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Dear Ernie

Improving the health and nutrition of Scotland's children

Please find attached my submission to the above consultation. If you require any additional information please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely

Shona Robison MSP

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Improving the Health and Nutrition of Scotland's Children – Consultation on the Schools (Nutrition and Health Promotion) (Scotland) Bill

Response from Shona Robison MSP

This submission is for the Scottish Executive's consultation on the Schools (Nutrition and Health Promotion) (Scotland) Bill entitled, *Improving the health and nutrition of Scotland's children*.

This submission will primarily deal with looking at free school meals, doubling the number of school nurses, and introducing annual fitness checks as pro-active measures to improve the health of Scotland's youngsters.

Introduction

The invitation to contribute to this consultation is to be welcomed. Much of the sentiment included in the bill is positive and hopefully will help improve the health and nutrition of Scotland's young people.

However, there is always scope to be imaginative with new legislation and this submission intends to expand on some of the ideas within the consultation document and in some instances, going further than some of the proposed measures.

School meals

While progress has been made with Hungry for Success, further research on the concept of free school meals is needed. I would recommend introducing a pilot scheme of free nutritious school meals for P1-P3. This will allow us to monitor the success of the scheme with a possible view to implementing it for all school children.

Well fed children have been proven to perform better academically. Indeed, teachers in Hull – the only council in England to offer free school meals when it was introduced as a pilot scheme in 2004 – have said they had seen an improvement in concentration among pupils since the healthy meals were introduced¹. The scheme proved so popular that as many as 95% of children were eating school meals in Hull and eating fresh fruit and vegetables each day².

A noble aim of this bill is to promote and increase the uptake of school meals, in particular free school meals.³ Statistics suggest making all meals free has a direct bearing on their uptake. Indeed Finland and Sweden who both offer free school meals to all pupils have a higher take up of them. Finland has turned its health around by giving all children access to free school meals. The meals are nutritious, simple and use local produce with over 90% of children taking it up. In Sweden, teachers sit with pupils to create a valuable educational experience taking a 'whole child' approach to health.

Therefore, the Scottish Executive should initiate pilot schemes across Scotland and provide adequate support for all local authorities to provide free school meals using,

¹ The Guardian, Wednesday June 7, 2006

² The Guardian, Wednesday June 7, 2006

³ improving the health and nutrition of Scotland's children

where possible, fresh local produce for P1-P3. This would allow information to be gathered to properly assess what works best for Scotland and the best route forward is to improve the health of our nation's children. Using local produce would also ensure that the scheme is sustainable, cheaper and educational for the children who should be encouraged to discuss and learn where their food comes from.

Low take-up

There are many reasons why take up of free school meals is low. The most notable is the stigma attached to receiving a free school meal. The consultation document correctly identifies this problem and suggests increasing the numbers of schools who use an anonymous system of allocating free school meals to those entitled to them.

Recent figures show that 33% of mainstream schools had an anonymous system for free school meals receipt, up from 26 per cent in 2004⁴. However, the numbers of those entitled to and actually taking a free meal has decreased from 69% in 2004 to 67% in 2005⁵. Arguably, this could suggest that the anonymous system of claiming a free meal is not encouraging a higher take-up. Therefore, more action needs to be taken.

17 year-old Dundee pupil

"In some schools, a swipe card system is operated for school meals where each pupil has their own card onto which they may put money to purchase their lunch. Although this affords a degree of anonymity to those who receive free school meals, it can discourage others due to the often time-consuming nature of queuing to put money on the card. In addition, if the card is forgotten or misplaced, the pupil may find it difficult to purchase lunch from school due to the hostility of the school towards 'card sharing' or the expense of purchasing a new card (£2.50). These problems, when combined with the proximity of local shops offering 'junk food' such as fizzy drinks that are not sold at school, lead to a down turn in uptake of school meals which can affect pupils' health."

25 year-old former pupil, Perth

"After leaving school, I realised that I was entitled to free school meals at primary school. However, my parents decided to not take up this offer, despite it potentially giving them much needed support. Their rationale behind this decision, was purely down to the stigma attached to it. The school was small and everyone's families knew one another. If I had taken a free-meal, it would have been around the villages in a second. It is a pity, nearly 20 years on, the same problems still exist."

Physical Activity

The commitment to recruit more PE teachers and to set a target of two hours of physical activity per week for school children is welcomed. This will help improve our children's health and solve the problem of Scottish children receiving less PE than most other countries in the developed world.

⁴ SCHOOL MEALS IN SCOTLAND, JANUARY 2005, 7 June, 2005 - A Scottish Executive National Statistics Publication

⁵ SCHOOL MEALS IN SCOTLAND, JANUARY 2005, 7 June, 2005 - A Scottish Executive National Statistics Publication

However, in order to make sure all pupils have PE I would recommend that the Scottish Executive stops allowing the selling-off of school playing fields and end the reduction of school facilities as part of PPP programmes. What is the point of encouraging more physical activity if there are no pitches or they are too expensive to use?

School Nurses

Figures suggest that there are only 305 school nurses – one for every 2,850 pupils. If the numbers were doubled, it would allow school nurses to focus on preventative measures to cure ill-health, especially in deprived areas. A study by the Royal College of Nursing revealed 83% of school nurses concurred with the need to increase numbers.

As a way to assess the health of children through school, annual health checks should be introduced and individual health plans should be drawn up through the primary school years. By introducing an annual check-up and giving more control to the child to improve their own health, it will create a new thinking and encourage youngsters to adopt a healthy lifestyle that will stay with them through adulthood.

Conclusion

It should be reiterated that much of what is contained within the Bill and consultation document is to be welcomed and will hopefully help improve the health of our nation's children. However, there is much more that could be achieved within the devolved settlement to truly tackle the growing problems of poor health and obesity.

We need to extend the eligibility of free-school meals and properly assess the benefits it would bring by universally allocating them to P1-P3. This would give the opportunity to examine the situation and to look at Scottish solutions for our growing problem.

More PE and more PE teacher recruitment is an aim that I doubt many would have trouble agreeing with, however, we need to ensure there are playing fields and facilities in which to teach the pupils and that such facilities are affordable to use.

Doubling the numbers of school nurses is again, a proactive way to tackle poor health and has the support of the RCN. I would urge this to be examined and included in the Bill.

This Bill is a start to remedying the problem of poor health and I look forward to further debate on its content once it is presented to parliament.