a system in the Authority
- Production Kitchens/Dining Centres – this report looked at the mix of provision within the authority between those schools which have kitchens to supply their own meals, and sometimes those of other schools; and schools with Dining Centres whose meals are transported in from a production kitchen at another school.

Consultation Exercise with Schools, parents, and governors

The Panel wrote out to all 68 primary schools in the Bath & North East Somerset area asking them to engage with their staff, school councils, parents and governors to encourage them to let the Panel know their views on the Primary School Meals service. A list of example topics accompanied this letter and respondents were able either to make comments under these headings, or to address any other issues of concern or interest to them.

The Panel received over 300 responses to this consultation exercise, the most received by any Overview and Scrutiny review in Bath & North East Somerset, and the Panel would like to take this opportunity to thank; all those who took the time to respond, and to the schools which consulted with their parents and governors, and pupils. Analysis work was undertaken on the responses received and this enabled the Panel to identify the key themes and issues which were of importance to those most affected by the provision of primary school meals. A summary of this analysis is included at Appendix III.

Consultation with Catering Staff

A list of questions (attached at Appendix IV), was sent out to all catering staff who were asked to respond anonymously (in order to allow an honest and open response) with their views on the service currently provided, and their thoughts on future provision. The Panel received 52 responses from catering staff and would like to thank all those who took the time to write in. Analysis work was undertaken on these responses, and this was valuable to the Panel in supporting the formulation of their recommendations. A summary of this analysis is contained at Appendix V.

Contributor Session

A public Contributor Session was held by the Panel on 13th April, and this marked the end of the evidence gathering stage of this review. During this day long session the Panel heard from a wide range of stakeholders and experts, including local parents, a Parent's Group "Get Real School Meals", a dietician, local primary school children, school cooks and a Head Teacher, and a representative from another Local Authority.

The invited speakers who attended on the day and the themes around which they were invited to speak were as follows:

Session 1 – Council's Service Officers to introduce the issue <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mary Rozmus-West, Catering Manager, Bath & North East Somerset• Richard Morgan, Education Finance Manager, Bath & North East Somerset
Session 2 – Parents / Children <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Representatives of a Parents' Group, Get Real School Meals• Group of children from Saltford Primary School talking about their own experience of school meals• Public Speakers - Parents
Session 3 – Other Council's Experiences/Views <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Charlie Werner, Devon County Council
Session 4 – School Staff <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School Cooks: Heather Baker (Southdown Junior) Sue Tugwell (Bathwick St Mary) Jane Weeks (East Harptree)• Governors from Freshford Primary School
Session 5 – Nutrition and Food for Life Pilot <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jill Tuffrey, Nutrition and Dietetics Manager, Bath & North East Somerset PCT• Claire Hammond, Health Education Officer, Bath & North East Somerset PCT; Sue Green/Stephen Young, Food and Trading Standards Team, Bath &

North East Somerset Council

- Kevin O'Shea, Head Teacher, St Saviours Junior School

Copies of the presentations made to the Panel by these speakers, together with the full notes for the day are attached at Appendix VI.

Invited contributors who were unable to attend were requested by the Panel to make written submissions. The Panel also heard from pre-registered public speakers on the day, including Cllr Marian McNeir, the Chair of the Council; a representative from Envolve; and parents of children in local primary schools. Two local farmers also attended and spoke to the Panel. There were several open sessions during the day in which discussion on the issues was opened up to the floor. The day therefore gave the Panel an excellent opportunity to gather evidence and also to facilitate discussion of these important issues.

Correspondence

The Panel received a number of letters and e-mails from parents, interested organisations, nutritionists etc who responded in more depth to the issues raised by this review, and these are included at Appendix VII. These were generated as a result of the Panel's efforts to publicise its review not only through consultation work but also by issuing press releases and the creation of a web page to encourage the widest possible public participation in this review. This was highly successful, and the level of engagement, reflecting the interest felt in this issue, was of great help to the Panel in reaching their recommendations. In addition it is felt that the level of public engagement will lend weight to these recommendations and give the Executive the impetus to make the necessary improvements to meals.

Media

As the Panel began this review in July 2004, Bath & North East Somerset have in many ways been ahead of the game in relation to the calls for improvements to school dinners which have resulted from Jamie Oliver's television series and associated campaign. However, it is recognised that this series has generated much debate amongst parents and also within the broader media. The Panel noted with interest the range of newspaper articles both national and local on this issue, and these were of help in providing a broader context to the issues under consideration.

