

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 May 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

14th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

WITNESSES

Richard Blackburn (Association of Public Service Excellence)
Fergus Chambers (Glasgow City Council)
Craig Clement (Angus Council)
Keith Downton (City of Edinburgh Council)
Councillor Eric Gotts (East Dunbartonshire Council)
Councillor Helen Law (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Frances McInnes (Unison)
David Melvin (Glasgow City Council)
Des Murray (Association of Public Service Excellence)
Danny Phillips (Child Poverty Action Group)
Mary Senior (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Linda Shanahan (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Grahame Smith (Scottish Trades Union Congress)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Susan Duffy

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Tuesday 7 May 2002

(Afternoon)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:34*]

The Deputy Convener (Mr Frank McAveety): Good afternoon, and welcome to this meeting of the Scottish Parliament Education, Culture and Sport Committee. I ask that everyone ensure that all mobile telephones and pagers are turned off.

I welcome Cathy Peattie, who is a committee substitute. She is here on behalf of the Labour party. I also welcome Tommy Sheridan, who is sponsor of the bill that we will consider later. In accordance with standing orders, he is able to participate in this afternoon's meeting. If that is okay with committee members, we will accept that.

This will be my last meeting as deputy convener, and I thank my colleagues for the adulation that I have received. The Parliament still has to determine whether the announcements made by the First Minister at the weekend will be implemented, so it is perhaps premature to make a judgment, but I think that it is sensible for this to be my final meeting, given the time commitment that we are making to the sponsors of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill and members for dealing with the bill at stage 1. Given the post that I may well be fulfilling, I do not intend to ask any specific questions this afternoon, as I think that that would be inappropriate. Some of the issues that we will be discussing today may emerge later in the context of ministerial decisions.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I offer my congratulations. Despite the political differences, I think that all of us on the committee have enjoyed working with you, and I think that you have made a strong and distinguished contribution to the committee in your time as deputy convener and as acting convener.

I am grateful for your assurance about the propriety of your contribution to the meeting. I know that the meeting could not have taken place without your attendance, owing to the rather odd nature of our standing orders. A motion to appoint a junior Scottish minister will not be considered by the Parliament until tomorrow—whatever that motion turns out to be will be a surprise to us, of course—and might well be opposed and defeated, so it is still quite appropriate for you to chair the meeting. I am glad that you have recognised the

circumstances at the start of the meeting, so that there is no question of a conflict of interest.

You leave the committee with our good wishes and, I have to say, some reluctance on our part to see you go.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you very much. Even I am modest at such moments.

Item in Private

The Deputy Convener: We are to decide whether to consider item 4, on the drafting of a proposal for a committee bill, in private. Do we agree to consider item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Petitions

The Deputy Convener: The next item is consideration of two public petitions. The first is petition PE442 from Mr Howard Campbell and Sir Sean Connery. The second, PE468, is from the Scottish Trades Union Congress women's committee. We felt it appropriate to consider that petition today, given its relevance to the main item under examination this afternoon.

Film Industry (PE442)

The Deputy Convener: The first petition is the one from Mr Howard Campbell and Sir Sean Connery. The petitioners call on the Parliament to facilitate the setting up of a film industry in Scotland. The Public Petitions Committee has written to the Scottish Executive for further information, and the Executive's response has been circulated.

We received a report on issues in the Scottish film industry from Mike Russell in early January 2001, and we agreed to factor into our work programme an inquiry into education and training in the media industry. I invite the committee either to agree that no further action be taken in relation to the petition, on the basis that initiatives to develop the film industry are being taken, or to agree to consider whether to undertake further work in this area at the committee's away day in August.

Michael Russell: In January 2001, the committee decided to consider the issues further. The pressure of business did not allow us to do that. I would be happy if we dealt with the petition at our away day in August and considered what action we might take in the coming year to inquire into aspects of the film industry. Not only is the petition well vouched for and well founded, it has distinguished support, and I do not think that we should ignore that. We should consider the petition at our August away day and I hope that we will look into film issues in the final year before the election.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I am disappointed that the distinguished support did not join the committee to launch the petition.

Michael Russell: He might yet do.

Cathy Peattie: I agree with Mike Russell. Important work must be done in respect of the film industry. I remember raising the issue of training and preparing young people for the film industry in Scotland. We wanted to consider training for the film industry in more detail as a result of Mike Russell's report. It would make sense to consider the issue at the away day in the autumn.

The Deputy Convener: The committee broadly approves that proposal. Do members agree that we should deal with the issue at the committee's away day?

Members indicated agreement.

School Meals (PE468)

The Deputy Convener: The next agenda item is petition PE468, on behalf of the women's committee of the Scottish Trades Union Congress. The petition relates to the general principles of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. Are members agreed that we should consider the petition as part of our consideration of the bill at stage 1?

Members indicated agreement.

School Meals (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 3 is oral evidence on the general principles of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. We have received written submissions. A Scottish Parliament information centre briefing paper was posted by e-mail today and hard copies of it are available for members. A note from Tommy Sheridan, who is one of the sponsors of the bill, is also available for members—it has previously been e-mailed. Spare copies of the bill will be available.

There will be a fairly extensive evidence-taking session this afternoon. Des Murray and Richard Blackburn from the Association of Public Service Excellence and David Melvin and Fergus Chambers of direct and care services at Glasgow City Council—Fergus Chambers is the director—are here. Does any witness wish to say something on behalf of his organisation? Members can then ask questions.

Des Murray (Association of Public Service Excellence): The Association of Public Service Excellence thanks the committee for the opportunity to give evidence on the bill. I will be brief, as I am aware that the committee has a number of submissions to discuss.

The association looks after the operational services of all 32 councils in Scotland and has 250 member authority bodies throughout the United Kingdom. We are a tripartite organisation—there is equal involvement from elected members, officers and the trade unions. We are primarily concerned with the on-going delivery of best value in council services.

The association represents the views of the 32 councils. Last week, when we were notified of the opportunity to present evidence, we e-mailed members and asked for their views. There was no objection to the bill's underlying principles—anyone would find it hard to object to the principles of delivering an improved service to schoolchildren and removing the stigma attached to free school meals services in Scotland—but a number of contextual issues arose from the consultation. I have brought Richard Blackburn, who is the managing director of Dumfries and Galloway Council commercial services. He is an expert witness who will tell the committee about the views that were expressed.

Richard Blackburn (Association of Public Service Excellence): As Des Murray said, there are two parts to the proposal. The first part relates to nutritious meals. We have absolutely no quibble with the provision of nutritious meals—we entirely support that. The second part relates to the provision of meals free of charge. We want to

raise a small number of practical issues. If meals were free, would uptake of the school meals service rise? At the moment, the assumption is untested. There are practical limitations in serving meals to all pupils. Currently, most schools have nothing like 100 per cent uptake. If uptake of school meals were to rise dramatically, the question is whether facilities could cope. Would capital be made available to upgrade facilities? It is well known in the school meals business that queueing is as important to schoolchildren as it is to other consumers. There are issues in respect of facilities and capital investment.

We also wonder whether the stigma might continue to exist. If the meals were free, they might be devalued. This is guesswork to a certain extent, but the stigma might be reversed if there was a certain kudos in not taking the meal.

14:45

On a more practical point, we must consider provision. Generally speaking, the cash cafeteria dominates in secondary schools and very few pupils take the standard two-course meal—5 per cent at a maximum. If we were to move to free meals, we would need to get round that problem. Should we provide a free two-course meal or an allowance up to a certain value?

Since 1988, school meals have gone through the revolutionary process of compulsory competitive tendering and have become much more customer responsive. By and large, the cafeterias also trade in other commodities, so there are practical issues about what would be covered by free school meals and how much value they would have.

There is concern in some quarters that, over time, the provision of free meals for all could change the nature of the school catering service, which has changed quite dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years. There has been something of a revolution. The traditional mince and cabbage or boiled rhubarb and custard that members might remember tends not to be found as standard fare any more. Today, the service is much more modernised and customer responsive. A move back to the welfare origins of school meals could change the nature of the service.

I do not know whether the bill's financing is within the committee's remit, but the service deliverers question whether the additional funding to increase the subsidy to 100 per cent would be ring fenced for the provision of free meals for all. Would the funding be hypothecated? Would the provider be paid on the basis of the total school roll or of the meals provided? Some practical issues need to be thought through.

I want to be brief, so I will leave the committee

with one final thought. If we are concerned about nutrition and welfare, could not we consider other, more targeted opportunities? Two possibilities that might come under that category are breakfast clubs and fruit in schools.

The Deputy Convener: Does Fergus Chambers or David Melvin wish to contribute?

Fergus Chambers (Glasgow City Council): I think that our invitation to attend today's meeting was based on Glasgow City Council's reputation for having made a fairly radical move in its school meals service over recent years. After reorganisation, we had a good look at the service, which then had an uptake of about 32 per cent. Over recent years, we have developed a concept called "fuel zone", which has received a lot of positive—and some negative—press. Having more than doubled the uptake of meals, we have a good track record in improving the popularity of the service.

Pricing is not the only issue. The story of fuel zone is probably very much part of the debate. Glasgow believes that giving away meals free is not the only solution. Essentially, if the meals service is not popular, pupils will not attend whether the meals are given away free or whether the charge is £5. I agree entirely with Richard Blackburn's comments about the possibility that providing free meals for all could devalue the service. That is a great risk.

Equally, many educationists would be concerned if the bill was passed and the free meals proved to be successful, as that might put huge pressure on the education service, which has been reducing the time allocated for the school lunch. In my day, the school lunch lasted one hour and 20 minutes, but it is currently sitting at about 40 minutes on average. A significant increase in the usage of school meals would require a radical rethink of the way in which our schools operate. That would certainly present problems for the educationists.

Let me explain Glasgow's biggest concern. The Scottish Executive has recently established an expert panel on school meals with a threefold remit. First, the panel is to establish standards for the nutritional content of school meals—for the first time in many a year. Secondly, the panel will present proposals to eliminate the stigma that is attached to free school meals. Thirdly, it will consider ways in which the popularity of the service can be improved.

I happen to be a member of the so-called expert panel. We are due to present proposals to ministers by the end of May or the beginning of June. The panel is taking a wide variety of opinions from experts, including people in catering and, on the teaching side, in home economics, the

Scottish Consumer Council, the Food Standards Agency, the Health Education Board for Scotland and nutritional and dietary experts. It is a broad forum. Without going into the detail, I inform the committee that the panel is considering a large number of positive initiatives, which may well present better value for money. Glasgow City Council would like to see the outcome of the good work that the panel is preparing for ministers before considering the wider issues of free school meals for all.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Will you expand on your view that making school meals free would devalue the service? Supporters of the bill would say that it will probably have the contrary effect. Will you also expand on the pressure the bill would place on the education service, as opposed to the school meals service? We have quite a lot of evidence on the difference that it would make to catering facilities.

Fergus Chambers: There is much evidence that, if we provide something for free, it does not necessarily attract a value. When Glasgow City Council first developed its fuel zone concept, one of the first schools to convert to the concept was Lourdes Secondary School in the south side of Glasgow. One day, we decided to have a fruit promotion. The head teacher announced over the intercom that every customer that day would receive a free item of fruit and the offer was publicised widely in the school. Only 30 per cent of customers took their free item of fruit, although it was offered to all at the point of sale.

We can learn two lessons from that. First, when something is free, that does not necessarily mean that it is popular. Secondly, our catering services now know that to provide something raw—in a manner of speaking—is unpopular; it must be prepared and presented properly to attract children's interest. There is plenty of evidence from our primary school sector to support that.

A risk is attached to providing something for free. No statistics are available to tell us that uptake of school meals would jump up to 85, 90 or 100 per cent if they were free. We would prefer the service to be improved consistently so that there is a high-quality service that people value before we consider giving school meals away for free.

On the pressures that the bill would place on the education service, our dining rooms are designed to cope with a certain capacity. I suggest that those in Glasgow are operating nearly at full capacity. If the number of customers who use the school meals service in Glasgow was to increase dramatically—although the gap is already not very big—the capacity of dining rooms would not cope, the production capacity of the kitchens would probably not cope, the number of service counters that we have for a 40-minute lunch break would

certainly not cope and our existing staffing resources would not cope either. We would need to encourage the educationists to change to a two-lunch break system. That would put significant pressure on the curriculum and the resources that are available to support that, because the school meals service needs to be supervised. That responsibility tends to land on the head teacher or deputy head teacher.

