



# Better School Food Conference Report

29 September 2005



## **Introduction**

More than 170 delegates gathered at the University of Sussex at Falmer, near Brighton, on Thursday, September 29, for the Better School Food Conference, organised by the Regional Public Health Group at GOSE, and DEFRA.

Although the event had been planned for many months, the timing could not have been more apt.

That day's newspapers were full of Secretary of State for Education Ruth Kelly's announcement of the latest government initiative to improve the standard of food in school dining halls, vending machines and shops.

The headlines spoke of a "war" - for example:

"Cola, crisps and sweets banned as Kelly declares war on junk food"

"Tuck shops lose fizz in war on unhealthy school food"

While the media language may have been colourful, delegates - including teachers, school caterers, public health professionals, PCT representatives, local, regional and national government representatives and health professionals such as school nurses - were already in no doubt that it was a vitally important issue.

The very full day included a mixture of presentations from a wide range of speakers, discussions, question and answer sessions, cookery demonstrations and poster displays.

It came, too, just three days before the School Meals Review Panel set out detailed proposals for higher nutritional standards.

Before the first speaker, delegates were given a reminder - not, of course, that they needed one - of exactly why they were there by watching a DVD of children giving their thoughts on school food.

Organised by Brilliant Futures, it featured some 100 youngsters from 25 schools in the Brighton and Hove area.

The children had been asked for their opinions on the food they were served, how it could be improved - and why those of their age might not eat healthy things.

"Some food is cold", "it's not proper meat" and "there's not much choice because I'm a vegetarian" were typical responses over quality.

They said they should be given “more fruit and vegetables” - and one said he would “tell my mother to stop giving me crisps”.

That last comment was echoed by a youngster asked why children did not eat more healthy foods.

His comment that it was “because they have chocolate and crisps in their packed lunch” emphasised to everyone that the problem does not begin and end at the school gates and that the support of parents and carers is vital.

The event was chaired in the morning by David Hawker, Director of Children, Families and Schools, Brighton & Hove City Council.

He welcomed delegates and highlighted the topicality of the conference, given Ruth Kelly’s announcement the day before.

He also emphasised how crucial the subject was, saying: “Nothing, really, is more important in terms of children’s wellbeing than what they eat”

And he added: “We have an opportunity here to establish some really robust policy and practice, wherever we are.”



**David Hawker, Director of Children, Families and Schools, Brighton and Hove Council**

## **Keynote address**

The keynote speaker was Tabitha Jay, Obesity Programme Manager at the Department of Health, who spoke on “Why this issue is important”.

She pointed out that while her presentation was focused on obesity, better food and diet was - of course - vital for all children.

She spoke of the “big challenge” in meeting the target of halting the year-on-year rise in obesity in children aged under 11 by 2010.

The figures were worrying - it was estimated that by that year there would be some 1.4 million children in England who were obese or overweight. The proportion had been 9.6% in 1995 - and 15% in 2003.

It was a problem faced by many developed countries, not least of which was the US. She pointed out that “they all have programmes to tackle it so we can learn from best practice”.

And she emphasised: “We know that when children are obese or overweight they are more likely to be obese or overweight adults.”

There were enormous consequences in terms of health, with 28,000 heart attacks a year attributed to obesity. Some 6% of all deaths were attributed to the condition.

Financially, it was estimated to cost the NHS some £0.9 billion a year, with the cost to the economy as a whole running at around £7.4 billion.

Most at risk were children who have two obese or overweight parents and those living in manual households. London was the biggest problem area. However, there was no difference in obesity rates between white and non-white households.

The reasons for the increasing rates of obesity included higher intakes of non-energy foods, the marketing of such snacks to young people, fewer meals being prepared at home, poor eating patterns, larger portions and less breast feeding.

Children were also less active, with more sedentary pastimes than before and not playing as much outdoors. There were now fewer PE lessons in schools - and there were far more car journeys, particularly to and from school.

Individual interventions had not been yet been proved to work - “multi-based” initiatives were more likely to have a beneficial effect.

She said early action was vital because “it is easier to stop someone becoming obese rather than help them become unobese.”

She referred to the White Paper “Delivering Choosing Health”, which aims to tackle obesity through a wide range of initiatives on diet and physical activity.

And she added: “Health ministers and the Food Standards Agency are leading discussions with the industry to improve the availability of, and access to, healthier foods.”

There was also a commitment to increasing young people’s engagement in sporting activities, detailed travel plans by 2010 and tougher control of school playing fields.