FINDINGS

Due to the broad range of evidence and information gathered by the Panel in this review, the Panel's findings and recommendations have been arranged in thematically organised sections, which reflect the key areas of the scope of this review. Individual recommendations are numbered and set out in highlighted boxes at the end of each section. These recommendations will be submitted to the Executive Member for Children's Services through the existing O&S tracking process via the Weekly decision register, and the Executive Member will be asked to respond to the Panel with regard to their recommendations within a six week timescale.

The Panel's full recommendations are laid out below, with a summary attached at Appendix VIII.

A Vision for the Future of the Primary School Meals Service

The Panel felt it was important to set out some clear principles underpinning why Bath & North East Somerset should continue to provide school meals to Primary Schools in the area, and a vision for future provision.

The Panel heard a great deal of evidence, particularly at the Contributor session which suggested that the current Primary School Meals service in Bath & North East Somerset is already a good one. The school cooks who were invited to speak at the Contributor Session highlighted that the publicity which has surrounded the "Jamie's School Dinners" series, had to some extent led to a false impression being created about the current state of school dinners in the Authority. As part of the review, Panel members sampled dinners in local primary schools in November 2004, and were impressed by much of the service they saw. A senior dietician also noted that Bath and North East Somerset was not starting from "ground zero" with their meals service. However, the service is in need of change, and the Panel's recommendations set out some key improvements to the service.

Furthermore, the Panel recognises that changes to the service have already been taking place, and initiatives such as the Food for Life Pilot have already led to improvement in some schools. Nevertheless its recommendations if adopted entail a significant amount of further change within the Primary School Meal service. The Panel therefore think it is important that a realistic and deliverable programme is put in place which can lead to a stepped series of changes, with achievable annual targets. This is set out in more detail later on in this report (see Recommendation 8).

The Panel were concerned to learn that the Education Service do not have a policy in place regarding the provision of primary school meals. It is felt important that a strong steer is provided by the Education Service, who are the commissioners of the Primary School Meals provision, and should therefore in co-operation with schools have ownership of and play a far more significant role in shaping it. In doing so they should work together with Commercial Services and Heads and Governors to ensure a coherent Primary School Meals policy is successfully implemented.

The Local Authority is only obligated to provide Free school meals, however it was felt that to limit provision to Free school meals could lead to a decrease in the level of service provided to those who take up free school meals. It also seems clear that the majority of parents and schools want a Primary School Meals Service to be provided, and that there is generally a desire for the Local Authority to continue to provide a hot meals service. The Panel's research indicated that the key issue was to provide primary school children with a good quality meal with sound nutritional content, but which would also be enjoyed by and attractive to the children who eat it.

The evidence received by the Panel suggested that the school meals service was an important part of the broader educational experience for Primary School children. It was felt important for children to sit down with their peers and adults to a regular meal, and that this provided them with valuable social skills. The Panel in their visits to schools and in hearing from parents and schools were concerned about the tendency for children eating packed lunches to be separated at lunchtimes from those taking school meals. It was felt important that schools were encouraged to integrate packed lunch and school meals pupils, ensuring that all children went out to play together.

Education, Behaviour and Learning

The Panel received anecdotal evidence suggesting links between behaviour and academic performance and good nutrition. There is an increasing body of evidence relating children's behaviour and learning ability to what they eat, and what they do not eat. As time goes on, it is anticipated that more evidence will be available to further prove the benefits/harm arising from specific food content. It was therefore felt important that school meals should form an integrated part of a whole school approach to healthy eating, nutrition, food awareness and exercise. As part of this, they felt it important to encourage schools to ensure healthy snacks were available at break times as well as the provision of a healthy lunchtime meal.