The bill would have significant resource implications for the education service. I have no doubt about that. It would also cause the rejigging and replanning of the delivery of the education service, which, we must accept, is the education service's main priority. School meals are a lesser priority for that service.

I suspect that a considerable amount of reinvestment would be required in facilities, equipment and operational budgets to facilitate a massive increase in the uptake of school meals, whether in Glasgow or in another authority in Scotland. We have one of the highest uptakes so we speak with quite a lot of experience.

Jackie Baillie: I am conscious that you cannot legislate for the behaviour of children—indeed, my daughter insists on having a packed lunch rather than a school meal. You say that you have doubled the uptake in Glasgow. Was that across the board or was the increase evident only among those who receive free school meals? Was the scheme attractive to children generally?

Fergus Chambers: Between 1996 and 2001, the uptake in secondary schools went from 32 per cent to 66 or 67 per cent. In primary schools, where the level of uptake was always higher, we have gone from 58 per cent to 64 or 65 per cent. The biggest increase in uptake has been in the area of cash sales, although there has also been an increase in free school meal uptake. The rise is due partly to the fact that we have improved the service and increased the popularity and the acceptability of the system. Our research suggested that the number 1 problem was not the food but the queues, so we decided that speed of service was essential. Furthermore, we have converted eight of our 29 schools to cashless systems, which has reduced the stigma attached to free school meals. The panel that the Scottish Executive has set up is encouraging local authorities to bid for further funding to support more investment in cashless systems.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I would like to talk about those young people who do not currently eat school dinners. You say that you have increased the uptake in secondary schools from 32 per cent to 66 or 67 per cent. Have you any information—or have you an opinion—about which groups compose the remaining 34 per cent? What might influence

them? That will be of major interest to the committee if we are to encourage them to attend.

Fergus Chambers: We have conducted two programmes of research in that area. One was in 1996-97, when we were not at all happy with the situation that the unitary authority had inherited. The other was last year, and involved a survey of 2,000 secondary school children in Glasgow. I do not have the detail of the statistics, but the general trends are the same: the number 1 problem was queuing. If we are unable to put kids through quickly—to put it crudely—and they have to stand in a queue for 10 or 15 minutes, they will be turned off. The second point was that the facilities have to be modern and not institutionalised. The third point was that we have to provide food that is acceptable to young people. I will not use the term “fast food”. Let us call it “modern food that is served quickly”. I do not think that there is such a thing as “fast food” and modern food that is served quickly can be extremely healthy.

Those are the three areas that the children told us they wanted to be improved. Over the years that we have been doing research, price has never been an issue. That is not to say that it is never an issue. One price relative to another is an issue and will always be so.

The number 1 problems are queueing, modernising the service, improving the facilities and making the service more popular. If the service does not have what children call street cred, they will never use it, whether it is free or not.

15:00

Mr Monteith: I am interested in the idea of a stigma being attached to paying. What percentage of children are entitled to free school meals? Of those, what percentage choose not to have them? Do we know whether they have anything to eat at all? Do they prefer to pay—in a sense, to reverse the stigma—because it is cooler to spend money? I have seen schoolchildren going to Chinese takeaways where there is a special deal of a meat or chow mein dish with a can of juice at an all-in price.

Fergus Chambers: I will split my answer between the primary and secondary markets. In Glasgow, the entitlement to free school meals in the primary sector is 43 per cent. We currently serve 80 per cent of that 43 per cent, so the gap is 20 per cent, but we must also take into account the absence rate. I am not sure what the absence rate is in Glasgow, but if we assume that it is 5 or 6 per cent, that leaves about 14 or 15 per cent of children in the primary school sector who are not using the free school meal service to which they are entitled. Those children may go home or they may go elsewhere—and I agree that it may be

more popular or attractive to them to use cash and go to a local outlet.

The situation in the secondary school sector is slightly different. Free meal entitlement is 38 per cent and 68 per cent of that 38 per cent use the service, so the gap is bigger. Part of the problem is that some schools do not have the cashless system and another part is that some schools simply could not cope with more people using the service than are doing so at present. Holyrood Secondary School in Glasgow is, I think, the largest secondary school in western Europe, and something like 850 children are served at lunch time. Within the 40-minute window, it would be impossible to serve more.

Richard Blackburn: Fergus Chambers is speaking for Glasgow; I will speak for my authority in Dumfries and Galloway. Although my area makes quite a contrast with Glasgow, many of the aspirations and preferences of children in Dumfries and Galloway do not differ too much from those of children in Glasgow. Many of Fergus's points apply equally well to almost any authority in Scotland, but he did not mention one or two important points. One is how far away the chippy is, which can be an important consideration when you are designing a new school; and another is the weather. Our experience is that the volume of school meal business is far more sensitive to the weather than it is to price.

Although Dumfries and Galloway is a low-wage economy, we do not have the same proportion of entitlement to free school meals as does Glasgow. The uptake among those who are entitled is about 85 per cent so, if we allow for absences, we find that only a small number of children choose not to take up their entitlement.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I would like to ask each of the witnesses a couple of questions—and Fergus Chambers will forgive me if I use different terminology because I am a wee bit troubled by the use of the term “customer” when we are talking about schoolchildren.

Could the witnesses tell us on whose behalf they are speaking? Are you speaking on behalf of your organisations and, if so, how did you arrive at your conclusions? Des Murray spoke about consultation. How many took part in that consultation, and was the consultation on the general principles of the bill? I put those questions to each of the witnesses.

Des Murray: The Association of Public Service Excellence has as members the 32 local authorities in Scotland and Tayside Contracts, which represents Perth and Kinross, Angus and Dundee. We did not give them set questions in the consultation. We simply informed all the statutory authorities and Tayside Contracts last Tuesday

that we were coming to present evidence and would welcome any views that they wanted to express on the bill. I said at the outset that none of the submissions that we got back had a fundamental problem with the underlying principles of the bill. The problems arose in relation to the capacity of the services to deliver and the potential impact of the legislation. We had 16 individual responses from various authorities; the opinions that we have expressed are a consensus of those 16 viewpoints.

Fergus Chambers: I represent Glasgow City Council. The time scale for the request for a submission from the council did not allow enough time for it to go through our education committee. However, I have met colleagues in my department and the director of education and I have consulted my convener and elected members. Likewise, the director of education has consulted his convener and elected members—it is his name that is on the submission to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. The comments that I have been relaying are attached to that submission.

Tommy Sheridan: What name was on the submission?

Fergus Chambers: Ken Corsar, the director of education for Glasgow.

Tommy Sheridan: I thought that Jimmy Andrews's name was on the evidence that I received.

Fergus Chambers: I do not have the covering note, but Jimmy Andrews would have signed the note on behalf of Ken Corsar, the director of education.

Tommy Sheridan: I just wanted to establish the fact that the council itself has not arrived at a decision.

Fergus Chambers: The matter has not been through committee.

Tommy Sheridan: I see.

You were pursuing the point about alternatives to free school meals. I am glad that you have pointed out that the 16 respondents were in favour of the general principles of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. Do you think that the general principles of the bill should be supported? What is your opinion of other initiatives such as breakfast clubs and free fruit?

Fergus Chambers: There is sympathy, rather than support, for some of the principles of the bill. However, in my opinion—and this is a personal opinion—you cannot simply pass a bill to give everything away unless you consider the wider implications for service delivery and whether it will be successful in the longer term. You are right to talk about the fruit and breakfast club initiatives in

Glasgow, but the free breakfast club initiative in the 20 pilot schools in Glasgow attracted an average uptake of 30 per cent. Although it is free for all, only 30 per cent want it.

Tommy Sheridan: I must interrupt you there, because I think that you are in danger of misleading the committee. Tell us how long the free breakfast initiative has been going and whether it is available in all schools yet.

Fergus Chambers: I said that 20 schools were part of the pilot scheme, which we are about to roll out across the council.

Tommy Sheridan: Would you agree that it is a bit premature to talk about the success or otherwise of the initiative?

Fergus Chambers: No, I would not. Twenty schools make a pretty representative pilot scheme. We will do as much promotion work as we can to increase uptake, because that is in our best interests. However, if we are giving the service away free but only 30 per cent actually want it, that supports the argument that I raised earlier. Glasgow has scored well on its free fruit initiative, which is quite well documented. Just giving fruit away free three times a week to 60,500 children would not have been successful, but we have built it into the curriculum and the item of fruit is used as a learning tool every day in the classroom. It might be used to support learning about climate, geography, colours or shape—it is made fun for the children so it has value and is extremely popular. There were cherry tomatoes on day one, but nobody wanted to know about them.

Tommy Sheridan: I have visited a number of the schools in Glasgow and am well aware of how popular the free fruit initiative is. In fact, primary school head teachers are telling me that it is so successful that it is leading to the pupils asking their parents to purchase fruit as well. That runs counter to the logic of your argument that providing something free devalues it. That does not seem to be the case with the free fruit initiative. Are you arguing that Glasgow City Council is wrong to provide free breakfasts because that devalues the breakfast service?

Fergus Chambers: Not at all. Glasgow is prioritising its funding as best it can within current resources. I am not saying that because Glasgow gives fruit away free it should give everything away free. The fruit initiative is successful because it has been built into the curriculum. It is not just a case of, "Here is a banana—take it." Children are being taught about the banana in the classroom. Interaction is taking place, which is fun for the children. That is why the initiative is valuable and successful. The uptake is extremely high.

Tommy Sheridan: I am sure that you accept that those who support the School Meals

(Scotland) Bill would also want it to be included in the curriculum. Your comments are welcome and I am sure that they support the provision of free school meals and making that part of the curriculum. You suggested that there is no evidence that providing a service free improves take-up.

Fergus Chambers: It does not improve the take-up of school meals.

Tommy Sheridan: You did not specify that. You said that you would provide examples from the food service. You can check your evidence on that.

How would you react if you were told that free swimming access in the city of Glasgow had improved the take-up by 80 per cent among under-18-year-olds? In the social inclusion partnership areas of Glasgow, free swimming access has increased the uptake in Easterhouse by 157 per cent, in Pollok by 222 per cent, in Drumchapel by 257 per cent and in Castlemilk by 330 per cent. Do you think that swimming has been devalued by its free provision?

Fergus Chambers: Not at all. In Glasgow, we are making best use of the resources that are available. If those figures were put into the school meals service, it would not be able to cope.

Michael Russell: Fergus Chambers and Richard Blackburn are the most likely candidates for answering my questions. What efforts are made at the point of delivery to ensure that the stigma that children who receive free school meals feel is diminished as far as possible?

Fergus Chambers: I will go first. The issue of stigma does not arise where a cashless system is in use, because nobody knows who receives a free meal and who pays cash. Not enough is being done by the system—if I can call it that—where free meal tickets are used. Everyone has elements of responsibility to reduce the stigma as much as possible, although we will never be able to eliminate it.

It is my experience that the stigma is significantly stronger in secondary schools than in primary schools. Two weeks ago, I visited another authority—which will remain nameless, if that is all right—and I saw prefects handing out school dinner tickets to secondary school children. That was the first time that I had seen that practice, which I believe adds to the stigma and so should be eliminated. Stigma exists where free meal tickets are handed out. In my authority and in other authorities in which I have had experience, the handing out of tickets tends to be done by people in education rather than by the catering staff.

Michael Russell: Will you explain how the cashless system works?

Fergus Chambers: At the point of sale, the tills can take a debit card—in Glasgow the technology is slightly different; the tills take a debit card rather than a smart card. A child who qualifies for a free school meal has the value of the meal credited to the card each day. The child goes to the point of sale and hands over their card, which is swiped through. The cash-paying customer also has the card—it looks identical. At any time during the day, they can visit a validator machine to insert coins, which puts credit on to the card. Alternatively, their parents can send a cheque in. Whether one is a cash-paying pupil or a free meal child, one goes to the point of sale and one is treated in exactly the same way—nobody knows who is who and therefore there is no stigma.

Michael Russell: That could apply to the cash cafeteria as well.

