

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 14 May 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE 15th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (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

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab)
Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

WITNESSES

Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)
Gillian Kynoch (Scottish Executive Health Department)
Nicol Stephen (Deputy Minister for Education and Young People)

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 14 May 2002

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:06*]

Deputy Convener

The Convener (Karen Gillon): I call this meeting of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee to order. Mobile telephones and pagers should be turned off. We have received apologies for Mike Russell's absence.

Members will be aware that, at its meeting on 9 May, the Parliament appointed Cathy Peattie as a permanent member of the committee in place of Frank McAveety. Members will also be aware that the Parliament appointed Karen Whitefield as the committee substitute for the Labour party.

The committee must choose a deputy convener. Members will remember that, in December 1999, the Parliament agreed that the deputy convener of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee should be a member of the Labour party. Under standing order 12.1.9, when a deputy convener ceases to hold office, the committee must choose a successor from the same party. I therefore invite members to nominate a Labour member as deputy convener. A seconder is not required.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I nominate Cathy Peattie.

The Convener: Cathy Peattie, do you accept the nomination?

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I am happy to accept it.

The Convener: As there are no further nominations, does the committee agree that Cathy Peattie should become the deputy convener again?

Members indicated agreement.

Cathy Peattie was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: It is good to have you back as deputy convener, Cathy.

Items in Private

The Convener: Does the committee agree to discuss item 5, on the 2003-04 budget process, in private, as it involves consideration of a draft report to the Finance Committee, and also item 6, which concerns the proposal for a committee bill?

Members indicated agreement.

School Meals (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Convener: We now move to the second day of oral evidence at stage 1 of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. Our first witnesses are Gillian Kynoch and Dr Maureen Bruce of the Scottish Executive's health education and diet branch. I welcome Tommy Sheridan MSP and John McAllion MSP, who are co-sponsors of the bill, and Karen Whitefield MSP. Do the witnesses wish to make opening remarks before we move to questions?

Gillian Kynoch (Scottish Executive Health Department): Good afternoon. I was appointed early last summer as co-ordinator of food and health policy for the Scottish Executive. The role is wide ranging and involves trying to move forward the Scottish diet as a whole. I work with the food industry and with many cross-cabinet portfolios to achieve a major step forward in the Scottish diet.

The Scottish Executive's priority is child health. I have worked as a community dietician in central Scotland and I have worked on school meals. An early priority for me was to sort out school meals. The ministers with responsibility for social justice, education and health asked me to proceed with that work and to consider what we need to do in respect of the provision of food in schools.

As part of that work, we set up the expert panel that advises ministers on school meals—I think that it has already given evidence to the committee. I am part of that panel. We are working on a broad portfolio of measures to improve school meals. We are considering their nutritional content—the quality of food on the plate—and ensuring that school meals deliver nutritionally for children in Scotland.

We are aware that there is no point in offering healthy food if nobody chooses it, so a big part of our work is making healthy food the best choice and making school meals an option that children want to take up. Therefore, getting involved with and participating fully in the presentation and delivery of school meals is important. It is not just about nutrition. The panel has also been asked to consider stigmatisation in the free school meals service and to do everything possible to eradicate any stigmatisation that exists. I work within that framework and try to do everything possible to improve, and realise the full potential of, the school meals service.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): At this morning's meeting of the Subordinate Legislation Committee, we considered the provisions of the bill. It does not define a nutritious meal. What does a nutritious meal mean in respect of the bill?

Gillian Kynoch: The expert panel's work on defining a nutritious meal will be applicable. The panel is looking at the setting of nutritional standards for school meals in Scotland and will report to the minister on its recommendations at the end of May. The panel is working on setting nutrient standards rather than food group standards, which have been adopted in the rest of the UK. That is as much as I can say without pre-empting the panel's findings. The expert panel will define the term "nutritious".

Ian Jenkins: Will a nutritious meal be quantified, using calories and proteins, for example? Will it be measurable?

Gillian Kynoch: Yes. The process of measuring implementation will also be important.

Cathy Peattie: I am interested in children's choices and how they can be legislated for. This afternoon, some of my colleagues and I had school dinners at Leith Academy. The choice was better than in the Scottish Parliament restaurant, but we were struck by the number of kids who had plates of chips and cheese and who came in with wee baskets of chips from outside. We asked why they did so, because the cafeteria had an excellent choice of food. They said that they liked to go out for a wee walk and they liked to choose. How does one legislate to ensure that children take the opportunity to eat nutritious food? At Leith Academy, such food was available for children at the same price, but they did not choose it.

Gillian Kynoch: You have put your finger on the complexity of the issue—one cannot legislate for children's choice. We must wrap school meals in a whole package. It is important that we do not see the provision of a dinner in school as an isolated item. We should build the provision of food in school into a whole-school approach.

"Whole-school approach" is a term that we hear bandied about a lot and people mean different things by it. However, we should think in terms of whole-day provision. It is not only lunch that is important, but breakfast, lunch and what a child eats when he or she gets home from school. The whole-school approach is also about setting consistent policy and practice, which is about delivering the same message in the classroom as is being delivered by what is provided in school meals. That is to do with influencing choice by wrapping the children in a continuous process of nutrition education. I firmly believe that knowledge of nutrition is gained more by absorption of experience than by being preached at. We have to put school meals in that context; we must work with children from when they are very small and keep influencing their food choices all the way through their school careers. We have to back up teaching in the classroom with experience in the dining hall and through schools' other food policies.

14:15

We cannot make children choose certain food, but we know a lot about marketing and presentation. The panel has been auditing current practice throughout Scotland—I have, while auditing individual schools over the past two years, eaten more than my fair share of school dinners. We have examined the broad ambit of practice in Scotland to see what works. Where the majority of children make good choices, it is because good food has been presented well. There is a great deal to be said for stacking it high and selling it cheap. The product that has the best visual impact in terms of what you see the most of and appears to represent the best value for money will sell the most. That is true in most areas of life and school meals are no different. As I said, however, those choices must also be reinforced. In order to sell the children anything, we have to get them in the door. That means that we have to create a school meals service that children want to buy into.

Cathy Peattie: I expect that a lot of what you are talking about is happening in Leith Academy. However, one of the children to whom I spoke said that, in her cookery class, she did not cook pork because she was vegetarian and had instead cooked a spicy Quorn meal. Nevertheless, she still liked to have a tuna sandwich or chips and a briedie.

Gillian Kynoch: We cannot expect changes overnight. We have to view school meals in the context of the general culture of diet. That is the part of the task that is keeping me awake at night. How do we turn around the culture of diet? There are many factors that influence children's choices about their diets but we have to make school meals a firm plank in the profile of the work that we are doing, and we must keep on working on it.

Cathy Peattie: We are talking only about lunches, but there are obviously other opportunities for children to eat at school. Have you been considering breakfast clubs and other opportunities to explore the whole-school approach? I am interested in work that is done with pre-5s, because that is an important time in terms of nutrition.

Gillian Kynoch: A lot of exciting work is being done in relation to children's diets. It is true to say that, until now, school dinners have been the weakest link in that range of initiatives and they have been undermining a lot of the work that is being done. We are committed to rectifying that. It is a big priority for me, but it is also a big priority for the Scottish Executive.

Breakfast clubs are important because provision of breakfast is important. We cannot do everything that we need to do to combat hunger in Scottish

children—which is still a significant problem—solely by improving school dinners. For some children, we need also to provide breakfast. We are undertaking a review of breakfast clubs and breakfast provision to ensure that breakfasts are being provided in the schools in which they should be provided, and to find out what the most effective sources of funding are, which include the new breakfast club challenge fund that was announced by the Minister for Social Justice in November. In our review, we are trying to understand the funding structures for breakfast clubs better. The easiest thing with a breakfast club is to set it up; the hardest thing is to keep it going. We are determined to build in sustainable funding for breakfast clubs.

A lot of exciting work is being done to put fruit shops instead of tuck shops in schools, and the Scottish Community Diet Project is putting together tools to support schools in setting up successful and sustainable fruit shops. The ultimate would be to have children buying fruit, rather than having it given to them free. It is better that they make choices for themselves. Work is also being done to support after-school clubs. We need to have all those schemes built into the curriculum. Work with under-fives is also important. It has been exciting to see the impact that the health improvement fund has had in nurseries throughout Scotland in helping to set up exciting projects to do with fruit and vegetables. Those projects are not just about eating fruit and vegetables, but about learning about them and growing them. That is a dynamic situation.

Jackie Baillie: You excited some comment in the media today. In your written statement, the first point that you make is that

"There is no evidence that the universal provision of free school meals will have any benefit to health in addition to policies currently being pursued by the Scottish Executive."

Do not you think that providing a free, nutritious school meal to all pupils would be advantageous in addressing their dietary needs?

Gillian Kynoch: I have been asked to present the evidence, and the evidence that we have is what we are working on. We are building evidence based on best practice into the recommendations that the expert panel will make. That broad range of recommendations will address what we think the nutritional content of school meals should be and what we have learned from best practice throughout Scotland about what works to make a school meals service deliver a quality service for children. It is not just about nutrients; it is also about the way in which the service influences choice, which was mentioned earlier. We need to look after vulnerable children and their needs, but we also need to make the service work for all children by influencing their eating behaviour.

We are putting the evidence that we have into the expert panel's recommendations. The bill asks us to gaze into a crystal ball to see what would be added to that broad and strong package of measures by making school meals free for every pupil. The onus is on the bill's supporters to tell us what evidence they have that making school meals free for all pupils would add to that package. Perhaps making the entitlement universal would lead to a radical increase in uptake. There might be a mass flurry of children from all over Scotland flocking into the school meals service because it is free. What would the pragmatic effect on the service be? Could the service cope? Would that cause meltdown in the service? I am crystal ball gazing—I cannot say whether those things will happen.

It could also be suggested that, in time, if the service was overstretched, the problems that exist—the big disincentives to children to have school meals, including queuing, overcrowding, bad environment and take-it-or-leave-it choices—would still make the service one that children would not want to take up. After the initial flurry, children who could make the choice to go down the street and whose parents could make different choices about what their children ate at lunchtime might opt out of the service and leave it as a free school meals service for those who could not opt out of it. I cannot say whether that will happen. I know, however, that we are drafting strong recommendations on the evidence of what we know will work to make the school meals service deliver for Scotland.

Jackie Baillie: You seem to be making a distinction—which the committee has made in previous evidence sessions—between universal entitlement and nutritional standards. There is some consistency of thought to the effect that nutritional standards need to improve and that, therefore, the expert panel is very welcome.

Without wanting to get you into deep water, I would like to ask a number of questions about the expert panel. Will it consider the provision of water in schools?

