

## Appendix 2

### Extract from the draft minutes of Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 27 January 2022

#### 7 REDUCTION OF SINGLE USE PLASTICS AND CARBON REDUCTION IN THE SCHOOL MEALS SERVICE

The Chair welcomed all present for this item, including Councillors Huw Hilditch-Roberts, Lead Member for Education, Children's Services and Public Engagement and Brian Jones, Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment whose portfolios covered the service area and the environment respectively, together with the Head of Highways and Environmental Services and Principal Catering and Cleaning Manager. A warm welcome was also extended to two pupils from Ysgol Dinas Bran's Student Council who would be invited to ask questions on the item.

Councillor Huw Hilditch-Roberts introduced the report by the Principal Catering and Cleaning Manager which provided an update on progress, and the challenges, in relation to reducing single use plastic and carbon within the School Catering Service together with estimated associated costs. In terms of context he advised that the report had been based on the current service provision situation and that implementation of the Welsh Government's decision to provide free school meals to all primary school children would have a significant impact on the service.

The Committee was guided through the report which referenced the following –

- the current model for school catering relied on income from drink sales in secondary schools with drinks generally sold in single-use plastic containers. Options to eradicate the sale of drinks in single-use containers included (1) not selling drinks with pupils bringing their own drinks to school resulting in a £220k pressure, or (2) selling drinks decanted into re-usable containers
- Option 2 had been trialled at Ysgol Glan Clwyd and the difficulties encountered together with the financial impact had been set out in the report, with the service concluding the trial could not be rolled out to all secondary schools given it was too logistically challenging; lack of space in some schools; waste created from non-recyclable plastic drink cups, and it was not financially viable
- the service had made good progress in other areas to reduce single use plastics and had reduced food item packaging purchased and disposed of. However, there was an increase in price for recyclable alternatives and concerns that those items were not being recycled by students. Where possible the use of plastic cutlery had been stopped and food was served on plates but many schools did not have the dining room capacity to accommodate pupils
- detailed actions taken by the service to deliver the catering function in a low carbon way and future challenges in terms of improving recycling by pupils with a new post to promote behaviour change, and discussions on the potential reduction of red meat on menus which was a sensitive issue.

Councillor Hilditch-Roberts emphasised the commitment of the service to reducing single use plastics and carbon despite the challenges faced with progress in a number of areas. He reiterated the significant financial impact associated with actions identified in the report - £220k per annum for stopping the sale of drinks in secondary schools, and £197k per annum for selling/decanting drinks into reusable cups. That deficit would need to be met by an increase in revenue subsidy, an increase in school meal prices, or by passing the costs on to schools. The expansion of the service to provide free school meals for all primary schools would also increase its carbon footprint. It was noted that the current model treated all schools equally and unless an individual school wished to take a different approach (and fund any budget gap) the consistent model across schools would be retained.

Councillor Brian Jones reported on previous work undertaken with a view to reducing single use plastics leading up to the current report, and he highlighted the need to align financial budgets with climate change priorities and find innovative ways of addressing the issues raised. He welcomed the participation of the two students from Ysgol Dinas Bran and collective working with schools and others to find innovative solutions in order to move the climate change agenda forward.

At this point the Chair invited questions from the Ysgol Dinas Bran students who referred to the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and sustainable procurement and questioned why the service was not using positive alternatives to single use plastics in line with the Act and how much extra waste had been generated by single use plastics to match student demand. The students also queried the actual cost associated with the current use of plastics in schools in comparison to eco-friendly alternatives, and challenged the reference in paragraph 10.2 of the report regarding schools' desire for change given the ongoing commitment of Student Councils. In response the Lead Members and officers –

- explained the tight timescales for serving meals across the eight secondary schools together with limited space and dining room capacity which significantly impacted on how the service was delivered whilst also trying to accommodate pupils' preferences and ensuring the service was financially viable
- elaborated on steps taken to reduce single use plastic packaging for sandwiches and pasta and the challenges in using stainless-steel cutlery and plates given the time restrictions on the service and lack of dining capacity in schools together with cutlery not being returned and subsequent cost impact, and in using plastic alternatives such as bamboo and affordability for pupils
- waste generated varied between individual schools with some pupils not recycling any single use plastic and the non-return and inappropriate disposal of utensils etc. (including littering) which were issues beyond the service's control, and there was a need to educate and change behaviours in that regard to ensure that waste generated as a result of the service was disposed of in the best way. Funding had been secured for a new post to promote behaviour change and work with the catering service and schools would be prioritised
- explained that the reference in paragraph 10.2 that it was not clear schools had a consistent/collective desire to change to a new model had followed a general discussion at a head teacher cluster meeting regarding the sale of drinks, with concerns regarding the withdrawal of pure fruit juice (given the health benefits) and use of cans as an alternative to plastic (given that cans could not be resealed and

accidents involving shredded cans on the school field). Ysgol Glan Clwyd (YGC) had been keen to undertake the drinks trial but when it had been rolled out the majority of pupils had not wanted to participate

- the sale of drinks in schools had been recognised as the biggest issue for the service in terms of single use plastics and whilst the simplest way of dealing with the issue was to stop selling drinks in schools, there would be significant implications arising from that action, notwithstanding the budget deficit which must be met, but also in terms of health considerations and potentially other hidden factors, and the matter required a political discussion and consultation with all schools to reach an agreement as to the best way forward
- the expansion of the service as a result of the future requirement to provide a free school meal to all primary pupils would necessarily increase the carbon footprint of the service which also represented a significant challenge.