**Tabitha Jay, Obesity Lead, Department of Health**

## **Policy presentations**

Following Tabitha Jay's presentation, and a short question and answer session, much of the rest of the morning was given up to exploring many recent and current initiatives under the heading "What does the policy say?"

Lesley Taylor, Team Leader, Regional Children and Young People's Strategy at GOSE, spoke on "Children and Young People's Policy - DfES perspective".

She began by detailing some of the recent initiatives such as Every Child Matters, the Children Act, the Change A Child Programme, and the DfES Five Year Strategy Plus.

These, and more, were included in a "raft of measures that government hopes will lead to much better outcomes for children."

She pointed out that "There has never been a more radical time for changes in children's services" although the policy context was "very complicated".

Much of her presentation was taken up with detailing the Every Child Matters initiative, designed to bring together groups and individuals to work collaboratively.

She said Every Child Matters had the aim of ensuring that "no child slips through the net" and helping "every child to realise their potential".

The Victoria Climbié case had been "a profound illustration of how over time organisations had not been encouraged to work more effectively together."

Dr Yvonne Arthurs, Lead for Children & Young People, Regional Public Health Group, GOSE, gave delegates some insights into the health of children in the South East.

She pointed out that there were almost two million children and young people in the region, or just short of 25% of its population. There were, on average, some 88,000 births a year in the South East.

The region was very affluent but some 226,500 under-16s lived in poverty.

She presented tables showing the unhealthy lifestyles of many, including the proportion of those aged 5 to 19 consuming less than five portions of fruit a day and those aged 4 to 15 not taking the recommended amounts of physical activity.

She spoke about the "significant" number of young smokers, the amount of tooth decay in children and the number of low birth weight babies being born. Some 77,000 children were reported to have "a limiting, life-long illness."

So, she told delegates, “We have a long way to go in improving the lifestyle of children.”

Specific programmes included the Food in School project, the Healthy Schools Programme and Sure Start/Children’s Centres.

Strategies and planning mechanisms included Local Area Agreements, Children and Young People’s Plans, Children’s Trusts, Local Travel Plans (including School Travel Plans) and the “Move It” Physical Activity Framework.

And she insisted: “Change must be embedded in our planning.”

Colin Noble, National Co-ordinator of the National Healthy Schools Programme at the Department of Health, spoke about the programme, which has some 150 local schemes, managed by partnerships between LEAs and PCTs.

The aims were to help raise educational achievement, reduce health inequalities and promote social inclusion.

He emphasised that this was not a short term project, but a long term programme. “We are talking about a real revolution, a real culture shift.”

Healthy Schools, he said, were asked to implement four new criteria - Personal Social and Health Education, healthy eating, physical activity and emotional health and wellbeing - using a whole school approach involving the whole school community.

The target was for all maintained schools in England to have become Healthy Schools or be working towards it by 2009.

He detailed the healthy eating criteria necessary for schools to achieve accreditation, including the provision of a welcoming eating environment, healthy menu options, free, clean and palatable drinking water, training for staff, opportunities for pupils to learn about food and “meals, vending machines and tuck shop facilities that meet or exceed national standards.”

The Whole School Approach was “the engine of healthy eating - the engine that drives change”.

One of the most important aspects was the interaction with parents, carers and local communities because, he warned, “it is like pouring water into the sand unless we involve parents.”

Pamela Naylor, South East Food and Health Lead, Regional Public Health Group, GOSE, spoke of “the action going on at regional level which is trying to make policy work”.

The group was “a conduit between local and national levels”

She detailed the South East Food and Health Action Plan (FAHAP), which was a collective agreement between a number of regional agencies and local stakeholders to co-ordinate and develop regional activity to work for better diet and food-related health.

Those involved included DEFRA, the Countryside Agency, SEEDA, the South East Regional Assembly, NICE, the Big Lottery Fund, Healthy Schools, the South East Breastfeeding Co-ordinator, local food groups, academics and the FSA.

There were 10 key areas for action “right through the food chain”, from growing and production methods, through processing and packaging, advertising, marketing and promotion, and awareness of healthy eating, through to a “cultural shift in eating habits.”

Initiatives with children and young people included the 5 A Day scheme, “How to...(5 A Day)” booklets, the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, Food in Schools, School Meals and support for the Healthy Schools standard new criteria.

She said: “It is really important that we have this dialogue and maximise the opportunities that are about to come our way.”

Jamie Blackshaw, Senior Scientific Officer, Nutrition Policy and Advice , Food Standards Agency, told delegates of the FSA’s action to “encourage a whole school approach to food and nutrition.”