Gillian Kynoch: Yes.

Jackie Baillie: Will it consider the provision of milk in schools, which is another aspect of the bill? We have heard evidence—background reading supports it—that when nutritional standards are set as guidelines, they are not always helpful in ensuring that standards are adhered to. Is the expert panel considering whether standards should be set in statute? Last, are you doing costings?

Gillian Kynoch: The expert panel is determined that there should not simply be guidelines. The standards should be in the form of very firm

guidance that we will monitor. The panel believes that monitoring will be important, so we are considering several levels of monitoring. It will be important that schools report regularly on how they are doing against the standards, which will not only cover the nutrients on the plate. A whole-school approach will be taken and there will be consideration of the partnerships that schools must develop in order to deliver a good school meals service.

Presentation and uptake will also be important. We must make school meals more nutritious, but we must also ensure that more children opt to take those meals. We do not want to make meals healthier and then have nobody take them. Of course, healthier is nicer—we all know that—but we have to show that we are increasing uptake.

Monitoring will be really important. I am confident that parents will be able to see the impact of national standards. This year and on into the future, we will know how we are doing against the standards.

Costing has been an important part of the expert panel's work. We have to come up with a plan not only for implementation and a strategy for monitoring, but to ensure that all our recommendations are fully costed. It makes me quite scared to say that, because we must complete our work by the end of May, but I think that we will get there. It is a big task.

School meals services differ throughout Scotland. Some schools offer schemes whereby children can buy subsidised school milk, whereas in other local authorities, the provision of milk is built into the school meals service. The expert panel has not made any recommendations on the provision of milk. However, it will make recommendations on a number of issues that are peripheral to the school meals service. When I call some issues "peripheral", I do not mean to play down their significance.

Last year, the Scottish Executive stepped in to replace the level of subsidy that the European Union had removed. Through the health improvement fund, we have put money back in so that we can continue to offer subsidised milk in Scotland.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I want to follow up on one of Jackie Baillie's points. Last week, I was struck by the comments of a witness from the Scottish Trades Union Congress. From her considerable experience, she said that, in England, where nutritional standards are covered by guidance only, the system was not working. She said that if we are committed to the principle, we shall require some form of legislation. Might the expert panel recommend that?

Gillian Kynoch: That takes us to the nub of the argument. In England, standards have been set around food groups and guidance. They are binding—set in statute—but the system is not working. Nutritionists feel strongly that the important thing is not that standards should be legally binding, but that they should be nutrient based, so that we can monitor them. That means saying that a school meal will deliver X calories and X amount of protein, or that X portions of fruit and vegetables will deliver so much iron and calcium, and it means that we must set the values for that. Then, through software analysis, we can build in tools to consider various individual schools and ascertain whether they are delivering.

That level of monitoring is missing from the provisions in England and Wales and that is making them ineffective, regardless of the argument whether such measures should be set in statute. We are working in partnership with local authorities and giving them strong guidance. We are asking them to report back regularly on the standards. However, I do not think that the Executive and ministers have ruled out the possibility of using legislation in future if we need to. At the moment, a firm package of guidance is being closely and publicly monitored, and that is felt to be the best way to take local authorities through the process with us.

14:30

Irene McGugan: If the recommendations are accepted, and better nutritional content is delivered, the stigma will be eliminated and the presentation of food will be improved—which I hope will encourage more young people to take school meals. Do you think that making the meals universally free will help to achieve those things? We are concerned that children and young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have most to gain from measures to improve their health. Which of the packages—the expert group's package or that of the proposers of the bill, which involves making meals universally free—will have most impact on the health of low-income children?

Gillian Kynoch: You cannot separate the elements of the package—all are equally important. School meals are very important to the group of children to which Irene McGugan refers. If half the children in Scotland were taking school meals, they would be largely children from lower-income families. That is why the major priority is provision of a high-quality school meals service for those children. We are bent on delivery of that important school meals service.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): At last week's meeting of the Health and Community Care Committee, you accepted that there is a clear link between poverty and ill health. You also

accepted that there is a cost disincentive in relation to school meals because of the plethora of other food outlets near schools, which can offer cheap food, albeit that it is often lacking in nutrition. Do you accept that a large group of children in Scotland, who are officially classed as poor, are excluded from eligibility for school meals? Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 pupils are currently excluded from free school meals eligibility. Do you accept that figure?

Gillian Kynoch: I do not have those figures and cannot accept them per se. I do not have that evidence. On Tommy Sheridan's broader point, however—which I think is about the importance of taking children out of poverty—and reflecting on the evidence that I gave last week, the issue is really about the number of children who are not entitled to free school meals, and who may currently be disincentivised from taking school meals because of their cost. It would be oversimplistic to say that cost was the only disincentive to taking school meals. The importance of improving the school meals service and of encouraging children to take part in that service instead of going down the town relates to making the service deliver to children what they are looking for from it.

The question of children who are not currently entitled to free school meals relates to increasing entitlement to benefit. I am not so naive, however, to think that there will not always be an issue about the cut-off point. Wherever we put that cut-off point, somebody will fall outwith eligibility for benefit. The question then arises whether to increase entitlement to benefit or to introduce universal entitlement. It is a matter of combating poverty among children generally, but that is for the Executive; my job is to focus on delivering on food and health policy, not on benefits policy.

Tommy Sheridan: So we are agreed that there is a group of children who are not eligible for free school meals—CPAG estimates that there are as many as 100,000 of them. You say that you do not have evidence of how many children there are in that position.

Gillian Kynoch: I say that only because of my limited knowledge.

Tommy Sheridan: Sure. However, we agree that a group of children is currently excluded from eligibility for free school meals. We accept that cost is a disincentive—although not the only one. Do you—like Ian Young of the Health Education Board for Scotland—accept that if entitlement to free school meals were made universal, at least children who are officially classified as poor, but who are not currently eligible for free school meals, would have increased intake of nutritious food?

Gillian Kynoch: The school meals service currently serves children from low-income families. My focus is on the package of recommendations that we propose in order to improve school meals. Those recommendations will encourage children who are not entitled to free school meals and who do not take them to participate in the school meals service. We want to make that service as good as possible for them. It is for the minister to address the question of whether entitlement should be increased.

Tommy Sheridan: With respect—

The Convener: You may ask one more question.

Tommy Sheridan: I am trying to establish whether, based on your experience and background, you accept that, if school meals were made free for all children, that would improve the health of children who are currently not entitled to free school meals, even though they come from poor families. I asked Ian Young to answer the same question, based on his experience and background. He said that he was confident that uptake would increase. Are you saying that you do not share that confidence?

Gillian Kynoch: Last week in my evidence to the Health and Community Care Committee I said that I do not think that uptake of school meals will necessarily increase if we make them free for all children. I am not saying that I think uptake would increase or that it would not increase. You are asking me, in the absence of an evidence base, to predict what would happen. I have great concerns about how the school meals service would respond to the universal provision of free school meals, and about the influence that such a measure would have. I am confident that we can build best practice and improve the service based on the current level of provision. Because the school meals service and the provision of food in schools are so valuable to children, it would be wrong to make simplistic assumptions.

Tommy Sheridan: Do you think that Ian Young was making a simplistic assumption?

Gillian Kynoch: The Executive does not agree with the position that Mr Young took.

Tommy Sheridan: Do you think that he was being simplistic?

The Convener: Tommy, I am convening this meeting. John McAllion would like to ask a question.

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): You stressed the importance of evidence-based recommendations, as opposed to what you described as “crystal ball gazing”. I suppose that that comment was directed at the people who support the bill. What attempt has been made,

either by the expert panel or by the Executive, to seek evidence of the likely impact of the introduction of a universal free school meals service on uptake of school meals in Scotland?

Gillian Kynoch: You are asking me to indicate that the Scottish Executive has looked for evidence to justify a policy that it does not support.

Mr McAllion: I am simply asking whether the Executive has looked for evidence concerning the likely impact of the introduction of universal free school meals. You have stated:

“There is no evidence that the universal provision of free school meals will have any benefit to health”.

If you are not looking for such evidence, you will not find it. Is the Executive or the expert panel doing that?

Gillian Kynoch: The expert panel was set up by ministers to give them advice on how they should improve the school meals service.

Mr McAllion: There is evidence of the impact that universal free school meals services have had in Finland and Sweden. From Sweden, there is some evidence of what happens when universal free school meals provision is withdrawn. Has anyone in the Executive examined that evidence? Has anyone visited Sweden or Finland? Has anyone reached any conclusions about the impact that the introduction of a universal free school meals service would have?

Gillian Kynoch: The Scottish Executive has engaged strongly, and continues to engage, with health policies in Scandinavia. Next week a party from Finland is coming to visit Scotland. There have also been many visits the other way.

Mr McAllion: Has the Executive examined the universal free school meals service that is provided in Finland and Sweden?

Gillian Kynoch: The Executive has considered a range of health policy initiatives in Scandinavia.

Mr McAllion: What evidence has been uncovered as a result of that work?

Gillian Kynoch: It is impossible to pick out from the work that has been done in Scandinavia what effect making school meals free to all has had.

Mr McAllion: Do you include the experience of Finland and Sweden in that statement that there is no evidence that a universal free school meals service would have an impact on health?

Gillian Kynoch: I was referring only to the impact of making schools meal free for everybody. There is a lot of evidence about the whole gamut of public health initiatives in Scandinavia and the agenda of those countries for improving diet in general. The most important element of such initiatives was to improve the quality of the meals

service, but Sweden first took action on that back in 1947 and there is a huge history behind it. It would be for the supporters of the bill to say what evidence exists to show that making the entitlement to free school meals universal, in addition to the other public health measures, has had an impact on health.

Mr McAllion: So there is evidence, but you judge it not to be very important. Is that right?

Gillian Kynoch: It is not that simple.

Mr McAllion: The evidence is out there.

Gillian Kynoch: Then that is for the supporters of the bill to present.

Ian Jenkins: I recognise that you cannot do a nationwide pilot for free school meals, but is there any scope for a pilot scheme to examine how provision would work in a small area and to study changes in uptake? Different local authorities are adopting different policies for subsidising school milk or providing it free, so there must be a way of gathering statistics through a pilot that would show the difference between providing school meals at a cost for one month and providing them free the next. I know that such a study would not prove everything, but it would give us a flavour of evidence of how things work.

Gillian Kynoch: What is relevant is current practice in Scotland. There are schools where the current level of entitlement to free school meals is high. Most of the schools that I was working with in central Scotland had up to 80 per cent pupil entitlement to free school meals. The issue that mattered was making that service a quality service for the children. If the service was poor, if the environment was poor or if the food was not of a good quality, the children would go down the town with their friends. If we improved the service and made it work for them, the children would come in for their meals. When we look at schools that have a high entitlement, it is wrong to look at any one issue in isolation.

