



Briefing 16-56 December 2016

Meals on Wheels Survey 2016

In collaboration with the National Association of Care Caterers (NACC), APSE carried out a survey of meals on wheels and other community meals services across the UK during September and October 2016. The results are summarised below:

Key findings:

- Less than 50% of local authorities now actively offer a meals on wheels service
- Prices have increased an average of 19% over the last 2 years to £4.30 per meal
- Around half of providers offer additional services include wellbeing checks and blankets

Introduction

APSE conducted a survey of UK Upper Tier Authorities during September and October 2016. We asked a series of questions in relation to their provision of community meals ('meals on wheels'). The survey repeats an earlier survey in 2014 allowing trend information to be determined.

For the first time, less than 50% of the UK's local authorities now offer a 'meals on wheels' type service. Of these many purport to offer a service, but contracts amount to little more than an agreement with a preferred supplier and are at zero cost to the council budget. A significant number of councils provide no more than a list of suppliers, signposting the elderly to external providers including supermarket home delivery services.

Private sector providers have largely filled the gap where a council has withdrawn from the service, although the meals are usually at a comparatively higher price. As subsidies dwindle, prices have risen on average around 10% per year to cover the shortfall. Although not captured by this survey, increasing prices are likely to further dampen demand and the numbers using the service.

The Local Authority (LA) models identified might be summarised as following:

- LA prepare and distribute
- LA buy and distribute
- LA tender and subsidise
- LA tender and service is standalone
- LA signpost only

Results

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) carried out a survey of meals on wheels and other community meals services across the UK during September and October 2016

The survey was intended to determine the arrangements for the delivery of community meals, the related costs and the nature of the service offered.

Country	Region	Meal Cost Average	MOW Service	Country Average
England	East of England	£ 4.97	64%	
	East Midlands	£ 5.59	50%	
	London	£ 4.50	59%	
	North East	£ 4.56	25%	
	North West	£ 4.25	17%	
	South East	£ 4.22	33%	
	South West	£ 4.43	53%	
	West Midlands	£ 4.61	53%	
	Yorkshire & The Humber	£ 4.82	44%	£ 4.85
Northern Ireland			100%	£ 1.90
Scotland			75%	£ 3.24
Wales			50%	£ 4.48
UK			48%	£ 4.30

In 2014, 66% of local authorities offered a 'meals on wheels' service, either directly or via an external contract. By 2016 our findings show this had significantly dropped to 48%. The North West of England is the least engaged, closely followed by the North East. Northern Ireland (where the service is provided under contract to the Health & Social Care Trusts) notionally provides a 100% service, however meal numbers vary widely and eligibility criteria has been tightened.

Of those councils who remain active, the council's subsidy against the cost has been further eroded and many have stated that they are expected to be cost neutral within 2 years.

With so many authorities, exiting the market, the basket of prices provides a less accurate comparison, however across the UK there has been a 19% increase in price to the recipient over the past 2 years.

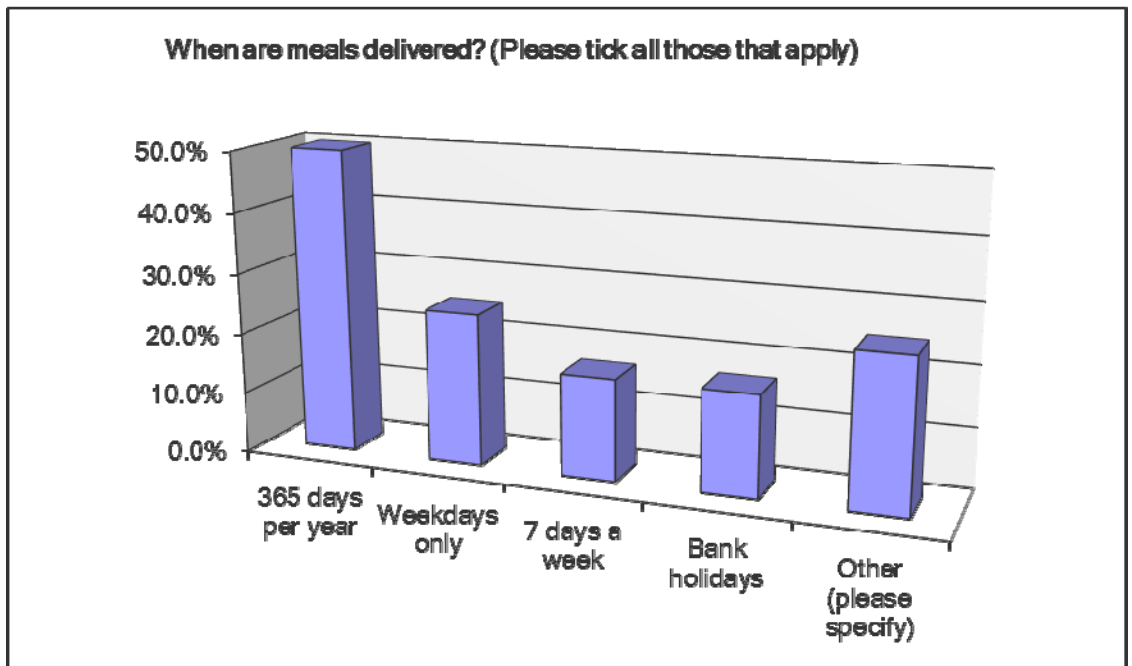
Scotland has contained the rise to 10% over the same period and Northern Ireland has seen the largest rise although still subsidised and the lowest in the UK.

