

## **Cabinet Member's response to the Healthy Eating in Worcestershire Schools Scrutiny Task Group's recommendations - May 2006**

### **Overall Comments**

There is no doubt this topic rightly commands both professional and public interest. If only all parents were concerned with what their children ate from birth.

There is a lot of research going on in this area, a new national focus, a new energy but gaps in our knowledge and understanding remain. This scrutiny puts the spotlight on the sea change going on in our schools around the healthy schools agenda, the partnership work between schools and the Local Authority and some of the remaining challenges.

There is much merit in the points made in this scrutiny being communicated to schools. However, take up cannot be guaranteed, head teachers and governing bodies will make their own decisions about the organisation of the school day patterns within schools. The Local Authority must be a significant influencer.

Local Authority officers, particularly the Healthy Schools Advisory Teacher who co-ordinates the Healthy Schools Programme and the school catering officer, are delighted to see the profile of these areas of the Authority's work highlighted and are keen to ensure any viable recommendations are developed.

In addition, whilst I understand the need to keep the scrutiny very focused it is equally important that the family and community aspects of healthy lifestyles that are the key to sustainability are not overlooked.

Finally, I hope that Scrutiny will be able to work on a mechanism to monitor the actions identified in this response.

### **The Impact of Food on Behaviour**

#### **Recommendation 1.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority continues to monitor evidence on the impact of food on the behaviour and concentration levels of pupils and revises its guidance to schools and catering companies accordingly.  
(Paragraph 4)**

#### **Response 1.**

It is my understanding that the Local Authority officers have never actually monitored evidence on the impact of food on the behaviour and concentration levels of pupils. Officers are following the Government's nutritional guidelines, which link food to health rather than behaviour. The guidelines are there to prevent longer-term problems such as obesity and heart disease, which are public health issues.

Local Authority officers have noticed schools do believe healthy eating has an impact on behaviour.

We must not forget the role of schools is a vital one, particularly those that are seeking to attain the National Healthy Schools status in this area, as is the role of health workers, particularly those working with parents of the very young where preventative influences, establishing good eating habits, can have even greater impact. I would suggest that officers should be working hard with partners in particular Health, to help all schools reach National Healthy Schools status to embed the necessary changes for children and families.

Interestingly, no properly controlled studies appear to have been undertaken on this issue.

Whilst not proven, based on my science background and personal experience, I would tend to and err towards the view that there could be a link so would ask the Authority to make reference to a possible link in its communications and ask that the Director of Children's Services, myself and the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Steering Committee send a joint letter, accompanied by a copy of this valuable scrutiny, to the Children's Commissioner asking for a controlled study to be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

### **Breakfast and Snacks**

#### **Recommendation 2.**

**We recommend that schools provide information to parents and children highlighting the benefits of eating a healthy breakfast. (Paragraph 5.1 to 5.4)**

#### **Response 2.**

It is my understanding that schools, as part of the Healthy Schools Agenda, do provide information to parents and children highlighting the benefits of eating a healthy breakfast. This is part of the Healthy Schools Initiative. If the Scrutiny Panel were aware of schools that are not engaging it would be helpful to share this information with the relevant local inspectors and the Healthy Lifestyles Manager.

#### **Recommendation 3.**

**We recommend that primary schools consider incorporating an afternoon break into the timetable to allow pupils to have a healthy snack in the afternoon. We also recommend that high schools consider having two substantial breaks in the day. This would avoid dips in blood sugar and therefore allow pupils to more easily maintain levels of concentration. (Paragraph 5.5 to 5.6)**

#### **Response 3.**

Both these recommendations:-

- \* a healthy snack in the afternoon
- \* high schools having two substantial breaks in the day

are again matters for an individual head and governing body.

It is interesting that there are regulations (European employment regulations) to ensure staff have a mid-day break but not for pupils.

The best available guidance to the law for schools around the issue of the length and frequency of break times during the school day is found in 'A Guide to the Law for School Governors' 2006, published by DfES and available to download on their website ([www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk)) in the section for governors.

Worryingly, there does not seem to be a minimum requirement. I quote 'the recommended lesson hours do not include time for collective worship, registration or breaks. Enough time should be allowed for all these activities'.

It goes on to say that any proposed changes to school session times must be fully negotiated with parents and other members of the school community.

I find it worrying that children and young people are not protected by the law or good practice to ensure they get enough time between lessons to eat in a relaxed, social environment.

