

Children in Scotland

Written Evidence to the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

September 2007

Free School Meals Pilot

Children in Scotland strongly endorses the Scottish Government's pilot programme to provide free school meals to all P1-P3 students.

Universal provision

Children in Scotland warmly welcomes the *universal* approach of the Scottish Government's Free School Meals pilot. We believe that this is essential to promoting healthier childhoods and enhancing children's experiences at school. We do not believe that a targeted approach can be as effective in teaching about nutrition, healthy eating habits and the food production system as one that involves all children as a normal and natural part of their school experience. A universal approach with P1 through P 3 students can establish a firm foundation of common knowledge and shared experience that advances the public health agenda in relation to obesity, nutrition and food.

Universal provision and choice

We believe that universal provision is necessary to meet the aims of this pilot. However, it was noted in the Education Committee that 'choice' is sometimes constrained in universal provision systems. Choice is an important element of children's lives, which increases with age and capacity.

Children in Scotland recommends an approach to choice that **fully engages children in menu planning**. Children accept this approach and regard it as "normal" in other European nations. Such an approach can be both economical and empowering with P1-P3 pupils. Many young children in Scotland do not have the opportunity that children in other countries have to learn about food production, cooking and healthy eating patterns/habits.

Children spend a great deal of their time in school. We believe that using this time to help children develop a healthy palate, at the same time as learning about food and nutrition, is key to developing healthy eating habits. We also believe that it will have an impact upon parental awareness of diet at a time when they are most engaged with their child's physical development.

International comparisons

Many of the Scandinavian nations have significantly higher levels of child wellbeing than Scotland -- and free school meals is a key element of these models. Sweden, for example, has provided free school meals *universally* for many years. Norway, which has not previously had a school meals programme, is now piloting free school meals in some areas. The Scottish pilot programme might benefit from comparing terms of reference and results with the Norwegian pilots. Children in Scotland's new publication *Northern Lights* contains additional Norwegian information and can be sourced from npay@childrenscotland.org.uk or found on www.childrenscotland.org.uk.

Pre-school provision

We believe that it is right for Scotland to test the benefits of an inclusive free school meals policy that will encourage healthier eating habits, combat childhood obesity and improve the social development of school children at the P1-P3 level. In addition, there is an ever-growing body of research evidence that health status throughout one's life is heavily influenced by early childhood experiences. Children in Scotland believes that if policies to improve diet among children and young people are to be successful in the long term, there is a need to develop healthy eating habits even before P1 – that is, among children of pre-school age in a direct and robust manner.

It is essential to ensure that children are provided with healthy and nutritious meals from an early age to help prevent health problems later in life, as well as to prevent obesity and dental decay in childhood. Many 3 and 4 year olds in Scotland do not have the opportunity that children in other European countries have to learn about food production, preparation and eating with their peers. *Children in Europe* magazine (Issue 10: “An appetite for life”) presents case studies of European good practice in relation to free meal provision for pre-school children. See: http://www.childreninScotland.org.uk/html/pub_tshow.php?ref=PUB0154

Children in Scotland encourages the Committee to recommend to Ministers that a short-life expert panel be formed to look at improving meals in pre-school centres. This would be similar to the Expert Panel on School Meals that produced Hungry for Success.

Parents

A survey by consumer researcher Mintel¹ suggested that one in three parents takes little interest in their children's eating habits -- and that 17 percent of parents give children food regardless of its fat content. Education and guidance for parents (as well as for children and young people themselves) is essential to developing healthy eating patterns and habits.

We recommend that this school meals pilot includes a requirement for schools to include parental involvement during the 6-month period to ensure a complementary, positive and supportive food-related environment in the home. Children who have their school learning reinforced at home in eating and nutrition (just as in reading or maths) are more likely to be successful.

Future of Free School Meals

We look forward to the outcomes of this pilot. If proven successful, then Children in Scotland hopes to see it universally expanded beyond the current six-month pilot programme to all P1 to through P3 pupils in Scotland -- and, indeed, to young children in pre-schools.

Key points and recommendations

- A **universal** approach to free school meals with P1 through P3 pupils is the best way to address the public health and education needs of these children.
- An understanding of ‘choice’ that **fully engages children in menu planning** is an appropriate and efficient approach.

¹ Childhood Obesity: Britain's kids need food for thought, Mintel, June 2005

- The pilot school meals programme should include a requirement for participating schools to include parental involvement during the 6-month pilot period to encourage a complementary, positive and supportive environment in the home.
- A short-life expert panel should be formed to look at improving meals in pre-school centres. This would be similar to the Expert Panel on School Meals that produced Hungry for Success.
- This Scottish pilot project would benefit from assessing the terms of reference of the Nordic pilots -- and from comparing the results from both nations at the end of the trial.

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies, services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society.

Children in Scotland represents over 400 members, including all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Executive, local authorities and practitioners. It also services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People; the National Children's Voluntary Forum; the National Early Years Forum and the Additional Support Needs Network. Children in Scotland also hosts Enquire, the national advice service for additional support for learning.

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