

Report to	Performance Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting	27th January 2022
Lead Member / Officer	Cllr Huw Hilditch-Roberts, Lead Member for Education, Children's Services and Public Engagement / Cllr Brian Jones, Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment / Tony Ward, Head of Highways and Environmental Services
Report author	Hayley Jones, Principal Catering and Cleaning Manager
Title	Reduction of single use plastics and carbon reduction in the School Meals Service

1. What is the report about?

- 1.1 This report is about progress/challenges with reducing single use plastic and carbon in School Catering, in line with the Council's aim to become net carbon zero by 2030.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

- 2.1 To provide Members with an update on progress, and the challenges, in relation to reducing single use plastic and reducing carbon within the School Catering Service.

3. What are the Recommendations?

- 3.1 That Members consider the report, and provide feedback as deemed appropriate.

4. Report details

The current business model for the Catering Service

- 4.1 The current business model for School Catering in Denbighshire relies on the income generated from the sales of drinks in secondary schools. The average annual (net) income generated from the sale of drinks is around £220,000.
- 4.2 Drinks are generally sold in single-use plastic containers, although cans and tetra pack drinks are also available. An average of almost 500,000 drinks are sold each year, which clearly generates a lot of single-use plastic. There are two main ways in which the sale of drinks in single-use containers could be eradicated:
- 4.2.1 By not selling drinks in our schools, with pupils bringing their own drinks to school, resulting in a c.£220,000 revenue pressure for the service; or
- 4.2.2 By selling drinks that are decanted into re-usable containers (as per the trial, discussed below).

Reduction of single use plastic: trial at Ysgol Glan Clwyd (YGC)

- 4.3 The Service trialled a new method of selling drinks in reusable cups in YGC from 1st September 2021 to 22nd December 2021. The service stopped selling drinks in single use plastic bottles during the trial.
- 4.4 Net income from the sale of drinks at YGC reduced by approximately £506 per week, (c.£20,000 pro rata) during the period of the trial, compared to the same period in 2019. We can therefore assume that rolling this system out across all secondary schools (if this were possible) may result in a net income loss of c.£129,000 per year.
- 4.5 To facilitate the trial, YGC purchased 1,000 reusable drink cups. As cups were not being returned, YGC purchased a further 1,000 cups in October 2021. The total cost to the school was £2,160, with only 250 of the 2,000 cups remaining at end of the 14-week trial period. The estimated cost of reusable cups (if this system was rolled out across all secondary schools) would be c.£37,000 per year.
- 4.6 Furthermore, the trial required an increase in staffing of 1.5 hours per day to decant and set up drinks ready for the lunch time service. This came at a cost of c.£1,652 for the trial and would equate to c.£30,000 per year across all secondary schools.

4.7 The service has concluded that the trial cannot currently be rolled out across all secondary schools. It is too logistically challenging to operate; some schools have insufficient surface space to mount the drinks machines that were used in the trial (which require a water feed); it creates a significant amount of waste in terms of non-recyclable plastic drink cups; and it is not financially viable (given the current business model). The anticipated total cost of rolling out this model across all secondary schools is c.£197,000 per year.

Progress made in reducing single-use plastic

4.8 The Catering service has reviewed all food items that are required to be packaged and reduced the amount of packaging purchased and disposed.

4.9 The service has stopped purchasing single use plastic sandwich wedges and sauce pots and has moved to cardboard sandwich and pasta containers. There is an increase in price for these items, and the service remains concerned that recyclable items are not being recycled by students. There has been a reduction in size and availability of serviettes, and reduction in pre-packing of food items. An alternative for salads and fruit salads that is not price prohibitive to pupils is being sought.

4.10 Where possible, the use of plastic cutlery has been stopped, but this is not always possible due to pupils taking more expensive stainless-steel cutlery from dining areas and disposing of them in a variety of ways.

4.11 The service serves food on plates wherever possible. However, in some schools, the service is serving 550 pupils a wide selection of food and drinks during a 30 to 50-minute lunchtime. Pupils can't be expected to sit in the dining room with a plate, knife and fork as many schools don't have dining room capacity.

Carbon reduction in the Catering Service

4.12 The service has been actively looking at how it can deliver the catering function in a low carbon way in order to contribute to the Council's carbon ambitions. Some of the things that the Catering Service have already done include:

- Energy efficiency of kitchens: we continue to look at equipment efficiency as and when it needs replacing, and staff given guidance to only have equipment switched on when it is required.

- Procurement: food miles have been reduced by receiving orders weekly, and fortnightly where possible.
- All recyclable material (including food) used by the service in the process of producing school meals is recycled.
- Service model: generally, meals are produced within each school, with only two schools currently receiving meals transported daily from a hub kitchen.

4.13 However, there are further issues to be considered. Research, led by the University of Edinburgh, concluded that the priorities for catering managers looking to reduce carbon emissions should be a) switching to low carbon waste disposal methods; and b) reducing the amount of red meat in menus.

4.14 Recycling by pupils needs to improve, with food and packed lunch waste needing to be separated to ensure it is treated in the most carbon-advantageous manner. A whole school approach is required, as this cannot be achieved by the catering service alone. Funding has been secured from the Net Carbon Zero Programme for a Carbon Reduction Officer: Waste (0.4FTE from 1st April 2022). The post will promote behaviour change “internally” to optimise waste diversion and reduce waste, and one of the priorities will be to work with the catering service and schools.

4.15 Reducing the amount of red meat in menus is likely to be a sensitive issue, given the significant farming community in the county. Meat free days have been introduced in other local authorities in the region, but this has resulted in adverse publicity.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

5.1. This contributes to the Council’s aim of reducing single use plastic and becoming net carbon zero by 2030.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

6.1. Stopping the sale of drinks in secondary schools would cost c.£220,000 per annum. Selling/decanting drinks into re-usable cups would cost c.£197,000 per annum. This deficit would need to be covered by an increase in DCC revenue subsidy; an increase in school meal prices; or by passing the costs on to schools. Any further

amendments to our procurement strategy, e.g. to insist that supplies delivery goods using Ultra Low Emission Vehicles, would likely come at an additional cost.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

7.1. No Well-being Impact Assessment has currently been undertaken for this, as no decision is currently being sought.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

8.1. Some discussions have taken place with schools regarding the issue of stopping the sale of drinks in single-use containers, and the cost implications of doing so. Additional consultation would be required before any such changes were made.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

9.1. This report provides an update on progress and, as stated in 6.1, the estimated cost associated with reducing single use plastic and reducing carbon within the School Catering Service.

9.2. The Medium Term Financial Plan includes investment for the Carbon Zero Project and recognises that DCC financial budgets will need to align with the Council's climate and ecological priorities when projects and interventions are developed and implemented. Any increased cost from interventions noted in this report would need to be covered by an increase in DCC revenue budget; an increase in school meal prices; or by passing the costs on to schools.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

10.1. The announcement by Welsh Government re. the provision of Free School Meals (FSM) for all primary pupils will have a significant impact on the service. It is estimated that the take up of FSM will increase from 48% to 77% in primary schools. This expansion in service provision will necessarily increase the carbon footprint of the school catering service.

10.2. The current business model for the catering service is a whole system approach, and all schools are treated equally, regardless of size. Unless an individual school wished to take a different approach (and was prepared to fund the budget gap), we would need to retain a consistent model across all Denbighshire schools. It is not clear that schools have a consistent/collective desire to change to a new model.

11. Power to make the decision

11.1. Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000.

11.2. Section 7.4.1 of the Council's Constitution sets out Scrutiny's powers with respect of policy development and review.