



ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



Children's food, including school meals and cooking in schools

5-6.30pm, Tuesday 20 February 2007

Committee Room 16, House of Commons

Lord Rea welcomed members and introduced the guest speakers Prue Leith, the new Chair of the School Food Trust; Adam Starkey, the Managing Director of Green Gourmet; and Sara Jayne Stanes, the Director of the Academy of Culinary Arts.

Prue Leith

Prue Leith (PL) said that we should not need a School Food Trust (SFT), but for twenty years successive Governments and schools have degraded the school meals services. As a result we are now a food ignorant society in which parents, teachers and children need to learn about food and cooking.

PL commended Jamie Oliver for succeeding in raising "over night" issues on which many other people have been campaigning for a generation.

PL drew attention to the decline in school meal take-up as a result of the introduction of new, healthier school meals and said she regarded this as a serious challenge. She said we need to encourage schools to adhere to the new standards. They should be providing good quality school meals and reinforcing them with positive messages about healthy eating so that take-up of school meals increases rapidly.

The Soil Association has been working for three years on a programme called "Food for Life", which encourages schools to buy food locally; to visit farms; to allow pupils to grow food on the school premises; and which teaches school dinner ladies to cook.

PL had been at a conference on 19 February for school dinner ladies and she reported positive messages from schools based in Swindon. At one primary school, Leatherbridge, the take-up of school meals had increased from 40 a day to 262 in one week. Another school, Lorne, used to serve 83 pre-cooked meals a day at lunch and they are now serving 250 school meals a day. A third school, King William, had served school meals to 10 of its 140 pupils, after two weeks of the new school meals that figure had risen to 80. The key to success in achieving these positive results was a whole school approach to food.

The SFT's mission is not limited to improving the nutritional quality of school meals and increasing the take-up of school meals. It would like school meals to be delicious so as to inspire a love of healthy food among children.

PL drew attention to the work of Baroness Jones, the Deputy Chairman of the SFT, in helping to draw up the detailed standards and food-based regulations for school meals. The SFT is now working on new regulations which will be more complex and challenging for cooks because they will be nutrient-based. The nutrient-based regulations will set monthly targets for school meals to provide a degree of flexibility and allow for the incorporation of "treats".

Chairman: Lord Rea
Vice-Chairmen: Dr Ian Gibson MP
& Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Damer
Secretary: The Earl Baldwin of Bewdley
Treasurer: Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen

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PL said that the SFT also has a “marketing” role – it can encourage improvements in standards by drawing attention to best practice. PL identified four key audiences for the SFT: children, parents, cooks and teachers.

Parents can be a difficult audience to reach, but only 17% of children’s food is consumed in schools, so parents are an essential audience for the SFT. The SFT will run cooking clubs for children in schools, but the children will have to bring their parents to the workshops. The SFT will pay for club “organisers” to be trained and they will lead the informal training of the children and parents. The aim is to enable cooking club members to reach a standard where they could, for example, provide a smoothie bar at their school’s sports day.

So far most of the SFT’s attention has been spent on school cooks, whose morale has been undermined by negative campaigning about the school meals service, and who face a stiff challenge for school resources. The SFT is running a series of conferences for school cooks and will provide regional training centres providing short courses for them. PL welcomed the fact that school cooks should benefit from the money (unfortunately not ring-fenced) now being made available by Government to improve school meals.

Teachers are another key audience for the SFT. The SFT will have the support of the “big stick” provided by Ofsted, which will now include school food as part of its inspection regime. The SFT has encouraged Ofsted to look at the environment in which school food is provided as well as the food itself. The SFT would like schools to provide an environment for school food consumption which is attractive to children so as to encourage the take-up of school meals.

Questions

Dr Ian Gibson asked if there was any difference between boys and girls in their attitude to food. **PL** said that both boys and girls were interested in the “coolness” of what they are eating. Boys like “café-style” food and are worried about their spots, whereas girls are more willing to think about the health aspects of their food and are more worried about their weight. However, there are variations: skinny boys may want to “pump up” their bodies. PL noted that body image is a great concern for many young people. She suggested one response to this is to encourage children to love food, but the SFT’s core mission is to encourage all children to eat fresh, healthy food.

Adam Starkey

Lord Rea introduced Adam Starkey, the founder and Managing Director of Green Gourmet. Adam Starkey (AS) launched the company straight from university, with a grant from the Prince’s Trust. AS and his team work closely with more than 100 local authorities around Britain to help them to meet the challenges of the new School Food Trust rules on school meals. AS is also a member of the Local Authorities Caterers’ Association (LACA), which supplies food for some two-thirds of the school food population.