Fergus Chambers: Yes. That applies to the system in many schools in many authorities.

Michael Russell: What system operates in Dumfries and Galloway?

Richard Blackburn: We have no smart card technology. Without it, we can only make the effort to ensure that there is no differentiation between those who use tickets—or whatever system operates—and others. We do not believe that that is a huge problem in rural areas, partly because all the pupils know one another well in those areas. I think that there is much to be said for the smart card system. It is fair to say that most authorities do not have such a system, because installation requires a fair capital investment. However, such a system has other advantages. It can speed up queues, and throughput times are important.

15:15

Michael Russell: The system can also encourage young people to eat more nutritious foods. In the Angus Council area, an advantage is given for eating nutritious foods as opposed to less nutritious foods.

Richard Blackburn: The system offers all sorts of possibilities, such as bonus points for some items. Perhaps smart card technology would not encompass confectionery. The system is flexible. Unfortunately, many authorities have been shy of adopting it, because there were one or two bad experiences of it in the early days.

Michael Russell: Would that be an investment worth making in developing services? Would investment in that system be more worth making than investment in some provisions in the bill?

Richard Blackburn: My personal view—it is nothing more—is that the system is very advantageous. The technology has improved greatly and could have many spin-offs. It would fit

with the general direction in which we are going, which is to remove exclusive measures.

David Melvin (Glasgow City Council): In secondary schools, the system is useful, but in primary schools, the problem is bigger. It is more difficult for primary 1 and 2 pupils to use cards and put money in machines. In secondary schools, however, the system would eliminate the stigma that is associated with free school meals.

Michael Russell: The vesting date of the bill is 31 December 2003, so the bill would come into effect for the term that started in January 2004. Between now and then, could you make the necessary changes to implement the bill, to which nobody denies that they are sympathetic? If so, what would the cost be for individual authorities and throughout Scotland?

David Melvin: We have given some broad figures. The problem is more in the logistics. In many schools, it would be difficult to change existing facilities to cope with that system. We would have to consider the education process and a split lunch time, which most education authorities have stopped using. The support facilities would have to be considered. In several places, existing facilities could not cope, so rebuilding some areas or making some investment would be required to deal with that.

Fergus Chambers: In Glasgow, we have been through a rebuilding programme with a public-private partnership. Reconfiguring buildings in that time frame would present even more problems.

Richard Blackburn: The longer the lead time, the better. Some practical capacity issues would have to be dealt with, which we have mentioned before. One problem with a dining room in a school is that, if it is used only as a dining room, it is empty for 95 per cent of the time, which is not a terribly attractive use of space. On the other hand, a double sitting can have knock-on effects for bus contracts in a rural area, for example.

A considerable lead time would be needed. However, I do not doubt that if the Parliament decides that we should go in that direction, school catering services will rise to the challenge. The more time that they have to prepare for the physical and organisational changes that will be required, the better.

Michael Russell: How much would it cost?

Richard Blackburn: That is a difficult question, which I hoped I would not be asked. I have simply an order-of-magnitude answer that I worked out on the back of an envelope and based on the situation in Dumfries and Galloway. On the revenue side, the cost would be about £75 million a year. That estimate might be out by a factor of a third either way, but it is not out by 100 per cent. A

sum of that magnitude would be involved. Some capital investment would also be required if we were to use smart card technology and make improvements to kitchen and dining facilities. A total figure of around £100 million would not be an unreasonable estimate for the continuing implementation costs.

Michael Russell: One of your colleagues is looking askance—his figures must be different.

Fergus Chambers: We would have great difficulty in estimating the costs unless you told us what you wanted us to include. If you are talking about changing the education system to support the provision of free school meals, I will need to consult colleagues on the figures. I might be able to give you the real cost if there was 100 per cent uptake of the service; I might be able to guesstimate how much more kitchen equipment would be required; and I might be able to tell you whether new buildings would be required for dining rooms. However, I could not comment on the cost of the changes to the education system that would be required to support the policy. That is difficult to cost.

David Melvin: In Glasgow, 11 new secondary schools have just been built to provide the capacity that is required now. We would need to go through the whole process again if we had to ask them to change their facilities. That possibility was never allowed for in the costings that we have projected for the next 30 years.

Michael Russell: One might argue that that is a good argument against PPP.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): You talk about dining areas being used only as dining areas, but in many schools they are used as assembly halls and gyms. If the school lunch period were extended, those spaces would not be available for other purposes.

If we provided free school meals but still gave pupils an element of choice, would there be problems in ensuring that the meals were of nutritional value? I do not know whether you monitor such things, but even when youngsters receive free school meals, nutritionists would not like a lot of what they choose. What implications are there for the potential amount of waste, if schools have to offer a choice of meals for the full number of pupils who might turn up for a school meal on any given day? What would be the implications for food safety and hygiene if such large amounts of food had to be transported around the place?

Fergus Chambers: The transportation of meals is a big issue that concerns most local authorities. I fear less for the food safety side of things, however, as the school meals service is lucky to

have many dedicated and qualified professionals. The necessary checks and balances exist in the system.

The issue of nutrition in school meals is important and is being researched by the Scottish Executive. Glasgow has had huge problems in that area over recent years—the diet of people in the west of Scotland is renowned for being somewhat unhealthy. We have used a range of tactics to encourage children to eat more healthily and to change their dietary patterns. We have had quite a lot of success, but it is a long road and we are not going to change the diets of the people in the west of Scotland overnight; it could take five to 10 years. Schemes such as the free fruit initiative will help. As a young child learns to enjoy fruit, they will tend to eat it throughout their adult life.

Local authorities are doing a lot of good work to improve the nutritional content of school meals. Work is being undertaken centrally by the Scottish Executive, which is due to report to ministers in May or June, to improve nutritional standards for the whole school meals service. That will be a positive move; it will provide a base on which the service can only improve and develop.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I want to develop further the point about the nutritional value of meals. Although it is legitimate for us to be talking about improving uptake and debating whether school meals should be free, there might have been an assumption that, at the very least, the meals that are provided are of a high nutritional standard. However, that is obviously not the case. Why is that? How has that situation come about? Is it to do with the money that is available to provide school meals? Is it to do with training caterers so that they know what a quality, balanced meal looks like? Is it that there has been pressure to provide food that the children want to have? Most important, will the bill address the situation and the reasons that have brought it about?

Fergus Chambers: That is a huge subject—how long do you have?

The Deputy Convener: You have three minutes, basically.

Fergus Chambers: Irene McGugan said that it is obvious that the meals that are provided are not of a high nutritional standard. I do not agree. In many authorities in Scotland, school meals, particularly in primary schools, are of a nutritional standard pretty close to whatever standards are likely to be put in place next year. There is a huge debate—between caterers, educationists, parents and head teachers—about whether one can force a child to choose a particular meal. If a secondary school child is asked what they want to eat for dinner, nine times out of 10 they will say that they

want a Chinese, an Indian, a McDonald's, a Burger King, a Kentucky Fried Chicken or any of the other sexy high street brands with which we have to compete. There are huge pressures on the service and on the staff. There are also huge pressures on the pupils or the customers, if I can call them that—

Tommy Sheridan: "Pupils" is better.

Fergus Chambers: They are being bombarded with all sorts of marketing messages, which puts pressure on them. The school meals service has to strike a balance between offering as nutritious a meal as possible and offering choice. If we dictate to a secondary school child what they have to eat, they will vote with their feet.

In Glasgow, we have taken a two-pronged approach. We have made the service more attractive and have tried to influence choice by incentivising tariffs, running active promotions and using point-of-sale strategies, for example. Five years ago, the number 1 sellers were chips and curry sauce and chips and cheese. Now, chips are no longer in the top five sellers. We can do some things, but we cannot dictate to a secondary school child what they should eat.

Richard Blackburn: I will add the perspective of a rural authority. On the question of who is the customer, the conventional wisdom has always been that, in primary schools, the customer is the parent whereas, in secondary schools, the customer is the pupil. Recently, we surveyed parents of primary school pupils and asked what their top three priorities for school meals were. We found that the top priority was nutritious content to the meal, the second was that the child should want to eat the food and the third was price.

As Fergus Chambers said, it is difficult to strike a balance between having a responsive service that is in tune with what the customer wants and somehow keeping the business viable and keeping the volume through the system. Unlike in Glasgow, in Dumfries and Galloway we have always provided a traditional service that we thought was in tune with a rural area. We have always planned the menu in association with the regional dietician to ensure that we had high nutritional standards in the meal service, even though that was not compulsory. I like to think that, if regulations come back into force, we will have no trouble adapting to them. In practice, our approach might mean that certain popular items, such as chips, go on the menu only a certain number of times a week. We advertise the menus in advance so that the pupils know what they will get on the days when they choose to come.

The Deputy Convener: I am conscious that we are running behind schedule. I know that one member of the committee has not yet been able to

ask questions. If Brian Monteith and Ian Jenkins have brief questions, we will deal with them.

We should also agree to use the word "diners" for the rest of the debate. That might resolve the difficulty between Fergus Chambers and Tommy Sheridan. That would be useful.

Tommy Sheridan: "Pupils" will do.

15:30

Mr Monteith: I have a question for Mr Chambers. There was some discussion of the difficulties caused by the layout of the 11 new schools and their delivery through PPPs. Does the difficulty arise because you have new schools or because of the method by which their building was financed?

The Deputy Convener: I did not know that the debate was going to cover those issues as well.

Mr Monteith: Accusations have been levelled that the funding mechanism is a problem. We must establish whether that is the case.

The Deputy Convener: Fergus Chambers can have a go at answering that, although he will need to seek advice from his director of finance.

Fergus Chambers: The funding mechanism is not the problem. However, there is a limit on the capacity of the new school dining halls. We cannot simply extend them—the land is no longer available because they are on new locations. The situation is difficult.

Mr Monteith: My other question—

The Deputy Convener: I thought that we were sharing the questions between you and Ian Jenkins.

Mr Monteith: If we are sharing them, I could ask him to ask the question for me. However, the point that I was going to make has already been answered.

Ian Jenkins: If the Parliament or the committee felt that Tommy Sheridan's bill was impractical and had gone too far, we could offer free school meals just to all primary school pupils. Would that be a big step forward and could it be coped with more readily? Would it be more achievable?

Fergus Chambers: The short answer is no. It would probably be a bigger problem, because the dining halls in primary schools tend to be used for other purposes. I suggest that about 80 per cent of the dining halls in Glasgow are used immediately prior to and immediately after the lunch service. If there were greater pressure on the service through an initiative such as the one that you suggest, that would present bigger problems in primary schools than it would in secondary schools.

Tommy Sheridan: I have a question on whether the content of the meals is of sufficient nutritional value. You mentioned that chips are no longer as popular as they were. The meal deal on the days on which I visited Holyrood Secondary School and Lourdes Secondary School—which, as you know, are the two biggest schools in Glasgow, if not in Scotland—was chips, cheese baguette and Coca-Cola or hamburger, chips and Coca-Cola. It seems that there is a wee bit of a difference between what you are saying and the reality.

Will you comment on the meal of the day that is on offer? On each of the days on which I visited the secondary schools in Glasgow, the meal of the day for those receiving free school meals was fish, chips and peas, which amounts to £1.10. Is that a nutritionally effective and adequate meal?

Fergus Chambers: Any nutritional expert would tell you that one meal in isolation is not nutritious. Nutrition is about the balance of a meal and a person's overall intake over a three-week or four-week period. That intake may well contain fish, chips and peas, which happens to be the second most popular meal in Glasgow. To be frank, I would prefer a diner to select that than to have the chip option every day. Fish, chips and peas is a traditional meal and contains some decent nutrition. Peas are nutritious—there is no doubt about that—and we all know of the benefits of fish, albeit that it is fried in that meal.

The work that we do with the Greater Glasgow NHS Board—which has been very supportive of our developing our own menus and of the service in primary and secondary schools—and the work that the national nutritional panel does can only be good for the health of Scotland's youngsters.

Tommy Sheridan: What would you advise the kids to drink with that meal?

Fergus Chambers: There are many choices. They could drink water or they could drink milk. Are you asking about secondary schools?

Tommy Sheridan: Yes.

