

Name of Scrutiny Committee	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting	9 December 2021
Title of Item	School Dinners
Cabinet Member	Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This report is presented at the request of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee following an annual workshop held with the members in June 2021 in order to identify timely and relevant items to scrutinise during 2021-22.

This cover report and associated attachments elaborate on:

- school dinner arrangements
- Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle correspondence
- the plans that Welsh Government have in the pipeline for the future.

2. BACKGROUND

It is timely to report on the arrangements for collecting school dinner money, emphasising that the welfare of children and young people is always our priority, and we will always seek to ensure that no child in the county goes a day without dinner at school.

In this report, information is provided on schools' arrangements to seek to ensure that no child faces a day without dinner at school, as well as the situation with school dinner debts and the processes that are operational in order to respond to that situation.

i. Children who are eligible for free school meals

A total of 2,885 (November 2021 figures) of Gwynedd children are registered to receive free school meals. The entitlement to free school meals is subject to the parents' circumstances and the benefits they claim. Under the Education Act 1996, a parent must apply for this entitlement and we as an Authority cannot provide this entitlement automatically.

ii. Vulnerable children who are not eligible for free school meals

A Designated Person at each school ensures that the school's staff, including kitchen staff, know the identity of vulnerable children at the school. The message is clear for every Designated Safeguarding Person; there is a need to ensure that every vulnerable child known to the school receives a hot meal at the school. An annual review is undertaken to ensure that designated officers and school managers act in accordance with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures for Children 2020.

iii. Dinner arrangements at secondary schools

a) Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle's recent correspondence

The content and wording of a recent letter sent from Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle to parents regarding school meal payments has led to concern and anxiety for a number of families in the locality of

Dyffryn Nantlle, to you as elected members, and to individuals, families and communities across Gwynedd and beyond.

As an Authority, we do not implement a policy of refusing dinners to children, and we aspire that all children receive a meal at lunchtime, whether it is a school dinner or a packed lunch. This should be made clear in any letter sent to parents from the county's schools whenever school meals are discussed.

Having investigated this incident, it appears that technical advice provided by the Department on how to deal with school meal payment arrears created a lack of clarity, and consequently we will review our guidance for schools. The welfare of children and young people is always our priority, and we will seek to ensure that no child across the county faces a day without dinner at school.

b) Usual dinner arrangements at secondary schools

In general, at secondary schools, a cafeteria system is operated where it is expected that the pupil has credit on their electronic dinner account system or pays there and then for their food choice. An electronic system is operated at each secondary school (except one).

All children who are eligible for free school meals receive an automatic credit on the electronic system, which equates to the price of a 2-course dinner at the school and so a dinner is available for them every day. Please note that alternative arrangements are in place for vulnerable children who are not eligible for a free school meal and the school will identify these children and act in line with (ii).

In following the cafeteria procedure, no child who pays for their dinner should be in arrears and an overdraft facility exists on the system in order to continue to be able to give a child a school dinner, despite the accumulating debt.

iv. School dinner debts

The remainder of this report will focus on the arrangements for collecting school meal money at Gwynedd primary schools.

The responsibility of identifying a debt on the account of an individual pupil falls on the school, and the school is expected to act as follows:

1. Letter dated January 2019 shared with primary parents (see **Appendix 1**).
2. Parents informed to pay in advance for school meals or by Friday that week at the latest.
3. For those with a debt of more than 5 meals, a PY18 letter is sent (see **Appendix 2**) to the parent, noting their debt amount.
4. If a debt of 5 meals or more continues by the following Friday, a PY19 letter is sent (see **Appendix 3**) to the parent, noting their debt amount, and noting that they need to make other arrangements for their child's dinner from the following week onwards, unless a payment is received. Although this letter states dinner would no longer be provided for the child, in the majority of cases, the schools do not implement a policy of refusing a dinner to any child.
5. If a debt of 5 meals or more continues to accumulate by the following Friday, the debt should be forwarded to the County under the PY20 process (see **Appendix 4**). The County will take over the debt and an official invoice will be sent from Gwynedd Council to the parent. This enables parents to come to an arrangement with the Council to pay the debt over a period of time.

If the school suspects that families should be eligible for free school meals but that this is not noted on their systems, they should contact the Education Department.

If there are exceptional circumstances as to why a parent cannot pay, then this will need to be discussed further with the Education Department.

The Authority expects that every debt has been paid at the school or transferred to the County at the end of each half term.

The Education Department receives money centrally from the Council for the value of the invoice raised and the Council centrally will chase-up the debt with the parents. Debt recovery from parents can take a long time. In a few cases, the debt is deleted by the Council. In these cases, the Education Department will not receive the monies due.

Some pupils are eligible to receive Free School Meals (FSM). If the FSM entitlement has not been identified promptly and debts are accumulating by the pupil, but that it comes to light at a later date that the pupil should have been in receipt of free school meals, the debt accumulated at the school is deleted.

As at the end of October 2021, school meal debts at schools stood at £36,159.98 and the invoices that remain due over the past 9 years come to £67,723.51.

The Schoolgateway app (also available via a bilingual app), enables parents to see their debt amount 24/7 and pay for school meals daily if they so wish. The comments of the Chair of Governors at Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle suggested that there were some obstacles and problems with the meal payment system, and we will investigate this in order to remove any obstacles. We are already collaborating with other secondary schools to amend the Schoolgateway system in order to receive a minimum of 50p from families per child.

v. Developments on the horizon

Welsh Government are looking at options to extend the free school meal entitlement to more people who are in receipt of Universal Credit, with a decision to be made in December 2021. In brief, the three options under consideration are:

1. Free school meals to all Universal Credit recipients
2. Free school meals to those with an income below £20,000 and in receipt of Universal Credit
3. Free school meals to those with an income below £14,000 and in receipt of Universal Credit

Whatever option is selected by Government, they expect the change to come into force during 2022.

Very recently, the Government has confirmed its plans to extend free school meals to all primary pupils. This statement is welcomed; however, considerable work is to be done before this can be achieved.

A probing case study will be required into this change. Currently, around 50% of primary pupils take a school meal (this includes pupils who are eligible for free school meals). As the scheme is one to extend free meals to all primary pupils, this would double the number that currently consumes school meals.

Here are some operational matters to be considered:

- Suitability of kitchens in terms of their size / equipment
- Insufficient space in the canteen / lunch hall
- Likely increase in the number of sittings at larger schools, without interrupting the teaching timetable
- Current recruitment challenges in the field
- By starting from scratch, this could mean externalising the service, or creating production kitchens in different areas of the county
- Cost of extra food/staff
- Additional capital to upgrade kitchens/dining spaces
- Loss of Income

As things stand, please see below the income target and running costs of the service.

Income target for school meals in 2021/22:

Primary / Special / All-through = £1,888,510

Secondary = £1,444,770

Total = £3,333,280

School catering service costs in 2021/22:

Primary / Special / All-through = £3,774,270

Secondary = £1,902,950

Total = £5,677,220

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to:

- provide observations on the current dinner money collection process
- provide observations on the Government's plans