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NEW NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL MEALS AND OTHER FOOD IN SCHOOLS

Analysis of responses to the consultation document

June 2007

CONSULTATION ON NEW NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL MEALS AND OTHER FOOD IN SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

This report has been based on 120 responses to the consultation document. Information about the consultation was issued to approximately 1,200 grant-aided schools and various other interested parties, eg Education and Library Boards, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, MLAs, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, Health Trusts and Food Manufacturers.

The organisational breakdown of respondents was as follows:

Parent	10
Principal	19
Teacher	7
School Caterer	5
Education and Library Board	4
Union Representative	3
Food Manufacturer	7
Dietitian/Nutritionist	16
Other Health Profession	19
Other*	30

* Those which fell into the 'other' category included the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, NICVA, the Consumer Council and several local Councils.

Analysis of Responses

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to identify the capacity in which they were responding. Four broad categories were developed from this information in order to understand the responses. The categories were:

- Customers – a category of 44 respondents consisting of those who made use of the service, or who were responsible for those who use the service (parents, teachers, principals, other school staff) in the nursery, primary, post-primary and special school sectors.
- Providers – a category of 19 respondents consisting of caterers, Education and Library Boards and food manufacturers.
- Health Professionals – a category of 46 respondents consisting of dietitians, nutritionists and other health professionals.
- Others – a category of 11 consisting of those outlined above.

The report starts with an overview, followed by a summary analysis of each question within the consultation.

OVERVIEW

When considering the results of the consultation, the low response rate of less than 10% (120 respondents) is evident as information about the consultation document was issued to over 1,200 schools and other interested parties as well as being more widely available through the DE Website.

Overall, the vast majority of respondents enthusiastically welcomed the food-based standards for school meals with many asking for even higher standards, eg the inclusion of more oily fish. Most acknowledged that setting standards to improve the nutritional quality of school meals was essential to the future health of young people.

Although there was also widespread support for the nutrient-based standards, a small number of respondents, ie providers and health professionals, felt it would be rather complex for catering staff to translate these into menus.

There was widespread support for the whole-school policy with respondents stating the importance of a partnership approach between schools, parents, the wider community and the health sector. Respondents also suggested that School Nutrition Action Groups (SNAGs) should be set up.

There was widespread support for the standards applying to vending machines, breakfast clubs, after school clubs, tuck shops and break time snacks. However, a small number of respondents felt that tuck shops should be retained in light of the income they generate and to provide pupils with some element of choice. It should be noted that it is not intended to completely remove other such sources of foods but rather to review and determine their content.

The proposed timescale for introducing new food-based standards in all schools by September 2006, as in England, had wide support.

Although most respondents were happy with the introduction of the standards, many stated that more Government funding would be required to continue with the nutritional standards programme. A small majority felt that parents would not be prepared to pay more for school meals.

SUMMARY

FOOD-BASED STANDARDS – SCHOOL MEALS ONLY

The Government is currently proposing that specific food-based standards be applied to schools in England. These standards generally reflect (with minor variations) the position in Northern Ireland where an increasing number of schools are joining the Nutritional Standards programme. The standards are:-

Food Standards	
Fruit and Vegetables	Not less than 2 portions per day per child, at least one of which should be salad or vegetables, and at least one of which should be fruit.
Oily Fish	On the school lunch menu at least once every 3 weeks.
Deep Fried Products eg chips, roast potatoes, other fried potatoes, garlic bread	Meals should not contain more than two deep fried products in a single week.
Processed Foods	Should not be reformed/reconstituted foods made from “meat slurry”.
Bread (without spread)	Available unrestricted throughout lunch.
Confectionery and savoury snacks	Not available through school lunches.
Salt/Highly Salted Condiments	Not available at lunch tables or at the service counter.
Drinks	The only drinks available should be water (still or fizzy), skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, pure fruit juices, yoghurt and milk drinks with less than 10% added sugar, or combinations of these (eg smoothies).
Water	Easy access to free, fresh, chilled drinking water.

We would welcome your view on these standards.

There were 114 responses to this question, with almost unanimous support for the standards. Some did comment as to the practicalities of actually implementing the standards and the possible financial implications.

Customers –There were 40 responses to this question with all respondents supporting the standards and 9 emphasising the need for even higher standards. Typical quotes from this group include:-

“The Nutritional Standards programme has addressed the need to give the children a balanced diet to ensure healthy minds and bodies. I have no doubt that children's ability to progress in the curriculum is linked to their diets.” (Primary School Principal);

“I welcome the food based standards being proposed. [...] PS has been part of the ‘Pilot Programme’ for the introduction of the Nutritional Standards. I have been very

disappointed by the quantities of food, and the quality of the products on many occasions. The introduction of these standards needs to be closely monitored as ‘saving money’ seems to be the main agenda in school kitchens.” (Primary School Principal); and

“The above standards are excellent nutritionally, the challenge will be to encourage children to eat things like oily fish, fruit and veg. I recently ran a promotion in the school canteens where pupils got a free piece of fruit if they chose a healthy meal. But a lot of pupils did not take the free fruit, even though they chose a healthy meal.” (Secondary School Teacher)

Providers – There were 18 responses to this question with only 1 respondent not supporting the standards. 8 providers, although supporting the standards, also sought further clarification on some issues. eg. processed food, drinking water, oily fish, deep fried products, salt, red meat. The provider not supporting the standards believes that for 11 to 18 year olds the drinks that may be purchased from vending machines are too restrictive.

Health Professionals - There were 45 responses to this question with all respondents supporting the standards, and 31 of these emphasising again the need for even higher standards. eg. number of portions of oily fish should be increased, elimination of reconstituted red meat from the menu, wholemeal brown or high fibre bread should be readily available, acidic fizzy water should not be provided.

Others – There were 11 responses to this question all supporting the standards and 4 respondents emphasising the need for even higher standards eg. elimination of white processed bread and more wholemeal bread on offer, no less than 3 portions of fruit and vegetables per day.

Overall Summary – There was overwhelming support for the food-based standards with a significant number requesting even higher standards.

NUTRIENT-BASED STANDARDS

The Government is also proposing that specific nutrient-based standards be applied to schools in England. These are outlined in the table below. The figures are for the recommended nutrient content of an average lunch over five consecutive school days.

Nutrient Standards	
Energy	30% of the estimated average requirement (EAR)
Fat	Not more than 35% of food energy
Saturated fat	Not more than 11% of food energy
Total carbohydrate	Not less than 50% of food energy
Non-milk extrinsic sugars (loosely termed “added sugars”)	Not more than 11% of food energy
Fibre	Not less than 30% of the calculated dietary reference value (see below)
Protein	Not less than 30% of the reference nutrient intake (RNI)
Iron	Not less than 40% of the RNI
Zinc	Not less than 40% of the RNI
Calcium	Not less than 40% of the RNI
Vitamin A	Not less than 40% of the RNI
Vitamin C	Not less than 40% of the RNI
Folate	Not less than 40% of the RNI
Sodium	Not more than 30% of the SACN recommendations

EAR: Estimated Average Requirement
 RNI: Reference Nutrient Intake
 SACN: Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition

We would welcome your view on these standards.

There were 94 responses to this question and only 8 respondents not supporting the nutrient-based standards.

Customers – There were 33 responses to this question with all respondents supporting the nutrient-based standards and 5 emphasising the need for even higher standards eg. fat content appears high, salt should be banned from all dining rooms and school kitchens.

Providers – There were 14 responses to this question with all but 4 respondents supporting the nutrient-based standards. A provider who does not support them states, “Information from some English school meals providers would indicate that planning a menu which meets nutrient standards and which is appealing to children is extremely difficult”. (Education and Library Board)

Health Professionals - There were 38 responses to this question with all but 4 respondents supporting the nutrient-based standards and 12 of these emphasising the need for them to be translated into practical guidance for catering staff. A typical quote

from this group is – “To help school meal caterers, sample menus demonstrating how they can reach the food and nutrient based standards would be useful”. (Dietitian)

Others – There were 9 responses to this question all supporting the nutrient-based standards. A very positive quote was – “The consultation outlines the specific nutrient-based standards that represent the recommended nutrient content of an average lunch over 5 consecutive school days”. (Consumer organisation)

Overall Summary – There was significant support for the nutrient-based standards, with only a small number of providers and health professionals not supporting them, as they believed it would be rather complex for catering staff to translate them into menus.

WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD POLICIES

(This considers food consumed by pupils other than as part of the main lunchtime meal.)

The Minister has indicated that vending machines should link in with the same healthy standards as school lunches and we propose that food provided by schools in other areas is also covered. However, we would like to know whether or not you agree. (The Department for Education and Skills in England is consulting on draft standards for these areas which have been recommended by the independent School Food Trust. A copy of the proposed standards is included in Annex B.)

1. Should appropriate standards be applied to:

- vending machines?	Yes	111	No	1
- breakfast clubs?	Yes	112	No	0
- after school clubs?	Yes	110	No	2
- tuck shops?	Yes	107	No	5
- break time snacks?	Yes	111	No	2

There was widespread support for a whole school policy with over 95% of the respondents agreeing that standards should be applied to all of the above. Some did, however, express concern about the availability of nuts in schools due to the increasing prevalence of nut allergies.

Customers – Quotes from two primary school principals emphasise the support – “Has to be a whole school approach in order to be successful. We consulted with parents and agreed and implemented a total ban on junk foods. It has been a major success.” “If we are genuinely to strive for an overall improvement in pupil’s eating habits it has to be across the school and across Nursery/Primary/Secondary sectors as well.” Several customers highlighted the fact that some children are only purchasing food from their tuck shop for lunch and if these were removed it would “greatly encourage pupils to purchase healthier options”. (Secondary School Teacher)

A few customers were not happy with the standards applying to tuck shops, believing that a tuck shop provided valuable income and that pupils should still retain some element of choice – “Pupils do not learn from total withdrawal of unhealthy food. They have to be equipped with knowledge to help them make informed decisions when faced with choices, especially when outside the school environment.” (Secondary School Principal)

Providers, Health Professionals, Others - Agreed nearly 100% that the standards should be applied to all of the areas above.

2. Should schools take steps to prohibit pupils from:

- leaving school premises to purchase food locally?	Yes	91	No	14
- ordering food to be delivered to the school?	Yes	104	No	5

87% of the respondents agreed with the first suggestion and 95% for the latter.

Customers – 88% of the customers agreed that pupils should be prohibited from leaving schools and 93% from ordering food in, with a typical quote from this group being – “ If children are educated in making healthy choices, healthy options are available, and the quality and quantity is good there will be no need for children to leave the school premises or order food in. We must accept that some canteens are not providing quality lunches.” (Primary School Principal) A small number of customers felt that to prohibit pupils from leaving school would be difficult to monitor and supervise, especially for senior pupils and those with parental permission.

Providers – 80% of this group agreed that pupils should be prohibited from leaving school and 100% from ordering food in – “Allowing children to leave school premises to purchase food locally, to have food delivered to the school, is not acceptable in terms of the Whole School Approach and brings into question issues around health and safety and food safety.” (Education and Library Board)

Health Professionals – 95% of this group agreed that pupils should be prohibited from leaving school and ordering food in. Characteristic of this group is the following quote – “It is most likely that children and young people will use this opportunity to purchase and eat foods such as fast food, snack food and confectionery. In allowing pupils access to purchase food outside of schools, schools are in fact going against the ethos of promoting healthy eating in school.” (Body representing Health Professionals)

Others – 60% of this group (6 respondents) agreed that pupils should be prohibited from leaving school and all 9 respondents from ordering food in. “By prohibiting children from leaving the school at lunchtime it will assist in promoting a healthy eating culture for the whole school community.” (Local Council)

All categories had a very small number of respondents who felt that out of school access should be available for senior pupils as part of their maturing process and raised the problem of supervision to prevent pupils from leaving school at lunchtime.