Some of the research that I have been involved in has considered the impact of using swipe cards or cashless systems in secondary schools that have a high entitlement but perhaps a low uptake. We know that putting in cashless systems, when combined with a package of measures to improve the environment and the provision of food, will greatly improve the uptake of entitlement. In fact, one published report showed that, in those circumstances, uptake doubled. When we are looking at schools with a high entitlement that have managed to increase uptake, we ask what they have done to make things work and to bring children back into the service. We want to spread that good practice right across Scotland.

Ian Jenkins: I agree with that. Do not get me

wrong. I think that the drift of what you are saying is broadly right, but there is scope for a wee bit of evidence taking. There could be a study to show how many people take up a service if there is a charge for it and how many take it up if it is offered free. There is scope for small-scale pilots that could give us more evidence about that.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): In your submission, you said:

"There is no evidence that the universal provision of free school meals will have any benefits to health".

Is there any conclusive evidence that free school meals will not be beneficial to health?

Gillian Kynoch: Perhaps I was not very eloquent last week, but I missed out the word "additional". I should have said that there is no evidence that making the entitlement to free school meals universal would have any additional health gain on top of the package of measures that we are proposing. That is really my point.

Alex Neil: My point is that there is no evidence to the contrary, either. Is your point, generally speaking, that there is no evidence or that the evidence points in one particular direction? I put it to you that you are arguing that there is no evidence.

Gillian Kynoch: That is what I was trying to say before. I said that you were asking me to do some crystal ball gazing, but that comment was not meant with any disrespect. We are building a strong package of measures on evidence and that final step is the bit that we know least about and that is the most expensive.

Alex Neil: So if you were to see the evidence from Finland, Sweden and local authority areas in the UK where a free school meals service has been introduced effectively, which shows that additional take-up has led to better health, you would accept it.

Gillian Kynoch: I am interested in what we do and learn in Scotland. I am interested in what we know about the Scottish school meals service and the challenges that it faces. We have to hear from the people who are involved in delivering the service and we are looking to learn from best practice.

14:45

Alex Neil: You are not answering the question. What we do in Scotland will be based on evidence from elsewhere in the UK and in Scandinavia, for example.

Gillian Kynoch: And other parts of the world.

Alex Neil: I am asking you whether, if you were to see the evidence, which is available from Finland and Sweden, that the provision of free

school meals leads to additional take-up, which leads to better health, you would accept it.

Gillian Kynoch: You are focusing on uptake.

Alex Neil: I am asking you a simple question, which is based on the opening sentence of your evidence. You are trying to suggest that there is no evidence that there would be an improvement in health. If there is evidence of an improvement in health from elsewhere, I take it that you would accept it.

Gillian Kynoch: Yes.

Alex Neil: I want to ask just one other question. A report last month showed that one in six children admitted to the Edinburgh sick children's hospital suffers from malnutrition. Are you saying that the provision and better uptake of free school meals would not contribute to the solution to that problem?

Gillian Kynoch: No one is saying that the current provision of school meals is adequate. I began by saying that it has not been fulfilling its important role and that we are determined to ensure that it will do so. School meals play two important roles—to safeguard the nutrition of vulnerable children and to challenge and influence the diets of all children.

Alex Neil: If one in six children admitted to hospital suffers from malnutrition, by definition there is something seriously wrong. It suggests that the current provision of school meals is one of the things that are seriously wrong.

Gillian Kynoch: That is why school meals are so important—we are giving them a high priority—and why we are determined to sort the service out. The issue is not just about school meals, which, given that we are talking only about lunch, form only so many meals throughout the year. We have stressed the importance of seeing school meals as part of a whole package. Breast-feeding and weaning practices are an important part of the picture. School meals will not sort the problem out by themselves. It is important that we get the diets of toddlers and young pregnant women right. There is no quick fix.

Alex Neil: I am sure that neither the convener nor I would disagree with that. However, the provision of free school meals is part of the package.

Gillian Kynoch: The provision of a high-quality school meals service to Scottish children is the bit of the task that is my remit and is the bit on which I am focusing.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Obviously the goal of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill is to improve children's health in the short term and reduce the incidence of coronary heart

disease, diabetes and obesity in the longer term. Would it be more effective to use the money to provide universal free school meals for all children and would that reduce the incidence of those diseases in the longer term? Alternatively, would targeting that money on children who already qualify for free school meals be more effective? You said that half the children in Scotland qualify for free school meals. Should the money be used to improve the nutritional standards of those meals? Would giving better oral health care for those children, ensuring that they are given proper meals at home and providing breakfast clubs be a more effective use of our limited resources? What measures would provide longer-term health benefits for the children of Scotland?

Gillian Kynoch: That is a good question. My remit is food and health policy. I advise ministers on that and consider how to develop existing Scottish Executive diet policy, which is all aimed at tackling the broad ambit of problems that Karen Whitefield described. No one element will deliver everything. We must consider diet in its totality. We must examine the provision of healthy choices, whether in school or in the workplace. We must also consider demand and ensure that the food industry provides solutions for people.

As for the source of the biggest health gain, I am the food and health co-ordinator, so the broader sweep of the member's question, which concerned prioritising health budgets and education budgets, should perhaps be put to the Deputy Minister for Education and Young People.

Karen Whitefield: Would using the money for the universal provision of free school meals improve health and reduce the incidence of obesity and coronary heart disease?

Gillian Kynoch: You assume that the total pot of money is available. That question would be for the minister to answer, rather than me. As for prioritisation, the minister would have several measures in the education portfolio on which to spend money, if it were available.

The answer to health issues such as obesity and diabetes should not be pinned on a school meals service, although that is an exceedingly important plank that we must get right. If 50 per cent of children choose to use the school meals service, 50 per cent of children do not, and we should not forget about them. We need to do everything that we can to influence their food choices.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Is there evidence that taking measures other than universal provision of free school meals would bring additional benefit?

Gillian Kynoch: That is what we are working on—I described the broad reach. There is much evidence about the positive impact, particularly on

educational attainment, of providing breakfast in schools to children who are poorly nourished. The provision of healthy food is inequitable. Children from lower socioeconomic groups are not attaining the heights of children from higher socioeconomic groups. Evidence shows that, when the calories of an extra meal are provided, growth rates in children from lower socioeconomic groups can be increased. That shows that we have a problem of under-nutrition in Scotland, which must be addressed. School meals and breakfasts will be an important part of that—the broad sweep of the Scottish Executive's major agenda on taking children out of poverty is a huge part of that and food plays one role in it.

Mr Monteith: Given the evidence in support of taking other initiatives and the lack of evidence for the additional benefit of the universal provision of free school meals, if you had about £180 million, perchance, would you have other priorities before the universal provision of free school meals?

Gillian Kynoch: Without letting myself be led too far on a journey that it would be inappropriate for me to take, I would say that the answer to your question lies within the work of the expert panel. The expert panel will be making recommendations on how to build a flagship school meals service. Such a service will not come free. I would be concerned if we spent the money only on making school meals free for everybody.

I am a housewife who has to keep to a budget; coming from the health service, I am very aware that there is a finite pot of money and only so many ways in which to spend it. Bringing school meals to the required level will require a major investment plan. For example, we will have to consider the kitchens. I have worked in school kitchens that, since the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, have suffered from disinvestment. We will have to put money back into kitchens. We will also have to put money into dining rooms, to make them into nicer environments. Members say that Leith Academy is nice, but I have been in many schools where the environment would drive you straight out to the van. We have to invest in those environments.

We also have to invest in the food on the plate. The issue all boils down to the quality of the food. A major problem with school meals is the size of the portions: children do not get enough to eat. I will be careful not to pre-empt the recommendations of the expert panel, but if it were to recommend an increase in portion sizes, we would need to find the money to do that. Before going into Mr Monteith's question on where else money could be spent, I would say that even within the school meals service there are many priorities for investment.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your

evidence. We will now move to our next set of witnesses, who are from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. We welcome Judith Gillespie and Eleanor Croner. Would you like to make any opening remarks before we move on to questions?

Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): We normally use the results of surveys to back up our submissions, but we have not done so this time. Instead, we have attached comments that have been taken from our around-the-country debates on free school meals. Although we do not have survey evidence, the comments represent the views of parents with whom we have discussed the issue.

Cathy Peattie: Nutritional standards are clearly important. It has been argued that, if universal free school meals were available, nutritional standards would improve and children would be a lot healthier, which sounds good. How can we ensure good nutritional standards in a way that encourages children to eat the food?

15:00

Judith Gillespie: We must recognise that choice is central—it is important for adults but it is even more important for children. Choosing what they eat is vital to children. There is a long-running debate over getting children to eat sensibly and to eat nutritional food, but for more than one parent the main priority is just to get their children to eat and to ensure that they get the calories in.

What children want changes over time, as they mature from toddlers, through primary school and into secondary school. They do not necessarily follow a straight path. Primary school children tend to be moral and good about picking up messages. Secondary school children tend to want to assert their independence—all one has to do is say, "It is good for you," and they walk a million miles in the other direction. The point is well made that food has to be attractive to youngsters.

It is important to recognise that swipe cards—which I hope we can discuss, because they are a valuable development—have been used to monitor what youngsters choose when they are offered a good range of food. Their choices, in terms of health, are depressing. We have to recognise that food is a matter of choice for all of us and it is a matter of choice for children, too.

Cathy Peattie: I wish to push you further on that point. We had lunch in a school where swipe cards were used and good meals were offered, which afforded us an opportunity to speak to children. They volunteered to us, "We have free school meals. I swipe my card." Those same kids were having chips and cheese. A host of nutritional food was on offer, which, with a drink, was within the value of their swipe card, yet they chose to have

chips and cheese or tuna rolls. How do we deal with kids? They have a choice, but that food is what they wanted to have. Should chips and cheese come off the menu? Should they be told, "This is what you are getting, and nothing else"?

Judith Gillespie: Schools have tried chip-free days, which sometimes work quite well. We could work on getting kids to try different types of food, for example by having an Italian day and putting pasta on the menu, but kids are innately conservative in what they eat, and tend to eat what they are used to; they do not tend to experiment. They go through a short period of experimentation, then they get locked down into conventional eating. We have to work hard to get them to try different foods.

I am sorry to be anecdotal, but my youngest son, as a wee one, to my great dismay, liked avocados. I would have loved it if he had not. He has moved on now—he hates them. We cannot predict what children will and will not like. When they are in a strange environment and they choose chips, often they are choosing a safe comfort food—they feel familiar with chips and they know how to eat them—therefore persuading them to eat healthier food is quite an art. I was interested to hear the previous evidence on how to do that through marketing. Understanding children's psychology is important.

