

West Lothian pupils suggest school dinner menus

A school dinner menu suggested by pupils shows how far we have travelled in West Lothian from the days of dessert branded “squashed fly” and custard with a skin on.

Jamie Fisher, the head of facilities and support services in the council told councillors that almost 3,000 pupils responded to a survey on what they would like to see on the menu and – within limitations – they got it.

Chairing a meeting of the Performance Committee, Councillor Peter Heggie said: “That must have been an interesting journey.

A report to the Performance Committee detailed: “the service developed a consultation for school pupils which included pupil focus groups, to empower the pupils to have a voice in the design of the school menus.

“As a result of this consultation juice cans have been reintroduced to school catering and meal deals have been introduced.”

Pupils are offered a “Grab and Go” meal deal menu featuring sandwich baguette combinations, hotdog and chips, baked potatoes and pasta, as well as a range of sweets, diet cans of juice, water or milk and a piece of fruit.

They can be pre- ordered and paid for on an app.

Mr Fisher said the improvements had also evolved different ways to pay for the meals which cost up to £2.93 daily. He added: "The primary reason for the cashless catering is to maintain anonymity for those who are entitled to free school meals, but it also takes away the manual process of handling lots of cash."

Further improvements come in after the Easter holidays when pupils will be able to pay for meals using digital wallets on their phones and QR codes.

In addition to the Grab and Go there is also a rota of set menus including a choice of main meals, including vegetarian dishes as well as stalwarts like steak pie, chicken casseroles and curries with fruit and yoghurt joining apple crumble and custard.

Veteran councillor Carl John said the new menus represented a world of difference to his experiences of "leftover gruel" school dinners in the 1950s.

Changes to the way schools' dinners are now made and delivered, as well as standardised menus across the schools' estate have saved almost £150,000.

A West Lothian Council spokesperson said: "We have been working to improve our school meals service to better meet the needs of our young people.

"The council is legally required to deliver a nutritionally balanced menu to students, and we have undertaken a menu engagement survey, which involved 2,800 pupils and a focus group at every high school in West Lothian, to assist in shaping school menus going forward.

"Whilst we are unable to meet every request, their input as customers has been invaluable to the menu development.

"We currently operate a cashless system in all our secondary

schools, which helps deliver a more efficient service and remove any stigma for pupils who receive free school meals. West Lothian Council was one of the first councils to introduce cashless catering at St Margaret's Academy in 1995 and cashless systems are in place across the school estate.

"We are now looking to improve the service further with the use of QR codes which will enable pupils to use their digital wallets on mobile phones to enable payments. This provides further choice and can also help avoid delays with lost cashless dining cards.

"To date we have also managed to achieve £144,000 of savings through more efficient ways of delivering meals from our larger production kitchens to local dining centres."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter