

REPORT TO: Corporate Policy & Performance Board

DATE: 3rd September 2024

REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director Environment & Regeneration

PORTFOLIO: Corporate Services

SUBJECT: School Meals Service – Service Closure

WARD(S) Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To provide Members with an update on the current status regarding the cessation of the school meals service provided by Halton Borough Council.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That:

- 1) The current position regarding the withdrawal from the provision of school meals be noted.
- 2) The actions required to achieve the deadline of 31 March 2025 be noted

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 BACKGROUND

The decision to cease the provision of the school meals service was agreed in February 2023. The decision was to allow up to two financial years for schools to either procure an alternative catering provider or bring the service in house. The deadline for all schools was set at 31 March 2025.

3.2 The Director for Community & Greenspace briefed all school meals service employees which included representatives from Halton Borough Council Employee Relations, Unison and GMB on 15th February 2023.

3.3 Two catering providers expressed an interest in approaching Halton schools regarding their catering services early April 2024. The school meals management invited all schools effected to two open days consisting of a presentation, sample meals and an open question and answer forum with the two providers.

3.4 A Department of Education (DofE) training session was offered to

all existing schools, both online and in person which was facilitated by Wade Deacon. The DfE has a department that deals specifically in the procurement of non-teaching expenditure; they offered to assist all Halton schools with a free catering procurement package. To date, several schools have engaged with the DfE and utilised this offer.

3.5 **CURRENT POSITON**

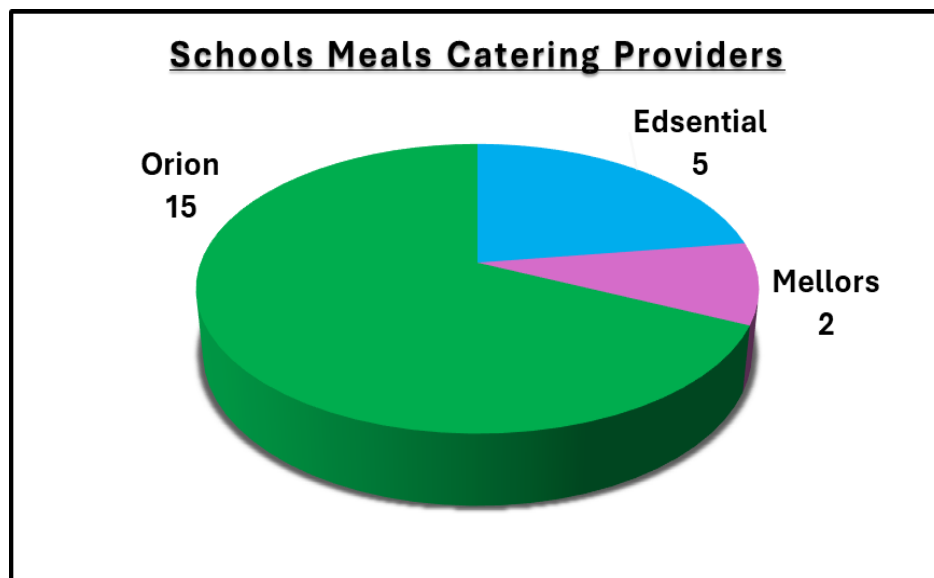
The number of schools that have transferred arrangements to date is lower than anticipated. The Council's school meals service continues to provide catering to 27 of the 47 schools that started the process on the 1 April 2023, this equates to 55% of the total schools.

3.6 A further 14 schools have given notice to terminate or with provisional leave dates of before 1 January 2025.

3.7 This will leave 13 schools to confirm new catering arrangements by 31st March 2025.

3.8 Those that have progressed alternative arrangements have engaged three different providers current analysis of catering providers is: -

- Orian Solutions (15)
- Edsential Catering Services (5)
- Mellors Catering Solutions (2)



3.9 The above chart includes two of those at notice of leaving position who have advised of their provider, further reports will provide clarification on providers for all schools.

3.10 ACTIONS REQUIRED

The 13 schools that have not confirmed their new catering provider, or termination date will be actively engaged from school return in September 2024 by the school meals management team to establish their approaches and timescales with ongoing input from the team to achieve the transfer date.

3.11 The Director of Community and Greenspace will be briefed regularly on their progress.

3.12 Any school that has not provided a transfer date by 1 October 2024 will receive a termination letter from Halton Borough Council, effective from 31 March 2025.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are no significant policy implications arising from the above.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The school meals service currently operates at a £500k deficit budget, failure to terminate the service by 31 March 2025 would result in a percentage of this burden moving into future financial years.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

The school meal service offer promotes healthy nutritional choices from a young age to support self-decision making, self-responsibility and independence.

6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy

The cessation of this being provided as a direct Council service has brought alternative providers into Halton and wider offers such as holiday activities had developed with some of the providers.

The service also provides local employment opportunities, the workforce are protected by TUPE transfer arrangements with new providers.

6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families

The school meals service impacts children's nutrition: the schools are well placed to work directly with providers to ensure an appropriate menu offer responding to their pupil needs.

6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need

All children in Reception Class, Year 1 and Year 2 are entitled to receive a free school meal. Under the universal free school meal entitlement, parents and carers are encouraged to apply for free school meals as each child

eligible for a free school meal based upon parental income attracts a “Pupil Premium” for the school which is provided by Central Government providing funding to the schools.

6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future

The service has a long-established approach around reducing and managing food wastage which contributes to the Council’s climate change approach.

6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community

The provision is essential to schools and their pupils, Halton’s young residents. The nutritional value and food offer directly impacts health and wellbeing outcomes for pupils into the longer term.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 There is managed risk, Management are supporting the schools to ensure all remaining schools have their arrangements in place with new providers with staff transferred by the effective date

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 The service is a universal offer and accommodates faith or cultural requirements.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None identified.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

10.1 None under the meaning of the act.