



Written Evidence to the Scottish Parliament Communities Committee on the Schools (Nutrition and Health Promotion) (Scotland) Bill - Stage 1 November 2006

Introduction

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to present evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Communities Committee on the Schools (Nutrition and Health Promotion) (Scotland) Bill. We strongly support the Scottish Executive's commitment to promote healthy eating among children and young people. However, in some instances, the Bill's proposals do not go far enough.

We welcome the proposal to place a duty on education authorities to ensure that the food and drink supplied in schools meets set nutritional requirements. In particular, we are pleased that this will apply to local authority nurseries. However, we would like clarification on precisely which services this will cover as it is unclear if this will apply to all pre-school provision. Similarly, whilst we welcome the duty on Scottish Ministers to endeavour to ensure that local authority schools are health-promoting, we urge that this duty also includes all pre-school provision. We would suggest that a short-life expert panel be formed to look at improving meals in pre-school centres.

Children in Scotland welcomes the provisions to promote the uptake of nutritious school meals. Equally, we welcome the power given to local authorities to provide free drinks, cereals etc., as this will benefit those children whose only guaranteed daily meal is the one they receive at school. We welcome the provision to allow local authorities to provide children with snacks, but, as a minimum, we believe that this Bill should not prevent local authorities from being free to provide free school meals, if they wish.

Children in Scotland is also disappointed that the Bill does not include a stronger provision for, and more details on, an extension of eligibility for free school meals. Providing nutritious free school meals would have a universal, beneficial impact upon the health of children in Scotland. It would also go some way to meeting the Scottish Executive and the UK Government pledge to eradicate child poverty in Scotland by 2020. Children in Scotland urges the Executive and the Communities Committee to provide free school meals to 3 groups of children:

- All 3 and 4 year olds
- All primary school children in Scotland
- Families receiving working tax credits (see Children in Scotland's Manifesto)

Nutritional standards

Early years

Children in Scotland welcomes the fact that the nutritional standards will apply to all local authority nursery providers. However, it is unclear if the standards will apply to all pre-school provision. We would like clarification on precisely which services this will cover. We realise that this may be difficult given the fragmented nature of pre-school services. Children in Scotland would urge that ministers ensure that the guidance applies to all pre-school providers, including private and voluntary sector centres and suggest that an 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.

Health throughout life is heavily influenced by early childhood experiences.¹ Children in Scotland believes that if policies to improve diet among children and young people are to be successful long term, there is a need to develop healthy eating habits among children of pre-school age. 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 and eating with their peers. For instance, in schools and nurseries in Sweden and Italy 100% of children present at lunchtime have meals. Examples of how other European countries approach children's meal times can be found in the enclosed recent issue of *Children in Europe* magazine. Ferruccio Cremaschi explains here how lunchtime is an educational opportunity and can be used to guide food choices.²

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.

Involving children and young people

Children in Scotland believes that it is essential that children and young people are meaningfully involved in the development of the nutritional standards for local authorities. In the absence of good habits set at a young age, children and young people too often will, given the choice, opt for unhealthy food. Therefore, food and drink provided by schools must not only be nutritious but appealing – within a nutritious framework- to children and young people.

Healthy eating in families

Beyond improving the quality of food and drink provided by schools and early years settings, it is important that healthy eating is promoted in families. This would support parents and other carers to provide their children with nutritious and healthy food. Findings from a survey by consumer researcher Mintel suggest that one in three parents takes little interest in their children's eating habits and that 17% give children food regardless of its fat content.³ Guidance on nutritious food and drink for families -- and directly to children and

¹ *Improving Health in Scotland: the Challenge*, Scottish Executive, 2003

² *Children in Europe*, Issue 10, 2006

³ *Childhood Obesity: Britain's kids need food for thought*, Mintel, June 2005

young people themselves -- will help to consolidate what children are learning in class and improve eating habits long-term.

Supporting families with the tools to provide healthy food also is important. Some children and young people make their own packed lunch and they need to be equipped with the knowledge to prepare healthy food. A greater emphasis on cookery skills for children and young people would have long-term and immediate benefits. Community cookery courses could be helpful.

Cost

Whilst Children in Scotland welcomes a duty on local authorities to ensure that food and drinks provided by their schools meet defined nutrient standards, we are concerned that some local authorities may not be able to meet this duty without additional national funding. There is wide variation in spending per school meal and we believe that the quality of meals in some areas will not change unless the funding to meet the duty is ring-fenced by local authorities. The Executive should provide guidance on this procedure.

Monitoring

It is essential that the nutritional standards give clear direction to local authorities and set clear parameters and timescales for implementation. HMIE should monitor implementation closely on a school-by-school basis. We also suggest that health staff members should be involved in the inspection process. Children in Scotland would also like to see a clear commitment to involving children and young people in the inspection process.