Fergus Chambers: Fizzy drinks are popular in secondary schools. We know from experience that, if we ban fizzy drinks, the customers—sorry, diners—vote with their feet and go elsewhere or bring them into the school.

Tommy Sheridan: Is it not totally inadequate that the meal that I have just mentioned amounts to £1.10, which means that those who are on free meal tickets do not have enough to buy anything to drink?

Fergus Chambers: To answer your first point, I think that you are talking about what might have been called the mega-meal deal rather than the meal deal, which tends not to have chips.

Tommy Sheridan: No. The meal of the day is the £1.10 option—

The Deputy Convener: Let me stop Fergus Chambers and Tommy Sheridan at that point. The committee is not here to go through the nuances of the menu of every school in Scotland. Some legitimate issues have been raised, but there are avenues outside the committee for dealing with them. The specific issue that we wanted to address is the nutritional role of the meals available for children in primary and secondary schools. Fergus Chambers has provided enough information to answer that question adequately. I want to move on—

Tommy Sheridan: Can I not ask my question about what the kids are supposed to drink?

The Deputy Convener: Before we started, I said that each member could ask one question. We are only on to the third question. With due respect, it is right and proper that we move on. There will be other chances to elaborate on the issues with other speakers this afternoon. I am conscious that Cathy Peattie wants to ask a question and that we are 20 minutes over time.

Cathy Peattie: At the beginning of your evidence, you said that people generally welcomed the theory of universal free school meals but that, in practice, universal free school meals might cause difficulties for the management of schools and for educationists. I suggest that the only difficulties are with the management, not with educationists. However, the background papers and lobbying that I have received make it clear that the issue is about how we provide our kids with better nutrition. We need to encourage them to eat the right foods and to drink water instead of Coke, for example.

Can you deliver that better nutrition without universal free school meals? Are you failing to do so because kids must pay for their meals? Are there other ways of targeting resources to provide good nutritional food for kids—I say “kids” rather than “customers” because they are bairns and pupils, not customers—or is the principle of providing universal free school meals the only way in which that can be done?

The Deputy Convener: We have had a wee run of hearing from Fergus Chambers and Richard Blackburn, so we shall let Des Murray have a say.

Des Murray: If I may clarify what was said at the outset, we stated that APSE and its members support the underlying principle of improving the nutritional content of school meals and increasing the provision of school meals. However, if the question is whether we think that the School Meals (Scotland) Bill is the best way of achieving that aim, I would have to say that our members have raised massive questions about capacity, as the

committee has heard.

Other alternatives are available, which the task force is considering, such as the provision of free fruit for all and using targeted initiatives to increase or improve the facilities that are available for catering to schoolchildren—or pupils or diners or whatever terminology you want to use. A whole raft of opportunities and initiatives are under way in a number of authorities. We have not considered all those initiatives in detail, but we should do so before deciding to go for universal free school meals.

Richard Blackburn: Let me add slightly to that. If the question was phrased, “Is the current school meals service failing?” my reply would be, “Most certainly not.” There is a far higher uptake of school meals today than there has been over the past 20 years. Genuine efforts have been made to look at the nutritional value of the meals and to make the service responsive to the customer—however that person might be defined. Efforts have also been made to try to build in school meals as part of the total educational experience of the child, which is particularly important in the primary school.

The question is a political question about the best way in which resources should be applied. We are simply trying to provide the voice of the experience of those who have delivered the service. Our problem in answering your question whether free school meals would do X, Y or Z is that that is an untested proposition.

Cathy Peattie: I need to know whether you are in favour of the proposition. You seem to be facing in two different directions at the one time, so I am a bit confused.

Richard Blackburn: That is probably a fair comment, but we are not trying to prejudge the political priority that might be put on increasing the subsidy to school meals. At the moment, school meals are subsidised through the grant-aided expenditure system. The proposal is that they should be subsidised 100 per cent. In essence, that would mean that other opportunities would be forgone. That is a political issue. We are saying that, if that is the direction in which people choose to go, there are a number of practical issues that we would like to bring to the committee’s attention so that they are included in the planning process.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you—

Cathy Peattie: Convener, I have waited until the end to ask my question.

The Deputy Convener: Okay. Mind you, this will be your third question.

Cathy Peattie: To increase uptake and improve nutrition, would universal free school meals be needed or could the various authorities do that?

Richard Blackburn: I can give only my personal opinion, which is that the introduction of universal free school meals will not result in 100 per cent uptake. There will always be some students who choose to go elsewhere. It is well known from the surveys that what many students—especially in secondary schools—bring into their thinking is the desire simply to be out of the school at lunch time.

The Deputy Convener: Does Fergus Chambers also want to respond?

Fergus Chambers: I will summarise my view by saying that, although the bill contains measures that everyone would support, I would far rather wait to find out what comes out of the Scottish Executive expert panel before answering the question. There are options, but we are only three or four months away from knowing how practical those options would be. I stress again that many Scottish authorities currently have a low uptake of all meals, whether they are free or need to be paid for by cash. Simply giving the meals away free will not improve the popularity of the service. Other issues need to be taken into account.

The Deputy Convener: I thank the witnesses who have given evidence this afternoon. We have gone on for much longer than was anticipated in our schedule, but I have tried to ensure that all members of the committee could contribute.

We will have a suspension for two minutes to allow people a quick comfort break as we change the stage and props.

15:41

Meeting suspended.

15:48

On resuming—

The Deputy Convener: I call the meeting to order and thank everyone for their patience. Today’s meeting is lengthy, but that is right and proper. With us is Danny Phillips of the Child Poverty Action Group. I thought that Danny would have other people beside him, but he is absolutely alone, looking isolated.

The CPAG has submitted substantial written evidence to the committee and has produced a booklet and information on the issues surrounding school meals. I invite Danny to make some opening remarks.

Danny Phillips (Child Poverty Action Group): I will try to keep my statement short, so that we can proceed with questions. The CPAG believes that the School Meals (Scotland) Bill can make a significant impact on what we believe are

unacceptably high levels of child poverty and on diet-related ill health.

CPAG is proud of the major role that it has played in getting the bill to its present stage, and we urge all MSPs to consider the points that we are trying to make. We hope that we have demonstrated the considerable support for the bill throughout Scotland, and we have worked with others to set up a school meals working group. My resources are pretty thin on the ground, but we tried as best we could to consult widely and to include as many people as possible in the debate on the proposed legislation.

I will give members a flavour of the organisations that have put their support for the bill in writing, or who have worked with us on the bill. They are: One Plus, NCH Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland, Unison Scotland, the Scottish Local Government Forum Against Poverty, Shelter Scotland, One Parent Families Scotland, the Poverty Alliance, the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Scottish Low Pay Unit, the UK Public Health Association, members of the Scottish churches social inclusion network, the Scottish Out of School Care Network and the British Medical Association. I know that the committee considered a petition from the STUC earlier in the meeting. We have held well-attended seminars on school meals, and the publications to which you referred, deputy convener, have been widely distributed. We hope that those have raised issues and that they have been useful.

We believe that providing a free, nutritious school meal for every child attending a state school would eliminate the stigma that poor children undoubtedly feel when claiming a free school meal. The two elements of the bill—the free provision of meals and the nutritional standards—eliminate what I refer to as the postcode lottery. Some schools deliver a good service, whereas children have to endure problems at others.

This is not just a political statement. I believe that a universal school meals service would maintain standards throughout the system on the basis that, if all parents had a stake in the system, they would have a reason to protect it. A further reason for supporting the bill is that it would be a concrete measure to fight child poverty and to do it through inclusive, positive policies that would benefit us all.

Other countries with similar social and economic structures to our own have a fraction of the level of child poverty that we have in Scotland and a low incidence of diet-related ill health—in which I include cancers, heart disease, diabetes and obesity. Those other countries have achieved that—in part—through the universal provision of free school meals. The evidence is that parents protect children from the worst aspects of poverty,

and I believe that the Scottish Parliament has a duty to do the same. It is simply wrong to means-test children at the age of five.

We have never argued that school meals are a panacea for our problems, or even that a child will necessarily eat a plate of nutritious food that is put in front of them. However, if the bill is carefully considered and implemented as part of an anti-poverty strategy and a healthy eating strategy—bearing in mind the full resources that that requires—the provision of a free, nutritious school meal could make a real difference to the chronic problems that we have.

The Deputy Convener: We will reverse the order in which members ask questions. You are not getting in for 28 minutes, Jackie, right? I call Cathy Peattie.

Cathy Peattie: We all agree that we need to consider a joined-up way of dealing with child poverty. You are right about a strategy that looks at all the issues. You talked about fighting the stigma of claiming free school meals. As well as playing an important role in fighting that stigma, would the bill deal with poverty? Could the bill give the impression that we are fighting the stigma and that that is enough?

Danny Phillips: One of the problems that we face in organising campaigns against child poverty is the low level of outrage about the prevalence of child poverty in the country—we are constantly concerned about that. Members know what the figures are: 30 per cent of our children are affected. I am not suggesting for one minute that the Executive has not prioritised the issue—things have been done and the trend is slowly reversing.

The provision of universal, free school meals would be a service for all families and all children, which would undoubtedly have a beneficial effect on child poverty in Scotland. I will give a simple example of the difficulties that are involved in moving from means-tested benefits into work, which I outlined in our submission. Having to consider how much school meals cost per week creates a difficult problem and adds to the poverty trap. The way in which the tax credit system is being implemented is dealing with many such problems by attempting to make things portable between being in work and being out of work. A free, universal school meals system would act as a portable system that would make it easier—particularly for lone parents—to avoid the poverty trap.

Cathy Peattie: You also spoke about universal standards and about parents monitoring to ensure that the standards are good. How do you respond to the argument that the most articulate parents would do the monitoring and that it would be those parents who would insist that their kids had access

to free school meals because they were entitled to them? Some kids might still fall through the net. Rather than providing free school meals across the board, would it not be better to redistribute wealth a little and to find other ways of supporting the kids who need more support, better nutrition and so on?

Danny Phillips: I do not necessarily disagree with what you say. You are suggesting that it might be better to target the system towards the poorer children. We must think about such policy issues.

My point is that we should start from the problems of child poverty, diet-related ill health and the dietary intake of children in Scotland. Why do children not take up their free school meals? The research shows that stigma is a major factor, although I would not suggest that it is the only factor. What is the best policy for dealing with that situation? It is to provide a universally free service, because that will target all children who are in poverty.

The present system does not target children who are in poverty. It targets a percentage of those who are in poverty—those who receive income support and those who overcome the stigma and claim their free school meal. I am not arguing that we should have universal benefits in all systems, but the problem with targeting free school meals is that one misses many of the targets and one does not provide those meals to every child who needs them—only some such children receive them. That is the problem with means testing.

Cathy Peattie: How do we ensure that the children about whom we are concerned do not continue to opt out of the system, by going to the chip shop or not having lunch, for example?

Danny Phillips: I am not suggesting that if we implemented free, nutritious meals next week, all children would rush over and start eating them. We have a huge problem.

I was a bit disappointed that I did not hear mention of the interests of children in the preceding discussion, which was all about school management problems, technical problems and capacity problems.

Surely, if we think that our basic principles are correct we must find a way of implementing them. One of those principles must be to consult children. When the school meals group visits schools, we try to consult the children as much as possible. On one visit, I was struck by one of the kids who, when asked why children did not choose the nutritious meal option, said, "I don't like the stuff that's there. No one ever asks me what I want to eat."

We could consult kids. I hope that, over time, they might start to move towards more nutritious food. Children on high incomes eat healthy food, as do children in Europe and Scandinavia. I do not understand why, if that is the case, we believe that children on lower incomes in Scotland will never eat healthy food. If we consult children and we provide a decent school meals service, over time we could achieve children eating healthily. Stigma is a fundamental problem, but it would be dealt with under the universal system.

16:00

Michael Russell: Your paper makes an important contribution to the debate. One statement, on page 1 of the paper, stuck out strongly.

"Many children who officially live below the Scottish executive's poverty line are not entitled to or are not recorded as entitled to a free school meal."

Could you expand on that? What is the threshold for entitlement and why is it so high? What is wrong with the system that means that children are not recorded as entitled to a free school meal if they are so entitled?

