



All Party Parliamentary Group on School Food

## Minutes of meeting of the School Food APPG

**Thursday 19 December 2024, 2-4pm – Room M, Portcullis House.**

### Present

Sharon Hodgson MP (SH) – Chair

Baroness Walmsley – BW

Kate	Austey	KA	Child Poverty Action Group
Jake	Barwood	JB	The School of Artisan Food
Myles	Bremner	MB	Bremner Consulting
Luke	Consiglio	LC	The Pantry
Barbara	Crowther	BC	Sustain
Louise	Davies	LD	Food Teachers Centre
Lauren	Denyer	LDe	University of Hertfordshire
Fiona	Fearon	FF	National Governance Association
Andy	Feltham	AF	University of Hertfordshire
Zoe	Griffiths	ZG	Z G Nutrition
Vickie	Hacking	VH	APSE
Luke	Hall	LH	Office of Sharon Hodgson MP
Laura	Hamilton	Lha	University of Hertfordshire
Barbara	Monks	BM	Food Teachers Centre
Caroline	Morgan	CM	Local Food Links
Rebecca	O'Connell	ROC	University of Hertfordshire
Jenny	Paxman	JP	The School of Artisan Food
Birgitta	Rabe	BR	University of Essex
Kathy	Ross	KR	Magic Breakfast
Kay	Shearing	KS	Childrens Health Food Company
Nikita	Sinclair	NS	Impact on Urban Health
Stephanie	Slater	SS	School Food Matters
Tracey	Smith	TS	Sodexo
Anthony	Swaby-Burleigh	ASB	The Pantry
Sean	Taylor	ST	NEV
Frances	Thivet	FT	Sodexo

*Letterhead designed by pupils at Harehills Primary School, Leeds*



Secretariat - APSE

## **1. Chair's Welcome**

SH welcomed attendees to the Group and thanked the speakers for attending the meeting. She advised that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury had been invited to the meeting to provide details of the changes to National Insurance Contributions that had been announced in the Autumn Budget. However, he had been unable attend today's meeting, but discussions were ongoing, and an additional meeting of the APPG for School Food would be convened if required.

## **2. Updates for the group from the Chair, Sharon Hodgson MP**

### **Government Policy and key takeaways from the virtual meeting of the APPG held in November.**

SH reported on the recent announcements regarding government policy and summarise the key issues from the virtual meeting. The key points raised were noted as follows:

- It had been announced that £2.3 billion had been allocated as core funding for schools.
- £13 million pounds had been allocated to fund breakfast club pilots. The schools that were selected to take part in the pilots would form part of a test and learn phase, prior to the full roll out and further funding being allocated.
- Although a slight increase had been announced in the funding for free school meals, this falls short of the £3.00 plus that the sector is calling for.
- Dinner money debt had been highlighted in a report published by Child Poverty Action Group
- The Childrens Wellbeing and Schools Bill had been launched but there were several omissions relating to school meals, including School Food Standards, future funding commitments, the Healthy Start scheme and a commitment to auto-enrolment for those children eligible for Free School Meals. Therefore, a letter was being sent to the Education Secretary to highlight these issues and outline the reasons these should be included in the Bill.
- Peter Lamb MP had introduced a Private Members Bill - Free School Meals (Automatic Registration of Eligible Children) Bill 2024-26 and SH would be meeting with him in the New Year to discuss how the APPG can support the Bill.
- There was still a push to get Ofsted to include School Food Standards as part of their inspection regime.
- The number of children presenting with allergies was being highlighted as an issue in schools and was a barrier from children accessing school meals.

### **3. School Food Alliance Update – Stephanie Slater (SS)**

SS provided an update from the meeting of the School Food Alliance that was held on the morning Thursday 19 December 2024 and in so doing the key points were noted as follows:

- The Alliance had been renamed, removing Plan from the title as the School Food Plan had now been in place for over a decade.
- A representative from the University of Essex had presented an overview of research that was currently being undertaken into the impact of school breakfast provision and would be launched in February 2026.
- MB had attended the meeting to provide details of the work that local authorities had been doing regarding auto-enrolment for Free School Meals and reported that 68 Local Authorities had introduced auto-enrolment in place, 20 of which were supplying data to build a case to support the campaign for a change in government policy.
- A report had been presented by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) highlighting the issue of dinner money debt and the impact that it was having on children, families, and schools.
- A representative from the Department for Education (DfE) had attended the meeting and confirmed that ministers had signalled an interest in reviewing school food standards and the mechanism for monitoring adherence. However, no work on this was currently being undertaken.