The strategic target between 2005 and 2010 was to “influence the eating habits of the next generation” by encouraging all schools that have not already done so to adopt this approach.

It had four main themes: diet and health, consumer awareness, food handling and preparation and food hygiene.

The dozen or more school-based initiatives included “Cook It”, out-of-hours cookery clubs for 11 to 14-year-olds, “Dish It Up”, a multimedia interactive CD to motivate 11 and 12-year-olds to eat healthily and “Five A Day the Bash Street Way”, promoting fruit and vegetable consumption among 7 to 11-year-olds.

There was also much work being done on making vending machines selling healthy drinks in schools economically viable, effective fruit tuck food shops for

primary schools and encouraging school governors to embrace the whole school approach.

Priorities for future action included lunchbox research, practical cookery skills for children, specific skills and qualifications for caterers, school meal pilots, target nutrient specification and a survey of primary school meals.



**Jamie Blackshaw, Food Standards Agency and  
David Hawker, Brighton and Hove Council**

## **Diet and Behaviour**

Dr Alex Richardson, Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford, and Co-Director of Food and Behaviour Research, spoke on “Why diet matters - the links between nutrition and behaviour”.

She pointed out to delegates that there was, of course, already serious concern about the effects of a poor diet on children’s physical health.

But, she insisted, there should be just as much - if not more - concern about the effects on their mental wellbeing, even though “incredibly” there was a lack of research into this important issue.

For example, she said, experiments on animals had shown that excessive sugar consumption can lead to agitation, anxiety and an inability to concentrate, with symptoms “equivalent to those experienced on opiate withdrawal”.

Those effects could be brought on in rats fed on a diet of just 25% sugar - she pointed out that some popular children’s cereals and snacks contain more than 40%.

She detailed a study of young offenders in a high security unit in the UK, one group of which was given a daily multivitamin and fatty acids supplement, the other given identical-looking placebos.

Re-offending among those who had been given the supplements subsequently fell by 25%.

In another study, some 3,000 young offenders had their snack foods replaced by healthier options, resulting in large reductions in anti-social behaviour.

Another worrying aspect of many diets of people in the UK and other developed countries was the amount and type of fat they contain.

Dr Richardson pointed out that the brain is 60% fat “so the type of dietary fat consumed is crucial to its functioning”.

She said the dangers of saturated fats had long been known, but the “trans fats” found in most processed foods - a by-product of hydrogenation - were potentially even worse.

These trans fats were known to have no nutritional value and a number of health risks.

In stark contrast, omega-3 and omega-6 fats were “essential” to health, especially to that of the brain. Humans, however, cannot make them so they must be provided by our food.

Omega-6 is usually plentiful in modern diets, but omega-3 is often lacking - it comes directly only from fish and seafood (and indirectly from green vegetables and some nuts and seeds).

So, she said, “the old wives’ tale that fish is good for the brain is true”.

Dr Richardson told delegates research that a lack of omega-3 could contribute to a range of behavioural and learning problems in children, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and autism.

There had been some small-scale research but larger scale studies were now required.

She also detailed some of the problems associated with pesticides and food colourings.

She emphasised again that poor diet was “not just about obesity and poor physical health” but mental health as well.

She said given what was already known about the importance of diet on the function of the brain, funding for more research was “urgently” needed.



## Lunch

Practising very much what they preached, delegates enjoyed a healthy lunch comprising a variety of quiches, cheeses, fresh vegetables and fruit.

While they were eating, Robin van Creveld and Julie Morehead of the Food and Health Partnership, East Sussex, gave a demonstration of how to do a stir fry dish.



**Robin van Creveld giving at cookery demonstration at the conference**

The following day was “Stir Fryday”, a regional initiative to celebrate this form of cooking. They produced a spicy omelette with stir fried honey-glazed cabbage - a quick, simple, inexpensive and healthy dish very suitable for school menus.

Earlier, arriving delegates had been able to watch and sample fruit smoothie demonstrations.



**Smoothie demonstrations taking place**

## **Work in Local Schools**

After lunch - in a session chaired by Jo Sheath, Principal Trading Standards Officer, West Berkshire District Council - three speakers gave short presentations on local school food initiatives.

Jo Sheath talked about the Brighton and Hove Food Action Group (SFAG).

This had been born out of the "Spade to Spoon" conference in 2003, where groups and individuals, including teachers, restaurant owners, professionals from a number of spheres and even allotment holders, had got together to talk about the issue.

Food partnerships were developed - and these grew into SFAG, which now had some 60 interested parties.

Its aim was "to develop, support and facilitate multi-agency healthy eating initiatives and ensure the use of local produce."