Cathy Peattie: How would you improve school meals? How would you encourage youngsters to take school meals?

Judith Gillespie: First, it is important to get the children inside the door. The effort that was made in Glasgow with fuel zones, which tried to make school dining rooms into places that were familiar to children, was successful in increasing participation, but the fuel zones were criticised heavily because they did not offer children the right kind of food. However, they should have been congratulated on their efforts to increase participation.

Increased participation should be stage one. Stage two should be moving further and offering themed days, such as baked potato day, to persuade youngsters that there are other foods that are safe for them to eat—in terms of not being too different from their normal diet—but which are healthier than their traditional automatic choice. The number one point is to get children through the door.

Tommy Sheridan: I am disappointed with your evidence, because it seems to be anecdotal. Do you accept that what you have said today and your submission are anecdotal?

Judith Gillespie: I am happy to acknowledge that. The evidence is based on talking to parents up and down the country. It is not scientific. We

were not in a position to produce scientific evidence. Other people are better placed to do that. We are offering you what we have learned from discussing the issue with people up and down the country. The evidence is anecdotal.

Tommy Sheridan: You may not have had access to all the other submissions that have been made. However, if you were to learn that the Scottish School Board Association had conducted a survey that received more than 1,500 responses from parents, teachers and pupils, that One Plus had conducted a survey that received responses from 245 parents and pupils, and that West Gap Against Poverty in Glasgow had conducted a survey of 300 parents and pupils, would you accept that their evidence was stronger than yours, because it is not anecdotal but based on surveys?

Judith Gillespie: I cannot comment on the last two surveys to which the member refers, as I have not seen them. I examined the SSBA evidence, because the results of its survey were available on its website. The survey was based on questions. We decided not to conduct a survey because we felt that the bill raises more issues than could be dealt with by asking simple questions, and that any survey would be overly complex. We believed that it would be better for us to talk to people about the bill. When talking to people, we did not lead the discussion, but put questions in a neutral way. Members will not be surprised to learn that people knew that universal free provision of school meals was being debated and were aware of the issues. We did not in any way prescribe what was said to us. We did not offer people questions to answer. Instead, we sought to cover the issue of free school meals in the context of the national debate on education.

Tommy Sheridan: You will accept that the three organisations that I mentioned asked parents whether free school meals should be made available to all. In all three surveys, the majority of parents supported that measure. Does that not have more strength than the anecdotal evidence that you have presented to us? In your submission, you make the sweeping statement that parents do not support the introduction of universal free school meals. Do you not think that that is going too far?

Judith Gillespie: I accept that parents have different views on the issue. As I said, I cannot comment on the surveys by One Plus and West Gap Against Poverty, because I have not seen them. However, I do not think that the question that was asked by the SSBA explored fully the issue of universal free school meals. Often, the reasons that people gave for youngsters' refusal to take up free school meals had nothing to do with meals. Those reasons cannot be explored in a

survey. I do not think that the surveys to which Tommy Sheridan refers explored the issue adequately.

I am perfectly happy to accept that not every parent in Scotland backs our submission. However, the submission reflects the views that were expressed at the meetings that we held, which involved very good discussions. I can say no more than that.

Jackie Baillie: At the risk of being anecdotal—which I would hate to be—I refer you to my experience at Leith Academy, which was quite instructive. I wonder whether that was mirrored in the conversations that you had with parents. When they were asked whether they wanted school meals to be free, the overwhelming majority of children to whom we spoke—admittedly, it was not a large sample—said that they did. Only one or two said that they did not. However, when they were asked whether they wanted to eat those school meals, 100 per cent of the children said that they did not. Did you pick up on that in your discussions with parents? As has been said, it is enormously difficult to legislate for children's behaviour. If anyone finds the secret of doing that, I am sure that many parents will want to know it.

Judith Gillespie: We found that eating choices varied greatly. There was great pressure for children to take packed lunches or to go home at lunch time if they attended a primary school close to where they lived. Another important factor was the proximity of the local shop. The situation varied from school to school, depending on the location of the school and its surroundings. When they were asked whether, if school meals were free, children would still want a packed lunch and money to visit the local shop, people said that they would.

In North Lanarkshire, the cost of meals is £1.35 in primary schools and £1.45 in secondary schools. We found that what the authority was charging was highly competitive and I am sure that most parents were giving their children more money than that to eat out. The cost incentive was in favour of the school meal, but people were choosing to go outwith the school for a series of reasons, some of which have been mentioned. One disincentive was the environment—some youngsters just hate the crowded dinner hall. The noise levels in dinner halls are incredible and some youngsters find that intolerable. Queuing was at the top of the agenda at almost every meeting—youngsters did not want to stand and queue. It is a huge disincentive. The minute that they had to queue, they voted with their feet and went somewhere else. Those practical aspects made children choose to eat outwith the dinner hall.

Teenagers also have the business of asserting

their independence. At secondary school, the fact that teenagers are able to go outside the school meant that they chose to go outside the school, because they could. That level of self-assertion was very important.

That is one reason why we did not conduct a survey. We knew that school meals have a lot of things attached to them and we did not feel that we could adequately pick up the information in a survey that we could pick up from meetings. Obviously, we did not involve thousands of children, but we went across the country and we chose to get better quality information, rather than broad survey information. I accept that it is anecdotal and not 100 per cent.

Alex Neil: What proportion of parents have you spoken to in any school at any of the meetings? Have you spoken to 50 per cent or 60 per cent?

Judith Gillespie: No. We do not run individual school meetings, but authority meetings. We talk to people from a range of different schools, so the numbers from any one school are a small proportion of parents at that school, although many schools are involved in the meeting.

Alex Neil: If the number from individual schools is a small proportion, by definition the overall number must be a small proportion.

Judith Gillespie: I am not arguing the numbers game—I would not even begin to do that.

Alex Neil: The point is, as Tommy Sheridan said, on the one hand you tell us that parents in Scotland do not support the measure, and on the other hand you tell us that you are speaking for a minute proportion of parents in Scotland. Is that correct?

Judith Gillespie: No.

Alex Neil: In your evidence, you say that parents in Scotland are against the measure, but the evidence that you have given us today makes it clear that you do not have the right to speak for parents in Scotland. As you have said, you have spoken to only a minute proportion of parents in Scotland.

Judith Gillespie: Yes. I would be more than happy to concede that, if we take the number of children in Scottish schools as 750,000 and use a multiplier of 1.5 for the number of parents, we have spoken to a small proportion of parents. Everyone will have spoken to a small proportion.

Alex Neil: Fair enough, but everyone is not claiming to speak for 100 per cent of parents.

Judith Gillespie: I would not claim that. I admitted to Tommy Sheridan that our evidence is anecdotal.

Alex Neil: In that case, are you prepared to

withdraw the statement that parents in Scotland are against the measure?

Judith Gillespie: I do not think that I have made that statement.

Alex Neil: You have. Will you withdraw that statement?

Judith Gillespie: Yes, I withdraw that statement in terms of the universal use of “parents”, on the basis of the multiplier that I mentioned.

Alex Neil: Have you made any special effort to speak to the parents of those children who take up school meals, or of those children who are entitled to free school meals but do not take them up? Have you had in-depth discussions with those parents to find out what the issues are and why their children who are entitled to free school meals do not take them up? Have you asked them about stigma? Have you made any effort to speak to the parents of those kids, to find out how they view life?

Judith Gillespie: We have not identified those people separately from parents in general. We have not asked particular people about their experiences. As I said, we ran the survey on the back of general meetings at which we did not inquire—we never do—about the backgrounds of the people who were there. It was generally recognised, among the people to whom we spoke, that the stigma that is associated with free school meals is unacceptable. That view is held across the board. On the back of talking to people, we have also recognised that it is important that that situation is addressed and that mechanisms are put in place to ensure that youngsters do not feel disadvantaged or stigmatised because they are taking up free school meals.

15:15

The solution that has been suggested strongly by a number of sources is the swipe card mechanism, whereby no difference is perceived because the money is on the card and how it got there is not specified. The knock-on effects of the swipe card system are considerable. Youngsters do not have cash in their hands at school, which cuts down bullying, as some youngsters have their money taken off them at school. The swipe card system also cuts down the tendency that some youngsters have to spend their money in shops before they arrive at school, which means that they go through the school day having eaten only packets of crisps and chocolate biscuits. The swipe card mechanism is regarded as a useful development that could address the issue of the stigma.

I assure you that the view is held universally among the parents to whom we spoke—although I

accept that they constitute only a small proportion of the parents in Scotland—that the stigma is unacceptable. There is huge support for the intention behind the bill. There is support across the board for the principle of making it easier for youngsters to have good food at lunch time. I hope that you will be pleased to know that that principle is also supported by parents who are able to pay. The trick is to find a way of delivering that properly for youngsters, and swipe cards have been suggested to us on many occasions.

Alex Neil: However, you accept that the provision of free school meals for all pupils would be another, potentially better, way of doing that.

Judith Gillespie: The youngsters who needed them would get free school meals. It is generally accepted that there may be a need to reconsider the cut-off point for free schools meals, and among the non-representative group that we surveyed there is much support for what you are trying to achieve. There is no argument about the goal.

I hope that you can accept that, when I talk about parents, I am talking only about the people to whom we spoke. I do not want to have to clarify that every time. Parents to whom we spoke felt that other approaches would deliver better and would have other benefits for children.

Alex Neil: I am sure that middle-class parents thought that.

Judith Gillespie: We are not talking about middle-class parents. I find it upsetting that you suggest that we surveyed only middle-class schools. We held meetings in many areas, not all of which were at middle-class schools. I find your comment quite unacceptable.

Mr McAllion: Do you accept that the use of swipe cards would fail to tackle the issue of eligibility for free school meals and that the children of working poor families that do not receive the jobseekers allowance or income support would still be excluded from the free school meals scheme and would suffer as a result?

Judith Gillespie: There is a strong argument for reconsidering the eligibility criteria for free school meals, to see whether they should be expanded. That was the general message that we received. Mechanisms should be put in place to study how to improve the level of provision in order to ensure that those who would gain most benefit from such a service would be eligible. People were happy to sign up to a package that contained that proposal, but they found it difficult to sign up to the proposal to make the provision universal. People stopped a stage short of that proposal—they stopped at the level of provision that they thought appropriate.

Mr McAllion: Do you accept that the swipe cards that would be made available to those in receipt of free school meals are not exactly the same as the swipe cards that would be made available to other children who had paid for the cards?

Judith Gillespie: No. It is possible to make the cards look exactly the same.

