

Response to Consultation on School Meals Scotland Bill

Background

Barnardo's Scotland provides over 60 children's services throughout Scotland, employing 600 staff and assisting over 10,000 children, young people and families. The services provided are diverse covering all age groups from early years through to young adults. Services include working with children's behavioural difficulties, providing educational support, providing family support, assisting families affected by disabilities, HIV, youth offending and homelessness and working with looked after children and those leaving care. In addition Barnardo's Scotland runs two schools, Blackford Brae and Lecropt. In these, we run breakfast clubs and are implementing healthy eating programmes including the provision of high quality school meals.

Barnardo's Scotland has consistently highlighted the human, social and economic costs of poverty. Our "Counting the Cost of Child Poverty" report looked at the ongoing cost of poverty, and considered the benefits achieved, and savings incurred, through intervention at an early stage. Our "Silver Spoon" advertising campaign in 2003 demonstrated that from the very beginning children born into poverty will have a very different set of expectations and opportunities than those born into more affluent families and called for a minimum income guarantee for families.

Our 2004 report "*Burger Boy, Sporty Girl: children and young people's attitudes towards food in schools*" interviewed nursery, primary and secondary school children across the UK in order that the voices of children themselves could be heard in the school meals debate and to determine what social and environmental factors influenced their food choices.

QUESTION 1:

(a) The main proposal of the Free School Meals (Scotland) Bill is to provide free school meals to all Scottish children in state primary schools. Do you support this extension?

Barnardo's Scotland wholeheartedly supports the stated policy goal of improving the health, wellbeing and educational attainment of Scottish children. We accept the arguments presented regarding diet, health and school attainment. However, we do not feel able to support the proposal to introduce universal free school meals to all primary children. Whilst we are committed to providing benefits where they are needed, we remain to be convinced that the extension to universal provision is the most effective use of limited resources.

Barnardo's Scotland believes that additional investment in school meals is needed. In our answer to question 9 we consider a package of measures to promote take-up and quality of school meals and some of these will require extra funds. These include the extension of free meals to additional families in poverty, investment in the attractiveness and nutritional quality of food, improvements in dining room and kitchen facilities, the roll-out of swipe card technology to reduce stigma and the extended opening of facilities for breakfast clubs

and school holiday provision. We believe that any additional spending must be carefully directed across a range of measures.

We have looked in some detail at the Dundee research quoted in the consultation document as supporting the case for universal provision. We do not agree that this work “demonstrates that means-testing is economically inefficient” and suggest that the opposite may in fact be the case. From the researchers’ own figures, a change from the current system to universal provision would deliver more money to households in the ninth income decile (second richest group) than to those in the second decile (second poorest group). It would also deliver more to each one of the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth income deciles than to the poorest decile.

Question 2:

As well as extending entitlement to free school meals to all primary school children the Bill would also give powers to Scottish Ministers to further extend provision to older children. On what grounds would you favour extension to older children –(please tick all the options which you would support)

Barnardo’s Scotland accepts the benefits which would accrue from widespread take-up of free, nutritious school meals. However, as indicated above, we question whether universal provision will produce greater benefits for children than other, more targeted, use of the same resources. Grounds for our support of extending universal provision would therefore be the removal of the current financial constraints.

Question 3:

The Bill would give free school meals to all primary school children in state schools but if Ministers chose to further extend provision to older children who would you support gaining entitlement?

If Ministers did choose to make additional funds available to extend provision by age group then we would favour targeting younger age groups first. We would also suggest looking into the benefits and feasibility of extending support to those in early years provision.

Question 4:

At the time of the “Hungry for Success” report Scottish Ministers introduced measures to eliminate children experiencing stigma when they took free school meals. In your personal or professional experience do you believe that stigma still exists for those claiming free meals?