Projects it had been involved in included "Fuel for Fun" workshops, "Grab 5" packs, National Food Safety Week, the Friendly Vegetable Book, changes in the school meals service and newsletters.

The group had also been part of Safety in Action Week, joining the Police and Fire Service, as well as groups involved in animal welfare and other issues, in promoting their message.

She told delegates that although SFAG could not devise individual school food policies (a model was being drawn up), they could "point people in the right direction, offer advice and publicise work".

Current and future initiatives included a School Food Worker post, the Brighton Food Strategy and Action Plan, expansion of the newsletter, a database of food workers, taking part in the 2006 Safety in Action Week, increasing the involvement of parents and a survey of school meals.

Sue Acreman, a teacher at South Moreton School in Oxfordshire, spoke about Eco-Schools<sup>1</sup> and her role as Co-ordinator.

The programme, she said, involved the whole school - the children, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and governors - as well as the local media and businesses.

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<sup>1</sup> \* The Eco-Schools project was in parallel to the Healthy Schools initiative - South Moreton had chosen this route but the two schemes could work together in a complementary way.

It had become an integral part of South Moreton's "culture and ethos" through its work in reducing litter, minimising waste, saving energy and water and promoting green transport.

It had become embedded in the curriculum, eco-friendliness touching every part of teaching and learning in areas such as PHSE, DT and literacy.

As far as links with better food were concerned, it was "about working from the bottom upwards - it's about educating the children about how they can eat more healthily and help them make informed choices."

Initiatives included a healthy eating break time, a healthy eating tuck shop, the Fruit and Vegetable Scheme at Key Stage 1 and salads at lunchtime.

The school was buying more local food and South Moreton was now a pilot school for Oxfordshire in this area.

Its success could be measured by the fact that more local food was being sourced, leading to a reduction in food miles, parents were giving their keen support, there had been extensive media coverage, as well as a 17% increase in the take-up of school meals.

South Moreton was now a demonstration school and she added: "If we can do it, other schools can do it."

Sandi White, of Robertsbridge Community College, spoke on the topic of "Food In Schools - empowering primary schools".

An experienced food technology teacher and DfES-accredited trainer, she gave details of the project, which helps primary school teachers gain the knowledge to teach from a design technology perspective.

It was, she said, about designing with food - "not just making it".

Thus, primary teachers could pass on their new-found skills to their own pupils, and demonstrate to the youngsters that working with food could be "fun and cool".

The brief was also to encourage schools to take part in the Healthy Schools scheme and encourage the development of the Whole School Approach to healthy eating.

Two "fantastic" days of practical training had been staged - four primary school teachers had been "motivated, enthusiastic and completely enthralled" by the background to food.

The primary teachers were keen to continue planning more activities in her school.

When this happened, the benefits were that pupils could use specialist equipment and develop their practical skills, having been taught by a specialist teacher with a great understanding of the subject.

They were also entered for their Primary Taste of Success Awards.

All round it brought excellent outcomes for the primary pupils, teachers and schools, as well as giving secondary teachers the opportunity to establish contact with their primary counterparts.

She emphasised to delegates: "Food is fun - do work with it any time you can."

## Parallel Sessions

Three parallel sessions were staged twice in the afternoon, delegates being able to opt for two of them and hear a number of speakers. They were:

### Session one

“School Lunchtimes” - Chair: Ann Goodwin of the Food Standards Agency.

- “Changing the environment - dining room culture” - Speaker: Rosie Dennison, 5 A Day Co-ordinator, Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber.
- “Encouraging healthier lunchboxes” - Speaker: Lesley Potter, School Food Worker, Brighton & Hove PCT.
- “Improving school meals” - Speaker: Bobbie Bremerkamp, Head of Catering, London Borough of Greenwich.
- “Menu planning for schools” - Speakers: Amanda Frost, Head of Catering Services and Evelyn Cook, Hampshire County Council Catering Services (HC3S).



**Rosie Denison, Regional 5 A DAY Co-ordinator, Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber**

### **Session two**

“Improving Quality and Influencing Contracts” - Chair: Beverley Baker, Head of Commercial Services, Surrey County Council.

- “Working with contractors” - Speaker: Kathy Box, Corporate Catering Advisor/Contract Manager, Brighton & Hove City Council.
- “Better labelling and specifications” - Speaker: David Pickering, Lead Officer for Food, Trading Standards Institute.
- “The challenge of changing school menus” - Speaker: Jane Carlton-Smith, Programme Manager, Centre for Environmental Studies in the Hospitality Industry.
- “Developing new/direct supply sources” - Speaker: Katharine Rayner, Director, Common Cause Co-operative, Lewes.

