



ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



School Meals

Tuesday, 22 February 2005

Committee Room 10, House of Commons

CHAIRMAN: Lord Rea

SPEAKERS: Paul Lincoln, Chief Executive, National Heart Forum

Joe Harvey, Caroline Walker Trust

Eileen Steinbock, Head of Dietetics, Brakes Ltd

Peter Roberts, Nutmeg UK

Introduction

1. Lord Rea welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited Paul Lincoln and Joe Harvey to make their presentation.

Paul Lincoln and Joe Harvey

Introduction

2. Paul Lincoln began by explaining that the National Heart Forum and the Caroline Walker Trust are currently working together on revising the school meals guidelines which have not been revised since 1992. The final guidelines should be published in April/May 2005.
3. The school meals industry is a high volume business. Around 3.5 million meals are consumed every day but the fact that circa 1/5 of children do not eat them as entitled, is cause for concern. In England, 17% of primary school children and 15% of secondary school children are eligible for free school meals. In addition to the problems surrounding children's diets, there are huge levels of inactivity amongst children.

Historical Context

4. The 1944 Education Act placed a statutory obligation on Local Education Authorities to provide meals for children. The 1980 Education Act revised the obligation meaning that there was no longer a fixed budget. Milk became discretionary and free school meals became the exception.

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In 1992, the Caroline Walker Trust guidelines were published and in 2001, school meal budgets were delegated to all secondary schools and minimum nutritional standards were re-introduced. In the past few years there have also been a number of announcements from the devolved administrations including in 2003 the Welsh Assembly's free breakfasts for primary school children pledge [to be implemented by 2006]. In 2002, the Scottish Executive produced the whole school approach "Hungry for Success". In the past few weeks, the Department for Health has published "Choosing Health" and the Department for Education and Skills has recently produced "Raising the Standard". It is very good news that the involvement of Ofsted in school meals looks set to increase.

Nutrient Based Standards

5. There are a number of reasons why compulsory nutrient based standards are needed. A survey carried out jointly by the Food Standards Agency and the Department for Education and Skills in 2004 found that there is an inadequacy in food based standards. The impact and potential of health inequalities should also be considered. The consumption of fat, sugar and salt are heading in the wrong direction - salt consumption is 40% above recommended levels and fat is 20% too high. This issue is particularly important as studies show that a child's diet has a significant bearing on their attention and attainment at school.

CWT/NHF recommendations

6. The Caroline Walker Trust and National Heart Forum will be making a number of recommendations in various areas.
 - **Food policy** Mandatory nutrient based standards are needed; the school inspection process needs a framework within which it can operate; and a national minimum cost is needed and this should be subject to revision.
 - **Training and Support** Better training and support is needed for all involved. This includes school meal providers, governors and head teachers as well as teachers and support staff. Better resources are also needed including CD-Rom menu planning.
 - **Monitoring** A framework on nutrient based standards should be established and this should be included in school contracts. A school's annual report should reflect whether the school is meeting the needs of pupils; this area is the responsibility of the school's governors.
 - **Overall** A whole school approach is needed and it is hoped that every school will be required to have a food and nutrition policy. Speaking as an inspector, Joe Harvey said that he would like to see a framework and something against which schools can be measured.

Key Issues

7. The Government also needs to focus on infrastructure as some kitchens are in a terrible state and schools do not have a budget to spend on equipment. The upgrade of school equipment should be audited and selective. Catering staff should also be required to have a certain amount of training and specific accreditation. There is no set value for free school meals. It is a variable based on what a school thinks it can 'get away with'. A free school meal in a Birmingham secondary school was worth £1.50 in 1990 and that figure is still the same now. Delegated budgets impact heavily on small schools – the Government needs to take a closer look at delegated budgets in primary schools.

8. A significant proportion of students, when they first go to university, have no knowledge of how to cook and end up getting ill with food poisoning. For this very reason, cooking and basic food hygiene has to be re-introduced into the national curriculum. It is also a good time to think about establishing databases on the school meals service – it needs to be established where things are *now* so that progress can be properly measured. Ideally, fresh, unprocessed food which had been produced locally would be used.
9. At the very end of the talk, Paul Lincoln and Joe Harvey drew attention to the Support the Children's Food Bill campaign.