Mr McAllion: I do not mean exactly the same in the physical sense. I mean that those who are entitled to free school meals would have a cash limit on their swipe cards that would not appear on the swipe cards of other children. As children bought their school meals, it would become very obvious who was on a free school meal and who was not.

Judith Gillespie: That would depend on the mechanism that was used and on the type of service that was offered. It would be perfectly possible to offer the mechanism of a meal limit. At present, where authorities charge a fixed amount for school meals, people get choice and it is up to the children to take up that choice. The committee could examine that issue. It is not necessary to have a system that makes that distinction.

Mr McAllion: In our research for the bill, we found no cash limits for pupils in the pilot schemes that we came across. That would indicate that those who are not in receipt of free school meals can buy what they want, as they can put as much money as they wish to on to their swipe card. At the point where food is distributed, that immediately differentiates them from the children who are in receipt of free school meals. That, in turn, invalidates the whole of the swipe card argument as it relates to stigma.

Judith Gillespie: I have to accept what the member says about swipe cards. That issue has not been raised with us. Swipe cards are not an inevitable mechanism—it would be possible to address that issue.

Mr McAllion: Only if we refuse those who are well-off the right to put extra money on their cards.

Judith Gillespie: It depends on the pricing of school meals and the level of choice that is offered.

Mr McAllion: At present, the cash limit on free school meal provision means that those who are entitled to free school meals cannot afford to buy a drink with their meal. That would become immediately obvious whether children were using swipe cards or cash. The children cannot even afford water with their meal.

Judith Gillespie: Without a shadow of doubt, free water should be available in all schools. Children do not drink enough. However, the reason for that is that they do not wish to use the

school toilets. People have to look at the whole package to discover the reasons for children not drinking at school.

Ian Jenkins: Do you agree that school children do not consider lunch time principally as a time to eat, but as a time for social interaction? Many of the issues that we are discussing are concerned with social psychology, group dynamics, peer-group pressure, getting out into the fresh air, getting away from the school, not having to queue and not having to listen to all the noise. In most cases, the price of the meal is not a factor in the decisions that children make about how they eat.

Judith Gillespie: That is totally true for a lot of kids. However, an extra element is important, which is that a number of schools have deliberately shortened their lunch breaks. Schools have found that an extended non-organised period of time in the middle of the day is the point at which bullying starts to break out. One of the reasons that schools have been happy to shorten the lunch break, quite often in the face of parental objections that the shortened break does not give enough time for children to eat lunch, is that they find that a shorter break helps to resolve the bullying problem. If youngsters are not hanging around too long over the lunch break, to a certain extent it is possible to take bullying off the agenda.

One of the difficulties for schools that have a full uptake of their school meal provision is that they would have to introduce multi-sittings. That would mean that the children who had to wait for the second sittings would be hungry and the children who took the first sitting would be full of energy. The first-sitting children would be bouncing around but would not be organised for the duration of the second sitting.

The logistics of managing children in such circumstances are difficult and the ease of addressing them depends on the facilities and the space that the school has available to it. The problems that are associated with the lunch break are only partly about food.

Ian Jenkins: Those problems do not seem to be attached to breakfast clubs in schools. One of the attractions of the clubs is that children like to come in early and socialise with their friends. The psychology of the lunch break is important.

You talked about the problems that parents associate with double sittings or extended lunch periods to accommodate staggered lunch sittings. What would be the effect on the school curriculum if that were to take place?

Judith Gillespie: I have no doubt that there would be knock-on consequences for McCrone as the result of an extended school day. I say that with a smile.

It is true that there is no requirement on school staff to supervise lunch times. The issue is particularly significant, as there is no requirement on school teaching staff to be in the school at lunch time. Schools can bring in playground supervisors and so forth, but the issue is especially difficult for secondary schools.

Once the issue is put into context, it becomes more complicated by factors including supervision. It is also inevitable that the school day would have to be extended. If an extra 45 minutes had to be added to the middle of the day to deal with the school lunch time, it would be necessary to extend the school day by the same amount of time. Those issues would have consequences for youngsters and their families and they have to be addressed.

Ian Jenkins: It may not be necessary to extend the school day, as it may be possible to stagger teaching programmes. However the change is handled, however, it would cause administrative problems.

Judith Gillespie: One could imagine such a system working relatively smoothly in primary schools, but it would be difficult to organise in secondary schools.

Mr Monteith: In the past, the Scottish Parent Teacher Council has done a great deal of work on bullying and related matters. Do you have evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, on stigma? What are the causes of stigma, what effect does it have and what can be done to alleviate it?

Judith Gillespie: It is important to associate stigma with the issue of bullying. It is not always possible to predict the reasons that cause a youngster to be isolated from their peers. In some respects, poverty becomes the issue around which stigma grows, but that does not have to be the case. In many schools in Glasgow, where free school meal uptake is high, it is possible to imagine that the child who has to pay for their school meals could be in a minority. I do not say that to commend the situation, but to point out that the minority is not always what you assume it to be.

It is recognised that the stigma has to be addressed and that mechanisms, which can and should be tried, are in place to address it. People are energetic in their support of the idea that it is as important to consider ways of tackling the stigma as it is to consider ways of tackling bullying. Schools are conscious of the need to address stigma.

The Convener: Thank you for your evidence.

15:28

Meeting suspended.

15:39

On resuming—

The Convener: We now move to evidence from the Scottish Executive. We have with us the Deputy Minister for Education and Young People, Nicol Stephen, and his officials, whom I ask the minister to introduce.

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Nicol Stephen): I would first of all like to say how delighted I am—as we all are, I am sure—to see Karen Gillon here this afternoon. I pass on my congratulations to her at this, her first meeting since the birth of Matthew.

Members know Gillian Kynoch. To her left is Clodagh Memery from the social inclusion division of the Scottish Executive development department. On the far left is Moira Wilson from the pupil support and inclusion division of the Scottish Executive education department.

I have a relatively long opening statement. I will take the convener's guidance on whether that is appropriate.

The Convener: Make it short.

Nicol Stephen: I will do my best to abbreviate it.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss this issue and take questions. The Executive is committed to working together for Scotland's children. The evidence tells us that those who eat well enjoy better health and do better at school than those who do not. We want school meals to provide healthy, attractive food that children will enjoy eating. We want that for all children but it is particularly important that we help children from the poorest families. That already happens, through the provision of free school meals but, too often, free school meals attract stigma. There is clear evidence that some children would rather go hungry than have that stigma attached to them. That is totally unacceptable and the issues have, rightly, received a high profile in recent months. The bill and its promoters have played an important role in stimulating debate on the issue. Significant improvement is urgently needed.

The Executive is committed to establishing standards for the nutritional content of school meals, improving the presentation of school meals to increase their take-up and eliminating the stigma attached to taking free school meals. As members know, last year we announced the steps to be taken to achieve those aims, starting with the work of the expert panel under the chairmanship of Michael O'Neill.

I hope—indeed, I know—that the supporters of the School Meals (Scotland) Bill share our commitment to better school meals, better take-up

of school meals and an end to the stigma of free school meals. Members will be aware, however, that the Executive opposes extending the entitlement to free school meals to all pupils. We are not convinced that that would be the most effective use of public money or that it would be the best way to drive up standards and help children from the poorest families. If we had £174 million extra to spend in our schools, I do not believe that many of our parents, pupils and teachers would want it all spent on free school meals for all.

I will draw my comments to a close at that point. I was going to mention in detail some of the work of the expert panel and some of the positive things that the Executive is doing, but I am happy to take questions.

The Convener: Thank you. I assure you that Gillian Kynoch touched on much of what the expert panel is doing earlier in the evidence session.

Tommy Sheridan: The minister repeated the point that he made in his January press release about the fact that an important part of the work of the expert panel will be to attract young people to stay in school at lunch time so that they can enjoy lunch together in a safe and comfortable environment. Currently, less than 50 per cent of school pupils use school lunches. What is the Executive's target for the number of young people who use the school meals service? Is it 60 per cent or 70 per cent?

Nicol Stephen: There is currently no fixed target. Indeed, you could ask me a series of questions on the Scotland-wide provision of school meals, the strategy for nutritional quality, stigma, or the target that is felt to be appropriate, but we do not have the strategy in place at the moment. That is why the establishment of the expert panel was so important. The expert panel's recommendations—which, we hope, will be in ministers' hands by the end of the month—will be crucial in moving the agenda along. I share the view that is held by not only Tommy Sheridan but all members who are present that we need to do more. The status quo is not an option.

15:45

Tommy Sheridan: Is it your position that you definitely want to increase the number of pupils who use the school meals service?

Nicol Stephen: Yes. I want to see an increase in the number of pupils who use the school meals service. I want the meals to be nutritious and available without stigma. To do all that, we need to improve the quality and the environment, so that more young people are attracted to staying in school for school meals.

Tommy Sheridan: Do you accept that whether your strategy or that of the bill's sponsors is accepted, there will be capital costs, administrative problems and management issues? Those will need to be dealt with regardless of which strategy is supported by the Scottish Parliament.

Nicol Stephen: It is difficult to judge. I agree that the capital costs should not be the argument that I, as a minister, use as the key rebuttal to the target in the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. Overall affordability is one of the main concerns. The figure that is quoted is the estimate of £174 million. The Executive's position is that, if that £174 million extra were available to us—currently, it is not—we would not spend it on the provision of free school meals to all, but would consider other educational priorities.

We also need to consider the additional resources that will be required to implement the recommendations of the expert panel on school meals. There is no doubt that those recommendations will carry a price tag and we will need to consider how we address funding them.

Tommy Sheridan: Thank you. I wanted you to confirm that, whatever happens, there will be cost implications if we are to improve the school meals service.

Nicol Stephen: As has been explained, some schools have almost 100 per cent free school meal entitlement. The uptake in those schools will be increased only if we make the environment more attractive by investing in the softer issues that surround the debate. Some schools with a low take-up would have accommodation issues if take-up were to increase significantly.

That is part of what I want to discuss with local authorities as part of a school estates strategy. It is not only for free school meals that there is no comprehensive Scotland-wide strategy. The same is true of the current school estate. The condition of our school buildings is a reflection of the lack of strategy and the lack of investment in Scotland's schools not only over the past few years but for decades.

Tommy Sheridan: That leads me to my second line of questioning. You have stated that we already provide school meals for poor children, but I think that you would accept that that is not strictly true. There is a large number of children from working poor families whose parents are not in receipt of income support and so who do not qualify for free school meals. The estimate from the Child Poverty Action Group, One Plus and the Scottish Low Pay Unit is that between 80,000 and 100,000 children are in that position. What is your department's estimate of the number of children from poor families who are excluded from free school meals? What will your expert group do to

improve eligibility for free school meals?