### **Session three**

“Schools and Communities” - Chair: Johnny Denis, Regional 5 A Day Co-ordinator.

- “Food and farming - making the link” - Speaker: Louisa Devismes, Schools Co-ordinator, Plumpton College Farming and Countryside Education, East Sussex.
- “Schools and communities” - Speaker: Stuart McLaughlin, Headteacher of Falmer High School, East Sussex.
- “How parents can try to influence school food” - Speaker: Tania Lindon, Founder, Lewes School Food Action group.



**Stuart  
McLaughlin,  
Headteacher of  
Falmer High  
School talking  
about Schools and  
communities**

## **Food Poverty and Health Inequalities**

The afternoon session was chaired by Dr Martin Caraher, Reader in Food and Health Policy, City University, London.

Dr Caraher began by pointing out that it was a very complicated issue but there was indeed such a problem in England, saying “there are parts of London where there is incredible food poverty.”

A great many food issues were related to inequality.

Low income groups were 50% less likely to eat fruit and vegetables than high income ones. All were eating more fruit but there was a “growing gap”. The same was true of fresh vegetables, mainly accounted for by the more exotic varieties.

Dr Caraher got delegates thinking about the economics involved, reminding them of the proposals to give pupils in Scotland free school meals at a cost of some £174 million. It had been estimated that the longer-term benefit to the economy could be some £196 million.

But, he insisted, “not everything begins and ends at the school gates.”

Dr Caraher contrasted the £91 million spent annually on advertising chocolate with the mere £2.8m on marketing fruit. “The 5 A Day initiatives are working against a huge industry prepared to spend millions.”

He pointed out, too, that children were spending as much on snacks to and from school (just over £2 a day) as on meals at school and lobbying was needed for more planning regulations surrounding the siting of takeaway outlets on those routes.

He continued: “What has been good today is that there have been lots of new and exciting things going on - but we have got a political situation where the government is under pressure from two sides.”

On the one hand there was industry saying we were becoming close to a “Nanny State” and on the other “people like us saying we need more regulation”.

Dr Caraher said there was too much from “the bottom up” and called for more regulation of advertising and marketing.

He also highlighted the problem of short-term, typically three-year, funding for projects and insisted: “If you pull money out, initiatives die. You have to see it as an investment, not a cost.”

Ultimately, schools could become “healthy food refuges in unhealthy food sites” unless we change the community environment.

He also touched on the problem of “purchasing inflation” whereby contractors marked up the price of produce and said that often “you could go and buy products cheaper in Tesco than from contract caterers.”

And he said: “Schools are not the only answer to inequality but they are appropriate and important settings.”



**Dr Martin Caraher, Reader in Food and Health Policy,  
City University, London**

## Marketplace



**The Natural Vending Company stand**

A number of groups, organisations and companies took the opportunity to be at the conference, the result being a colourful display of posters, leaflets and booklets on the topic of healthier food for children.

Representatives from the stands were also on hand to offer specialist advice to delegates.

Among those taking part were the Food and Health Partnership, East Sussex; the School Food Action Group; Brighton & Hove City Council's Food Safety Team and the School Milk Project (Milk Development Council).

Among the commercial concerns there were The Natural Vending Company and Scolarest, the specialist catering arm of Compass Group, UK and Ireland.



**Food and Health Partnership stand**

## **Feedback**

What they said about the Better School Food Conference:

“The whole day was great and easy to understand, especially Dr Alex Richardson - more please.”

“Excellent conference providing many exciting ideas.”

“A very useful day and a great idea to have different groups with similar interests together.”

“Excellent, short, focused presentations. High quality content.”

“Huge range of ideas covering many topics.”

“Great to see kids’ views - would have been good to see more.”

“Overall a useful (and fun) day.”

“A fascinating collection of speakers who all had a vital message towards the whole picture. Very impressive - please organise a follow-up.”

“I have really enjoyed my day and am now off to look into a career in school food nutrition!”

## **Conference planning and organisation**

The conference was planned and promoted by Pam Naylor, Policy Lead for Food and Physical Activity in the South East Public Health Group.

The Department of Health is grateful to Margaret Atkins who provided excellent administration support and ensured the conference ran smoothly.



**Pam Naylor, Policy Lead in Food and Physical Activity, South East Public Health Group and Margaret Atkins, Events Co-ordinator**

This report was quickly prepared by Malcolm Deacon who recorded the key sessions and captured the essential outcomes of the meeting.