During a lengthy debate members scrutinised the report in detail and took the opportunity to raise questions and discuss with the Lead Members and officers various aspects of the report. The Chair also permitted follow up questions from the Ysgol Dinas Bran students and non-Committee members. The Committee recognised the challenges faced in terms of balancing the needs of the service and school meal provision against climate and ecological priorities, not least the financial implications and necessary behaviour changes to meet those ambitions.

Main points of debate focused on the following –

- ideally stainless steel cutlery would be used but service provision was restricted by the available space, facilities and seating capacity within schools together with the length of lunchtime, and thousands of stainless steel utensils went missing each year with some being inappropriately disposed of; whilst a bamboo alternative was available there was a significant cost element attached in comparison with plastic cutlery with a mark-up of 10p – 15p for each utensil, and the cost increase having to be passed onto the customer
- it was hoped that the Council could do more in future to work together with schools to improve behaviours to ensure all the material produced from school meals was recycled and to address the problem of littering
- the current catering model focused on a whole school approach and therefore a change in one school had a financial impact on all other schools, for example if the selling of drinks was stopped in one school, the budget deficit as a result of that action would need to be absorbed equally across all schools and therefore all schools would need to agree to such an approach
- it had been hoped that the drinks trial at YGC would have proved successful and subsequently rolled out across all secondary schools but unfortunately that had not been the case with other problems created as a result
- assurances were provided that there was an appetite in all schools to try and address the issue of single use plastics and carbon reduction and whilst progress had been made by the service in areas such as packaging and disposal, in reality the challenges in schools were proving difficult to overcome, and the financial implications of those changes difficult to surmount
- there was some debate on the national picture, given the wider global issue of climate change, and whether the Council should look to the Welsh Government to work with local authorities across Wales and provide the necessary funding to

effect a step change, particularly given the financial challenges already facing local government and pressures across schools and other service areas. The Chair proposed an approach to the Welsh Government as a way forward

- the majority of schools staggered dining times and as a result of Covid-19 had also used other areas of the school in addition to the canteen which proved continually challenging
- a refundable deposit for reusable cutlery and drinks containers had been disregarded given the associated administration arising from that process and the potential cross contamination from drinks containers
- some schools did not allow cans and switching from single use plastic containers to cans was still not ideal given that cans were another form of single use container; erecting signage to deter littering etc. did not necessarily stop it
- explained the need to comply with Welsh Government guidance on nutrition and food, and the lack of facilities and counter space in schools to accommodate self-vending together with cross contamination issues arising from reusable containers, and confirmed there had been no difference to income generated from drink sales as a result of school water fountains not being in use
- research had concluded that priorities for catering managers looking to reduce carbon emissions should be switching to low carbon waste disposal methods and reducing the amount of red meat in menus – the latter would require a political discussion as it would have significant implications for the county
- provided assurances that steps had been taken and progress made in reducing single-use plastics and it was agreed that small changes and incremental change could collectively make a significant difference
- the current service model was a whole system approach and treated all schools equally regardless of size, if Ysgol Dinas Bran wished to take a different approach and was prepared to fund the budget gap, it was entitled to do so and the Council would support the school in those endeavours as best it could.

Councillor Graham Timms had been disappointed to hear the Committee's response to look to the Welsh Government and instead felt that the Council should be addressing the issue. He asked whether any work had been carried out to develop and cost a service model which would eradicate single use plastics and reduce carbon which the Council could then fund and implement together with work to educate children in best behaviours. Councillor Hilditch-Roberts cautioned against formulating a service plan at this stage given that the implications arising from the future requirement for the provision of free school meals to all primary pupils was as yet unknown, and he had caveated the report as the current situation which was subject to future uncertainties including potential restructure and investment. The Ysgol Dinas Bran students also recognised the financial reality of the situation but highlighted that climate change was also a reality which need to be addressed. The Chair suggested that the Committee's recommendations to seek support from the Welsh Government could also include the YGC drinks trial as an illustrative example of the difficulties faced, and suggested that Ysgol Dinas Bran may also wish to contact the Welsh Government directly to express their disappointment regarding the lack of funding to progress matters.

Whilst there was no current solution to address the issues raised, the Head of Service confirmed the commitment to continue that work. In light of the new requirements for free school meal provision the service needed to prioritise its resources on delivering

that work over the next eighteen months, and whilst it may take longer to achieve those service goals in reducing carbon and single use plastics, assurances were provided that all were committed to resolving the issue. In bringing the debate to a close the Chair reaffirmed his proposal, seconded by Councillor Ellie Chard and upon being put to the vote the Committee –

**RESOLVED** *that subject to the above comments, concerns and observations to request that the Cabinet on behalf of the Council write to the Welsh Government seeking it to –*

- (a) work with local authorities across Wales in a bid to reduce and eradicate the practice of using single use plastics and non-recyclable goods in the supply, preparation and serving of school meals, and*
- (b) provide sufficient financial resources to all local authorities to enable them to realise the above objectives, facilitate carbon reduction measures within their School Catering Services whilst securing the delivery of a sustainable school meals service.*

The Chair thanked the students from Ysgol Dinas Bran for their input and challenging questions and also to all members for their contribution to debate, with special mention to Councillor Graham Timms, and to officers for bringing the report and answering questions thereon.