Danny Phillips: What I tried to do in points 5 to 10 of the paper was to give separate examples of why that system is wrong.

We do not have a definition of child poverty in this country. The nearest acceptable definition is that children in poverty are those who live on below 60 per cent of the median income after housing costs, including the self-employed. I think that that is the full definition. The problem is that families whose children are entitled to a free school meal are those in receipt of income support. They are well below the 60 per cent level.

A sample of the range of families that are not entitled to free school meals would include those on the minimum wage, low incomes, housing benefit, council tax benefit, disability living allowance and tax credits. All of those families officially live on or below the poverty line, but they do not have an entitlement to free school meals for their children.

The take-up level for the working families tax credit is between 75 and 80 per cent of families who are entitled to it. That is the case with all means-tested benefits, although take-up of income support is higher. However, in the case of child benefit, the take-up figure is 98 or 99 per cent. The same people who say that we should not have universal benefits also claim their child benefit. Why cannot the situation be the same for free school meals?

The target figure for the take-up of free school meals is missed. That means that a number of

children in poverty miss out. The other problem with means-tested benefits is that they have complex rules. The regulations for means-tested benefits are lengthy; they go into great detail to try to work out people's capital, income, what constitutes a family, who are the non-dependents in the family and so on. People get caught out by administrative difficulties and by legal regulations and end up living below the poverty line, but somehow not entitled to a means-tested benefit.

It is not true to suggest that it is possible to target one benefit and so catch all of the children in poverty. Choices have to be made between means testing and a universal service. In my view, a universal service hits the target better than does a means-tested service.

Michael Russell: One of the problems with the bill is the lack of definition of nutritious meals. However, are you saying that if we wish to provide nutritious meals to children, the only way to do that is by means of a universal benefit, as any other way would mean that people could fall through the safety net?

Danny Phillips: A universal system would be the most effective.

Michael Russell: With respect, you are saying more than that. You are saying that that is the only way to reach as many of the children who need nutritious meals as possible. Your paper says that there will still be losers through any other system, even those who simply do not take up their entitlement.

Danny Phillips: Yes. I have tried to show that if a system is targeted by means testing, not all children who live in poverty in Scotland will be reached. I do not know whether I understand your question, but that is what I am saying.

Michael Russell: I do not necessarily disagree with you, but you have given a wider critique of the benefits system and the society in which we live than simply a critique of the school meals system. Is that right?

Danny Phillips: The school meals system is tied to our benefits system. There is entitlement through the benefit system. There are problems in tying entitlement to a means-tested benefit. I presume that I agree with you.

Michael Russell: You have given a wider critique of society and how we deal with such issues. School meals are one example.

Danny Phillips: I am simply trying to point out the difficulties involved in means-testing benefits and linking a service to means-tested benefits. The Child Poverty Action Group has supported the tax credit system, for example, which has means-tested elements. We think that that system can start to tackle some of the huge structural

problems with child poverty. I am not saying that all systems need to be universal or that all means-tested systems are necessarily bad, but if a means-tested system is chosen, it must be accepted that there will be problems with it.

Tommy Sheridan: I have questions related to those that I asked earlier. How did the CPAG arrive at its support for the bill? What consultation was carried out? For whom are you speaking? If you have figures, will you elaborate on them? That is difficult, but we know that children whose parents receive income support qualify for free school meals. Do you know how many thousands of other children from low-income backgrounds do not qualify for free school meals? Do you have any international comparisons that indicate that the measure that you sponsor could be successful? As part of your research for the bill, what personal experience do you have of consuming free school meals?

Danny Phillips: I will try to remember all those questions—the member should tell me if I do not answer one. CPAG's policy was set by its executive committee. We have around 5,000 members throughout the UK and I think that the membership in Scotland is between 400 and 500. What was your next question?

Tommy Sheridan: Do you have any figures relating to those who are officially poor, but not—

Danny Phillips: Figures have been difficult to ascertain. I understand that there is a technical difficulty in putting a figure on how many children live in poverty in Scotland, although that may have been rectified recently. There was a technical difficulty when I last wrote to the Scottish Executive to ask about figures. Roughly 300,000 children live in poverty and there is around a 19 per cent uptake of free school meals. Therefore, there is about a 10 per cent difference. It would be difficult to put that in figures, but we are talking about in the region of 80,000 to 100,000 children. Certainly, there seems to be a 10 per cent difference between the two.

The Deputy Convener: The other question related to international comparisons.

Danny Phillips: The working group received two examples. The situation in Finland seems to be well documented—free school meals seem to have made significant changes to dietary health there. Sweden also has a free school meals system and there is good uptake by children. The food is nutritious and the children eat it. The system seems to be an integral part of Sweden's strategy to combat child poverty.

Tommy Sheridan: What about your personal experience?

Danny Phillips: I have eaten in several fuel

zones in Glasgow and many things struck me. First, charging children for water is an absolute disgrace. I went to one school where a bottle of water cost 47p. At the next school that I visited I told the kids that I had paid 47p for water and they told me that it cost them 60p for a bottle of water. That is unacceptable. At one school, I had the meal of the day, which was fish, chips and peas. It was not particularly appetising and was extremely salty, so the first thing that I wanted after eating it was a drink. When I go to a fuel zone, I try to experience the free school meal, but I have to admit that the last time that I went I had to cheat and buy a bottle of water. There is something about providing meals within a fast-food environment that the children like, but that seems to have been done at the expense of the nutritional value of the meals.

Ian Jenkins: Is there a problem that free school meals might encourage more of that? Youngsters will turn away from certain things. I am not saying that they are right to do so. To contradict what Tommy Sheridan was saying, youngsters regard themselves as customers and if they want Coca-Cola they will get it wherever they can. I regret that, but it is a fact. They will not respond to food that is unattractive, just because it is free.

I wonder about the extension of universal provision to free school meals. My heart tells me that it is a good thing to do, but my head worries about it. We must recognise that kids will pick certain things—they do not just want shoes, they want Nike trainers. We must take account of that psychology when we debate the issue.

Danny Phillips: I wonder whether that attitude is something that we should encourage in our education system? Surely the education system should encourage children to eat healthily. That is why we have placed as much importance as we can in the bill on having nutritional standards. If we set nutritional standards with nutrition experts and follow that with a consultation process that includes children, parents and other interests, we might get a system where children eat healthy food.

I do not suggest that it is an easy transition and I understand what Ian Jenkins is saying. However, I am not convinced that it is quite as difficult as he suggests. When I speak to children in schools, they tell me that they want to eat healthily. At least they know that that is what they should be saying and that they should want to eat well, which is the first step.

I asked one child whether the bill would encourage her to eat better. Her answer was quite reasonable. She said that she would eat in the dining hall more often, although she might still go out once a week. If I had a free canteen at work, I would probably eat there most days and perhaps

choose to go out for lunch on a Friday. That is not unreasonable. We have done our best to talk to children in the dining hall and that is the sort of attitude that we encountered.

Ian Jenkins: I do not want to preach a doctrine of despair in that regard, but the psychology of the thing is more complicated than we might think.

The Deputy Convener: You are an eternal optimist then, Ian.

Ian Jenkins: Absolutely. I am a Liberal Democrat.

The Deputy Convener: I am looking forward to your attempts at designer clothing, after that contribution.

Jackie Baillie: Before I ask a question, I would like to clarify a couple of points. Do not benefits such as the working families tax credit already contain a calculation for an amount for school meals? Instead of being made to qualify for school meals, are not children given a cash equivalent through the working families tax credit? That is my understanding.

16:15

Danny Phillips: That is debatable. When the family income supplement changed to the working families tax credit and families lost their entitlement to free school meals, we were told that there was an element of the award that enabled families to buy school meals. However, no work has been done on the adequacy of our benefits system, although it is universally accepted that the benefits are inadequate. There seems to be a process of trying to put more money into them, but your point is debatable.

Jackie Baillie: I was merely suggesting that qualification perhaps comes in a different way. If a cash alternative is provided through people's benefits, that starts to address the issue.

You mentioned certain figures. I will not debate with you the level of child poverty, which is unacceptably high. However, taking the number of children in poverty to be 300,000, you said that 10 per cent of those children did not avail themselves of free school meals. You then said that the figure was around 80,000 children. By my reckoning, 10 per cent of 300,000 is 30,000. Let us be clear about the difference.

Danny Phillips: Yes, you are right. I am sorry. A third of children who live in poverty do not have a legal entitlement to free school meals.

Jackie Baillie: I now move on to my questions. I acknowledge Ian Jenkins's point and I worry that we attempt to legislate for the behaviour of children, although that is nigh on impossible. Increasingly, children want to exercise choice. I

agree with you about nutritional standards and that that choice can be a healthy one. However, do you think that legislation would achieve the same ends as the initiatives in some parts of Scotland to deal with issues of attractiveness, to remove the stigma of free school meals and to increase choice? I am talking about the positive examples, such as schools' providing free water, rather than water costing 47p or 60p?

Danny Phillips: That would go some way towards achieving those ends. Swipe cards have been mentioned. It is important to point out that swipe cards are used in only a minority of schools—maybe two to four schools in certain areas, although I could be wrong. The evidence is not conclusive that swipe cards remove the stigma completely. We have spoken to children who have said that they still know who is receiving free school meals and that there are still problems with the system.

I have been going around schools, trying to assess the experience of getting free school meals. At one school, I picked up a drink of chocolate milk but was told that I could not have it because it cost too much. The kids were looking at me and thinking, "He's got chocolate milk. He should not be doing that." What would it be like to have a free school meal swipe card and then have a problem at the till because of the chocolate milk, meaning that you had to go and put it back? That seems an unfair thing to do to children.

With any system, some form of identification is required. One school that I visited had a cashless system but every Monday the children had to go to the front in their class to pick up their tickets. So everyone knew which kids were getting free meals. The committee will hear from the City of Edinburgh Council later, but I understand that the uptake of free school meals in Edinburgh schools that have swipe cards is around 40 to 50 per cent. The evidence is therefore at the very least inconclusive. I would go so far as to say that a stigma still exists with swipe cards.

Jackie Baillie: We may be in danger of confusing the uptake with the stigma. I find that uptake is predominantly about pupils—or diners or whatever we are going to call them—exercising choice. It comes down to what is provided at school compared with what is available at the nearest retail outlet, or to the pressure that kids exert on their parents to give them a packed lunch because they prefer that to what is available at school.

I want to come back to nutritional standards. How would you ensure that the nutritional standard of free school meals for all is not just the standard that we have now? Who would ensure that standards were acceptable? How would standards be monitored? What would happen if

standards were not met? Whatever approach is taken, such matters will be important.

Danny Phillips: I am not an expert on nutrition but, in paragraphs 31 to 34 of my submission, I have tried to outline how we can learn from work that has already been done on nutritional standards. The work of the Caroline Walker Trust, which has been recommended by the Department for Education and Skills, could be used as a benchmark. Guidelines have been set for energy and a selected range of nutrients, which are markers for the quality of the diet and have roles in the maintenance of health.

Following extensive consultation in England, the Education (Nutritional Standards for School Lunches) (England) Regulations 2000 (SI 2000/1777) came into force in April 2001. That is another example of experience elsewhere that we could consider. I understand that there are model nutritional guidelines and service guidelines in the diet action plan that was published by the Scottish Office in 1996.

I understand that a sub-group of the expert panel is considering nutritional standards and how they can be monitored. The group includes Professor Annie Anderson, who has contributed to CPAG's book and has given support to this bill. Clearly, work has been done in this area and I am sure that we can do the same in Scotland.

Jackie Baillie: The expert panel is considering this matter in the round and is taking evidence from a variety of sources. Would it not be better to wait for the outcome of its research rather than pressing ahead with the bill?

Danny Phillips: The press has asked me whether I support the work of the expert panel and I have said yes. If pressure that we may have exerted has had anything to do with the setting up of that panel, then I am pleased. My slight problem is that the work is being done before the main principles of the service that we want to provide have been established. I feel that the work should be done after those principles have been established. We can decide now whether we want to have a universal free service with high nutritional standards. The expert panel can then play a significant role in working out how we can provide that service and how we can set nutritional standards. It may also be able to consider school management and other issues. That panel could have a considerable role, but I do not think that that affects the principles that the bill argues for.