In response to the update the following questions and comments were raised: -

- SH commented that with the roll out of breakfast provision there was a requirement for the review into standards, not only for lunch provision but to ensure that there were additional standards for breakfast provision and the SFA and the APPG needed to ensure that it remained on the agenda for the DfE.
- AF questioned how prevalent the stigma was for children's whose families were in dinner money debt, and it was confirmed that from the research undertaken, one in ten children had reported being given alternative food, which was leading to stigma.
- KL (Magic Breakfast) commented that the Bill introducing breakfast provision had a mechanism for food standards and it was doable to provide a breakfast to meet the current standards.
- ZE further commented that the current standards do not have a limit for the amount of sugar that can be in a meal which was a particular issue when looking a breakfast provision.
- The point was also raised that the review of the School Food Standards needed to take into account the whole school day.

### **4. Professor Rebecca O'Connell, Professor of Food, Families and Society Team, University College London**

ROC presented an overview of the work that had been undertaken regarding the adaptations that could be made to the Healthy Zones programme to improve the school food experience for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and in so doing the key points were noted as follows: -

- There were growing numbers of children with SEND in schools and these children were the most likely to require a school meal but least likely to be able to get one.
- There was a gap in the evidence regarding SEND children and school meals. Therefore, the government had funded research to gain a better understanding of the issues.
- The project aimed to collaborate with stakeholder to highlight what improvements could be made.
- Free workshops were held with stakeholders, including workshops with thirty adults, forty children and young people and a further fifteen parents and carers were consulted.
- Interim findings show that 33% of children cannot access a free school meal due to dietary requirements or sensory issues.
- Special schools had twice the number of children eligible for free school meals.
- The research highlighted that barriers for children taking a school meal included the environment that lunches were served, for example. noise levels and the way that food was served.
- It was found that improving the dining experience and taking a more flexible approach regarding where the food was eaten, consistency in the offering and the type of food that was served would assist in overcoming the barriers to children accessing a school meal.

In response to the presentation SH commented that 33% of children with SEND not accessing their free school meal was concerning and she looked forward to hearing the results as the project progressed.

#### **5. Baroness Walmsley, Committee Chair and author of the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee Report.**

BW provided an oral overview of the report and the key findings relating to school food. In so doing the key points were noted as follows: -

- The report was available to view [online](#) and the objective of the report was to set out a plan to fix the system so we can all eat better diets and therefore live healthier lives.
- The School Food Standards that were introduced 10 years ago, were outdated and needed to be updated to reflect current research findings and once updated they needed to be reviewed regularly.
- The evidence showed that the system for ensure compliance was not adequate.
- The Standards needed to be extended to cover breakfast provision and the food being served in early years settings.
- It was recommended that only water and milk should be served in schools, and that water should be provided free of charge.
- The government buying standards had been extended to schools but there needed to be support provided to ensure schools deliver healthy food.
- The funding provided for Free School Meals had not kept up with the costs of providing the meal.
- Due to the funding for school meals not being ringfence, not all the funding was going to provide the meal, and evidence was presented that parents were having to supplement the money allocated for a Free School Meal.
- The eligibility criteria for Free School Meals need to be reviewed and auto-enrolment should be considered.

- The recommendations of the report had been shared with the respective Minister and Government departments. Responses were being pursued by BW.
- The quality of meals was a factor that impacted on the uptake.
- The amount of funding provided for the Healthy Start Scheme needed to be increased, the eligibility requirements be reviewed and there should be better promotion of the Scheme.
- The government were scheduled to respond to the report by 24 December 2024, but they had confirmed that the response would not be provided until February.
- The report made realistic and affordable recommendations and highlighted that the sugar tax had been successful, and the tax should be extended to salt and other such products to encourage manufacturers to reformulate their products.

In concluding, BW stated that children receiving good food was a postcode lottery and the report was designed to make recommendations that could mitigate this and set out recommendations of how this could be achieved. There had not been any recommendation to ban any particular type of food and it was more about changing the whole dietary pattern.

In response to BW's update the following questions and comments were raised: -

- BC complimented the committee on the report and commented that there needed to be a genuine cross party buy in and procurement in schools needed to link with public health objectives and should support British producers.
- JB advised that in his experience there were issues with compliance of the School Food Standards, such as fizzy sugary drinks being sold in schools. The cost of school meals to the pupil was ambiguous and there was little understanding of the actual cost of providing a school meal. JB also stated that the Standard should be expanded to include Sixth Form colleges.
- BW responded to the comments by advising that concern was raised that the government's priority was about growing the food industry and not necessarily in a healthy way and that the food industry was good at lobbying and there should be restrictions on the amount of influence these companies had on policy development.
- JM commented that the report represented the consensus and captures the experiences in the sector. It was commented that action was required and that the Treasury needed to support the recommendations as currently it was a blocker to effective change.
- MB commented that the work that had been undertaken by FixourFood had seen 68 councils introduce auto-enrolment, but there are many challenges to putting it in place such as computer systems not talking to each other and the Department for Education telling councils that implementing auto-enrolment was illegal.
- In response to a question from MB regarding what the sector should be doing to improve the system BW advised that where there were blockers in the system to improving children's health, the government have it in their gift to change the law.
- In addition, there was an economic impact to people being obese and overweight, and school food was part of the answer to preventing this.