AS explained that he had started Green Gourmet twenty years ago when he had a passion for vegetarian food and he remains passionate about good quality food.

AS has been attending a series of regional seminars for school caterers and he said he wanted to give FHF members their views on what the SFT is trying to do. School caterers are not clear what message lies behind the SFT rules on school meals. They are clear as to what the rules are, but not why they have been drawn up as they have been.

AS said school caterers are facing a number of serious challenges, not least the lack of support from head teachers. School caterers have told him that head teachers are reluctant to adhere to the new standards because they do not believe Ofsted will enforce them and, in any case, they do not anticipate serious penalties if they are seen to have failed them. Head teachers’ focus is on educational performance and the quality of school meals is a lower priority for them.

There are some 60,000 people involved in providing the school meals service. They used to be part of schools' "health and welfare" departments, now they are teamed with school cleaners in "school facilities" divisions and this has had a negative impact on their morale.

Many school caterers were dismayed by Jamie Oliver's campaign, but there was some truth in it, not least because schools were trying to provide meals for 35p.

School caterers are now under pressure because the falling take-up of school meals is leading to a loss of income and staff are being dismissed.

AS quoted an example in Devon, where a number of options for the future have been identified including, a school meals management service providing the meals, schools providing their own meals and a decision to close school kitchens rather than seek to meet the new SFT standards. One official estimated that a third of the school kitchens may close in the next few years.

AS said he had been told by school caterers that they are now at the "cheating" stage. For example, "mid-morning breaks" have been replaced by an "early lunch" at which cakes can be served as a pudding.

Green Gourmet provides a full range of foods to schools. It also provides recipes; a nutritional service because many schools lack expertise in this area; and temporary schools cooks to cover when staff are absent. AS's experience of school caterers is that many of them are highly motivated and trying hard. He tries to encourage them by drawing attention to positive developments, such as Masterfoods' decision to stop advertising Mars Bars to children under the age of 12. He believes we should value the people who work in the school meals service – the people are not the problem, they are the solution. However, we need to deliver encouraging messages to head teachers, Local Authorities, school caterers and their assistants.

AS added a warning note that promoting best practice can be difficult to achieve. He was aware of one school, which had succeeded in reducing waste and providing the meals children wanted to eat by allowing the children to select colour coded wristbands at registration to indicate their preferred meal. However, when this effective strategy was promoted to other schools in the Southampton area it was rejected by them on various grounds - including a wish to deter the wearing of wristbands in one school.

Sara Jayne Stanes

Lord Rea introduced Sara Jayne Stanes, the Director of the Academy of Culinary Arts, Britain's leading association of head chefs and restaurant managers whose principal aims are raising the standard of food, cooking and eating through education and training. Sara is also a Trustee of the Academy's "Adopt A School Trust" and the author of "Chocolate the Definitive Guide", the story of chocolate from pod to palate.

Sara explained that the "Adopt a School" (AAS) programme was established because in the early 1990s, chefs complained about the lack of suitably qualified trainees. Sara and her colleagues had investigated this problem and found that school career advisers viewed the hospitality sector as a "last resort" and they recognised they needed to change attitudes in schools. She and her colleagues devised a programme aimed at primary school children, which taught them about ingredients, nutrition and the source of food. The aim of the sessions is to encourage children to consider food more closely; to understand about food provenance; and to learn basic food preparation skills. They involve children by asking them to identify and taste foods, teaching them about the way different parts of the tongue pick up the tastes: bitter, salt, sour and sweet.

The AAS now focuses more on healthy eating. In addition to the voluntary work of the Academicians themselves, they have a team of five chefs on staff covering five regions of the

country, but hope to cover the whole country in due course. At present they visit 300 schools and they have another 300 schools on their waiting list. Every year they reach between 12,000 and 15,000 school children.

The AAS does not attempt to change school food; they are trying to educate children about food. Over the last two or three generations eating habits have changed dramatically in the UK, not least because children are not learning how to cook from their parents and grand-parents. The AAS finds that many parents are not interested in what their children are eating.

The AAS believes it is vital to restore cooking to the mainstream school curriculum and that will also involve teaching teachers about food.

The AAS Trust is a registered charity whose work is made possible by the support of their sponsors: the Worshipful Company of Cooks, the Food Standards Agency, the Hilton Foundation, the Edge Foundation, the Savoy Educational Trust and Birmingham City Council.

Lord Rea thanked the speakers and noted that the UK might learn something from Finland, where school meal take-up is virtually 100% because school children do not leave the school premises during the day and the food is good and popular.