Eileen Steinbock

Introduction

10. Brakes supply food to caterers but do not actually provide the catering. The company's customers are the caterers – Brakes is therefore one step back from the customer. As the “food service supplier”, the company is one part of a group of interested parties of which the child and parent are most important. Brakes has a closer working relationship with the Food Standards Agency than with Defra, but on occasions, feels pulled in all directions.
11. When you consider that school meals are provided for just five days a week and there are long holidays over the course of a year, school meals provide only around 10% of a child's total diet. 14% of children are entitled to free school meals. Obviously children are entitled to spend their money outside school and the largest amount of money is spent on snacks like crisps.

Problems

12. There are a number of problems facing school meal providers. Not surprisingly, the top chefs are not keen to work in a community primary school so one of the main problems is that of low skills – many cooks lack training and the wages are low. Facilities are often poor, with old kitchen equipment and the fact that dining rooms are also used for purposes other than just eating, being two of the problems.

Money

13. 25 years ago, an average of 25p was spent per pupil – that figure has now risen to 45p. This can be broken down as follows: 15p main course protein item; 12p for dessert; and 18p for the rest. As Jamie Oliver says in his current series, it is not possible to provide a good meal for 37p. The

people who do produce good meals spend more. The cost is determined by the value of the free school meal and this varies across LEAs.

Standards

14. As there has been no consistent monitoring of meals standards over the years, it is not possible to say whether meals have got better or worse. As the school lunches regulations are still based on food groups and frequency, high fat foods are still allowed but more fruit and vegetables are encouraged. Consultation on new regulations has been announced for 2006. Scotland has implemented nutrient based standards.
15. In developing healthier food solutions, the following points have to be factored in: the need for convenience (school timetables and facilities' constraints); the development of healthier products should play to the tastes of children to ensure maximum consumption; the need to reduce the fat, salt and sugar content of standard products; and the need for better advice and information for customers (i.e. schools and catering staff).
16. Brakes uses the 5-a-day logo on its packaging and is working with schools to show how to include fruit and vegetables in dishes. Desserts can be used more extensively to make use of fruit. Fruit bags containing chopped pieces of fruit are incredibly popular – kids will eat prepared apples but will reject them if they are confronted with a whole fruit.

Healthier Menus

17. It is no good taking items like burgers off the menu completely as that is the food-type kids want – the challenge is reducing the fat and salt content and this is something that the company has worked hard on. The company has a salt reduction programme that has resulted in over 10 tonnes per annum being taken out of products, including basics such as mashed potato and fish fingers. The new range has reduced children's intake of fat by over 3 tonnes so far this year and salt by nearly half a tonne.
18. The company employs qualified nutritionists and dieticians. It runs a nutrition helpline, lists the ingredients in its products and produces allergy lists. Special diets are also catered for.

Peter Roberts

Introduction and context

19. Before inviting Peter Roberts to make his presentation, Lord Rea asked whether a compendium exists containing examples of different types of good practice in providing good school meals at a realistic price. Joe Harvey replied that the Health Education Trust is doing just that.
20. In November 2002, the Scottish Expert Panel on School Meals published its report, *Hungry for Success: A Whole School Approach to School Meals in Scotland*. This was the expert panel's final report and set out their vision for a revitalised school meals service in Scotland. The report also presented a number of far-reaching recommendations connecting school meals with the curriculum as a key aspect of health education and health promotion. As a result, for the first time in the UK, national nutrient-based standards for school lunches are proposed and detailed mechanisms for monitoring these standards are set out. The nutritional standards for primary schools in Scotland were effective from December 2004.

21. Following the publication of the Expert Panel's report, Nutmeg UK approached the Scottish Executive and convinced it to use the menu planning and analysis software (H4S) designed by Nutmeg.
22. The program was given to the 32 local authority caterers in Scotland in July 2004. The effect of the introduction of quantified standards has been that since the program was introduced, 143 recipes in the database have been redesigned with lower salt content and 37 with lower saturated fat content at the request of local authorities, in order to be able to use them within the guidelines. The major food wholesalers have all introduced new lower fat and lower salt versions of many of their existing products, and a continuing programme of modification is under way.