I am not averse to the valuable points, on this aspect of this scrutiny, being communicated to schools. However, take up cannot be guaranteed, head teachers and governing bodies will make their own decisions about the organisation of the school day. Local Authority officers cannot impose any particular patterns on schools.

I have asked officers to work with governing bodies, to ask them to consider how pupil's behaviour and attitude to work could be affected by food intake and the school timetable.

#### **Recommendation 4.**

**The task group welcomes the Government ban on fizzy drinks, chocolate and crisps and the moves by some schools to reduce their availability ahead of the ban. Furthermore, we recommend that the Local Authority issues guidance to all schools that fizzy drinks, chocolate and crisps should not be included in packed lunches. (Paragraph 5.7 to 5.9)**

#### **Response 4.**

I would hope that, through the Healthy Schools Agenda which covers healthy snacks and lunchboxes, mentioned above, and advice given to parents currently and the high profile of these statements in the media, much of what is being recommended is actually getting through to parents.

Schools are working hard in this area and should be applauded for their efforts. Interestingly some schools actually check the content of lunch boxes – my personal view is that this is a step too far undermining the parental relationship but continuing vigilance and discussion and communications with young people is to be encouraged within and outside school.

The Healthy Schools Team are involved with a number of projects to do just this: creative ways involving rewards per table, badges, stickers etc. all carefully organised so that individual pupils are not stigmatised.

The Catering Officer and team will audit and advise schools and caterers on how to implement the ban on junk food and alternative options. It is important to note that school and caterers are concerned that income will fall once junk food is removed and that pupils will go elsewhere for snacks – e.g. the local shop - so education is more important alongside restrictions.

### **The School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme**

#### **Recommendation 5.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority considers extending the very popular free fruit and vegetable scheme to provide fruit or vegetables for all Key Stage 2 pupils as well. Wherever possible, contracts should be negotiated with Worcestershire fruit and vegetable growers for whole fruit of a size appropriate to a child's appetite. (Paragraph 5.10 to 5.12)**

#### **Response 5.**

This scheme, free fruit and vegetables, for all Key Stage 1 pupils is popular with children, parents and teachers alike. It appears the rules would allow it to be extended to Key stage 2 as well but again it is a matter for individual schools, and there is the issue of cost. Some visionary schools have already done so.

Schools in Worcestershire are well placed to access fruit direct from local farms. In view of the supermarkets' drive for uniform fruit and vegetables of a certain size there may well be opportunities for individual schools to negotiate very reasonable arrangement for quantities of smaller or differently shaped fruit and vegetables. Individual schools have this opportunity especially those in more rural locations. I understand, in particular, some schools in the Evesham / Pershore area have excellent arrangements with suppliers.

#### **Recommendation 6.**

**We recommend that as part of the drive towards healthy eating and drinking parents should be given the option to purchase milk for their child throughout primary years and that it should be available in high school, restaurants, vending machines and tuck shops (Paragraph 5.13 to 5.14)**

#### **Response 6.**

Milk is available in most primary schools to all pupils at the subsidised cost of 8p.

And the school milk project employs facilitators to work with schools dairies and LEAs to encourage more children to drink milk at school - [www.schoolmilk.co.uk](http://www.schoolmilk.co.uk)

However, this recommendation must be considered with an element of caution.

Some children have allergies to milk especially cows' milk.

Published scientific research implies lactose intolerance and milk allergies are very common but remain underestimated.

There are longevity problems connected with milk in vending machines.

Mycobacterium avium subspecies paratuberculosis (MAP), which infects cattle, has been shown to be infiltrating water supplies and defeating the milk pasteurisation process. Links between MAP, which has been found in 2% of pasteurised milk cartons, and Crohn's disease have been investigated for some years though in 1998 the government's advisory committee on dangerous pathogens decided that a link could not be demonstrated by the available evidence.

Milk is not always a magic bullet where a child is not getting a healthy balanced diet.

On balance parents should be given advice and guidance on milk as a food substance, its benefits and the possible adverse effects. Its availability in schools is a matter for the school but the Local Authority is willing to work with schools on the issue of advice and guidance and facilitating access to milk where parents feel it is appropriate for their child.

Parents should be encouraged to consider their child's dietary needs as a priority.

I have asked the officers to consider dietary needs and education as a topic for "Parents Voice". It would be helpful if parents in Worcestershire could equally champion this area.