Questions

Chris Wermann of Kelloggs expressed an interest in the whole school day approach to food and asked, against the background of children spending longer hours at school, what the process is for extending the range of nutritious snacks in schools. **PL** said the SFT was concentrating on trying to change children's food culture from one which involved "snacking" throughout the day to one which encouraged them to eat proper meals. However, the SFT recognises that many children do not eat breakfast, so the SFT does allow schools to provide some snacks, such as nuts and seeds, in school vending machines. **AS** said many school caterers did not like providing breakfast because of the low profit margins involved. **Baroness Jones (MJ), the Deputy Chair of the SFT**, said that the SFT are keen to work with food manufacturers to find new products that could be provided in schools. The SFT had convened a meeting with a range of food manufacturers with the Minister to talk about food that might be included in school vending machines, what children would eat, how nutritious snacks could be made more attractive to children. For example, she felt the tactic of giving away free samples, so that products became familiar to children would encourage them at a later stage to buy them from vending machines.

MJ said progress so far has been patchy and the SFT wants to undertake research with the FSA about food affects behaviour. They believe they can secure a dramatic increase in support for healthy school food if they can demonstrate to teachers that more healthy food consumption by children will lead to better behaviour in the classroom.

PL said that when the food based guidelines had been introduced, the SFT had not anticipated that they would lead to the exclusion of, for example, nutritious, hand-prepared sausages as well as ready made meals. They expect the introduction of nutrient-based guidelines to allow for greater flexibility in the provision of school meals.

Lucy Daniels (LD) of the British Dietetic Association welcomed the SFT's drive to improve school meals, but expressed concern that achieving the SFT's nutrient-based standards was virtually impossible given school budgets. She was critical, for example, of the 6mg of iron target set for school lunches. She acknowledged the targets were well-intended, but said they were too strict. She asked whether some flexibility might be introduced so that snacks consumed later in the day, for example, between school lessons and sports sessions could include more calories. **PL** agreed that the standards were high and explained that in order to draft legislation the standards had to be precise. She invited LD to write to her setting out her concerns. **Lord Rea** asked LD to confirm that she thought the Caroline Walker Trust (CWT) recommendations were unachievable and she said yes.

Eileen Steinbock (ES) of Brakes said she had been a member of the Caterers Group on the School Meals Panel and from an early stage they had flagged up their concern that the iron targets would be difficult to achieve. Like LD she had never seen the analysis upon which the CWT recommendations had been based and she would like to see it. **ES** said that beef burgers, which were popular with children, could enable the iron targets to be met, but it had been taken off many school menus since the foot and mouth crisis. She thought the only realistic way to achieve the nutritional targets would be to fortify school meals. She did not think the flexibility introduced by setting the targets on a monthly basis would help because of the requirement to serve fish. **ES** said in Scotland the target for school lunches is 30% of nutrients, recognising that part of the target will be achieved at breakfast, supper and through snacks. She thought this target was realistic.

PL observed that if caterers have to work to very precise recipes and menus planned a month in advance there was a risk of stifling innovation.

Lord Rea asked for clarification that the 40% target had been set in England in order to help children in danger of nutrient-deficiencies because, for example, they do not eat breakfast and **ES** confirmed that was correct.

Lindsey Bagley, Institute of Food Science and Technology said she had a son who had been taught food technology by teachers without relevant qualifications. She believed, however, that the teaching of such subjects would enable children to teach their parents about food. **Lord Rea** referred to Professor David Morley, who after teaching children in hospitals and clinics about hygiene and nutrition then found that they passed this information on to parents and siblings. This scheme became known as the “child-to-child” programme.

PL said that at present students could complete a food technology course without ever actually cooking, but this would change under the new curriculum. **PL** would like to see the introduction of broader food education, which would include such issues as sustainability.

Shirlee Posner of The Design and Technology Association said that cooking could be taught under Design and Technology courses, it was simply a matter of interpretation of the curriculum. She argued there were other impediments, for example, teachers were concerned that some families could not afford to provide children with the ingredients for a cooking lesson. **SP** has just finished writing materials for the “Active Kids Get Cooking” programme and said there is a lot of good work in schools on cooking and food, but teachers need more support. **PL** agreed that schools should provide the ingredients for cooking lessons, in the same way that they provided the chemicals for chemistry lessons and sports equipment for PE. She added that resources should be provided to ensure that there was also a sensible staff-teacher ratio - in her own schools, which taught adults, it was 1:8.

Stephanie Valentine of the British Nutrition Foundation said that teachers were a valuable and under-rated resource and she drew attention to a campaign to recruit more specialised food teachers.

Lord Rea thanked the members for contributing to a healthy exchange of views and brought the meeting to a close.