Nicol Stephen: I am here to respond to questions in relation to the bill. You are pressing me on whether we could shift the entitlement to free school meals to ensure that more families and so more young people are entitled to free school meals, which is a form of targeting. I am here to defend the targeting of resources and to say that more needs to be done on targeting, improving the nutritional quality of meals and encouraging the uptake of meals, particularly among those from the poorest of backgrounds, so I am sympathetic to your question.

We will always have to consider where to draw the line in deciding who to class as poor and so entitled to free school meals and other benefits. If we were to alter where that line is drawn and create a more generous entitlement, there would almost inevitably be consequences for difficult reserved versus devolved issues. In this case, benefits and the tax credits system are reserved and we would have to discuss issues around that. If the expert panel had a view or if you were to change your position away from one that calls for free school meals, the Executive would be prepared to consider the matter further.

Tommy Sheridan: So right now your position is that eligibility for free school meals is not part of your remit—I will not use the word “concern”, because I know that, politically, you are concerned about it. As part of its remit, the expert panel will not make recommendations to tackle the poverty trap that 100,000 children are in.

Nicol Stephen: The expert panel was asked to consider establishing standards for the nutritional content of school meals, eliminating stigma attached to taking free school meals and improving the presentation of school meals with a view to improving general take-up. If the panel had a view outside those three areas and wanted to comment, I would be happy to consider its suggestions. I would be equally interested in any proposals that you wanted to make.

Alex Neil: I want to ask the minister two questions about the research that the expert panel is undertaking. Will the panel consider the experience in Finland and Sweden? Has someone from the panel been to see what is happening there? If so, what are the results? If not, why not?

Secondly, has any primary research been commissioned to find out the likely impact that free school meals would have on uptake and the consequential impact on the health of school kids?

Nicol Stephen: I am not aware of any research having been done in Scotland. On the first point, I am not a member of the expert panel and I am not aware of the details of its work or of visits on which its members might have been. Gillian Kynoch

might be able to clarify whether the panel has considered overseas examples.

Gillian Kynoch: We have not been on visits to Scandinavia or elsewhere. The experts on the panel have wide international and scientific experience, which will form part of the advice that the panel gives.

The member asked whether we have sought evidence that the bill would be effective in adding to the current package of measures in improving health. The answer is no.

Alex Neil: Given that the expert panel commissioned no research either in Scotland or on international comparisons, will its work be incomplete in determining whether a policy of universal free school meals would have a positive impact on the uptake of school meals and, consequently, on kids' health? Will the Executive consider commissioning such research as a matter of urgency?

Nicol Stephen: The expert panel was not asked specifically to consider the issue of free school meals. It was asked to address the three areas that I described: the nutritional quality of school meals and the monitoring of that nutritional quality; stigma; and enhancing quality and presentation to increase uptake. That is the policy of the Scottish Executive, which, as Alex Neil knows, opposes the bill and feels that, if £174 million of resources were available, providing universally free school meals would not be the best or most effective use of public funds.

Alex Neil: As you oppose the bill from a position of ignorance—with no research, no facts, no figures and no real evidence one way or the other—how can you say that we cannot afford to spend that £174 million?

Part of the evidence from Finland is that, as a result of a policy of school meals being universally free, uptake of nutritious food by schoolchildren has increased substantially, as a result of which there have been substantial improvements in the health of kids as they enter young adulthood—and probably beyond. As a result, there have been substantial savings to the Finnish health service and other services.

Until you commission the research, how can you come here and tell us that you cannot afford the £174 million? Judging from the Finnish experience, I think that the net cost may well not be £174 million, and there might even be a net saving in the long term. You are not in a position to say one way or the other, are you?

Nicol Stephen: I disagree with that. I said that we had not commissioned any research, but we are well aware of the Swedish and Finnish examples and of the fact that there are several

areas in Italy that provide free school meals. As far as we are aware, those are the only examples in Europe and we know sufficient about them to be able to say that there is, and was, no direct correlation between the improvement in nutritional standards and the health of the population in Finland and the introduction of free school meals. Free school meals were introduced in Finland immediately after the war and the improvements in health standards came about from the late 1970s and 1980s onwards. The information that we have is sufficient for us to know that there is not a direct causal link.

I would never argue that the introduction of free school meals would make no impact on nutritional standards; all I am saying is that it would not necessarily lead to the uptake of free school meals that I think you are hoping for, and it would not automatically raise the nutritional standards of those meals.

What we are working on is an affordable, proven set of measures that will ensure that we direct the limited funding available to maximum impact and target it to the families in greatest disadvantage, to the young people that need the free school meals the most and to the people who need the most improvement in their nutrition.

Alex Neil: I am allowed one more question, I think.

The Convener: One more.

Alex Neil: Will the minister please make available to each member the information that he claims to have in respect of Finland—and possibly the other countries that were mentioned—that proves that there is no correlation between improvement in nutritional standards and health and the introduction of free school meals?

Nicol Stephen: I am not claiming that there is proof. There is only one view versus—

Alex Neil: But you just said that you had information proving that there was no correlation.

Nicol Stephen: You said that I said “proof”. I do not think—

Alex Neil: Yes—that is what you implied.

Nicol Stephen: If I did—

Tommy Sheridan: You told the committee that there was no “causal link”.

Nicol Stephen: Okay. I am of course happy to provide the information that we have in relation to those other countries. I was talking about the lack of proof of a causal link between the introduction of free school meals in Finland and the turnaround in the Finnish health situation.

Alex Neil: I am sorry, convener—

The Convener: Wait.

Nicol Stephen: I think that there is no such causal link and I would be happy to provide further evidence in relation to that.

Alex Neil: With your indulgence, convener, I say that the minister said that he had information that showed that there was no causal link. Will he give us and the members of the committee that information before we come to vote on the bill, or did the minister get it wrong?

Nicol Stephen: I have just said that I would be happy to do that.

Alex Neil: Okay. Great. Excellent.

Irene McGugan: The minister said in his opening remarks that he feels that the bill is perhaps not the most effective way of ensuring that children from socially deprived areas benefit, particularly in terms of their long-term health. What is the best way to target that specific group? The expert panel recommendations are, in a sense, universal too; they are not focused primarily on low-income families. What are the minister's thoughts on how we can best ensure that low-income families have access to nutritious food?

16:00

Nicol Stephen: It is important to emphasise that I am sitting here not as an expert on the issue but as one of the ministers who will receive the recommendations from the expert panel. I am certain that the expert panel will examine issues such as increasing the uptake of free school meals among those who are entitled to them, as well as increasing the uptake of school meals across the board. Certainly, the intention behind the panel's remit was that the problems of the most disadvantaged and poorest families in Scotland should be addressed. I expect there to be a range of costed recommendations in relation to nutritional standards, which take into account not simply food groups but matters such as portion size.

We must also consider the monitoring that will be required to implement the new standards effectively across Scotland. There is no point in having new nutritional standards if we discover in three, four or five years that local authorities are implementing those standards in 32 different ways and they are not effective.

On stigma, I hope that there will be recommendations on the use of new technology. In 21st century Scotland it is totally unacceptable for one colour of ticket to be handed in by a young person who receives free school meals and a different colour of ticket to be handed over by those who have to pay for their meal. There will be ways of overcoming any of the issues that remain

in relation to the use of new swipe card or smart card systems.

The longest list of recommendations is likely to relate to changing the environment in which young people receive school meals, because there is a lot to be done in that area. That does not just mean the experience in the room where the free school meal is provided. The experience also includes queuing beforehand, the attitude that young people have to going into a room at lunch time for a free school meal and the impact that that has on their peer group and on the individuals who go out of school for their meal. I hope that the panel will also consider packed lunches, which keep people in the school environment. A healthy packed lunch is, in my view, a worthwhile meal at lunch time. I do not think that we should force everybody down a single route.

Another important area, which is separate from the bill, is the provision of breakfast, the provision of water throughout the day and the provision of fruit and milk. Other initiatives are essential and must be addressed if we are to tackle the issue in the round and make significant progress on the quality of the food and drink provided from the start of the school day right through to the end.

Cathy Peattie: I am interested in the route to getting children to eat nutritious food. At Leith Academy, only 50 per cent of children who are entitled to free school meals eat them. A number of children are quite keen to get out and about at lunch time. How can we legislate for children's choices? How can we ensure that children have the opportunity to eat nutritious food or to eat school meals and so on?

Nicol Stephen: One cannot legislate for that in a controlled sense, but one can turn around the perception of school meals. I hope that the recommendations of the expert panel touch on that. Let us be honest; the stigma does not relate only to those who are eligible for free school meals. Sometimes stigma attaches to the whole notion of eating a school meal. Some children would far prefer to be away from school at lunch time.

We can turn around attitudes to the system by raising quality standards, by understanding the sort of provision that young people would make greater use of and by having a much deeper insight into the decision-making process that young people go through. We must always remember that in many cases young people are making a choice about what form of meal to have. Over the past few decades, the school meals system has had a cinderella reputation because of poor investment in provision and low awareness of the importance of the nutritional value of the school meal.

In schools in some parts of the country, the attitude towards school meals has begun to turn around as a result of improvements in the school meals environment and in the nutritional value of meals. Fruit and vegetables have been put on the menu and healthy eating initiatives, such as chip-free days, and other innovative approaches have been tried. As a consequence, in areas in which that work has been done well—where smart cards have been introduced and where the environment and the quality of the meal have been improved—there has been a significant increase in the number of young people who eat school meals.

Cathy Peattie: You suggest that we need to look at nutrition and to do all the things that the expert group is considering.

Nicol Stephen: Yes.

Cathy Peattie: Are there other ways of targeting kids? We talked about lunches, but lunch is not the only meal that children eat, although some children go to school hungry. There is an issue about pre-school education. We know that children develop at that age and that what they eat at the age of two or three, or at nursery school, has an effect on their height and health in future years.

Nicol Stephen: The effect begins even younger than that, as Karen Gillon and I know from recent experience. The level of breastfeeding in Scotland is woeful—it is a disgrace. We are taking steps to tackle that, but we must do more at every stage to improve the nutritional intake of young people in Scotland. The same solution applies to many aspects of the education system. The more that we do soon, the more we will avoid serious problems later. In relation to behaviour or discipline problems, for example, it is often said that we start to take action only when the children in question are seven or eight or nine, although their problems were evident at pre-school stage. The same principle applies to nutrition. That is why we must take action soon and why we must improve standards as early as possible, which means immediately after birth. Indeed, many would argue that the earliest stage begins before birth, with the nutrition of the mother.

Cathy Peattie: So you suggest a holistic approach that relates to the child, rather than simply a school approach.