Whilst changes can and should be made to primary school meals to increase nutritional benefits to children, the school meals service should not be the only meal of the day, and currently over half of the children attending primary schools in Bath & North East Somerset bring in sandwiches from home. It is therefore important that any new approach is embedded in a broader healthy schools agenda, allowing the school to become a means of disseminating information to both children and their parents about nutrition and health issues. The Panel felt that the Council could play a role in offering advice and best practice guidelines to primary schools regarding education on food and nutrition matters. It is also suggested that food technology education could be used to teach children about food, its origins and preparation, and that if possible, bearing in mind health and safety issues, schools might consider using production kitchens as a food technology teaching resource. Further, it is important that the Council maintains strong links with the Bath and North East Somerset Primary Care Trust to ensure that we are working together on this issue. The Panel recognise that much excellent work was already being done in this area by Primary Schools, (particularly noting one school where children were taught about nutrition and food immediately before lunchtime), and hope that their

recommendations can build on, and disseminate these areas of good practice to all Primary Schools.

The Panel felt that the Council could also play a role in influencing parents either directly or through children about the healthy eating and lifestyles agenda. Whilst the nutritional value of lunchboxes provided by parents is not within the control of the Authority, a leaflet could be produced by Bath & North East Somerset offering advice about healthy lunchboxes, possibly giving healthy diet recipes and lunchbox suggestions alongside nutritional information. Such a leaflet could also help to keep parents informed about primary school meals and their nutritional composition, allowing them to make an informed choice between providing sandwiches and purchasing a school meal for their child. This initiative could therefore be linked to attempts to improve take-up of primary school meals.

The Panel therefore make the following recommendations:

1. Bath and North East Somerset should continue to provide a school meals service to all those Primary Schools who wish to receive it. It is recommended that this service should extend well beyond the statutory provision of free school meals, and should be improved in order to attract an increased take-up amongst all pupils.
2. The Executive Member is asked to formulate a Local Education Authority policy on Primary School Meals which would:
 - Provide Commercial Services, as the in-house provider of the service, with a clear steer for the future provision of the service
 - Re-establish the importance of the Education Service's role as the commissioner of the Primary School Meals Service
 - Encourage the LEA in co-operation with schools to take ownership of the Primary School Meals Service and set clear guidelines for all schools on meal provision
 - Encourage the LEA and schools to work closely with Commercial Services, Heads and Governors to ensure the successful implementation of the policy

The Executive Member is asked to bring this Policy, once formulated back before the Education, Youth, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel for their consideration.

3. The Primary School Meals Service should be focused on providing a good quality, healthy and nutritious meal which children will enjoy and want to eat. The Council should work increasingly closely with the Bath and North East Somerset Primary Care Trust in order to address this.
4. Schools should be encouraged to increase integration between the lunchtime experience of those pupils taking sandwiches and those who are provided with a school meal. Neither group should be disadvantaged or feel excluded

by having less play time as a result of their meal choices.

5. It is recommended that schools are encouraged to further incorporate the provision of a healthy school meal within wider healthy schools initiatives. The Executive is asked to formulate a series of best practice guidelines for primary schools, which would encourage them to consolidate existing moves to educate children on food and nutrition issues, and to encourage a healthy schools approach to include the provision of healthy snacks for breaktimes.
6. The Executive is asked to investigate the possibility of working with schools to allow the multiple use of school kitchens, in particular as a resource for food technology teaching.
7. The Executive is asked to consider the production of a leaflet which could be issued by Bath & North East Somerset to parents, both as a means to explain and promote the school meals service and its nutritional make-up and values, but also to influence those parents who provide packed lunches for their children. It is suggested that this leaflet could include:
 - healthy eating ideas and recipes
 - nutritional information
 - suggestions for creating a healthy lunchbox
 - information on the primary school meals service and its nutritional values
8. A realistic and deliverable programme for change should be put in place by the Executive Member, with annual targets, and regular re-evaluation. This programme should include targets on:
 - increased use of fresh produce
 - increased use of locally produced foods
 - increased use of “proper” meat
 - increased proportion of food to be “home-cooked”
 - implementation of a training programme
 - purchasing of additional equipment
 - increasing take-up of primary school meals

Sourcing of Supplies for Primary School Meals

The Panel explored the way in which food is currently supplied for Primary School Meals, looking at the contracts with suppliers, but also at issues such as the use of organic and/or locally produced food supplies.

The Panel heard evidence regarding the current contract which Commercial Services has with Bristol City Council, and noted the concerns raised by some parents and also by Council Officers about the current contract.

It was found that local farmers were willing to forge links with the Council in order to provide locally produced foods for school meals. It is recognised that in some cases this will take time to achieve, as farmers need time to plan for increased or changed provision.