## 6. Nikita Sinclair, Co-Head of our Childrens Health and Food Programme - Impact on Urban Health – Evaluation of the Mayor of London’s Universal Primary Free School Meal

NS presented an overview of the work that Impact on Urban Health had been undertaking and in so doing the key points were noted as follows: -

- Back in Summer 2024 two evaluations were commissioned of the policy, a lived experience evaluation and an evaluation to gain an understanding of the implementation of the policy.
- The findings were published in November in one report.
- The s found that the policy was easing the pressure on low-income households with 84% of families reporting this to be the case. The money being freed up was being used for other household essentials and school related expenditure, for example on school uniforms.
- It was clear that there were emerging benefits on health, in terms of emotional burden and stress of the families and children.
- Evidence showed that the policy was strengthening school communities.
- There was also evidence showing that children where more able to learn in the after-lunch period.
- Although there was some legacy dinner money debt, following the introduction of the policy the issue of had been eliminated, and this was helping with attendance at school as there was evidence that some parents had kept their children off school due to being in debt and there was also an improved the relationship between schools and parents.
- The upfront clarity of the fund for the meals had been welcomed by schools.
- The funding of £2.55 although higher than the government funding in England was still short of the amount required.
- The policy allowed councils to look at auto-enrolment and some councils were able to extend the free school meal offering to children not eligible under the policy.
- One of the key ingredients for successful implementation included the good will of the catering staff and schools.
- Where there were adaptations to be made, these included extensions to catering contracts and employing additional staff as well as some kitchen upgrades.
- Strong leadership in the schools was key to the effective implementation of the policy.
- There had been high take up of the policy but there was further work required to ensure equable uptake for example where faith-based diets were not being meet effectively.
- There were examples good practice, and this needed this to be shared and built upon.
- Recommendations had been shared with the GLA, and Councils to improve the provision.

In response to BW’s update the following questions and comments were raised: -

- SH advised that everyone in the room could get behind the recommendations in the evaluation and the evaluations provided evidence to support the campaign for extending Universal Free School Meals provision across England.
- It was commented that the policy was not working for children with allergies, and it was confirmed that this was something that had come out in the evaluation. As part

of the implementation evaluation there was evidence that schools had changed menus to accommodate children with allergens but there was further work to do on this.

- In response to a question, it was confirmed that schools within London had been more able to increase the number of meals provided in the short timescale due to the geography, the number of children entitled to free school meals was higher and there was also a more resilient supply chain than in other areas of the country,

## **7. Fiona Fearon, Head of Policy, and Research at the National Governance Association (NGA).**

FF presented an overview of an e-learning module that had been developed for governing boards in schools on the importance of a strong whole school food offer and in so doing the key point raised were noted as follows: -

- Governing boards were the first line of accountability in the education system and had a unique position in that they hold the school leadership to account but also have knowledge of their communities.
- Meeting the requirements of the School Food Standards and supporting the health and wellbeing of children were statutory responsibility of governors.
- There was an issue of School Food Standards not being met, and although governors do not have operational responsibility, they needed to understand what good looks like in terms of a whole school food approach.
- Funding was received from the Department of Education to develop the e-learning module.
- The NGA were supported by sector representatives to develop the programme.
- There were four units to the training, and it was free for governing bodies to access the training.
- The training had been designed to make it accessible to all, and there is an evaluation at the end of the training module to ensure that it was fit for purpose and to evaluate understanding.
- There were a range of topics covered in the modules including allergen management, and the wider school food offer for example activities involving food and how to provide effective strategic oversight.

In response to the presentation the following comments and questions were raised: -

- SH queried how many governors had been through the training and FF confirmed that 255 users had accessed the module to date.
- SS commented that OFSTED needed to be more engaged to ensure that the governing bodies were held to account but there was push back from OFSTED as they state they are not food experts.
- In response to the comments FF advised that she would speak with the policy officers at the NGA regarding sharing guidance with the DfE and sharing the message to the wider NGA membership.

## **8. Next Steps**

SH advised that she was looking at getting a representative from the Treasury at a future meeting to discuss the changes introduced regarding National Insurance and the implications on school caterers.

## 9. AOB

There was no AOB raised.

***Meeting concluded at 16.00pm***

