



ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



School food – an update

4-5.30pm, Tuesday 8 July 2008

Committee Room 17, House of Commons

Minutes

Introduction

Lord Rea welcomed members to the meetings. He noted the Forum has been revising the subject of school food regularly for some 20 years because we have always thought it is of the greatest importance. It is as important now as ever, with progress being made since the School Food Trust was set up in 2001. It works with the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to improve school in our foods. Lord Rea welcomed the speakers, the Schools Minister, Kevin Brennan, and the Chief Executive of the Schools Food Trust, Judy Hargadon.

Kevin Brennan, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children, Young People and Families

The Foresight Report on Obesity has made the Government think further, very carefully, about our children. If we continue living as we do, a quarter of our children will be obese and the figures will be worse for adults, with more obese men than women. The social and economic consequences of that would be astronomical, so we have to plan to manage that risk.

The Foresight Report looked at the issue from a scientific viewpoint and it found that we are programmed in an evolutionary sense to consume, but modern, less active, lifestyles in combination with energy dense foods are resulting in increasing obesity. We have to address both sides of this equation: the input, food, and the output, activity. It will require a complex, comprehensive and coordinated approach.

The DCSF was deliberately set up so we do not focus just on education, but on children and families as well as schools, and we are working in partnership with the Department of Health on children's health and well-being. Our joint report, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives*, seeks to ensure that our children become more active and eat more healthily.

Being more active is an effort because we have defined progress as reducing hard physical labour. For example, modern washing machines have replaced washing mangles. Daily life involved more physical activity years ago, but machines have made life less active and more convenient. Years ago people spent a lot of time walking, but this is no longer the case. People now go to gyms in order to take exercise. It is difficult, sometimes, to find stairs instead of using lifts. Our physical environment has designed out activity and we need to address this. The Government has, for example, invested £230m in play facilities and we have a new play strategy. A quiet revolution has been going on in school sport. 86% of pupils now take part in 2 hours of sport per week, compared with 27% in 2002, and we are trying to ensure that every child does 5 hours of sport per week in and out of school.

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

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On the energy input side of the equation, we are trying to improve school food. I approach this from a personal viewpoint because my mother was a school dinner lady. They used to get fresh ingredients and cook them. Later this was abandoned in many schools and it became normal for children to be fed unhealthy, poor quality, processed food at lunch. That is unacceptable. I believe we have a moral responsibility to ensure that if we are serving food to children in school, it is healthy food.

We face a huge challenge to turn around the fact that a whole generation of children has been given unhealthy food at school. The School Food Trust has only been in place for a few years and we are trying to overcome two decades of neglect of school food. We are investing to improve facilities as well as trying to put more money into ingredients – and there will be announcements very shortly from the School Food Trust and the Local Authority Caterers Association on school meals take-up. We also want to give catering staff better support and training. We are doing all this at a difficult time in terms of increasing food costs and increasing transport costs, so we are also trying to limit the affect of some of these trends, for example, by improving procurement policies.

We face a huge challenge because unhealthy eating has become ingrained in our culture and it will take time to overcome this, but we will continue to take positive action because is a vital issue. We need to change attitudes and behaviour and, while this is difficult, the School Food Trust Million Meals campaign is starting to make progress. Whole school food policies help, engaging parents and staff and improving the environment in which food is consumed. Staying on site policies also help. *The Observer* said that my suggestion that more schools should have “staying on site” policies for pupils under the age of 16 is Orwellian! I am happy to be described as Orwellian if necessary – though I do not think it is an accurate reflection of the issues that concerned Orwell - and I do not resile from my support for staying on site policies. I believe schools should seriously consider this as an option.

Progress is being made. More children have positive attitudes to school meals, but this is just a start. We need to make more links between school food and the rest of the curriculum so children understand where their food comes from and the benefits of a healthy diet.

We are introducing cooking lessons for Key Stage 3 pupils. When I visit schools, I always ask the children three questions. What is your favourite food? Can you cook? What would you cook for me for dinner tonight? In some of our most deprived areas, but where there is a strong ethnic mix, you get very rich answers to these questions. For example, one child’s favourite food might be a mango. In a different ethnic area the answer might be pizza. Food choices are not just a reflection of economic means, they can reflect lack of experience of good food and cooking.