There was a thorough exploration of the issues surrounding the use of organic and/or locally produced foods.

Organic

Whilst the Panel recognises that many parents would like to see organically produced foods used for school meals, it was noted that concerns were also raised about how practical this would be, particularly regarding achieving best value for money. The Panel heard strong evidence from a Senior Dietician from the local Royal United Hospital, which suggested that whilst there might be other reasons to use organic foods, there was no evidence that they provide specific nutritional benefits over other fresh foods. The Panel therefore felt that the priority lay with providing good quality foods, locally produced where possible, rather than primarily on a move to organic provision.

Locally Produced

The Panel felt that it was more important to increase the use of locally produced foods which carry the following benefits:

- **Food Miles:** food travels much shorter distances therefore there is a decrease in “food miles”
- **Transport Costs:** Decreased transport costs may mean locally purchased foods are more cost efficient
- **Local Economy:** The use of local suppliers supports and encourages the local economy and is in line with the Council’s Corporate Improvement Priority “Develop a sustainable economy for Bath & North East Somerset”

The Panel therefore makes the following recommendations:

9. Current contracts should be reviewed and more supplies should be sourced directly from suppliers and local farms. New contracts should be flexible in order to encourage contractors to make use of suitable local supplies.
10. Commercial Services should work to forge partnerships with local farmers in order to encourage and enable them to gear up for production to supply schools. Work should be done to establish agreed volumes for farms, so that farmers can plan ahead.
11. The emphasis on the food is that it should be *produced* locally rather than *sourced* locally.

12. After careful consideration the Panel feel that there is no evidence of specific nutritional benefits for the use of organic foods, and suggest that the focus of this Authority should rather be on providing a good quality meal for primary school children, reducing to an absolute minimum the amounts of processed food used.
13. The Executive should put targets in place for a stepped increase in the use of locally produced foods.

Menus and Nutrition

The Panel gathered a great deal of evidence surrounding the issue of menus and nutrition, and looked at a diverse range of issues such as current regulations and guidelines relating to the provision of Primary School Meals, and the comparative nutritional benefits of hot or cold meal provision, organic or non-organic foods, locally produced fresh foods or frozen or dried foods.

The consultation exercise with parents, schools and governors suggested that many people wanted to see a reduction or end to the use of processed foods in primary school meals, and that many wanted to see increased use of fresh foods. The Panel agreed that there should be a managed reduction in the use of processed foods with targets set in place to remove them from the menu. This should lead to an increase in freshly prepared foods, cooked from basic ingredients by trained school cooks.

The Panel felt that menus should be simplified so that children were not confused or put off by too much choice. A simpler menu should also reduce costs and make provision somewhat easier.

Concerns were voiced about the use of frozen vegetables which had been blanched before freezing, and which when cooked did not hold much nutritional value. However, a senior dietician informed the Panel that in some cases fresh-frozen foods could be more nutritionally valuable than fresh foods, and dried or tinned foods could also be acceptable at times. It was therefore felt that the focus should be on nutritional value, balance and content, looking at each item on its own merits rather than on a simple blanket move to fresh foods. Peas for example it was stated are often better frozen, whilst some vegetables such as broccoli seem difficult to cook well from frozen and were often over-cooked. Therefore where individual products proved difficult to prepare properly (or were not available fresh), and were not attractive to children, it would be preferable to exclude them from the menu.

The Panel shared the concerns of those who wanted to see a reduction in the use of sugar (and sweeteners), salt and additives, and felt that it was important that catering staff should be careful about their use, and that limits should be set out, with no sweeteners added at all.

Alongside the use of local foods, the Panel supported the idea of a seasonally responsive menu. In order to address the trend for declining take-up of school meals in the summer months (in part due to children wanting to eat outside, not wanting a

hot meal in hot weather and so on), it is suggested that a separate winter and summer menu could be introduced to encourage better summer take-up rates.

Many parents were concerned over portion size, although the school cooks who attended the contributor session gave evidence that portions are adapted to suit different age groups of children. The Panel supported the continuation and reinforcement of this practice to ensure that children were not overwhelmed by too much food on their plate, but were also not left hungry.

The issue of vegetarian food provision emerged strongly from the consultation exercise with parents, schools and governors, many stating that there weren't enough vegetarian options or that there were too many cheese-based recipes. Some parents said their child would like to take the vegetarian option even though they were not vegetarian. The Panel supported this viewpoint, and would wish to encourage the provision of a wider variety of vegetarian food available for all pupils.

