



Better Eating, Better Learning: A new context for school food

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in Scotland

For information only to England, Northern Ireland and Wales

Key Issues

"The aim of this report is to offer inspiration and support by sharing and encouraging action and will help practitioners to challenge what they do, discuss how to make it better and work with others to drive change forward" – BEBL Working Group

This report includes the following recommendations:-

- Resetting school food as an education and health service
- Using school food to tackle our prevailing health and environmental problems
- Encouraging innovation and partnership working to reinforce positive food behaviours

1.0 Introduction

Despite the significant amount of progress made in school food provision and food education through the recommendations set out in Hungry for Success eleven years ago, the diet of Scottish children still manages to fall short of the recommendations for a healthy balanced diet. The Better Eating, Better Learning (BEBL) report argues that by refocusing and resetting school food as an education and health service we can encourage food behaviour change, make a sizeable dent in our prevailing health and environmental problems and make significant monetary savings in the longer term on linked costs such as the funds spent on preventable diet-related illnesses by the NHS.

In order to ensure that Scottish children have a healthy balanced diet, there are a number of challenges to overcome such as the limited understanding of the value of school food, determining how to encourage widespread involvement from stakeholders in the changes, staff behavioural change and training, reorganising and rethinking procurement, improving the lunchtime experience, ensuring children put their learning into practice and the promotion of the changed and improved service. The report can be accessed online at:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/03/8564>

APSE has already published a related briefing this year (14/01) entitled 'Scottish Government free school meals P1-P3 pupils', which can be accessed by [clicking here](#) or by visiting the Briefings section of the APSE website.

2.0 Challenges and Opportunities

The report cogently argues that schools – with their access to families and as a provider of both education and a food service – are ideally placed to make a positive influence on the dietary choices of children. By looking at the many challenges faced as opportunities for improvement and innovation, the BEBL report outlines the problems ahead and offers real solutions to combat them.

Scotland has one of the highest obesity rates in the world – around thirty-one percent of children aged two to fifteen are either overweight or obese; these children are at risk of serious diet-related conditions like diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers. Since obesity is especially prevalent in low income communities, revolutionising school food provides a real opportunity to tackle the health problems of those that need the most assistance while impacting on other deprivation-related issues like educational attainment. Unchecked, obesity will be an unsustainable burden on our NHS which is already under considerable strain as a result of our rapidly ageing population.

This proposed change in school food also presents the opportunity to make considerable progress towards meeting total climate emissions targets, will allow us to build our resilience against growing global food competition, will enable us to protect our biodiversity and will help to bring new business prospects to our local economies. This has implications for food production, processing, distribution and consumption.

There are a number of challenges that must be overcome in order to provide children with a healthy balanced diet. A related research paper by Children in Scotland (CiS) found that children were in most cases already being given the knowledge, skills and experience to make the best food choices, but that they didn't always put their learning into practice; CiS also highlighted the need to include and consult children on their preferences and on changes to the service in order to maintain uptake. Engagement with all stakeholders of the food service is one of the biggest challenges in overcoming limited understanding of the value of school food and correcting any misconceptions they have that may hold back progress; using strategies that will reach different groups of people will be the most effective method in dealing with this kind of challenge. Other methods of improving stakeholder engagement detailed in the report include running local campaigns and holding tasting sessions at parents' evenings to make parents aware of the benefits of school food.

There are also a number of lessons that schools will need to learn, including what attracts children to food businesses on the high street in order to revamp their own service in a way that encourages uptake of school food; for instance, some schools have adapted to a more social cafe-style approach to their dining areas with great success.

Another area the report touches on is staff behavioural change surrounding the service. The report highlights the fact that catering staff can play a key role in positively influencing the food choices of young people and that gaining staff commitment and optimal performance appears to be linked to levels of staff training and their understanding of the part they play in the process, so it's important that staff have access to training opportunities and are included and consulted in any changes to the service. Behavioural change isn't only limited to catering staff though, as teaching

staff are being encouraged to make food part of the curriculum by making connections between curricular areas and school menus (e.g. Italian history alongside an Italian food menu) to broaden children's palates, using cross-curricular projects to promote healthy eating (e.g. an enterprise project where a group of pupils plan, publicise and prepare school meals for the whole school), having practical kitchen work experience in primary schools, using outdoor settings to teach children how to grow food and more; to assist teachers in building interdisciplinary learning into their lessons, Education Scotland have developed resource and support materials on health and well-being.

The report calls for a need to rethink procurement through innovative menu development to increase schools resilience against the rising cost of food without resorting to any compromise of quality; the need to maintain quality is also important in food transportation and thought should be given to the delivery time and temperature in order to maintain the nutritional quality of school food. By recognising that schools are opportunity creators for local businesses and are therefore in a position to demand resource efficient products and new delivery arrangements, local authorities can drive change to sustainable models that will bring environmental improvements in terms of reduced emissions and waste, and will bring economic benefits to their local community.

The report also includes an accompanying self-evaluation tool to be completed by schools, local authorities and caterers. Alongside each challenge is the opportunity to note 'where we are now' and your action plan to improve your service. It can be accessed at:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/bettereatingtool>

3.0 APSE Comment

APSE welcomes this publication and the important contribution it will make to securing Scotland's future. APSE recognises that the dietary choices and habits formed at a young age can have a significant impact on health inequalities and target the prevailing health problems most commonly found in low income communities; it is also encouraging that these recommendations will enable us to tackle environmental problems, bring new opportunities to local businesses and reduce the unsustainably high cost to the NHS caused by diet-related illnesses, especially when budgets are being stretched more than ever before.

APSE recognises the innovative whole-school approach that schools in Scotland are taking to overcome the misconceptions stakeholders have about school food, while finding ways to change how children feel about food through interdisciplinary learning and adapting the service to improve their health and their dining experience through measures such as Renfrewshire's recycling monitors programme to direct waste to the correct bins. APSE is pleased that the report encourages increased access to training opportunities for staff and hopes this will increase their investment in the service and their overall job satisfaction.

APSE recognises that even in times of financial difficulty for local authorities, they should always be recognised as opportunity creators for businesses that can drive change, and that reductions in quality shouldn't be the default method of thinking for service providers; through consulting with stakeholders, many schools and local authorities highlighted in this report have come up with novel solutions to universal problems that are well worthy of wider replication.

APSE is currently conducting a wider price of research to determine the outcomes from the return of Public Health to local authorities in England through Health & Wellbeing Boards and the involvement of local authorities in delivering health interventions in Scotland, Wales and Northern

Ireland. The focus will initially be on nutrition and opportunities within schools including the impact of school meals and also on physical activity mainly within leisure centres. Both have a potential impact on obesity and longer term outcomes around diabetes and cardiac health. For further information on this research please contact Rob Bailey, Principal Advisor on Rbailey@apse.org.uk

APSE/ASSIST's Better Eating, Better Learning seminar will be held on 22nd May 2014 at the Apex, Waterloo Place, Edinburgh; this will provide local authorities the opportunity to hear what this report means for them and how they can put these changes into practice. Please contact the Scotland office at 01698 459 051 or by e-mail at glee@apse.org.uk for more information.

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