Jackie Baillie: That is helpful. Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: I am conscious that we have spent a bit of time on that subject, so I thank Danny Phillips for covering a wide range of questions. I appreciate that it must be quite difficult to sit there on your own with everyone looking at

you. Well done and thank you for your time.

Rather than having a comfort break and allowing a couple of folk to have exit strategies for cigarettes or whatever, we shall now move on to hear evidence from the STUC. We have also received a petition from the STUC women's committee. I invite the witnesses to make their way to the table. At least there is a better gender balance in this panel of witnesses.

I welcome Grahame Smith, deputy general secretary of the STUC, and Linda Shanahan, chair of the women's committee. I also welcome Mary Senior, who is a member of Unison and of the STUC, and Frances McInnes, also of Unison, which has indicated its support for the principles of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. I invite you to make opening remarks before members ask questions.

Grahame Smith (Scottish Trades Union Congress): We welcome the opportunity to meet the committee to discuss the issue of school meals. As you say, a 10,000-signature petition was submitted to the Parliament by the STUC women's committee. I know that you also have copies of the *Official Report* of the evidence given some time ago to the Public Petitions Committee by Linda Shanahan and Rozanne Foyer.

You also have copies of the comprehensive submission from Unison. Mary Senior has been doing a lot of research on the matter for Unison. As you will be aware, Unison represents staff who work in the school meals service. Frances McInnes works for the school meals service for East Lothian Council. Members might find it interesting to get her perspective on some of the implementation issues, given that you have already heard from some senior managers in local authorities.

The research and advocacy work on the issue has been led by the STUC women's committee and supported by our youth committee. As Danny Phillips said, the STUC women's and youth committees have been working closely with the CPAG. Members may also be interested to note that the issue of free school meals was debated at the STUC congress in April. The congress unanimously adopted a resolution calling for the universal provision of nutritious school meals in Scotland and a national strategy to improve current provision. It also called for the return of free school milk. The resolution was adopted unanimously by delegates who represent our 47 trade union affiliates, which have a combined membership of more than 625,000. Those trade union members, taken together with their families, represent a significant proportion of the Scottish population.

I confess that my colleagues have been much

more involved than I have in the matter, and they will want to handle some of the detailed arguments that we have in favour of the principle of universal free school meals and the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. The STUC supports the bill, because it will improve child health and welfare in an holistic way. It will tackle poverty and social exclusion, improve child health in the longer term, improve the health of all our population and deal with inequalities in child health. Congress also believes that it will have impacts on educational achievement.

Congress took the view that school meals have to be universally free. Targeting does not work because of the stigma that is attached to it. Our congress considered evidence from abroad, which showed that the provision of free school meals was successful. It rejected the view that this is about feeding rich kids. In our view, children have no independent wealth. We apply the principles of universality to child benefit, state education and child health services. We do not see any reason why the same principle should not apply to school meals. The issue is about social inclusion and social cohesion. Universality is the best way of achieving that.

16:30

Congress recognised that costs are involved, but we should view them as an investment rather than a cost—investment in the health of our children and general population. The provision of free school meals should be viewed as part of the overall educational experience that can be enjoyed by our children, by improving their social skills and manners and changing the ethos and atmosphere in schools. We are pleased to indicate our support for the principle of the provision of free school meals and for the School Meals (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Convener: Does anyone wish to add to what Grahame Smith said?

Linda Shanahan (Scottish Trades Union Congress): Members of the STUC women's committee petitioned on the streets on the provision of free school meals. We got involved when we heard about the bill from the CPAG. To be honest, we were not convinced to start with, which is one of the reasons why we thought we would ask children and their parents as well as the associated trade unions.

It quickly became evident that the current service is not very good, although there are good examples in certain areas. When we started, we were not aware that no regulations covered school meals. When we found out that children were being charged for a drink of water, we were astounded. Like the Scottish Parliament, my

workplace has water containers at vantage points in the building, where you can go to get a drink of water.

Parents and children told us that children take packed lunches to school because they do not like the meals in schools: they are not nutritious and do not taste good. For example, we went to one school and a young boy came out and spoke to us. He said, "I was last in the queue the day. This is my free school dinner." He produced a polythene packet with a sandwich made of white bread. Nothing was spread on it, and there was some cooked meat in the middle. Frankly, I would not eat it and I would not give it to my child to eat.

The boy had a sugary drink, which he had paid for himself and which was cheaper than the water. I am not saying that he would have taken the water if he could have afforded to do so—I do not know if he would—but he could not get a drink of water. He had a yoghurt that looked disgusting. You would not want to eat it. He said, "I get my school meal, but I am still hungry." I felt corporate shame for the whole of Scotland, because this is my Scotland. This is the Scotland that I grew up in and work in. That wee boy will go far, because he was eloquent. He put across his case.

I listened to some of the previous arguments, and it is clear that the views of children in Scotland are not being taken into account. I know that I have gone on a bit, but I want to get across the fact that we went on to the streets and asked children and parents their views. In two days, in parts of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth and Kirkcaldy, we collected 10,000 signatures. That says a lot for the people and the children of Scotland.

The Deputy Convener: I invite questions from committee members.

Irene McGugan: Linda Shanahan talked about speaking to children, which is the right thing to do. The committee hopes that it listens to children, too. Did not some children say that there was no way that they would go into a dining room and buy anything, regardless of whether the quality was upped, the price was lowered, a jazzy surround was created or music was played? Did some children say that there were better places or places that they preferred to the school dining room at lunch time?

Linda Shanahan: Yes. Some children said that, but passing the bill—as I sincerely hope that the Scottish Parliament will—would be a start. We could start to work on those attitudes. When I was a child—it was a while ago, but I still remember it—and my mother gave me my dinner money, I preferred to spend all that money at the chip shop on Monday and starve for the rest of the week. If free school meals are provided, parents will expect their children to take those meals. If education is

provided to support nutritional values, that will be not a short-term but a long-term measure. We can use that to look forward for future generations.

Irene McGugan: Would the fact that meals were free be the single biggest factor in increasing uptake?

Linda Shanahan: Yes. Providing money for a child to have a school meal is a worry for parents who are on a low income and particularly for single parents. If a family has three children, £27 a week must be found from benefits or from a low income to provide meals. Some people decide to make a packed lunch, as that is cheaper. The provision of meals for children in school creates much worry. If the meals are nutritional and free, parents will expect their children to take them up. I hope that education would be behind that to encourage children to take them up. As I said, the measure would not be for the short term. The aim would take a few years to accomplish.

Tommy Sheridan: I congratulate the STUC, its women's committee and its youth committee for some excellent work on the bill and the concerns. I do not have to ask the question that I have asked everybody else, because Grahame Smith has made it clear that he is speaking on behalf of his affiliates and is not giving a personal opinion.

However, will you indulge me by commenting on potential support for the bill? If we are realistic about politics, my worry is that because I am involved in the bill, we will not receive support for it. Has the cross-party support for the measure impressed the STUC? Does the STUC's support reflect that cross-party thrust? Will you join me in appealing to the committee and the Parliament to look beyond narrow politics to the wider issue?

Grahame Smith: I do not think that narrow politics has been an issue for us. We were impressed by the strength of the arguments behind the proposition, rather than by who presented the arguments. Like Linda Shanahan, I was sceptical about the idea. I asked why we should devote limited resources to providing free school meals for children whose parents can afford to give them nutritious meals. Linda Shanahan said that, and Frances McInnes had the same view.

We have examined the arguments and reached the view that that is the most effective way of dealing with the issue and that we know of no better way. We did not take into consideration who was supporting the measure. We considered the strength of the arguments, what we are trying to address and what would be the most effective way of doing that. We have taken the view that the provision of universal free school meals is the best way of tackling issues of child health and welfare, child poverty and education.

Jackie Baillie: I want to start by picking up on Tommy Sheridan's last comments, because I think that it is important that support for a bill is based on what the bill sets out to achieve and its efficacy. The committee has a responsibility to take evidence and scrutinise. We do not all view matters through the prism of individual personalities. It is important to make that clear.

I commend the STUC on the work that it has put in. I have no doubt that, however sceptical it might have been, it has reached its position with due consideration. The bill seeks to achieve a lot. We have heard a lot of evidence about the need to improve nutritional standards, the provision of water and milk in schools, choice for kids and the question of universality. Which of those is most important?

Grahame Smith: We cannot separate them; they are all related. We have considered what we are trying to achieve. As I said earlier, we are trying to achieve a measure that will improve child health and welfare. We believe that the best way of doing that is the universal provision of free school meals that are nutritionally sound. I do not think that it is wise to separate out the various aspects. The issue needs to be considered in its totality. We have considered the arguments for and against the measure in their totality.

Jackie Baillie: I return to the question of either/or. We were getting written and oral evidence that universal provision would guarantee uptake, but we have heard that that is not the case. How would you ensure that uptake was improved?

Grahame Smith: My colleagues might want to comment on that. Our view is that universal provision would guarantee increased uptake. Our assessment of that is based on experiences with other universal benefits—if I can put it that way—of which uptake is higher than that of means-tested benefits. To say that uptake would not increase is speculation. I do not think that, as was said earlier, the measure stands on its own and that simply making the order will mean that uptake will naturally follow. We made the point that the measure must be viewed as part of the overall educational experience.

I was interested in the comments that were made earlier when contributors spoke about the Glasgow free fruit initiative. They made the point that if free fruit is integrated into the curriculum and if children understand the issues at primary school, we will have a far greater chance of increasing uptake. The situation is the same with free school meals.

Linda Shanahan: The universality of provision and the nutritional aspects of meals are equally important. I take a long-term view. A substantial

number of children in a Glasgow hospital were found to be suffering the effects of malnutrition. In other parts of the country, children are developing adult forms of diabetes because they have a bad diet and continually eat pizzas, chips and all the things that we know that children should not eat. The experience in America indicates that that will only get worse unless we do something about it.

If we introduce universal free school meals, the generations that come after us will benefit. We will reap the benefit because we will not have the health costs that we will undoubtedly have if we do not do something now. I am reluctant to divide up universality of provision and the nutritional aspects of meals and say which is more important, because each is as important as the other.

16:45

Frances McInnes (Unison): I was interested to hear from a previous witness that England has introduced the Education (Nutritional Standards for School Lunches) (England) Regulations 2000 (SI 2000/1777). I am a member of the national school meals forum—I am the member from Scotland. We recently discussed problems of implementation. I acknowledge that England has slightly different problems because of devolved budgets in schools and far higher uptake of private finance initiative schemes and public-private partnership schemes.

A paper that separated out the nutritional issues was produced. That paper identified the implementation cost of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill as a food cost of 40p per child. That is quite worrying, because that cost would, I presume, have to be covered by local authorities. I work for a local authority and am aware that there are budgetary constraints, about which nobody has spoken. I have worked in the school meals service since 1979. In that time, the service has been faced with compulsory competitive tendering and with a direct service order, and has reverted back to local government. There has, since I started in 1979, been a huge depletion in the skills base in the service and a huge depletion in the uptake of schools meals. I cannot see an alternative to making free nutritious meals available to everybody.

I have a personal comment to make about the bill. I was sceptical about it until I attended a seminar that the CPAG gave. A number of its arguments changed my opinion of the bill, but the bill does not go far enough on nutritious standards. I would prefer nutritional standards to be mandatory, rather than there being guidelines. Part and parcel of the problem in England is that nutritional standards are not mandatory; neither private nor local government providers stick to them.

Jackie Baillie: I have a tiny question on your view on the budget consequences of the bill. I am not talking about costs, because they will be quantified in different ways. As many of the witnesses know, the revenue expenditure for local authorities goes into grant-aided expenditure. That expenditure is not hypothecated; local authorities can and do choose to vary the amounts that they spend on school meals—whether they spend more or less—and tackle other education priorities. Should that funding be hypothecated—that is, ring fenced—so that it can be used only for school meals?

Frances McInnes: Yes.

Grahame Smith: There is no dissent.

Jackie Baillie: So, the STUC is in favour of hypothecation.

Grahame Smith: With respect, it is unfair for Jackie Baillie to make that comment. We were asked a specific question, which we answered. In this instance, hypothecation might be the most appropriate way forward, but that should not be taken as an indication that the STUC supports hypothecation in general. We have given evidence on local government finance and our position on hypothecation.