Some parents suggested that the menu sent out to them was not always adhered to, and the Panel felt it was important that once a good quality menu had been established and introduced it should be kept to.

The Panel therefore make the following recommendations:

14. The Primary School Meals Service in Bath & North East Somerset should be working to meet the Caroline Walker Trust guidelines for school meals. It is understood that these are currently under revision with updated guidelines to be issued in June. The Executive is asked that a set of targets are put in place to ensure that these guidelines are met by September 2006.
15. The use of fresh foods should be encouraged where possible, but fresh-frozen foods or dried foods could be used where appropriate if they meet nutritional requirements.
16. There should be a move away from the use of processed foods, with stepped targets to ensure reduction of use by September 2006. Targets should also be set in place and regularly reviewed to ensure the reduction of sugars, salt and additives in school meals, and the cutting out entirely of sweeteners.
17. Menus should be simplified so that children are not confused by too much choice, and this should also help to reduce costs and make provision easier.
18. Menus should be responsive to the season, and a winter/summer menu split should be considered to encourage take up during the summer months.
19. A wider variety of interesting, well balanced vegetarian foods should be available, with less reliance on cheese-based recipes. Vegetarian options should be available to all children.
20. Once menus are agreed and issued to parents they should be adhered to.

21. Portion sizes should be adapted for different age groups of children, to ensure children are neither overwhelmed nor left hungry. Good practice in this area should be reinforced through training.

Staff training and development

Whilst the expenditure on the food on the plate is seen as one key area for development in school meals, and has been much publicised both through the Jamie's School Dinners programme and in the wider media, it is important to note that these are not the only additional cost implications of the changes recommended in this report.

The Panel heard at the Contributor session that an extra half hour of catering staff time was being used by schools within the Food for Life pilot. It is evident that an increase in freshly prepared foods, made from basic ingredients, and a corresponding decrease in the use of processed and pre-prepared foods, will lead to increased labour hours.

It is clear that school cooks, some of whom, it is suggested, may have become somewhat deskilled by the use of pre-prepared processed foods, wish to be cooks rather than assemblers of food. This was borne out by the Panel's discussions at the Contributor session with three school cooks. However despite existing skills, it is recognised that the changes recommended in this report will make some short-term and longer term training and support necessary. The Panel feel that such training should include not only a catering qualification, but also training in cleaning and food hygiene standards, and training specifically tailored to school cooks' roles as providers of food for children.

There should also be a recognition of the value of the SMSA role, and appropriate training provided, in order to promote their importance in creating a positive, healthier lunchtime environment, and offering encouragement to children to try different foods.

The Panel therefore make the following recommendations

22. There should be a recognition that in order to achieve improvements increased labour time will be necessary
23. The Executive is asked to formulate a training programme for school cooks which would include:
 - short-term training to prepare staff for making food from basic ingredients
 - longer-term training programme to ensure all staff supported in

- changes, and that skills are maintained and built upon
- training on hygiene and cleaning standards
- consideration of the introduction of training towards a catering qualification
- consideration of the use of an assessor to identifying existing skills, and target training where it is needed

This training programme should be tailored specifically to meet the needs of school cooks who provide food for children, and links could be made with local vocational colleges to ensure a consistent standard of catering training

24. Training should also be provided for SMSA's, and recognition made of the role they can play in making healthy school meals a success.

Production and Organisation

Bath and North East Somerset currently has a mix of primary schools with their own production kitchen, and others which have dining centres and have their meals supplied from other schools. Thirty-five primary schools in the area have production kitchens, and have their school meals prepared, cooked and served onsite. Twenty-nine primary schools have dining centres and have their school meals transported in from a school with a production kitchen.

The Panel felt there should be a clear consistency in provision across the Local Education Authority. It was felt to be particularly important that if a school did not have its own production centre it should be able to source a full and substantial hot meal.

Where schools have production kitchens it was felt that there should be some clarity given to the ownership of the kitchen and eating space. At present schools have responsibility to maintain the fabric of the building, as well as heavy equipment. In many schools this is done via the Building Maintenance Indemnity Scheme (BMIS). The budget for the replacement of heavy equipment is with Education and is now managed by Commercial Services. It should be recognised that production kitchen maintenance costs should continue to be shared by schools with dining centres.

