

School meals

School meals play an important role in tackling disadvantage and in the fight against child poverty.

The need for good quality, easily accessible school meals is more important than ever. Of the 1.8 million children entitled to free school meals in the UK, over 350,000 do not claim them due to fear of stigma and bullying.

Research also shows that millions of mothers often have to go without food because they do not have enough money, in order that their children can eat.

What is food poverty?

Food poverty is 'the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so'.¹

Addressing food poverty is complex. It has a strong correlation with low income. Families surviving on low incomes face many financial pressures. While expenditure on rent, heating bills, council tax, and debt or social fund repayments are fixed, the amount spent on food is in the flexible budget category. For many of these families, living day-to-day and looking to save money in order to make ends meet, food is often their only flexible budget.

Food security

Removing the financial obstacles is not enough to end food poverty. If food poverty is to be overcome, other factors such as access to food and consumer choice need to be addressed. Food security means that all people at all times should have physical and economic access to sufficient, affordable, safe and nutritious food necessary and appropriate for a healthy life, and the security of knowing that this access is sustainable in the future.

In Britain this means people need:

- access to food – to have enough money, and to be able to reach the kind of shops which stock the foods needed for health at affordable prices;
- to enjoy choice – the food people can buy has to be both safe and necessary or appropriate for a healthy life and for their culture;
- freedom from fear – as far as possible people should be free from anxiety about whether they will be able to eat properly.²

The importance of healthy eating

Unhealthy eating increases the chances of suffering from heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers and obesity. Today, one in five adults in the UK are considered obese, a figure that has tripled in the last 20 years. However, more alarming is the high level of obesity in children – 8.5 per cent of 6-year-olds are obese, increasing to 15 per cent of 15-year-olds.³

Britain now has the third-highest obesity rate in the world behind the United States and Mexico, with those from low-income households disproportionately represented.⁴ It has been calculated that 34,100 deaths in England in 2002 were attributable to obesity, with each person losing nine years of life, and the overall cost of obesity being between £3.3 and £3.7 billion.⁵

Policy developments

There are areas in which the Government has taken action to try to improve children's diets, including schemes such as the Welfare Food Programme and the National School Fruit Scheme as well as the commitment at the end of 2004 to review the minimum nutritional guidelines for school meals. But the success of these schemes varies and many of these initiatives are failing to fulfil their full potential. For example, the changes to the Healthy Start Scheme under the Welfare Food Programme now entitle pregnant women and mothers of children in their first year to an additional allowance. While this move is welcome, it is based on conditionality which limits its impact. The extra allowance is withdrawn after the child's first birthday, just at the time when a highly nutritious diet is essential for a child's development.

It is encouraging that the Government recognises schools as a vehicle by which to promote and ensure healthy eating, but progress in this area has been somewhat disappointing and in places contradictory. School vending machines and incentives for school equipment are being sponsored by companies from the junk food industry, thus encouraging the consumption of unhealthy food, while at the same time schools are trying to promote the importance of eating fruit through the National School Fruit Scheme.

What needs to be done?

The importance of maintaining a healthy diet has been recognised by the Government. However, the prospect of healthy eating is beyond the reach of many children in families on low incomes. The high cost of healthy food is a major obstacle for many parents wanting to provide this for their children. Healthy food needs to be accessible as well as affordable. To help achieve this, a coherent package of initiatives is required to remove the various obstacles to healthy eating that children from low-income families have to face. It is within this context that schools and school meals have an important role to play.

CPAG's work shows that where schools and local education authorities do address these issues, real improvements can be made to the diet and health of young people.

History of school meals

1879: Manchester became the first city to provide school meals for 'destitute and badly nourished children.'⁶

1904: a Parliamentary Committee reported that the poor physique of volunteers in the Boer War highlighted the problem of underfed children.

The next 50 years saw a gradual increase in provision of school meals. Over one million children were taking free school meals by 1920, with free milk being introduced four years later.

1947: with Attlee's Labour Government in place and the post-war welfare state being built, the full cost of school meals in all state schools was met.

In the early to middle 1960s there was growing concern among academics and others that child poverty in Britain was on the increase. Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) was founded as a result of that concern. At the same time as CPAG began to lead the anti-poverty lobby, concern grew at the increasing costs of school meals.

1977: research showed that take-up of school meals had fallen, but 61.7 per cent of all school children had a school meal, at a cost of £380 million to the Exchequer.⁷

1980: the Education Act saw the beginning of the decline of the universal system of provision.

Sections 22 and 23 of the 1980 Act gave local education authorities the power to axe



the school meals service completely. The only remaining statutory requirements – which were the most basic – were that local education authorities had to ensure children whose parents got supplementary benefit or family income supplement received access to a free meal and that facilities were provided for those pupils who brought their own food into school.

1986: the new Social Security Act came onto the statute book. Children whose parents were in receipt of income support were still eligible for free school meals, but those who received family credit had the price of the meal nominally included in the benefit.

1995: less than half of children (45 per cent) in England took school meals.⁸

1998: Gordon Brown introduced a new system of financial support for those on low incomes – working families' tax credit.

2001: the Government introduced new, compulsory national nutritional standards.

2003: child tax credit replaced working families' tax credit. Those families entitled to full child tax credit were entitled to a free school meal for their children. This new financial support structure led to an additional 75,000 children across Britain being entitled to a free school meal.

