

Hull ends free school

When the Labour controlled Hull City Council decided to offer free school meals to all children in 2004 the move was so radical that they needed to obtain 'Powers to Innovate' from the Department for education and skills (DfES) to implement it.

At the end of the three-year pilot programme, children themselves were saying that they were more ready to learn and teachers said that the children were less hungry. However, the new Liberal Democrat-controlled administration chose not to continue the project when they took power earlier this year, in spite of the promising initial evaluation. This September saw the reintroduction of charging.

Eat well, do well

Councillor Mary Glew held the education portfolio at the time the free meals programme started in 2004. She explained that providing universal free school meals aimed to improve health, education, social and behavioural attitudes. She also pointed out that the universal element, "removes the stigma of free meals." At that time, only half

of the children eligible for free meals were claiming them.

Hull has a high level of deprivation causing problems in both health and education. Adults have very high rates of cancer, heart disease and stroke, and some children are malnourished. When it comes to education, primary schools fare quite well in the league tables, but secondary schools are almost at the bottom nationally.

The three-year pilot free meals scheme, called 'Eat well, do well' (EWDW) provided:

- breakfast in the schools that had a breakfast club (about 85% of schools)
- free school lunches for all children
- a piece of fruit for all children in primary and special schools
- a drink in the after-school clubs

Even before Jamie Oliver hit our screens, it was decided that the turkey twizzlers had to go: a healthy menu was introduced two months before the free meals scheme started. Unsurprisingly,

when these were first introduced, there was an initial drop in uptake. However, when the meals became free two months later, the situation reversed, with an average of 64% of pupils eating the dinners last year.

Contrast this with the rest of the country – national school dinner uptake has declined since the introduction of healthy school meals. A recent Ofsted report said: "Inspectors found that reasons for the decline were complex, but included a lack of consultation with parents and pupils about the new arrangements for healthy school meals, poor marketing of new menus and a lack of choice in what was offered."

In Hull, however, the enormous effort made by so many different

people working on EWDW to address these issues seems to be one of the reasons why more children ate the healthier food.

Healthy eating co-coordinator Sue Rae said, "Many of these children have never had a bit of broccoli and never seen a member of their family eat a bit of broccoli." It therefore took a great deal of encouragement by dinner ladies, careful planning of menus, and work with parents and children to introduce healthy food to the menus. Even some head teachers were against the project initially, but many changed their opinion when they saw how it worked.

Headmaster RN Petch of Paisley Primary School worked on the advisory committee with the caterers. He says that before EWDW, any form of potato that wasn't chips was, "a bit of a mystery to the children." The children were obliged to try the vegetables, and whilst there was still more waste than he would like, it felt that they, "were winning." The school is still hanging onto improvements introduced by EWDW despite the end of the scheme. For example, old favourites like sausages are still the most popular choice, but the quality of the sausages is now better. In his school they also have a 'healthy snack award' for those bringing packed lunches and after-school cookery clubs.

The social aspects of eating were also addressed by EWDW. Some schools had a 'buddy system', with the older children watching out for the younger ones in the dining room, which can seem an unfriendly place. Children were shown how to hold their cutlery properly as some of them were starting school not knowing how to hold a knife and fork.

Cooks in the school kitchens reported being pleased to be cooking again, as they had been deskilled serving ready meals, but some serving staff needed encouragement and training. A pilot scheme to train lunchtime supervision staff in behaviour management, helping them to talk and listen to children and to try to improve the lunchtime experience is still ongoing.

Results

The Eat well, do well scheme was evaluated in great detail by Professor Derek Colquhoun at the University of Hull. The evaluations showed some striking results. Children reported themselves to be more alert, and those eating the school lunches did better in tests after lunch than those having packed lunches. The teachers found the classrooms to be calmer, creating a better environment for learning.