It was noted that different schools have different facilities and space available for dining, with some children eating in their classrooms, and others having up to three sittings because of restricted space. The Panel felt it important that consideration was given to the best ways of utilising and maximising the space available, in order to have lunchtimes over the least possible sittings in the best possible social environment for the children.

The Panel felt that the school meals service should be recognised as important not only for providing children with sound nutrition and healthy meals, but also as an integral part of school life and education, and a means to encourage positive patterns of socialisation amongst children. Whilst it is important that children are provided with a good quality meal, the environment in which they eat also plays a significant role, and a good dining space is important in making lunchtimes a positive

experience for both pupils and staff. It is therefore worth considering if capital funding could be spent on good multi-use dining facilities, so that the space could be used flexibly by the school for other activities.

The Panel therefore make the following recommendations:

25. There should be consistent provision of primary school meals across Bath & North East Somerset. Where a school does not have a production kitchen it should be able to be supplied with a good quality, full and substantial hot meal.
26. The Executive need to clarify the ownership of kitchen and dining space and how schools are expected to maintain this facility.
27. Consideration should be given to encouraging schools to spend capital money on good multi-use dining facilities which recognises the importance of school meals, and the integral role they have to play in school life. Existing space should also be put to best use in order to provide the best possible dining experience for pupils.
28. There should be a continuing awareness of the best means of transporting hot meals to dining centre schools, the optimum time/distance, storage etc, and best practice should be reinforced.
29. There should be a recognition that additional equipment will need to be purchased in order to deliver the changes recommended throughout this report.

Take-up of primary school meals

Currently the average take-up of primary school meals in Bath and North East Somerset is 42% of the school roll, or 33.15% excluding free school meals. The LEA are unable to identify what proportion of those entitled to free school meals actually take them up, however anecdotal evidence from parents and schools suggests that some of those entitled to free school meals choose not to take them. There may be a number of reasons for this, one of which could be that such families are not happy with the current service.

Recent Government proposals regarding school meals have suggested that the cost of ingredients per meal should be set at a minimum of 50p. Bath & North East Somerset currently spends on average 40p per meal on ingredients. The Panel heard from the Council's Education Finance Manager that in order to cover the cost of increasing the Council's spend on ingredients from 40p to 50p per meal without increasing the price to parents, take-up levels would need to rise by approximately 10%. It should be noted that this was not an exact figure, but a guideline to the kind of scale of increased take-up which would be necessary.

The Panel believe that the provision of an improved, good quality meal which children will want to eat, is inextricably linked with moves to encourage increased take-up. It is felt take-up should increase as food becomes better in quality, and as both children wish to eat it, and their parents are happy for them to do so. In some Food For Life Schools such an increase in take-up has already begun to take place.

It seems clear that there is a demand for a meals service within the Authority, and that if this can be improved, and remodelled along the lines suggested within this report, the Panel believes that increased take-up will follow. It is vital that any improvements made are frequently monitored to ensure that standards remain high.

It was noted that for parents with more than one child taking school meals, costs could become too high and some had felt forced to stop taking school meals because of this.

Whilst a good quality meal is vital to increase take-up, the Panel also believe that this needs to be complemented by improved marketing and communication with parents and pupils. Once the service has been improved the Council should market the new service, promoting it to parents, schools and children, and this would help to improve take-up. The Panel heard from many parents who were dissatisfied with the way in which menus were communicated to them. A frequent comment was that the undated four weekly menu cycle caused some confusion as they often didn't know which week was currently being followed. However a significant minority of parents were satisfied with the way in which menus were communicated to them. A consistent policy for communication of menus should therefore be developed, which can draw on existing good practice in those schools that do this well, to ensure that all primary schools follow the same standards. Improved communication of menus should, alongside improved quality food, further help to encourage an increased take-up rate.