### **A Universal Hot Meals Service**

#### **Recommendation 7.**

**We recommend that the Overview and Scrutiny Steering Committee be given the opportunity to review and comment on the Local Authority's plans for the reintroduction of a universal hot meal service. (Paragraph 6.1 to 6.3)**

#### **Response 7.**

As Scrutiny is aware the plans for the reintroduction of a universal hot meal service will be coming to Cabinet in due course. I am sure I can speak for my colleagues that in view of the wealth of expertise amongst all local Members as to community facilities and links between schools, the healthy schools team and the school catering officer would be pleased to receive any advice and guidance on this subject. Advice and Guidance from the members of the Scrutiny Committee would be equally welcomed

## **Packed Lunches**

### **Recommendation 8.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority produces an information pack to share with parents, containing practical advice about the importance of breakfast and suggestions for healthy snacks and lunch boxes. We would suggest that parents would be particularly receptive to such advice when their children enter the reception year at age four or five. (Paragraph 6.5 to 6.8)**

### **Response 8.**

The Local Authority, through Angela Kirton's team, already signposts schools to excellent information from the Food Standard Agency and British Nutrition Foundation including practical advice about the importance of breakfast and suggestions for healthy snacks and lunch boxes. Schools share this information with parents in a variety of ways.

## **The Social Side of Meals**

### **Recommendation 9.**

**We recommend that schools ensure that all pupils spend at least 20 minutes eating lunch to avoid the race to get out and play. This would give children the opportunity to experience the mealtime as a social occasion, thus improving social skills and encouraging calmer behaviour. (Paragraph 6.9 to 6.12)**

### **Response 9.**

This is a more difficult recommendation as teachers will often advise that, in reality, many children have eaten their packed lunches by break time and those having sit down meals follow patterns of behaviour in line with their traditions at home.

It is however, a very sensible recommendation, which I am told schools do try to follow. For some schools just having a place to eat, let alone adequate provision for a social lunch break, is a challenge.

This whole issue is one the local authority is taking very seriously. Our plans for the reintroduction of a hot universal meals service will help considerably.

Many schools are to be commended for the emphasis they have put on this aspect of meal times – setting aside time, setting the table, encouraging conversation. In one school I visited there was clear evidence of the school's approach being taken home and influencing parents.

Interestingly a secondary head has advised that he can not ensure pupils spend 20 minutes – many do but it is impractical for everybody to do so. And the value of pupils getting exercise at lunch-time should be considered.

## **New Nutritional Standards**

### **Recommendation 10.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority should investigate ways to support schools and catering companies in implementing the new nutritional guidelines that the Government is currently consulting on, which will come into force from September 2006. (Paragraph 6.13 to 6.14)**

### **Response 10.**

I am sure the Scrutiny Panel will be pleased to know that the Local Authority is already investigating ways to support schools and catering companies in the implementation of the new food and nutritional guidelines that the Government is currently consulting on, which will come into force in a phased process from September 2006.

In the Autumn term the Healthy Schools Team and the School's Food Team are setting up training for both governors and school staff on the new nutritional guidelines. University of Worcester are setting up new courses that caterers will be able to access as well as school catering staff.

## **Training for Catering Staff**

### **Recommendation 11.**

**We very much welcome the funding that the Local Authority plans to use for training for the people who produce the food that our children eat in schools. We recommend that the Authority should aim to reach a position where all school catering staff receive basic nutritional training. (Paragraph 6.15 to 6.19)**

### **Response 11.**

Yes, this funding will help in the work we are doing already as described above.

### **Recommendation 12.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority should facilitate an annual meeting of caterers working in the County to allow them to discuss concerns and share best practice. (Paragraph 6.20)**

### **Response 12.**

The School Catering Officer already facilitates regular meetings of caterers working in the County to discuss concerns and share best practice. She will continue to do this.

A Head Teacher has advised that organising meetings that do not conflict with the caterers' responsibilities in school helps – this sounds like a raw nerve – officers should take note on this point.

## **Procurement**

### **Recommendation 13.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority should further investigate the potential for joint procurement to allow groups of schools to negotiate better deals with suppliers. (Paragraph 6.21)**

### **Response 13.**

The School Catering Officer already investigates the potential for joint procurement to allow groups of schools to negotiate better deals with suppliers. It will continue to work actively in this way. This is part of our on-going work to ensure a universal hot meals service.