Breakfast clubs are a good example of what can be offered and they can help set children up for the school day. Parents are an important influence. School food is also an issue for the food industry. I welcome the help and support we have received, and the initiatives which a number of companies are taking, and we would like to see more constructive partnerships between schools and businesses to help children learn about food and health.

This is a really important agenda. We are investing huge resources in a difficult climate. It is vital that we do more to promote healthy eating and one way we can do this is by giving children better food in schools.

Questions

Dr Ian Gibson MP asked Kevin Brennan to comment on the Prime Minister’s statement on food waste and asked if this applied to schools. **Kevin Brennan** said he did not have any figures with him about food waste in schools, but we do need as a society to look at the issue of food waste. We also need to look at how much of the good food that is given to children in schools is eaten. **Judy Hargadon** said food waste is an issue for schools and they are working on it, not least because it can help them to reduce costs.

Dr Ian Gibson asked how much of school work on allotments is concerned with food, rather than pond life and other issues. **Kevin Brennan** said that some schools, including several of the School Academies, have allotments. **Judy Hargadon** said there is a wide range of activity ranging from pots on windowsills to allotments. In the best examples, class work, lunch, farm visits and school gardens come together. However, the School Food Trust has not monitored this activity. **Joanna Collins** of the Food for Life Partnership said that schools growing their own food and using it in their school lunches had achieved improved take-up. One example, St Andrew's School in Shropshire, introduced raised beds from scratch and used them to grow leeks and potatoes which were used to make soup. Since they started using their own ingredients once a month, take up has increased from 50% to 65%. **Kevin Brennan** said that 9 Academies sponsored by Oasis have their own allotments and the food from them is used in their school catering. A lot of good work is taking place and it is not confined to Academies. One primary school in north London has used all its own organic food from the school allotment in its catering.

Judy Hargadon, Chief Executive, the School Food Trust

The School Food Trust was set up after Jamie Oliver's television series about food in schools. Initially we thought what was important was just lunch, but that early focus has widened to looking at all the food that is eaten in schools.

New regulations governing the food served to children in schools are being introduced in four stages. Food based standards were introduced first. These require, for example, a portion of fruit and vegetables to be served daily and stipulate that deep fried food should not be served more than twice a week. In the second stage, food based standards were extended to include all food in schools, not just lunch, so they now apply to vending machine and the mid morning break. As a result, schools cannot offer foods with added fat, salt and sugar. Finally, starting this September, nutrient based standards for lunch will be introduced to achieve the objective of balanced nutrition and developing healthy eating habits. These standards will be introduced in primary schools from this September and in secondary schools from September 2009. We have proved these standards are workable, but we need to engage with young people to make them work.

We want to use food in schools to help children develop healthy eating habits. Initially we met some resistance, but we are now making progress. We have monitored take-up rates because we do not want take-up to fall significantly because of the changes being introduced. We need to ensure that more and more children eat well. If a school is making sure its pupils eat a good lunch and they have a high take-up rate, they are succeeding. It is also really important that take-up is high for economic reasons: it makes the school food service more cost effective. Take-up percentages have been in the low 40s, and dipped into the high 30s in some schools after the introduction of food based standards, ideally we need to get it up to the 60s.

The School Food Trust has identified six barriers to better provision. We know children are happy to eat healthy foods but there are barriers to developing healthy eating habits. If their peers, parents, adults in schools and the celebrities they admire eat well, they will follow suit.

Without doubt leadership in schools helps enormously. If a school's leadership team is convinced that school food matters, the introduction of new standards is likely to be successful. Recognising the importance of leadership, the Trust set up the Million Meals campaign to work in this area.

The quality of school food matters. Children do not want to be fobbed off with poor food. The presentation of food and treating pupils as customers is as important as the quality of the food. We have therefore done a lot of work with school staff, through regular newsletters for catering staff and other initiatives to address these issues. The taste of the food and the quality of the environment in which it is eaten is important. Overcrowded dining rooms make eating in them

unattractive. We have produced a short report, *A Fresh Look at the School Meal Experience*¹, on the school meal experience to give schools tips on how to improve it.