Nicol Stephen: Exactly. That is why the expert panel will report to the Minister for Social Justice, to the Minister for Health and Community Care and to the Minister for Education and Young People. That is important. We must not stop with the remit of the expert panel, which I have explained. That remit would exclude some of the pre-school areas—the important zero-to-five category—that Cathy Peattie mentioned. Breakfast clubs are also very important. We need

to ensure that funding for those is sustainable.

Jackie Baillie: Where resources are scarce, the Executive wishes to target them more effectively. The improvements that are made to nutritional standards will benefit all children, which is welcome. However, where local authorities have introduced smart cards, increased the attractiveness of premises and improved the quality of food, uptake has not risen more among those who receive free school meals than it has risen generally. How do we improve uptake of school meals by the group of children with the poorest diet in nutritional terms, rather than just across the board?

Nicol Stephen: That is the most difficult problem to crack in this area. It goes without saying that the School Meals (Scotland) Bill would not benefit children who currently receive free school meals. Eighty per cent of the families who are entitled to free school meals are currently taking up that option. Those people would not benefit from the School Meals (Scotland) Bill.

The promoters of the bill would argue that the remaining 20 per cent of families who are not making use of their entitlement would be encouraged to do so. However, I wonder whether making free school meals available to all would tackle the problem in the way in which the promoters of the bill sincerely believe it would. I do not think that there is evidence to support the assumption that the 20 to 25 per cent of families who are currently entitled to free school meals, but who are not taking up that option, would automatically do so if provision of free school meals were made universal. In some schools there is virtually 100 per cent entitlement to free school meals, but there is not 100 per cent uptake.

We must deal with some of the softer issues—which we have spent most of this afternoon's meeting discussing—that relate to the quality of food and to the environment in which meals are served. Clearly, there is still a stigma attached to receiving free school meals. I understand that in the local authorities and schools where that problem has been tackled well there has been an increase in uptake of free school meals by the young people who are entitled to them. I do not pretend that there is an easy solution to the problem.

The promoters of the bill may not accept that, even if free school meals were made available to all, there would still be a significant problem. However, if we accept that, the scale of the challenge that we face becomes clear. We need to reach young people from the poorest families, among whom nutrition levels are low. Alex Neil mentioned children who are found to have nutritional deficiencies when they attend accident and emergency units at our hospitals. Reaching

young people who refuse to take up their entitlement to free school meals is a challenge for us all. We must work together to do all that we can, on a variety of fronts, to crack that problem.

Jackie Baillie: We received some interesting evidence from East Dunbartonshire Council, which has made its premises more attractive and has introduced smart card technology. Although uptake of school meals has been good across the board, there has not been a significant rise in uptake of free school meals. There is another factor at play that we have not identified, which may come down to the behaviour of children. That issue is worthy of further consideration.

Nicol Stephen: We need to understand more about that. Some members have suggested that pilot projects should be run and that more research should be commissioned. I am interested in discovering more facts. It is important to move forward, based on evidence; that is the approach that has been taken by the expert panel. There are areas in which it would be valuable to get additional information and in which we might also experiment. We are not a large nation, but we have sufficient schools in Scotland that we could consider some of the proposals and try to find out what works. If committee members or organisations that have submitted evidence have suggestions, I would be interested to hear them.

I should explain that once the expert panel has made its interim recommendations to ministers, we intend to publish the recommendations and carry out consultation over the summer, before the recommendations are finalised. That will provide an opportunity for everyone who is concerned about the issue to make further representations and suggestions.

16:15

Jackie Baillie: I do not want to pre-empt the work of the expert panel, but I would be interested to hear the minister's view on nutritional standards. There is some support for having robust nutritional standards. Should those standards be set by statute or guidance and how would you monitor implementation?

Nicol Stephen: It is unfair to explain how we would respond to that recommendation before the expert panel has even made it. However, we have signalled that we are sympathetic to the notion of nutritional standards and that we recognise the importance of monitoring such standards Scotland-wide. That is as much of a steer as I can give this afternoon. I will, once the interim recommendations are published, be able to say a little more. It is important that we take a holistic approach. I must ensure that not only the ministers who are responsible for education, but those who are responsible for social justice and health are

satisfied with my answer on that point. I am sure that if Jackie Baillie were in a different post, that is what she would expect me to say this afternoon.

Jackie Baillie: I think that your official was more helpful than you are being, minister.

The Convener: We have come to expect that from Liberal Democrats.

Mr McAllion: I have two points, minister. Earlier, you were talking to Tommy Sheridan about eligibility and you rightly said that benefits are reserved to Westminster. Can you confirm that it is well within the powers of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive to link provision of free school meals to a benefit such as the working families tax credit? Is not it true that we are free to do that if we so choose?

Nicol Stephen: I explained to Tommy Sheridan in response to his question on infrastructure costs that we will have to invest more in the provision of hall or dining room accommodation for school meals, but that is not my fundamental defence on the issue. I would answer your question the same way. I am simply explaining—

Mr McAllion: Are you aware that the Scottish Executive has the power to do that if it so chooses?

Nicol Stephen: Yes. I am just saying that there would be issues that would have to be tackled.

Mr McAllion: I want to be clear that the Executive chose not to make eligibility part of the remit of the expert panel, although it could have done. That was a decision that was made by the Executive.

In relation to your argument that the £174 million could be better spent elsewhere in educational provision, because you are already addressing the main issues, particularly food poverty and stigma—

Nicol Stephen: That is the second part of my answer on that question—the first part is that we do not have £174 million.

Mr McAllion: Have you costed the recommendations of the expert panel? Do you know how many recommendations it will make, what the cost of the recommendations will be and whether it will come to £174 million, to less than that or to more than that?

Nicol Stephen: We have asked the expert panel to cost its recommendations. When we receive the recommendations we will check the costs.

Mr McAllion: However, at the moment, you do not know what those costs are.

Nicol Stephen: At the moment we do not have

a figure from the expert panel.

Mr McAllion: So, you do not know whether the recommendations would be to spend more than £174 million, as we are suggesting.

Nicol Stephen: That is unlikely, given that the £174 million would be to provide free school meals for all young people in Scotland.

Mr McAllion: There is also new technology, breakfast clubs, the provision of free water and fruit bars. Will all those initiatives be provided universally throughout Scotland? Will they be charged for or will they be free?

Nicol Stephen: With respect—

Mr McAllion: You do not know.

Nicol Stephen: Please let me answer. We do not yet know the cost of the panel's recommendations.

Mr McAllion: The panel would not argue that the £174 million could be better spent until it knew what the bill proposes and how much it would require to be spent.

Nicol Stephen: I will not be putting my neck too close to the block if I say that if the expert panel produces recommendations that would cost £174 million, we will be likely to give the same answer that I am giving this afternoon, on the grounds of affordability.

Mr McAllion: So, even the expert panel would be told that the money could be spent better elsewhere.

Nicol Stephen: No. That is the second part of my argument. The first part of my argument is that we do not have £174 million. As far as I am aware, the promoters of the bill have not explained where they think the £174 million should come from.

Mr McAllion: How much do you have? What is the point of setting up an expert panel to make recommendations if you are going to say that you do not have the money anyway, so that it does not matter what it recommends?

Nicol Stephen: In most cases, when we set up working groups or expert panels, we do not allocate a budget in advance of the recommendations of those panels.

Mr McAllion: You have already said that you do not have £174 million. How much do you have?

Nicol Stephen: Currently, we have nothing budgeted for—

Mr McAllion: So, the expert panel can make all the recommendations it wants, because they will not be implemented.

Nicol Stephen: Currently, we have nothing budgeted. If we wanted to budget for this area,

and if we regarded it as a priority, we would have to do what promoters of bills do not have to do: we would have to look carefully at our budget and see whether we could reallocate resources to find funding for the scheme. That is what any Government decision-making process is about. It is about trying to make effective use of the budget that is available. If sufficient resources are not available, we must either consider ways of increasing our income or reconsider our priorities.

Mr McAllion: Does not the same condition apply to the supporters of the bill as applies to the expert panel—that it depends on the quality of the suggestion that is made whether the Executive decides to find the money to pay for it?

Nicol Stephen: It is understandable and fair that you have produced a bill that has the objective of providing free school meals. We have to examine the section of the bill that suggests that there are no significant cost implications for the Scottish Executive and we must work out whether that is true. The work that we have done suggests that there would be cost implications for the Scottish Executive of about £174 million, although that is only an estimate. We must then decide whether that is a wise use of public money and whether there might be alternative ways in which to address the issue. You have all raised a fair issue in relation to the nutritional value and quality of school meals, and that is an issue that we want to address. However, we believe that we can do that in a more targeted and focused way, and probably at a significantly lower cost. I will find that out later this month when the expert panel produces its recommendations and costings.

Jackie Baillie: Let us have some clarity on the issue. First, is the figure of £174 million the Executive's estimate of the cost of extending what we all agree is a service that needs vast improvement? Is the sum that we do not yet know the cost of improving by a quantum difference the quality of the service that is provided to all children? Are those two figures different? Secondly, is not the Executive going through a comprehensive spending review, which means that the expert panel's report will be well timed?

Nicol Stephen: My answer to those questions is yes. However, we do not yet know whether additional resources will be available to us through the spending review process. We have to be cautious and proceed on this issue only if the additional resources can be found or if we can reprioritise. That is the challenge for us all. We are determined to make progress on the issue, because we do not believe that the current situation is satisfactory.

The Convener: I thank the minister for his evidence. We will now take evidence from the final set of witnesses. Alex Neil, who is the convener of

the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, has had to leave for a meeting with the new Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning, Iain Gray. I record his apologies.

I now hand over to the deputy convener and take my leave.

The Deputy Convener (Cathy Peattie): The next witnesses are Tommy Sheridan and John McAllion. I invite them to make an opening statement—they can make a joint statement or separate statements.

Tommy Sheridan: John McAllion and I would both like to make opening statements. Members can then ask questions.

The bill is a significant preventive health measure. It is a radical, but practical and visionary measure that starts at first principles. Scotland has the worst dietary health record in Europe. We are the sick men and sick women of Europe and have been for well over a decade. We talk incessantly about tackling that health problem, but do little that is practical in proportion to the size of the problem. John McAllion and I advocate universal and free healthy and nutritious meals with milk and water because we have a radical problem. The bill should be part of a national health policy, a national education policy and a national social inclusion policy. It is geared at trying to address a cultural problem in Scotland that is undoubtedly related to our poor diet, which is extremely, and increasingly, damaging.