School meals

Promoting school meals

Of the 46% of school children who take a meal provided by schools, 18% are entitled to free school meals. However, of those entitled to a free school meal, 31% do not take one.⁴ We are also concerned that the Bill does not address the discrepancy between the numbers of children living in poverty and the levels of entitlement. Whilst 23% of children in Scotland are living in poverty⁵, only 18% of school children are entitled to a school meal.⁶ Promoting school meals to pupils, whether they are free or not, will benefit children and young people if those meals are healthy and nutritious -- especially if the school meal is the only guaranteed daily meal they will receive. However, Children in Scotland would emphasise again the importance of involving children in the menu planning.

We would also urge that in looking at promoting the uptake of school meals, consideration is given to the eating environment as an enjoyable social experience. Most 3 and 4 year olds in Scotland do not have the opportunity to eat with their peers. When learning about food, it is important for children to interact and compare different tastes, habits and preferences. Children in Europe gives useful examples of how other countries make lunch time an educational, social and enjoyable experience.⁷ Adequate time is also needed for children and young people to eat lunch in an enjoyable, healthy way at school.

⁴ *School Meals in Scotland 2006*, Scottish Executive

⁵ *Scottish Households Below Average Income 2004/05*, Scottish Executive

⁶ *School Meals in Scotland 2006*, Scottish Executive

⁷ *Children in Europe*, Issue 10, 2006

Free school meals

Free fruit and breakfast clubs are welcome ideas, but Children in Scotland believes that more children and young people should benefit from nutritious free school meals. This is essential for building children's knowledge of healthy food and also will improve the ability of children to concentrate and function in an education environment. Importantly, the failure of this Bill to extend the eligibility to free school meals in Scotland does not reflect the Scottish Parliament and the UK Government pledges to eradicate child poverty.

Children in Scotland believes that universal free school meals is the best option for providing free school meals. However, we also recommend that the Scottish Executive should extend entitlement at least to: 1) all pre-school and primary school children; 2) all families receiving the maximum Working Tax Credit; and, 3) families receiving more than the family element of Child Tax Credit.

Children in Scotland believes that targeting younger children would be more beneficial in terms of forming long-term healthy eating habits and attitudes. We believe that the first priority is the provision of free school meals for pre-school children and all primary school children. Children will carry these healthy eating habits with them into their teenage years and adulthood, helping to reduce the risk of health problems later in life.

We believe that the Scottish Executive should also target children and young people from poorer families through the benefits system so that those children are guaranteed at least one healthy meal a day. Ideally, we would urge the Scottish Executive to extend school meal entitlement to all families receiving any Working Tax Credit and the maximum Child Tax Credit -- but, extend it *at least* to families receiving the maximum Working Tax Credit and families receiving more than the family element of Child Tax Credit. This approach would also help to remove barriers for parents to enter employment by removing the burden of school meal costs for each of their children.

Extending entitlement to families receiving more than the family element of Child Tax Credit would benefit larger families, who often are at increased risk of poverty. It is used as the qualifying benefit for the SureStart maternity grant and therefore, is already recognised as a means of identifying families requiring additional financial support for bringing up healthy children.

Health Promoting Schools

Children in Scotland welcomes the duty on Scottish Ministers and local authorities to ensure that all local authority schools are health promoting environments. Encouraging healthy eating and healthy living in the classroom -- as well as in the dining room -- is essential to facilitate attitudinal and cultural change. We would urge, however, that this duty is also applied to pre-school settings and seek assurances from the Minister on this point.

Sustainability

There is an opportunity with this bill to teach children and young people about sustainable development, and about how their choices impact on their wider community and environment. Lessons about healthy eating can be related to learning about the environmental benefits of purchasing local nutritious food.

A number of Executive bills are now including a sustainability duty and this Bill is a good opportunity to link sustainability with food. A sustainability duty on local authorities in relation to nutritious food in schools would support the Scottish Executive's Sustainable Development Strategy.

Other comments

Children in Scotland thinks that it is essential to point out that the provisions of this Bill will be undermined – and thus, not have the desired effect -- if children still have access to unhealthy foods and lunches outwith school premises during lunch time. Any health and nutrition policy in relation to school foods will not make a deep and lasting impact on children and young people's eating habits while the potential to chose an unhealthy option remains (this is particularly true at the beginning of a process of behavioural change). This problem needs to be openly acknowledged and thought given to the various ways in which it can be addressed.

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.

For further information contact Sheona Lawson, Assistant Policy and Information Officer, on 0131 222 2412 or slawson@childreninscotland.org.uk