Attitudes towards school food are important. We need to change the attitudes of young people, and of the role models around them, including the school leadership team and classroom teachers. We have undertaken lots of campaigns in this area. A recent example was a campaign surrounding the *Ratatouille* film to attract the attention of teachers, caterers and parents and to encourage positive attitudes. We also have a cooking club, *Let's Get Cooking*, to increase understanding of food and to encourage pupils and their parents to make better food choices.

"Food neophobia" is a barrier. It takes time to introduce new foods so that children become used to them. Schools can help children develop more healthy eating habits, but this cannot be achieved overnight.

Procurement is an important issue schools need to address, in terms of both sustainability and price. We are concerned about increasing food prices. Good school lunches are very good value for parents and we need to increase awareness of this. Healthier vending can be introduced and the money raised can be invested in catering services. We have produced a new report on this, *A Fresh Look at Vending in Schools*², to give schools advice on what works well.

Capacity is a problem in some schools. A lot of schools no longer have their own kitchens or the capacity to feed all their children in one area. When schools sign up to the Million Meals campaign they commit to improving their take-up rates. We also need to recognise that a lot of young people use their lunch break for other activities, so we are encouraging schools to develop healthy quick lunches.

The biggest challenge to improving the food eaten by children during the school day is other food available to them, including packed lunches and food bought near school. We now propose food options for packed lunches³ and if these were met, packed lunches would be no cheaper than school food. Local shops – identified in the aptly named, new report, *The School Fringe*, is an important challenge for pupils as consumers. I cannot give you the latest take-up figures for school lunches, but these will be announced on Thursday.

Questions

Sandra Gidley MP said she had been lobbied by the Food and Drink Federation which had argued that the nutrient based standards would be counter productive because they would encourage pupils to go off site to buy food from alternative sources. She had also seen children making use of chips shops near schools. The FDF argued for greater flexibility in the standards adopted to encourage pupils to stay on site and she asked if any qualitative research had been done on this issue. **Judy** said the Trust was working with many food manufacturers. She cited the example of one chip manufacturer which had reformulated its products so they met the required standards. The Trust wants to help children develop healthy eating habits, so they said chips should be served less often because they do not want children to think chips are a healthy option. Schools need to adapt a changing approach to ensure that the new standards work. The most successful secondary schools have adjusted their menus gradually and consulted their pupils on them. It is in manufacturers interests to reformulate their products and to develop new ones. There are good opportunities now for food manufacturers whose products meet the standards and the children being introduced to healthier food choices at school will be their future customers. **Lord Rea** said it was interesting and encouraging that some food manufacturers are reformulating their products to meet the new standards.

¹ See: http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/doc_item.asp?DocId=45&DocCatId=9

² See: http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/doc_item.asp?DocId=60&DocCatId=9

³ See: http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/UploadDocs/Contents/Documents/ticks&crosses_a4final.pdf

Adam Starkey of the Green Gourmet said that pubs and universities are asking for food that meets the nutrient based standards for schools so that the new standards are having a wider, positive effect.

Dr Paul Clayton noted that the nutrient based standards made specific recommendations in respect of iron, which he suggested was rather arbitrary, and he asked if the Trust was going to extend the range of specific requirements and require food fortification. **Judy Hargadon** said that with the exception of food that is required to be fortified by national legislation, the Trust takes the view that supplementation and the use of food fortification is not ideal. Food fortification could be used by particular schools in particular areas to meet special needs, but the Trust wants to encourage children to eat a healthy diet and develop healthy food habits. **Susan Jebb** of the MRC Human Nutrition Research Unit at Cambridge said that Paul Clayton was wrong to suggest there was any evidence of wholesale nutrient deficits or depletion and she did not accept there was a case for mass supplementation. **Maureen Strong** of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board expressed disappointment that the Trust had produced a series of iron rich recipes for school caterers but only two of them used meat. Most of them used obscure sources of iron, such as treacle, and given that iron is more readily absorbed from red meat she found the recommendations disappointing. **Judy** explained that the Trust had put a lot of work into providing advice on less obvious sources of iron to help schools meet the needs of vegetarians.

