

**ANGUS COUNCIL
EDUCATION COMMITTEE – 30 APRIL 2002**

**SCHOOL MEALS (SCOTLAND) BILL
REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION**

Abstract

This report updates members on the School Meals (Scotland) Bill and outlines a response to the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Education Committee endorses Section 4 of this report as the Council's response to the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee in respect of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill.

2. BACKGROUND

The purpose of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill is to require local authorities to provide a nutritious meal, without charge, to all pupils under their management. The Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee are seeking views on the Bill by 30 April 2002.

An Expert Panel on School Meals has also been formed, chaired by Michael O'Neill, Director of Education, North Lanarkshire Council. The group has not yet concluded their report, but as part of their work, information has been sought from all authorities. In addition the panel have visits arranged to a small number of Councils, including Angus, to further inform their deliberations.

Within Angus, following a Best Value review in November 1998, good progress has been made in further developing the school meals service in partnership with Tayside Contracts. A paper was recently prepared for the Education Department's Parental Sounding Board outlining progress (a copy is available in the Members' Lounge). One of the objectives being pursued within Angus is to eliminate any possible stigma for those pupils entitled to free school meals. In particular it should be noted that when the cashless catering system is introduced in Carnoustie High School in May 2002, all secondary schools in Angus will then operate Cashless Catering and this arrangement means that all Angus secondary pupils entitled to free school meals should be able to take advantage of that entitlement without their peers being in any way aware of this situation.

3. COMMENTS ON SCHOOL MEALS (SCOTLAND) BILL

There may be some benefits associated with introducing free meals to all pupils, particularly if stringent nutritional standards are adhered to. However it is important to balance this potential benefit against other issues, eg:

▪ **Quality Assurance**

Under the present arrangements quality assurance is critical to ensure that pupils and parents are satisfied with the product on offer. If meals are provided free the incentive of a need to ensure responsiveness to customers would almost certainly be reduced.

▪ **Health/Nutritional Issues**

Provision of a free meal may improve the diets of some pupils, but careful consideration would need to be given to products available, presentation, marketing etc.; some pupils would require considerable encouragement to eat particular meals or foods (ie. providing a nutritious meal is no guarantee that a pupil will eat it). Within Angus a pragmatic approach has been adopted in that pupils are encouraged to select healthy choices but other products are still available; efforts are made to ensure that these products are as healthy as possible in the way in which they are prepared (baking rather than frying, etc.).

- **Secondary School Cash Cafeteria**

At present, in common with the rest of Scotland, secondary school meals are based on a cafeteria model. It should be clarified whether it is envisaged that this model would continue and if so, there may need to be a change to current operational arrangements.

- **Financial issues**

In financial year 2001/02 in Angus, approximately 1,000,000 meals (33% uptake) were provided – 240,000 free of charge. From April 2002, for those not eligible for free meals the cost per meal is £1.35 in primary schools and £1.45 in secondary schools. This will generate approximately £1.1m. in income, with the net cost of the service being £813,000. Assuming that the introduction of universal free meals would increase demand to – say – 90%, it is estimated the net increase in cost to the Council would be in the order of £4.0m. per annum.

In addition, it is likely there would be a requirement for additional supervision, as well as additional furniture and equipment to cater for the significant increases in pupil uptake which would have to be assumed. In a number of schools physical improvements/extensions to buildings would be required to meet the increased demand.

The Bill allows for Scottish Ministers to make regulations including delivering a “nutritious meal” but only after consultation with, amongst others, education authorities. This feature of the Bill is welcomed and it is essential that any new arrangements are agreed in consultation.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSED RESPONSE

- 4.1 The desire to remove any possible stigma from pupils eligible to be provided with a free school meal is supported wholeheartedly; Angus Council has made significant strides forward already in doing just that, and will continue to strive for further improvements. Whether it is necessary to provide free school meals for all pupils in order to remove that possible stigma is highly debatable.
- 4.2 The concept of providing free school meals for all pupils is one which the Parliament is advised to approach with some caution – not least because the process of translating such a concept into the reality of all pupils actually consuming the meals provided for them may prove to be exceptionally challenging.
- 4.3 The provision of free school meals for all pupils would remove some of the helpful checks and balances in the current system which ensures that school meal providers have due regard for customer preferences, and would have the capacity to result in a monolithic national facility completely unresponsive to the wishes or aspirations of pupils or parents.
- 4.4 The financial implications of the proposed Bill require to be very carefully considered – firstly in terms of whether or not it is appropriate to give priority to this concept over other deserving needs (eg. in the education service alone the need for significant investment in the school estate across Scotland has already been recognised (within the National Education Priorities), and secondly in terms of ensuring that all the possible financial ramifications of the Bill have been fully and accurately costed. From the point of view of Angus Council, the Bill could not be supported at all unless there was a clear and unequivocal commitment from the Executive that additional costs would be met in full by the Executive (for Angus Council, estimated to be at least £4 million per annum, plus the costs of any capital refurbishment).

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report. Should the Bill be enacted, the financial implications would be significant.

6. HUMAN RIGHTS

There are no Human Rights implications arising directly from consideration of this report.

7. CONSULTATION

The Chief Executive, the Directors of Finance and Law & Administration, and the Managing Director, Tayside Contracts, have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

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DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

NOTE: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above Report.