The nutritional content of the school dinners improved during the programme so children



A healthy free school meal at Adelaide Primary School in Hull during the 'Eat well, do well' programme. Photo from Hull City Council.

meals experiment

were eating less fat and salt and getting more vitamins. More teachers also started to eat the lunches themselves, which suggested the food was more appealing. An analysis of the packed lunches showed that the children were eating too much saturated fat, sugar and salt and overall calories, but still lacking in micronutrients.

It is impossible to attribute improvements in educational performance solely to diet and there have been other support projects in the schools, but it is worth noting that the recent Key Stage 2 results in primary schools are the best they have ever been.

Colquhoun also notes that the 64% take-up in Hull was about the best even free school meals can expect because some children just do not like them and some parents prefer packed lunches.

The end of free school meals: the Lib Dem policy

Earlier this year, the Liberal Democrat-controlled council decided to stop the universal free school lunch scheme. Since then, the average uptake of school meals has dropped from 64% to around 40%. This is in spite of a marketing campaign over the summer encouraging parents who are eligible for the free meals to register again: it is thought that as many as 1,500 have failed to do so.

One of the other problems is that many people in Hull are on low incomes, but still earn enough to lose their eligibility for free school meals. For many families, £1.10 per day for each child in primary school is not easy to find. Councillor Glew mentioned that she recently saw a child with last night's cold fish and chips in their packed lunch.

When Councillor Mike Ross (who holds the life-long learning portfolio) was asked how they would spend the £1 million that would be saved by scrapping the scheme, he said some of it would go on improvements to the school meals service.

He mentioned, "working with children and parents to bring forward a menu that is healthy but acceptable... and to help engage the children with something that they wanted to eat." Rather like the EWDW programme – although he wasn't able to give any examples of projects. He also mentioned that they are intending to spend over 70p on the ingredients for school meals. Current spending is about 67p. Initial reports suggest in fact that the administrative cost of putting charging back in place will be around £1 million a year.

Glew says that she is devastated. "The research is clear, if children are hungry, they can't perform. If they are eating well, their health will improve." For some children, the loss of the free meals may mean, "a loss of life chance and an education."

Professor Colquhoun is now looking at the impact of withdrawing the free lunches. He says that, "children are still telling us that they are hungry... One head teacher described the dining room now as chaotic and messy and another head says that behaviour is worse." Colquhoun explained that hunger remains an important problem nationally. He said, "we were so obsessed with obesity, we have taken our eye off the hunger problem." It is hard not to be moved by this.

■ Fiona Laird, MSc Health Promotion



Ironically, members of the Lib Dem controlled council in Liverpool have visited Hull with a view to providing universal free school meals.

So, these children involved in healthy eating workshops at a school in Rainford, Liverpool may be benefitting from the sort of scheme that the Hull Lib Dems have scrapped.

Cutting the salt

The Food Commission has been working for the past several months with residents of Hexagon Housing Association in south east London on the 'Eat less salt' project. Funded by the Food Standards Agency, the project involves Hexagon staff and residents in free workshops to learn more about how to read labels in order to choose lower salt options and how to cook foods without added salt.

Workshops include special sessions with teens living in temporary accommodation, including teenage mums. The Food Commission has also done sessions with people in care homes who have long-term mental illness.

While the Hexagon community has made a commitment to doing its best to reduce salt consumption, there are serious questions about how well business is doing to help the consumer.

A recent survey of fast food restaurants by the campaigning group, Consensus Action on Salt Health, found shockingly high levels of salt in meal options – including one Pizza Hut meal that contained more than a child's recommended daily salt limit.

After a survey of food products this summer, the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS) said that industry could be doing better to meet Government targets for salt reduction in processed products, and also noted that industry may be deliberately confusing consumers with salt labelling information. For example, packets of chicken nuggets were found which described 15g – or one sole nugget – as a serving and gave nutritional details accordingly.



Reading labels can be a tricky business, but 'Eat less salt' workshops give housing association residents helpful tips.

"It would make it much easier for the consumer to make informed choices if the information was presented in a meaningful way," said Geoffrey Theobald, chairman of LACORS.

"The 'salt per serving' unit should be a realistic quantity and not one that provides a false sense of security to people buying the product."