Jessica Mitchell of The Food Commission asked Judy to comment on the inspection regime that would enforce the new standards. She said she spent a lot of time at schools and often saw children eating, and schools selling, foods that would not meet the standards, such as pain au chocolat. She asked who would enforce the standards if Ofsted only goes in briefly and does not have the expertise to do so. **Judy** said it would take time for the standards to be met and everyone needs to recognise that we are in a period of transition. The Trust is working with Ofsted and briefing inspectors. It is also responding to queries from schools and providing a lot of information and guidance. Where it finds overt examples of schools deliberately flouting the standards it will act, but it is focussing on helping schools to meet the standards. There had been a lot of discussion about the definition of lunch. The Trust regards lunch as the meal eaten in the middle of the day. If food is sold at mid morning breaks to be consumed at lunch time, it counts as lunch and must meet the standards. The Trust appreciates that the use of swipe cards makes the pre-purchase of lunch possible, and that pupils pursue other activities at lunch time, but it is trying to encourage children to cut down on grazing and to sit down and eat lunch. **Lord Rea** said that policy does raise the issue of capacity – because long queues and a scrum at lunch tables will be a disincentive to sitting down to eat lunch. **Judy** agreed, but said it is a school specific issue. Some schools stagger the lunch break but not all schools can do this. The Trust is opposed to the condensing of the lunch break, which some thought might help improve pupil behaviour. If schools sign up to the Million Meals campaign, they commit to giving children the time and space for lunch. Some schools give children lunch in their own classroom at the end of the morning, with their teacher, and this is followed by a 30 minute break.

Joanna Collins of the Food for Life Partnership said the Partnership had urged Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, to adopt *Six Steps to Transform School Food Culture*,⁴ with the support of the Caroline Walker Trust, the Local Authority Caterers Association and Suatin They welcomed the recent Cabinet Office report which recognised the need for an integrated approach to policy. **Judy** said she could not speak for the Government, but the Trust welcomes the increasing integration of policy and improving school food is an important contribution to food policy as a whole.

Jessica Mitchell of The Food Commission said she would like to see the introduction of free school lunches. She is aware of concern on the part of schools that the increasing cost of food will require them to raise the cost of school lunch which may lead to lower take-up among low income

⁴ See: www.foodforlife.org.uk/media_room/press_release/PressRelease480

families. **Judy** said that the Trust is aware that the cost of ingredients varies across the country. In some cases this is because of higher agriculture and transport costs, but in some cases this is because procurement policies have not improved consistently. The Trust is trying to support better procurement policies, but schools also need to make judgements about the prices charged for school food. Vending machines have been used in the past to subsidise the introduction of IT equipment, perhaps now other income earning opportunities could be used to support school catering services.

Lucy Daniels of the British Dietetic Association congratulated Judy on the improvements being achieved in school food. She expressed concerns that some schools, which are making great efforts to improve, are becoming over anxious about the introduction of nutrient based standards and she asked if there would be any leeway to help schools that are trying to improve. **Judy** said schools should not become obsessed by the nutrient based standards, but the regulations have been introduced and schools are expected to meet them. The Trust recognises that we are in a transition period. Some schools have been working for many months to prepare for the introduction of the standards. All school caterers should be working to engage with school pupils now to help them to adjust to the new standards when they are introduced. The Trust is giving most support to schools which have signed up to the Million Meals campaign.

Dr Paul Berryman of Leatherhead Food International said they had recently held a conference on food for children, which had included a panel of children answering questions about their likes and dislikes. He suggested that school caterers should seek feedback from pupils and that what is required is food that is tasty and nutritious. **Judy** agreed and said that the Million Meals campaign encourages schools to hold tasting sessions for pupils.

Sara Jayne Stanes of the Academy of Culinary Arts and Chefs Adopt a School initiative, said that they had just finished a report, *Feast*, based on their work with 1m children a year, which recommends that food should be more fully established in the school curriculum. One of their 5 key findings is that schools are quite confused about the many initiatives underway and they would like more coordinated guidance from the authorities. Sara commended the work of the School Food Trust and the Food for Life Partnership.

Adam Starkey of the Green Gourmet asked Judy if the Trust could do anything to persuade Local Authorities to put including catering services in their education departments, rather than other departments, because he is only aware of one Authority, Trafford, where this is the case. **Judy** agreed that catering needs to be regarded as part of the education and child development experience. The Trust has been working with Directors of Children's Services at a regional level and wants to extend this to working with them at Local Authority level.