The Deputy Convener: That clarification is helpful. We are conscious that hypothecation raises issues about how to address needs.

Mr Monteith: I have a question for Linda Shanahan. I am particularly touched by your concern about the stigma that is attached to free school meals and that the bill should seek to remove that stigma to help to ensure good nutrition.

If universal free school meals are provided, there will be no pressure on parents to put their hands in their pockets or purses for money for their children to go to the chippy, the chinkie or wherever they wish to go. There will undoubtedly be some pupils who, to show that they have money, choose to go to such places outside school. Surely, therefore, the stigma will remain. Will some pupils—in exercising their right to choose where they eat, thereby showing that they have funds—stigmatise those who choose to have school dinners? Pupils who have funds might allege that other children are having school meals only because they are free.

The Deputy Convener: There is a course in Hobbesian philosophy behind that point, but it would be useful to hear a response to that.

Mary Senior (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I did not hear all the evidence that Fergus Chambers of Glasgow City Council gave, but I recall speaking to Fergus about three or four years ago. He explained that one of the ideas

behind the fuel zone was to keep children in school, which would require a holistic approach to implementing the bill and incorporating it into education. It is about diet and making food appealing to children which, if it can be done, will encourage them to stay in school.

The Deputy Convener: Now for philosophy paper 2—do you want to ask the next question, Brian?

Mr Monteith: No—I will leave Oakeshott to Duncan Hamilton.

The Deputy Convener: Fair enough.

Cathy Peattie: I will pick up on the matter of children staying in schools at lunch time. I am aware that in various parts of England, in particular Yorkshire, children are simply not allowed to leave school at lunch time. Perhaps not allowing children to leave the school area would be a better approach.

Mary Senior: That would have to be linked to giving children a reason to stay in school. As long as there is an appealing meal for children to stay for, I agree.

Cathy Peattie: I am a bit concerned about the “appealing meal”. Frances McInnes highlighted the nutritional value of school meals, which we have heard is not particularly high, although I know that it is higher in some areas. A lot of research says that it is good for us to drink lots of water, but our kids must pay for water. I can understand the desire for free drinks and so on.

How do we ensure that we do not simply extend a bad service? If we simply extended a bad service, whether free or otherwise, would the children still vote with their feet and not eat school dinners?

Grahame Smith: That is the point that I tried to make in response to an earlier question. We cannot separate those matters out. I agree entirely that there is no point in providing a bad service, whether it is universally free or not. We must ensure that a universal service is good. If it is not, we will build up all sorts of other problems that relate to take-up and so on.

Cathy Peattie: Children will tell you what they think are good nutritional meals—I know that you have been speaking to children and all sorts of other people—but those are not necessarily the same meals that would be chosen by the providers. For instance, I know young vegetarian women for whom there are no options in school meals.

How do we monitor the standard of meals and ensure that they meet the needs of our kids in future—whether those meals are free or paid for by the kids—and contribute to bringing about the

healthier Scotland that Linda Shanahan described, and which I would like? I am not convinced that we are bringing that about or that we have mechanisms with which to do so.

Linda Shanahan: We must recognise children's rights. We must give them the right to a nutritious free school meal. We must consult them and treat them in a way that is not patronising, that does not involve talking down to them and that does not make assumptions about what they are going to say or think. We have to start giving children in Scotland rights.

Cathy Peattie: What if we do all that and the children still opt out?

Grahame Smith: We will not know whether they will opt out until we try. We have considered the evidence and believe that the measure is worth trying. The evidence suggests that it will be beneficial.

Linda Shanahan: Last year, the Scottish Parliament introduced free care for the elderly and did not ask whether people were going to opt out of that.

Cathy Peattie: Kids with money in their hands opt out of school dinners. Kids opt out of free school meals—I accept the issue about the stigma—and some of the other things that are available. We all know that kids opt out of things, but I want them not to. My question is not flippant: what will we do if they opt out?

Grahame Smith: I would be surprised if, even with universal provision, 100 per cent of pupils took advantage of free school meals. However, a far higher percentage would take advantage of school meals if they were universally free.

Ian Jenkins: I agree with you about children's rights. However, should they have the right to buy non-nutritious school meals at any time? Should they have the right to buy, for example, Mars bars in schools? That is debatable.

If you were to build a new school tomorrow, would you build the dining hall to cater for 100 per cent of the kids? Do you have any sympathy with local authorities' arguments about their strategic and technical difficulties in coping with the bill's implications? If you build for maximum uptake and the pupils do not come in, will that be a waste of money? I do not have a point of view to hammer on this; I am asking merely whether there would be logistical problems.

Grahame Smith: You will appreciate that we are not planners. We have experts to provide a view on such matters. I am sure that it is not beyond the wit of those experts to determine the most appropriate way of ensuring that the right facilities are available. There are several implementation issues that need to be considered.

In considering those issues, it is important that the staff who are involved are consulted, as well as the pupils and parents. Frances McInnes may want to comment on the implementation issues.

Frances McInnes: The logistical and implementation problems are real and will need to be addressed. There have always been space problems in schools, concerning dining areas, gyms or whatever. We must approach the problem not only from the point of view of the catering service, but from the educational perspective. The whole food issue must be brought into education, not just the question of whether school meals are free. We need to educate not only the children, but the parents, the people who work in the service and the managers. We need to implement change through education.

I do not have any illusion that we will change the eating habits of a lifetime in the next five years; nor will we change secondary school pupils' eating habits in five years. We should not be talking about secondary school pupils, but about children of early primary school age—we must start with them. We need to educate parents of early primary school age children about food, because those children will be in secondary school in five years.

We cannot change the attitudes of secondary school pupils. We must implement such education early. It is a long-term commitment that will not change attitudes immediately. However, our aim should be to change attitudes to food and to get school pupils to form good habits that will counter the bad habits that have been formed over the past 16 years since the standards were withdrawn.

Mary Senior: Ian Jenkins talked about logistics. It is common sense to stagger lunch breaks so that all children can enjoy a free school meal. The bill would also create employment opportunities in the school meals provision service in cooking, serving and supervising children. It will tackle social exclusion through employment opportunities as well as through providing nutritious meals for children.

17:00

Grahame Smith: It was interesting to hear evidence that suggested that the use of PFI/PPP schemes in constructing schools might cause problems for amending school facilities. It will be a shame if positive initiatives in the next 30 years founder on the rocks of PFI or PPP schemes.

The Deputy Convener: We had to clarify that issue. Because I allowed Jackie Baillie some licence, I allowed Grahame Smith a little licence, too.

Grahame Smith: I was making a legitimate point, convener.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you for your evidence.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:11

On resuming—

The Deputy Convener: We welcome our next set of witnesses. I know that some of you have been here since the beginning of the meeting and I thank you for your patience. I welcome back to the committee Councillor Helen Law, education spokesperson for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—at this rate you will become a permanent member of the committee, Helen. I welcome: Councillor Eric Gotts from East Dunbartonshire Council; Craig Clement, head of education services at Angus Council; and Keith Downton, principal officer of client services at the City of Edinburgh Council.

Councillor Helen Law (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): We welcome the opportunity to give evidence on the bill, elements of which we support—COSLA acknowledges the benefits of nutritious school meals and the need to address the stigma that results in non-take-up by those who are entitled to free meals, but we are opposed to the bill. We should wait for the recommendations of the expert panel on school meals before we progress with the bill.

My evidence is based on the collective view of education conveners, which was gathered when they met recently at Leith Academy. Their general view was that should extra resources become available, as the bill suggests, they should be targeted at the poorest children in the poorest families in our poorest communities. Councils do not think that the bill will achieve that. There is a need for better support of breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and the fruit entitlement through the health improvement fund. Given increased resources, councils could also enhance their clothing, footwear and higher education grants. That is our general view.

17:15

Councillor Eric Gotts (East Dunbartonshire Council): One of the points that has been made in favour of this bill is that it would remove the stigma attached to means testing and that that would lead to an uptake in the number of pupils eating nutritious meals. COSLA believes that the problem of stigma should be addressed by other means and advocates whole-hearted use of the swipe card system. That is being put into practice in many local authorities.

In my local authority, following a pilot scheme in 1998, all nine secondary schools use the system. It is effective and means that there is no difference between the two categories of diners. It has reduced queueing, which is a big factor in youngsters' decision to use the canteens. It has also given us useful information about the dietary habits of young people, which leads to change in the menu. Furthermore, it has increased uptake levels.

We are aware that that one device is not the whole answer and that many other measures have to be put in place. Some of them are to do with the environment that local authorities set in their schools—the menu design, the quality and quantity of food and so on—and some of them are to do with external problems, such as the competition from the private sector, which is a main concern. At the end of the day, the issue is one of choice. The provision of a free meal does not mean that young people will opt for that meal. We have to live in the real world. The educational programme that is involved will take generations to achieve its goals. The bill is simplistic in that sense.

Keith Downton (City of Edinburgh Council): Edinburgh's response to the bill has gained a certain amount of notoriety as it is slightly more positive than that of some other councils. I have not heard all the discussion this afternoon so I do not know whether this has been mentioned, but there is already a universally available and free nutritional benefit in schools: milk that is given to nursery-aged pupils through the welfare milk scheme. In Edinburgh, that has a 91 per cent take-up.

Mr Monteith: I have a question for my old friend Helen Law—and it is not about free meals for the children of striking miners. Your paper talks about additional costs of £160 to £202 million a year. Does that cost include the loss of income from those who pay for their meals? If so, what is that amount?

Councillor Law: I will ask Craig Clement to break down the costs for you.

Craig Clement (Angus Council): I understand that the costs include the increase that will result from the increase in the take-up of meals and the loss of the income that is accrued by authorities. It does not include capital costs associated with extending dining halls and so on.

Mr Monteith: Could you furnish the committee with a breakdown of those costs?

Councillor Law: Yes.

Cathy Peattie: Clearly, a lot of the concern about school meals is to do with ensuring that our children get appropriate nutrition that will lead to a

healthier lifestyle. We have heard that children often do not get healthy meals at school, and I was appalled to read recently that some children have to pay for water. If we offer universal free school meals, is there a danger that we will simply extend a bad service? Is the service bad, or would you defend it?

Councillor Law: There is a lot of good service in Scotland but there is room for improvement. I would welcome the introduction of standards that applied across the country. We will have to concentrate more on our breakfast clubs and after-school clubs. At the moment, there are myriad funding initiatives, and schools and councils have to go through 50 hoops, some of them on fire, just to get some funding together. We would welcome a block of funding, tied to outcome agreements, so that we can target the poorest areas. We have to ensure that our poorest children, as well as getting a free school meal during the day, get breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, together with another meal.

Cathy Peattie: That does not answer the question of how to improve nutrition and improve the service for the children who use it.

Councillor Law: As Eric Gotts said, the cashless system improves the service by reducing queues. Many kids I have spoken to say that it is not the quality or the price of the food that puts them off, but the long queues.

Councillor Gotts: Most authorities offer choice, and that choice includes nutritious food. It has been said that the people at the end of the queue get very little. Authorities address that problem in different ways. Some schools have a rota system so that each year gets to be first on different days. The situation is not totally satisfactory but it is not as bad as the advocates of this bill paint it.

Water is an important issue. A problem with water has been the way that schools were built in the past, with a water tank and no direct supply of drinking water. That will have to be addressed because there is a European Union imperative on the issue.

Cathy Peattie: You have said that you feel that the bill could be stronger. How? What would be the ideal bill?

Councillor Law: An ideal bill would deal with destigmatisation and with improving nutrition, and it might lift the threshold for free school meals—although I appreciate that that will be for Westminster to decide. The working families tax credit could include something for free school meals, but it might be better to go back to the old system where more young people got a free meal automatically. I appreciate that the Scottish Parliament cannot lift the threshold itself, but putting pressure on Westminster would be helpful.

When councils consider their own thresholds they will address local needs. In Fife, when we set the threshold for clothing grants, we considered the passport level of benefits as opposed to the very narrow free-school-meal-only entitlement. We have to set the qualifying levels to ensure that we reach more children.