We are not aware of any recent comprehensive research into the extent and influence of stigma on the take-up of school meals in Scotland. In the meantime we accept that it does exist and suggest that more needs to be done to ensure national roll-out of measures such as anonymous swipe-card or other pre-pay technology, as well as investment in the quality of school meals and dining facilities, which will help to ensure wider take-up through combating the perception of school meals as the poor, low-quality option.

Question 5:

Do you think that the advertising of junk food and fizzy/sugary drinks in schools should be regulated and effectively banned?

Yes. Barnardo's Scotland believes that fizzy drinks should not be available as options in school meals and therefore it is difficult to see what place advertisements for such would have on school premises. If a suitable definition of the term "junk food" can be agreed then a similar argument would apply.

Question 6:

Do you think that vending machines dispensing unhealthy foods should be regulated and effectively banned from school premises?

Yes. However we do not view this in terms of restricting choices for young people, as pupils will still have many opportunities to come into contact with junk food outside of school. Given that when children have the choice they tend to choose unhealthy foods, there is no reason for schools to add to those opportunities.

The Burger Boy researchers found that "For secondary school students with rules at home, lunchtime was an opportunity to eat more fast food than was allowed at home. Some young people said that they would consume more junk food at school just because it was widely available."

We note the remarks of Westminster Education Secretary Ruth Kelly MP at the recent Labour Party Conference "Because children need healthy options throughout the school day . . . from next September no school will be able to have vending machines selling crisps, chocolate, or sugary fizzy drinks" and that vending machines will have to stock items such as milk, bottled water and fresh fruit instead. Given the relatively advanced situation to date in Scottish schools, it would be ironic to now be left behind by colleagues south of the Border.

Question 7:

The Bill will require Scottish Ministers to set nutritional standards for school meals. Which existing set of standards do you think they should be based on:

Barnardo's Scotland agrees that nutritional standards for school meals should be compulsory. The National Heart Forum and Caroline Walker Trust have established an independent expert group on childhood nutrition to define school food nutrient based standards. These standards therefore provide an excellent benchmark with which to measure the quality of school meals.

Question 8:

Who do you think should be ultimately responsible for dealing with complaints about the nutritional quality of school meals?

Barnardo's Scotland believes that there should be provision for school pupils and their parents to complain about, or otherwise comment on, the provision and standards of

school meals. HMIE (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education) should be given responsibility of monitoring and enforcing standards. HMIE already has the infrastructure and the enforcement powers to carry out this role. Standards and take-up of school meals should be taken as part of the overall performance of schools.

Question 9:

How would you encourage children to eat healthier food?

Barnardo's Scotland would support a strong package of measures aimed at tackling poverty and ill health through increasing the uptake of high quality school meals:

- We support some extension of the current eligibility for free school meals, to cover households in poverty which are excluded by the existing criteria
- We favour greater investment in the attractiveness and nutritional quality of the meals provided
- We call for a more robust approach to tackling the stigma attached to free school meals, e.g. through ensuring national use of anonymous swipecard technology and phasing out cash-based cafeterias, ensuring the value of a free meal is enough to buy what's on offer and developing school meals as a high-standard, healthy choice
- We believe that schools should remove junk food and fizzy drinks from menus, on the grounds that children and young people already have many opportunities to indulge in unhealthy eating and schools should not add to that existing choice
- We note that optimum use of existing facilities can be achieved through extension of breakfast clubs and wraparound care, coupled with greater support for poor families during the Summer and other holidays (when the support provided to poor families by free school meals is withdrawn altogether)
- We feel there is a need for decent dining areas that will appeal to pupils, and so support investment in the attractiveness and appropriateness of dining premises
- We suggest that improving the culture of school dining halls, for example by encouraging teachers to take meals with the pupils, has the potential to increase take-up.

Even if the standard and accessibility of school meals can be improved, we must remember that children and families will still be influenced by personal preferences and cultural influences outside of school. As the Burger Boy report concluded "As a society we have to reclaim responsibility for what our children eat."