H4S Program

23. H4S contains a food directory, which holds a range of over 1800 foods and menu items. Food Groups are shown on screen in 'tree directory' format. Each Food Group, as defined in School Meals Regulations, is expandable into sub-groups which contain menu items of both dishes and foods. For example, the *Fruit and Vegetables* food group would be split into *Fruit* and *Vegetables* as sub-groups and then into *Fresh*, *Cooked* and *Tinned Fruit* etc, as required.
24. Each food item or recipe has a unique name and a food record which contains:
 - nutrient data per 100gms cooked weight
 - ingredients with amounts
 - method of preparation
 - preparation time
 - cooking times
 - portion sizes for each age group
 - a flag denoting appropriateness of food for vegetarians
 - the name of the originator and the date of entry
 - cost per portion for each portion size
25. H4S has a system for creating combination dishes (for example, sandwiches, pizza base plus toppings, selections of vegetables and fruit or plated hot meals) using any food items in the Food Directory in portions as determined by the user. These dishes can be named and added to the appropriate sub-group on the Food Directory. The nutrient content of the new combination is automatically updated in the Food Directory. Menu items are entered into a menu grid from the food directory via 'drag and drop'. The user is required to enter the number of servings for each food and the portion size as it is selected. It is possible to review and update at any time. Menus can be linked together in a menu cycle of any length.
26. H4S provides an immediate analysis of the nutritional content of a completed menu and compares that with the recommended Nutritional Standards, which are included in the programme. H4S will also give a frequency check to highlight repetition of dishes in a menu cycle to ensure variety. Analyses are appropriate to age groups. The age group relevant to the menu is stored during data entry and used to select the appropriate portion sizes and the table of guidelines at the point of analysis.
27. H4S provides a simple visual representation, in colour-coded (red, yellow and green) bar chart form which will compare 13 nutrients by normalising all to 100% of the guidelines. The relation of the nutrient bars to the 100% target ensures that the user is clear as to the nutritional quality

of the analysed data set. The table can be exported to Excel and compared with other menus both within and outside the menu cycle.

28. The user can identify particular dishes which are contributing most to an imbalance of nutrients (either positively or negatively, e.g. high in saturated fat or low in iron) by clicking on the bar chart for that nutrient. The relevant dishes are then highlighted on the menu. The user can click on a highlighted item, and the program will automatically suggest suitable alternatives from the same Food Group, or, if required, from other Food Groups. Menus where substitutions have been made can be compared visually to the 'before' menu to get an immediate visual feedback on the impact of the substitution, including side effects on other nutrients (e.g. decreasing fat will also be likely to decrease energy intake).
29. The completed menu, with cataloguing information (dates, weeks, school etc), menu item information and analysis can be stored. Menus can be re-opened for further modification and analysis.
30. When the menu has been compiled, users can make an individual choice of a week's lunches from the menu and analyse that. They can then make substitutions, but only from the menu, not from the database. This feature could be used by children in school to learn about nutrition in direct relation to the food they were eating.

Question and Answer Session

31. **Charlie Powell, Sustain**, asked why pizza 'had' to be on the menu. **Eileen Steinbock** said that pizza is the most popular food in schools and is a good means of for giving children vegetables in a semi-disguised form. Brakes is developing its recipes and reducing the amount of salt and fat in its pizzas. **Ruth Smee, Sodexo**, agreed and said that her company is producing pizzas in-house and uses low fat cheese, fresh tomatoes and other vegetables. **Joe Harvey** said that, somewhat to his surprise, he finds himself continually supporting manufacturers for their creativity: pizzas are a terrific vehicle for getting children to eat vegetables.
32. Asked by **Michelle Smyth, Consumers Association**, whether the salt reduction rates were in line with FSA recommendations, **Eileen Steinbock** said they were.
33. **Alan Long, VEGA Research**, commented on the absence of breakfast at schools as a "big omission". He also called for hospital style matrons in schools.
34. **Michael Nelson, King's College, London**, said that there is a notion of balance coming across and commented that everyone seems to be obsessed with choice at the moment. Food consumption patterns need to be revolutionised. **Eileen Steinbock** said that this was a tricky problem as children today expect choice.
35. **Mary Whiting** said that changes need to be carried out gradually - like France or Italy. In French schools, the children have four courses of which one is cheese; this helps the children to learn and taste their national cheeses and therefore feeds into history and culture.
36. Bringing the meeting to a close, **Lord Rea** thanked everyone and reminded members that there were two meetings coming up in March. On 8 March, the Forum would be hearing from Melanie Johnson MP, Public Health Minister, about the delivery of the Public Health White Paper. On 22 March, the Forum would be holding a half day conference entitled "Expanding Europe: eat, drink and be healthy?". Full details of both meetings have been circulated to all members.