Lord Rea asked Professor Jack Winkler to comment on what he had heard today in relation to his new report, *The School Fringe – What Pupils Buy and Eat From Shops Surrounding Secondary Schools*, and how children could be encouraged to eat more healthily. **Professor Jack Winkler** of London Metropolitan University, said the authors of *The School Fringe* saw their work as complementing what is being done by the Trust and the Government to improve the food children eat. Their research shows that many children do use local shops as a source of food and if you want to improve their diet you need to look at all the food they eat, including food from the school fringe. In addition to improving the push factors within schools that drive pupils out to the fringe, schools and local policy makers need a proactive policy to engage with local shops to improve what they offer. Given the evidence, simply requiring children to stay in school without first improving canteen conditions, would be a very conservative response.

Robin Armitage of Coeliac UK asked if only 6% of pupils eat a hot lunch at school on any one day what hope do we have of influencing the food children eat. **Judy** said that the definition of a hot meal is part of the problem. The Trust would like to see children eating a proper meal, but this could be a pasta salad with fruit and a yoghurt. She also pointed out that *The School Fringe* report was based on work at only 2 schools. The Trust is working with Local Authorities to agree a clear definition of lunch for take-up purposes to be introduced next year. It is expected to be based on

the total number of transactions divided by the cost of a free school meal equivalent to provide an estimate of the number of lunches sold. The Trust hopes this will encourage schools to move away from selling single items towards offering school meal deals, so that they are more likely to meet the nutrient based standards for the whole school cohort.

Lucy Daniels of the British Dietetic Association said anecdotal evidence suggests that children who have benefited from the school fruit scheme are more willing to eat a healthy diet than older children who did not benefit from the scheme. This suggests that the Government's policy of introducing the school fruit scheme for younger pupils is having a positive effect.

Maureen Strong of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board said that research indicates that school lunch take-up is highest when a hot roast lunch or sausages are offered and she expressed regret that this is only possible once a fortnight. If the Trust allowed sausages to be served twice a fortnight, they could meet their Million Meals target. **Judy** said that the Trust could consider the introduction of 4 weekly menus.

Lord Rea asked Judy if she thought further progress could be achieved within present financial constraints given that The School Fringe research suggested that eating out of school was a cheaper option than school food? Would schools have to reduce the price of school food? **Judy** said eating food bought out of school can be a cheaper option, but it is not cheaper if the food bought is the nutritional equivalent of food that meets the nutrient based standards for school food. She added that children do not always spend all the money they are given by their parents for lunch on food. They may spend some of it on a bag of chips and use the rest to top-up their mobile phones and parents need to be aware of this.

Lord Rea said that one of the recommendations of the Forum's inquiry report, *The Links Between Diet and Behaviour*, had been that the Government "includes financial support to School Breakfast Clubs as part of the package set up to improve school meals. We strongly recommend that all children entitled to free school lunches should be entitled also to a free school breakfast whose content, like school lunches, should be subject to quantified nutritional standards." He added that many children do not eat a full breakfast and asked Judy what progress might be achieved on this issue. **Judy** said that the non lunch food standards apply to school breakfasts. The Trust has focussed on lunch recently, giving less emphasis to school breakfasts. It will be as supportive of school breakfast clubs as it can be, but at the moment school lunches are its priority.

Nikki Hawkins of the Sea Fish Industry Authority referred to her step-son's sports college, where every food option is a healthy option and in a cashless environment the students cannot buy alternatives. **Judy** said that some schools are adopting a policy whereby they will only accept children if their parents agree the children will eat the school lunch. The more this happens, the easier it will be to control the food children eat during the school day. She believes this is a brilliant policy, but she recognises that it is not a top priority for every school.

Conclusion

Lord Rea thanked the speakers, congratulated Judy on the progress being achieved in improving school food (the Minister had left the meeting earlier), and offered best wishes for the Trust's work. He told members that the Forum's next meeting will be in October, after the Parliamentary recess, when we will be discussing the health consequences of the Common Agricultural Policy. Patricia will write to all members with information about the speaker and venue during the summer.