Any other suggestions to encourage the development of a Whole School Approach?

86 respondents provided suggestions to this question with the most prevalent being:

- 31 respondents suggested that links to the curriculum (Home Economics etc) are required.
- 26 respondents suggested that a partnership approach is required between schools, pupils, parents, the community and the health sector.
- 19 respondents suggested that School Nutrition Action Groups (SNAGs) should be set up.

Overall Summary – There was substantial support for the whole school policy, which is fundamental to the success of the nutritional standards programme.

TIMETABLE FOR NEW NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS

At present the proposal in England is to introduce new food-based standards in ALL schools by September 2006.

Do you consider this timescale is right? Yes 86 No 26

There was widespread agreement that the timescale is right within all categories except for the providers. They felt the strongest that the timescale was not right, with just over half of all respondents choosing no. A typical quote from this group is - "There is concern that if standards are implemented without a sound whole school approach that meal numbers may decrease." (Education and Library Board)

If your answer is no what do you think should be an appropriate date for introducing food-based standards?

The majority of the no respondents thought this should be September 2007 to allow more time for organisation, preparation and the training of staff.

COST OF SCHOOL MEALS

The cost of school meals is met through a combination of expenditure from Education and Library Boards and other school authorities, schools and parents.

Is enough financial priority being given to school meals? Yes 7 No 98

Would parents be prepared to pay more for higher quality meals? Yes 40 No 53

Comments

93% of the respondents (all categories) did not believe that enough financial priority was being given to school meals and over half (57%) would not be prepared to pay more for higher quality meals.

All categories felt overwhelmingly that more Government funding is required and that parents on low incomes with more than one child at school cannot afford to pay more. The numbers agreeing that parents would be prepared to pay more for higher quality meals were consistent within the four groups.

Any other comments on the nutritional standards proposals?

64 respondents provided additional comments on the nutritional standards proposals revealing:

- A partnership approach is required between schools, pupils, parents, the community and the health sector.
- Support for the involvement of the Inspectorate.
- Long-term health benefits will balance the initial funding investment.
- More sustained Government funding is necessary.
- Links to the curriculum (Home Economics etc) are required.
- Marketing and promotion/publicity are required.
- Monitoring and evaluation arrangements need to be clarified.

STANDARDS FOR FOOD OTHER THAN LUNCH IN SCHOOLS

The following standards for food sold in schools through vending machines, tuck shops and at break times, breakfast clubs and after school have been proposed by the independent School Food Trust and are the subject of consultation by the Department for Education and Skills in England:

- (i) no confectionary should be sold in schools;
- (ii) no bagged savoury snacks other than nuts and seeds (without added salt or sugar) should be sold in schools;
- (iii) a variety of fruit and vegetables should be available in all school food outlets. This could include fresh, dried, frozen, canned and juiced varieties.
- (iv) children and young people must have easy access at all times to free, fresh, preferably chilled, water in schools so that children do not have to depend on going to the lavatory to get water;
- (v) the only other drinks available should be bottled water (still or sparkling), skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, pure fruit juices, yoghurt and milk drinks (with less than 5 per cent added sugar) or drinks made from combinations of these, eg smoothies, low calorie hot chocolate, tea and coffee. Artificial sweeteners could be used in yoghurt and milk drinks; and
- (vi) every school should have a whole school food and nutrition policy, preferably reflected in its single School Plan.

The Trust also recommends that only food-based standards should be applied to school food other than school lunches. They advise that it would be inappropriate to set standards expressed in nutrient terms for food services for the whole school day.