Councillor Gotts: There are short-term and long-term solutions. One idea to consider is that of introducing price differentials: nutritious meals could be made cheaper than less nutritious meals. I would not be against the idea of a pilot scheme to determine whether what the bill's supporters advocate would work in practice.

The big battle in the long term will be about how to educate the next generation to eat healthily, especially when the adults of this generation eat so unhealthily. Finding how to do that properly will be a mammoth task.

Irene McGugan: Thank you, Eric. That point is a good lead-in to the question that I was going to ask. The STUC witnesses in particular talked about a long-term educational process. Do you feel that schools and local authorities have a role in that educational process when the poor health of some of Scotland's children is undeniable? Do you have sympathy at all for the view that addressing that poor health with this bill will offset the costs and difficulties of implementing the bill?

Councillor Law: We have the health improvement fund but, as I said earlier, there are so many different funds, pots of money, things to be bid for and plans to be put forward that a great deal of bureaucracy is required to make all that happen. Simplification, so that those initiatives are available in all schools, would be helpful.

Councillor Gotts: Clearly, there is a role for local government. At the end of the day, it is in charge of providing school meals. There is no simple solution. As committee members have said, we should wait and see what comes out of the expert panel on nutrition and school meals, part of whose remit is to examine diet and nutrition. Let us see what suggestions come from the panel rather than hang all our policies on one simple policy, that is, free school meals for all.

Tommy Sheridan: Each of the witnesses will be aware that the purpose of the stage 1 consultation on and analysis of a bill is to examine the general principles of the bill rather than the details. What is the position of each of you on the general principles of the bill? Do you believe that those principles should be supported? Do you think that the bill would improve nutritional intake in schools?

Councillor Law: Given that we are providing the COSLA response, it should be a collective response. The response is that we support some of the issues in the bill but not all of them.

Tommy Sheridan: What do you mean by saying that this is COSLA's submission? How did COSLA arrive at this submission?

Councillor Law: In a number of ways. We consulted councillors and had a meeting of the education conveners. The bill was on the agenda of the executive meeting of those conveners on 12 April. Our submission is the collective response from that meeting.

Tommy Sheridan: If I say to you that of the 32 items of written evidence, 14 were from councils, and of those 14, eight councils expressed support for the general principles of the bill, five said that they were neutral and one was opposed—and that one is not even a member of COSLA—can you explain how the majority of COSLA members appear to support the general principles, but you are here on behalf of COSLA to tell us that you are opposed to the general principles?

Councillor Law: There are 29 member councils, as you no doubt are aware, and we are expressing their collective view. With regard to the written evidence, it is down to interpretation. Many councils have said, "We support the general principles, but we are concerned about the resources. If resources were available, we would rather they were targeted at areas of need, that is, at poor families and the poorest communities." You might regard that as support for what you are saying, but I regard it as COSLA considering the poorest communities first and not wanting to go for universal provision at this time.

Tommy Sheridan: It is a matter of record, Helen. I told you that five councils submitted neutral submissions that presented views similar to those that you have outlined, that is, they said, "The bill could be an improvement, but if there are more resources perhaps we should do this or that." I have put them down as neutral. I am talking about eight councils expressing support for something, but you are here telling me that the collective view of COSLA—

Councillor Law: That is democracy, Tommy. People get together to express a common view. You take account of some being in favour and some being against, but the common view prevails.

Councillor Gotts: I will add to what Helen Law said. I attended the meeting of COSLA at which the education conveners were well represented. In fact, there was not a single voice of dissent at that meeting. We support the principle of encouraging young people to eat well, but we do not feel that the bill is the key to unlock that or that it is the best way forward.

Tommy Sheridan: For clarification, Eric, I am not suggesting for a moment that you are misrepresenting what happened at your meeting

on 12 April, but I am saying that when local authorities have examined the general principles of the bill, the majority of them have expressed support for those principles. You have expressed what the education conveners of COSLA feel. With the greatest respect, Helen, that does not represent the best aspect of democracy, given that you are supposed to represent local authorities, not just education conveners.

Councillor Gotts: I will clarify that. I assure Tommy Sheridan that when we go to a COSLA meeting, we do not represent only ourselves. We consult widely before we go. That is important.

17:30

Councillor Law: We are not giving our personal views. We are representing the collective position, which is not easy.

Tommy Sheridan: I have spoken to eight councils that are members of COSLA, and none has said that COSLA consulted it for the evidence. I suggest that COSLA sorts that out, because COSLA does not appear to be representing the views of local authorities that have undertaken consultation.

Councillor Law said that it would be better to spend money on improving school clothing grants and other aspects of what she called "targeting children"—I will use its real name of means testing. That suggestion runs counter to evidence from Lourdes and Holyrood, which are the two biggest secondary schools in Glasgow. The school clothing grant entitlement at Holyrood is 40 per cent, but the school meals entitlement is only 23 per cent. The school meals entitlement at Lourdes is 40 per cent, but the school clothing grant entitlement is 50 per cent. The rate of qualification for school clothing grants is higher than that for school meals. As you know, we cannot affect the benefits system.

Do you support the general thrust that universal and nutritious meals could improve our children's health?

Councillor Law: Like any conveners, when education conveners attend COSLA meetings, they bring with them the representative views of their councils, which are fed through the COSLA system. I dispute Tommy Sheridan's suggestion that there was a lack of democracy. Of the 29 councils, more than 20 were present at the meeting. Perhaps the eight councils to which Tommy Sheridan alludes were not represented—I do not know. People are expected to attend. A collective view was taken from the majority that was present and we have expressed that view.

The Deputy Convener: Given that the matter is under contention, I suggest that you take it back to

COSLA to obtain a clearer view so that we can clarify it for ourselves next week. That would be more useful than playing ping-pong with the matter.

Councillor Law: I would be happy to take the matter back to COSLA. As Eric Gotts said, there was no dispute when the matter was debated. In fact, I was surprised that the view was supported unanimously.

Tommy Sheridan was right with his other point. Councils give more clothing grants than free school meals, because they set the level for clothing grants. That shows that there is a need in our communities and demonstrates that we must campaign for higher uptake of free school meals and a change in the entitlement threshold. I know that that must be done through Westminster.

The Deputy Convener: I am sure that members wish to ask more questions. Ian Jenkins has generously waived the right to ask a question, because of the time available.

Jackie Baillie: I will talk quickly—I get the hint. Keith Downton has been quiet recently, and I would hate for him to have attended without talking. In my experience, nursery children are more prone to suggestion and instruction than primary or teenage children are. Perhaps it is difficult to draw a direct analogy between universal school milk provision and universal free meal provision, because that does not factor in children's behaviour. I am dead interested in how children's behaviour can be adapted—for reasons other than the purpose behind the bill. Do you have any suggestions?

Keith Downton: You adapt children's behaviour by starting with them young.

As well as supplying milk free of charge to children who get free meals, we supply it at a charge to other pupils. In primary schools, the take-up goes down to 64 per cent, which is still pretty high in comparison with our uptake of school meals.

Councillor Gotts: On adaptation of behaviour, one must consult young people at all levels in schools. Such consultation has often led to councils adapting their school dining rooms to achieve a more cafe-style ambience and has resulted in changes in menus. It is important to learn from the ground and to work upwards, rather than to impose something from the top. That is why I think that imposing universal free school meals will not work.

Craig Clement: I agree with that 100 per cent. There must be a whole-school approach to school meals. That is only one part of health promotion in schools. Consultation of pupils—through pupil councils, surveys or school meal committees—is

essential. School meal committees have been set up in some schools to examine what is on the menu and to consider how the dining hall could be improved. I support the remarks that Councillor Gotts made about consultation.

Jackie Baillie: I promise that I have only two more questions. I have knowledge of East Dunbartonshire Council's cashless system, which makes use of a swipe card, and have learned that the swipe card system had the effect of removing stigma. Eric Gotts said that East Dunbartonshire can monitor people's dietary habits from the information that the card provides, which is interesting from a nutritional point of view. Do you do that monitoring to help you to meet the demand that the children generate or with a view to changing the patterns of demand that are associated with choice and nutritional quality?

Councillor Gotts: Both factors are important. I will give a slightly ridiculous example. When a parent doubted that their youngster spent so much on school meals, we were able to give the parent a breakdown of what their child had eaten on every day of the week. The card is quite an interesting monitoring tool.

You are right that, through the card system, we could obtain feedback on what we provide and make changes accordingly. We do not want to reach a situation in which interest begins to drop off. Building and maintaining interest is primarily a secondary sector issue—on the whole it is not a primary sector issue. Primary kids tend to stay in school to have school meals and packed lunches. The big issue is how to get the secondary school teenager to have a meal or to stay in school. It is difficult to resolve that issue, even with cafes and all the rest.

The Deputy Convener: Tommy Sheridan has promised me a wee question.

Tommy Sheridan: I have a brief question and a very quick supplementary to it. I did not see anything in your written evidence about the effectiveness of the swipe card system. What evidence do you have that introducing the swipe card system improves the uptake of free school meals?

Councillor Gotts: I can speak about my authority, but I cannot speak more widely than that. There is no doubt that the swipe card system has made some difference. One of the problems is that in different authorities different percentages of pupils are on free school meals. In our authority, the percentage is quite low at only 10 per cent; that is probably not typical. Uptake has been reasonable. I think that Angus Council has more information.

Craig Clement: All our schools are now on the cashless system; the final school adopted the

system last week. Take-up of free school meals has varied—in some schools it has gone up from below 50 per cent to more than 90 per cent. In the seven schools on which we have done analysis, uptake of entitlement to free school meals has increased by about 20 per cent on average.

Tommy Sheridan: Is there any COSLA evidence on that? You represent all our local authorities.

Councillor Law: That statistical evidence can certainly be supplied. Not every local authority has yet gone down the swipe card road. I alluded to the fact that our local authorities are diverse and often have different opinions. It is unusual to achieve consensus.

The Deputy Convener: I suggest that to assist Tommy Sheridan we should get information from the local authorities that have adopted swipe cards.

Tommy Sheridan: I have the figures from Edinburgh—Keith Downton might be able to confirm them. Only two schools in Edinburgh use the swipe card system and the evidence seems to be that the uptake of free school meals from 2001-02 fell from 49.3 per cent to 44.8 per cent. The panacea that the witnesses are talking about does not seem to be proven in the case of Edinburgh.

Keith Downton: Those are the figures that were revealed by the snapshot of the school meals census. However, there would be the same variation—if not a greater one—in the general run of high schools. We have one high school that has a high percentage of pupils who are eligible for free school meals, but which turns over slightly more than 40 per cent, and another school that turns over 96 per cent. It is not for me to say what the difference is, but I think that much of it is down to the school staff and the head teacher.

Councillor Law: Perhaps Craig Clement could add something to that. I do not think that swipe cards are a panacea. I can remember the stigma of having free school meals—as a kid, I sat with white dinner tickets when everyone else had brown ones.

Craig Clement: I am happy to give the committee the statistics for Angus, if that would be helpful.

Tommy Sheridan: The figures for the whole of Scotland would be great.

The Deputy Convener: That would be useful. If I am allowed to say anything, I suggest that the point about local leadership taking responsibility is interesting.

We should ask our final questions. We must vacate the premises; the Hub requires this part of the building as of five minutes ago, so we have

overstayed our welcome. Jackie Baillie is keen to ask a question to COSLA.

Jackie Baillie: The question is about money. At present, GAE is not hypothecated. Some local authorities spend more than their GAE allocation on school meals and some spend less and divert the money to other educational priorities. How does COSLA determine its policy on charging for school meals? Should the GAE allocation be hypothecated?

Councillor Law: I will answer your second question first. Members will know COSLA's view on hypothecation. If we are given the resources and we agree on an outcome, we will deliver on that outcome. The collective figure that is spent on school meals is substantially above the collective GAE allocation. I do not have the individual breakdown, but I understand that the allocation for school meals is just over £60 million and that councils spend £84 million.

The Deputy Convener: I thank the witnesses and members for their patience. It is now quarter to six, so we have been here for three and a half hours. The evidence session has been good. We have heard a range of opinions that will assist the committee. I wish committee members well in exploring the issue in the next few evidence sessions.

I thank members for their time and forbearance with me as the deputy convener.

Meeting closed at 17:42.

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