### **Recommendation 14.**

**We recommend that all schools and catering companies be encouraged to follow the good practice of buying locally sourced produce from Worcestershire growers. (Paragraph 6.22)**

### **Response 14.**

All schools and catering companies are encouraged to buy locally sourced produce from Worcestershire growers and in addition fair trade products where there is no local conflict – as described above in answer to question 5.

Schools, however, especially those with challenged budgets, will take the most commercially viable route. Commercially viable does not automatically equate with low quality. Government funding for school meals and the associated equipment to deliver school meals is very low, the actual margin so tight that manoeuvrability for a school is difficult.

Sourcing locally takes time, however, there is good progress being made in this area.

### **Recommendation 15.**

**We also recommend that, as part of the educational experience, schools should be encouraged to grow some of their own food where feasible. (Paragraph 6.23)**

### **Response 15.**

As an ex 6<sup>th</sup> former that started my school's after school gardening club and annual vegetable competition I fully support this recommendation. The Healthy Schools Team is also promoting school gardening – this is deemed good practice.

## Water

### **Recommendation 16.**

**We recommend that all schools in the County should have a consistent approach to drinking water in school. Children should be allowed bottles of water in the classroom and be actively encouraged to sip water throughout the day. (Paragraph 7).**

### **Response 16.**

Yes, I fully agree.

All healthy schools ensure that children can access drinking water during the day.

Sources of water, bottled or dispenser, is a cost issue for some schools and some parents, equally there is an issue around cleanliness of bottles, when they are used and refilled, with consequent build up of bacteria inside bottles – left on warm window ledges and desks. These issues should be understood and considered by the schools.

The School Catering Officer gives advice on hygiene, water bottles etc. Many schools encourage parents to take responsibility in this area of water and hygiene as parents are responsible for providing the drinking bottle.

## **Promoting the Healthy Eating Message**

### **Recommendation 17.**

**We recommend that schools should continue to adopt a whole school approach to healthy eating and promote the healthy eating message wherever possible throughout school life. (Paragraph 8.1 to 8.5)**

### **Response 17.**

Absolutely!

### **Recommendation 18.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority adopts a wider and more varied approach to promoting healthy eating to parents and pupils including a publicity campaign beyond schools e.g. in supermarkets, newspapers and through drama presentations. (Paragraph 8.6 to 8.8)**

### **Response 18.**

Wherever they can the School Catering Officer and the Healthy Schools Team and schools do adopt a wider and more varied approach to promoting healthy eating to parents and pupils. The Scrutiny Panel itself has added to the debate enormously.

The new role of the Healthy Schools Team is to extend beyond the boundaries of home and school. The Healthy Lifestyles Manager and I welcome Scrutiny's suggestions.

### **Engaging Young People**

#### **Recommendation 19.**

**We recommend that the Local Authority facilitates the sharing of good practice that is already happening in a number of schools to engage young people with the healthy eating message. (Paragraph 8.9 to 8.11)**

#### **Response 19.**

It is my understanding the Local Authority, through conferences, school forums, network meetings etc does just this. The Healthy Lifestyles Manager (who also co-ordinates the Healthy Schools Programme) will be extending the Local Authority's role in sharing good practice.

### **Monitoring by the Governing Body**

#### **Recommendation 20.**

**We recommend that, as suggested by the National Governors' Council, all schools have a named governor with a special interest in healthy eating in schools. (Paragraph 8.12)**

#### **Response 20.**

It is important governors engage with the Healthy School's Programme.

There is some concern around such a recommendation, within governor services. as schools already have a governor for: SEN/LAC/ Literacy/ Numeracy/ Sustainability/ etc, etc.

On one hand there is a feeling that "it is all too easy to say, as many do "we will have a named governor for X or Y" and all will be okay. "

If governing bodies want to organize their business this way, fine, and if they have such a person who wants to do this, also fine.

The alternative approach is advising Governing bodies that under the legislation they are expected *collectively* to take responsibility for standards and the expectations within, national programme. Overall this seems to be a governing body/school organizational issue.

## **Developing the County Council Website**

### **Recommendation 21.**

**We recommend that the County Council website be expanded to bring together the information on healthy eating that the Local Authority provides to schools, parents and pupils in one easily accessible place. (Paragraph 8.13)**

### **Response 21.**

The web-site has some information around this issue but I support this suggestion – a more focused approach would be very helpful. This development is part of the plans of the Healthy Lifestyles Manager.