The panel therefore make the following recommendations:

30. There should be a continual review of meals provided to ensure that a good quality service is maintained and that children are still receiving a good quality meal which they want to eat. Initially these reviews should be undertaken by the Food Trading Standards team. Spot-checks, without prior warning, should be carried out to avoid any possible swaying of results by schools being prepared in advance for checks.
31. Consideration should be given by the Executive to implementing measures to ease the burden for families where more than one child is taking school meals.
32. The Executive is asked to draw together a consistent policy across all primary schools to ensure that menus are communicated efficiently and effectively to all parents. In drawing up this policy it is recommended that:

- the example of those schools where good practice already exists should be drawn on
- each week on the menu cycle should be dated rather than “week 1”, “week 2” etc which can lead to confusion amongst parents as to which week is currently being followed.
- Menus should be sent out to parents regularly, and it is suggested that schools could be requested to send them home with children and/or incorporate them into existing newsletters.
- A continuing dialogue should be encouraged via such newsletters between parents and the Council to ensure that the reputation of the Authority’s meals service continues to improve

Cost implications

A one year “Food for Life” pilot began on 21st February 2005 in nine primary schools in Bath & North East Somerset. The Food for Life programme is “a Government initiative to explore the feasibility of using locally sourced food within the Authority”¹. Under the pilot, there are targets for school meals to incorporate increasing amounts of organic and local foods, and decreased proportions of processed food. It is anticipated that full compliance with the Food for Life standards (menus are currently evolving and working towards full compliance) will lead to a 13p per meal increase in the spend on ingredients, an increase which is being borne by the schools involved. As the Pilot has only been running for a few months, it is too early to judge definitively how successful it is. However evidence suggests that the schools taking part are broadly happy with it and see it as an improvement, whilst others are interested in the direction it is taking. The Panel would therefore like to see the continued progress of the Pilot carefully monitored.

The Panel recognises that the recommendations it is making will have cost implications for the meals service. The combination of additional labour costs (estimated at 10 p per meal by the time the menus are fully compliant to standards in 2006), together with both short and long-term staff training, additional equipment, increase in salaries as a result of the implementation of single status, and an increase in the basic spend on ingredients will lead to increased costs. However to some extent the Panel feel this may be offset by the use of locally grown produce which has lower transport costs, and that this together with greater menu simplicity and less processed food will not only directly decrease costs but also encourage a greater take-up of primary school meals. It has already been noted that to offset the 50p per meal spend put forward by the government alone, the Authority would need to achieve around a 10% increase in take up. This might not be achievable in the short-term, and with an increased spend on labour and staff training, there will probably be increased costs to be borne. Some, if not all, of the increase might need to be passed onto parents who might therefore see the current price of £1.50 per meal increased. Some parents had stated they would be willing to pay more for school meals, if they were of an improved quality, however this might exclude some parents on the grounds of affordability. Another option would be for the LEA to

¹ Report to EYCL O&S Panel from Commercial Services, 24th January 2005, p17

identify primary school meals as a spending priority, and to bear the increased cost, however it is acknowledged that this would have a knock-on effect on other budgets within the service and/or the Authority.

The Panel therefore make the following recommendations:

33. The Food for Life Pilot should continue to be monitored, with an update provided to the Panel in November 2005.

34. The Executive Member is asked to formulate proposals for how any increased costs could be managed. Options would include:

- a rise in the cost to parents
- improved take-up levels
- The LEA absorbing some of the increase.

The Executive Member is asked to bring these proposals back to the Panel by November 2005.

Next Steps

This report and recommendations will be brought to the Education, Youth, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel's meeting on 4th July 2005. After this, the Panel's recommendations will be presented to the Executive Member, who will be asked through the existing O&S tracking process to provide a response to the Panel within six weeks.

Appendices

Appendix I	Terms of Reference for the Review
Appendix IIa	Administration of Primary School Meals: Analysis of Cashless Systems Report
Appendix IIb	Primary School Meals: Analysis of Production Kitchens and Dining Centres Report
Appendix III	Summary of analysis of consultation exercise with schools, parents, and governors
Appendix IV	List of questions sent to Bath and North East Somerset catering staff
Appendix V	Summary of analysis of consultation with Bath and North East Somerset catering staff
Appendix VIa	Copies of presentations made to the Panel at the Contributor Session
Appendix VIb	Notes of the Contributor Session
Appendix VII	Correspondence received by Panel during the review
Appendix VIII	Summary of recommendations

Appendices are available separately and copies can be obtained by contacting the Overview and Scrutiny Team, Democratic Services, Guildhall, High Street, Bath, BA1 5AW, or by e-mail to scrutiny@bathnes.gov.uk or by telephoning 01225 396410.