2004: CPAG published a good practice guide to school meals, *Recipe for change*. The Government announced that it would review the national minimum nutritional guidelines for school meals.

2005: CPAG is to meet with government ministers to discuss the future of school meals.



■ Students choosing their meals from the new-style Fuel Zone in Glasgow schools

Examples of good practice for school meals

Newham

Newham is a vibrant, multi-ethnic inner-city borough just 25 minutes away from the centre of London and in the heart of east London. Resources, both in terms of finance and new energetic thinking, are being channelled into the borough.

Breakfast clubs aim to redress some of the imbalances in pupils' diets and thereby contribute to improvements in their educational performance. Children have a choice of various cereals, toast, scrambled eggs, baked beans, fresh fruit, yoghurt and fruit juices as well as instant low-fat hot chocolate in the winter. The service is very well received, with between 20 and 80 pupils attending in some of the schools. Pupils' timekeeping has improved as a result and they also appear to be calmer when going into their lessons.

School nutritional action groups have been set up in many schools in the area, giving pupils a chance to air their views about school meals and contribute to improving them. These groups consist of pupil representatives from each year, school governors, teaching staff and representatives from the catering service.

Glasgow

Glasgow City Council is responsible for providing eight major services, including school catering, to the residents of the city. Glasgow's 197 primary schools and 29 secondary schools have 80,000 pupils to feed on a daily basis. They have used a holistic approach to healthy eating, to develop an ethos that promotes choice for pupils, while simultaneously educating and motivating them to select healthier options. This has been achieved through the introduction of Fuel Zone and through other initiatives, such as Fruit Plus, Glasgow's Big Breakfast and Glasgow's Refresh.

In 1996 a detailed review of the existing secondary school meals service was carried out. It had become evident that the school children of the city had very negative perceptions of the service, and as such it was largely under-subscribed.

Furthermore, there were real concerns about the general state of the health of Glasgow citizens. With research highlighting the importance of targeting audiences at a young age in a bid to improve eating habits, Direct and Care Services was given the job of developing a business strategy aimed at tackling these challenges.

As a result, the strategic decision was taken to revamp completely the existing school meals service in secondary schools and trade under a whole new branding concept known as 'Fuel Zone'. The brand varies slightly between primary and secondary schools, and has gone a considerable way toward improving perceptions and exposure to the principles of healthy eating and healthy lifestyles.

Hull

Kingston upon Hull's innovative policy for providing free healthy breakfasts and lunches for all of its primary pupils began as a vision of Councillor Colin Inglis and was translated into a pledge in the Labour Group's manifesto in 2003. The manifesto stressed the connection between nutrition and achievement, and that in order to learn, children must be well nourished.

The Education Act 2002 makes provision for local authorities to request a suspension of the statutory requirements if they want to introduce innovative measures that will contribute to the raising of educational standards. The Executive was able to persuade government ministers to approve the application because Kingston upon Hull's healthy meals initiative breaks new ground in tackling both health and education standards and was a good example of the Council working collaboratively with the primary care trusts.

In February 2004 the Council introduced a healthy menu, replacing traditional school meals with tasty menus containing reduced levels of salt, sugar and saturated fats and which encourage children to eat more fruit and vegetables.

Statistics show that a man living in Kingston upon Thames is likely to live six years longer than a man in Kingston upon Hull. By acknowledging and acting on the link between poverty, diet and health, the Council is determined to give Kingston upon Hull's children the best possible start in life. By beginning the quest in schools, it aims to develop children's understanding of food, nutrition and healthy lifestyles, an understanding that will improve their own life chances and those of their children.

1 Elizabeth Dowler, Sheila Turner and Barbara Dobson, *Poverty bites: food, health and poor families*, CPAG, 2001, p2

2 See note 1, p4

3 *Tackling Obesity in England*, National Audit Office, HC 220, 2000-01

4 See note 3

5 *Obesity: Third Report of Session 2003-04*, Vol I, House of Commons Health Committee, May 2004

6 Will McMahon and Tim Marsh, *Filling the gap: free school meals, nutrition and poverty*, CPAG, 1999

7 See note 6

8 See note 1, p4



CPAG recommendations

CPAG believes that a universal free school meal service is the fundamental solution to a great deal of the problems experienced and would make a major difference to the future physical development of children. CPAG continues to campaign for a universal system in 2005 with the knowledge that an all-inclusive system would eradicate stigma and improve the take-up of school meals for those from low-income homes, as it does with child benefit which has a 98 per cent take-up rate.

The recommendations in our recent publication, *Recipe for change*, support this position. They offer practical examples of what schools, local authorities and the Government can do now.

CPAG's recommendations are:

- The Government needs to make food and nutrition a compulsory part of the national curriculum.
- Basic nutritional standards need to be increased from their present level.
- All local education authorities need to ensure that all their schools have a school meals plan or a food policy for the delivery of healthy school meals, together with a minimum requirement for take-up.
- The Government needs to introduce 'innovation grants' in order for schools to implement such systems as smart cards.
- Local education authorities need to ensure that all schools have a school nutritional action group that includes students and representatives from the school's caterers.
- There is a need to value catering staff more highly – both in terms of pay and conditions.
- All school meals staff need to be trained, or receive training, to an agreed national standard in nutrition.
- Government guidelines for school meals need to emphasise the importance of grilling and baking over frying. Only one item of fried food (for example, chips) should be available in one day. ■

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