Country	2 year Price increase
England	23%
Northern Ireland	27%
Scotland	10%
Wales	19%
UK	19%

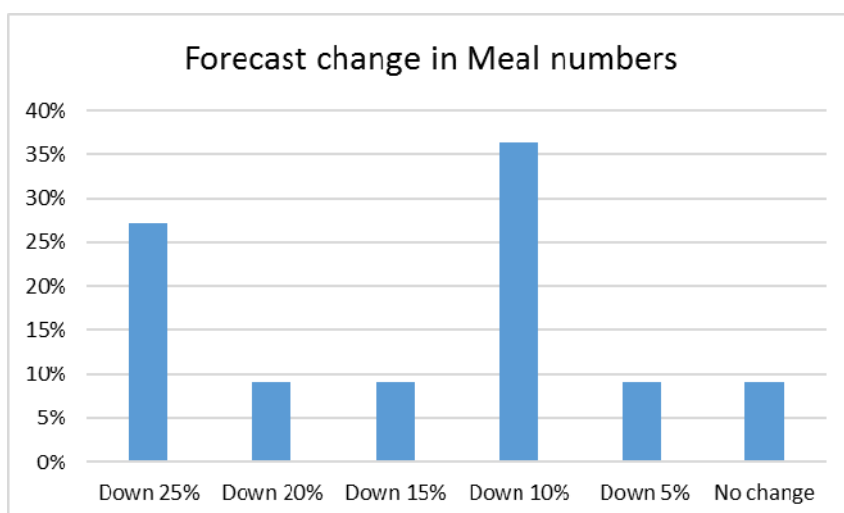
The average price for a two-course lunchtime meal was £4.30, with England being the highest averaging £4.85 and Northern Ireland the lowest at £1.90.

Whilst the majority produce and deliver their own meals, a growing number use their own transportation to deliver meals provided by an external supplier. Telephone sampling uncovered instances of authorities working closely with charities who use volunteers to deliver the meals and keep down the cost to the end consumer.

Service efficiencies have resulted in only half of respondents reported that they still operate a 365 day per year delivery service, whilst 25% only deliver on weekdays. The remainder mainly operate a 7 day per week service excluding bank holidays



We asked how providers estimated the number of meals to change over the next 12 months. Whilst 9% anticipated no change, the remainder saw further reductions with 27% estimating there to be at least a 25% reduction. This contrasts markedly with 2014 where sentiment was more positive. Then 23% saw no change, 26% saw some increase and the majority (51%) forecast a decrease.



An additional question this year concerned the effect of the recent Brexit vote of confidence. The sample preceded the devaluation of the pound, however 89% said they were unsure it would make any difference

Of those providing a service 67% provide an element of menu choice

Where the local authority provides the service, hot meals are mainly regenerated (58.3%) although 50% also fresh cook too. 6.7% offer a frozen service in addition. Most contracted services favour delivery of frozen meals.

Of those delivering meals, 41.7% also offer a tea-time meal at an average price of £2.51

Around half of providers offer additional services include wellbeing checks and blankets. Some authorities provide medicine prompting and slippers. A small number offer handyman services, warm drinks and shopping.

Over 80% of councils who provide a service themselves continue to part subsidise that service, although there are wide variances in that subsidy and it has been reduced substantially since 2014

There is a large range in the number of meals produced per year by each Council although the median figure of around 60,000 is close to that found in 2014 and perhaps indicates the lower limit for a service to remain viable. This equates to between 150 and 175 lunch-time meals per day.

Pricing decisions remain the preserve of councillors with 58.3% saying that it rested with the elected members.

APSE Comment

Meals on Wheels has undoubtedly become a victim of the squeeze on council budgets and rising demands for social care. However it is rarely purely a service that delivers meals alone and often acts as a vital link to ensure the continued wellbeing of the elderly in their own homes. The removal of the service may therefore prove to be a false economy if those same people end up within an NHS hospital at a cost vastly disproportionate to that of providing

meals on wheels. Whilst APSE recognise the pressure for savings, we suggest that the service is viewed in this wider context and part of the overall social care offer

Rob Bailey

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