Members will be aware that poor dietary health is the second biggest cause of premature death in Scotland. Smoking is the biggest cause of premature death, but poor dietary health is increasing and is the second biggest cause. We want to tackle that problem through a national health, national education and national social inclusion policy that addresses young people where we have the greatest access to them—for a minimum of 38 weeks of the year, they are in school. We should provide universal healthy and nutritious meals with milk and water. We should rise to the challenges of making those meals sufficiently attractive and we should make that whole school culture part and parcel of a health policy that raises our national health. The bill's success will be measured not in one year or two years, but in five, 10 and 15 years, when less coronary heart disease, less diabetes and fewer cancers that are related to dietary ill health will be recorded.

I ask the committee to raise our small Parliament's sights. The Parliament has been in existence for only three years. A Government has been in power for five years. I hope that members accept that too little progress has been made in tackling child poverty and ill health. The bill gives

us the opportunity to take a more radical approach. The £174 million that the Executive has mentioned should not be seen simply as a cost, but as an investment—the biggest investment in preventive health—which would more than pay its way in respect of the future health of Scotland's citizens.

John McAllion will make an opening statement, after which we will answer questions.

Mr McAllion: I thank the committee for inviting Tommy Sheridan and I here this afternoon. I will restrict my remarks to the question of a universal free school meals service, as opposed to a means-tested service. The minister has said that no resources exist to implement the bill or the recommendations of the expert panel; and there are people who argue sincerely that, because public resources are scarce, wasting those resources on people who can afford to pay for meals is not justified. Those people say that it would be much better to means test and to target the poor. That is an attractive idea—at least to people who have never been subjected to the humiliation of means testing—but it is superficial.

16:30

I attended a meeting recently in support of the bill that was organised by One Plus and the Child Poverty Action Group. A young woman described the dilemma that her young sister was facing. She was about to move from primary to secondary school in Glasgow and was terrified that her family would ask her to apply for free school meals because of the humiliation and shame that she would feel among her new classmates. People argue that new technology will solve the problem of stigma but, during discussion of the bill in committees, it has become increasingly clear that as many problems are attached to new technology as are attached to the system of blue tickets. Means testing has always led to problems; uptake has always been lower than expected and the question of eligibility always arises. That question has been largely ignored by the Executive.

Governments of all colours have been schizophrenic about means testing. Many of the benefits that we enjoy in Scotland today are universal and free. The national health service is free at the point of access and is funded from taxation. People are not means-tested; if you are middle class, you are not asked to pay for an X-ray or operation. Schools are free at the point of access; you are not means tested because you use school books or get access to computers. Child benefit is the most popular and successful benefit that we have; it is universal and free and goes to the middle classes. Many of the flagship policies of the Parliament—including free personal care for the elderly and the central heating

initiative—are universal and free. Sir Nicky Fairbairn would have been able to get free central heating for Fordell castle if he were still around. We cannot apply an argument in one area and then ignore it in others.

We are not arguing that a universal free school meal will be the answer to all the dietary problems that face young Scots today or to all the problems of the school meals service. However, it will be an essential part of any package to address the wider agenda. That is why we support the principle. Making the service universal is the one guaranteed way of ending the stigma that is attached to applying for free school meals. Supporting the bill will be the only way in which to achieve that.

Ian Jenkins: This bill is very fortunate in having as its sponsors three of the best advocates that it could possibly have—they are three of the best talkers in the Parliament. Every time I hear John McAllion and Tommy Sheridan talking on the school meals service, my wee heart starts going and I say to myself that I would like to support them. However, real questions arise about affordability.

If £174 million—a lot of money—was available, would universal free school meals be the first thing in education on which Tommy Sheridan would spend it? Would he forget all the other things that he has told us about in the chamber and put that issue first? Would he ring fence the money for local authorities or would he allow them to make their own decisions on how to spend it? What does the bill have to do with the redistribution of wealth? Would we offer full cream milk, semi-skimmed or skimmed? I am asking a wee variety of questions.

I do not disagree with some of what John McAllion said, but he seems to be talking about a way in which swipe cards for school meals would be limited. His argument was that money talks, one way or another, but how would you stop money talking? Will you offer everyone the same school meal, with no choice?

I am sorry that Alex Neil is not here. I thought that Alex was a wee bit ungentlemanly to the witnesses from the SPTC and I wanted to ask him to withdraw his criticism of the basis on which they gave evidence. I put that on the record as I would have asked him to do so had he been here.

The Deputy Convener: Full cream or semi-skimmed?

Tommy Sheridan: I hoped that Ian Jenkins would ask whether any evidence exists, because that question has featured a lot today.

Ian Jenkins *indicated agreement.*

Tommy Sheridan: I will take that as a question.

The Deputy Convener: I think that you need to answer the questions that the member has asked. That is important.

Tommy Sheridan: Ian Jenkins agreed that that was a question. I am appalled that the Executive has led so little evidence, because the evidence from Nordlund and Jacobson was available in 1997. They conducted a major study into the Swedish free school meals service and made the point that free school meals had improved the eating behaviours of the children of Sweden, because they snacked less. The service increased the uptake of school meals and appreciation of the school meals service. It improved food quality because everyone had a vested interest in it. Free school meals in Sweden also had a positive effect on physical fitness, well-being and alertness and provided a nutritious diet. All that information is available in Nordlund and Jacobson's 1997 research. That is clear evidence that such an investment has direct health effects for citizens. A study from North Karelia in Finland is also available.

We can bring the matter a wee bit closer to home. In 1998, Sir Donald Acheson reported on the independent inquiry into inequalities in health. He said:

"There is evidence that some members of poorer families go without food because of lack of money ... The characteristics and extent of those at risk of such 'food poverty' have not been fully determined. When they are, there may be a case for extending provision of free school lunches to include children from poor families who are not currently entitled, in order to relieve overall pressure on the family food budget, and improve the nutrition of other family members."

I give that evidence because it relates to Ian Jenkins's question on whether free school meals are a priority for me. Yes, they are—absolutely. I will put the issue in context. The overall budget this year is £22 billion. We are asking for £174 million, which is an investment of less than 1 per cent of the Scottish Parliament's budget. In the first year of our existence, we had a £435 million underspend. In the second year, we had a £718 million underspend. We think that the measure is a priority and that it is affordable.

The question about what type of milk should be available would be part and parcel of the consultation that the bill requires. As I said, we have not defined a nutritious meal in the bill because I am not equipped to say what a nutritious meal is. We must consult parents, pupils and nutrition experts to work out what a nutritious meal is. However, I want us first to agree that whatever we define as a nutritious meal will be given as of right to every child, because we should not means test people at the age of five.

Ian Jenkins: So that is the first priority, apart from all the other poverty aims. Would the money

to local authorities be ring fenced?

Tommy Sheridan: Absolutely. I am sorry; I should have mentioned that. The STUC was asked the same question and made it clear that, on this occasion, it supported hypothecation of that money in order to deliver the service. It would be unacceptable if that money was made available to local authorities and they spent it on other matters. The evidence from local authorities is that if the money is provided, that will be fine and they will get on with it, but they will not be able to implement the service on their own.

Ian Jenkins: You realised that when I asked about milk, I was not being altogether funny, because I have been told that I should drink skimmed milk, whereas sometimes kids would want full-cream milk.

Tommy Sheridan: Some children are allergic to all dairy products, so the question is not silly. We have written cultural, religious and medical considerations into the bill.

Mr McAllion: The impact of the measure should not be considered in relation to the education budget alone. I am a member of the Health and Community Care Committee, which took evidence last week from many nutrition experts from the University of Dundee, who said that for £174 million, we would have one of the best available preventive measures for ill health. They said that the measure would have a longer-term impact on health spending, so we should remember that.

The problem that I have with swipe cards is that they will freeze in plastic—if you can freeze plastic—the present means-testing system. That means that nothing will be done about eligibility and that children from working poor families will be left with no entitlement to free school meals. Plastic cards will make no difference to them. Furthermore, those who are entitled to free school meals are entitled to £1.35 worth of food. Those who buy their meals are not limited to that amount. They will be able to afford a certain drink or extra food when they go up to get their food and it will be immediately obvious who can afford only the bare minimum. That means that the stigma will remain.

Schools are small places. I worked in schools for many years and everyone knew who the poor families were—they did not need to have a blue ticket. The only way in which that stigma can be ended is by bringing in a universally free service. That is why the national health service and mass education were successful. Those who think that means testing is a solution to poverty are badly mistaken. Means testing and poverty are two sides of the same coin and if you want to abolish one, you have to abolish the other. That is my passionate belief.

Jackie Baillie: My heart does not go “thump, thump” every time John McAllion speaks—I will leave that to Ian Jenkins. Nevertheless, I concede that he is persuasive.

The fundamental issue is not what the bill’s intention is, but whether it will deliver the desired effect. Will it increase uptake of school meals to such a degree that it will make the health impacts that you want? My concern, particularly after discussing the matter with secondary school children today, is the extent to which their behaviour and culture is about getting out of school and accessing alternative provision. That concerns me because we might make policies in the Parliament for all the right reasons but, because we are dealing with the behaviour of children, those policies might be incapable of implementation.

I am delighted that Tommy Sheridan supplied us with the information that he did, although we had not asked about it. You spoke about eating behaviour being improved, increased uptake, increased appreciation of food and increased nutritional quality. I suggest that all those improvements could be achieved by the recommendations of the expert panel. The issue appears not to be to do with school meals being universally free but about the quality of the food. I would like to probe that matter a bit.

Mr McAllion: When the Health and Community Care Committee spoke with the food tsar last week, we dealt with the point that Jackie Baillie raises about whether the bill will achieve the desired effect. During that exchange—and, indeed, during today’s—it became obvious that when we are told that there is no evidence that there would be increased uptake it is because no one is looking for that evidence. However, evidence to support that view is available; the examples of Sweden and Finland show that there can be high uptake when the service is universal and free.

Ian Young, from the Health Education Board for Scotland, gave evidence to the Health and Community Care Committee last week. He did a masters degree on school meals and has been working on the subject for 20 years. He said precisely what I said; the evidence does not exist because the research has not been done. However, based on his experience and knowledge, he believes that there would be significant increase in the uptake of school meals as a result of our proposals, and that that would have a good effect on nutrition levels and the long-term health of youngsters.

I agree with the point about culture. The problem is not just to do with children’s culture, however. Scots are overweight, we have bad teeth and we eat all the wrong food. In a sense, the bill puts the

school meal at the heart of the learning experience in school and would impact on the whole country. Middle-class people would benefit as well because not only would the meals be universally free, they would be set at high nutritional standards.

We are not opposed to all the suggestions that have been made. School meals must be attractive and people have to want to go into the canteen. However, I do not know many Scots who would say, “If it’s free, I don’t want it. They’d better charge me or I won’t think it’s worth it.” I do not think that the Scottish middle class in particular would turn down anything that was offered to them free. The fact that the meal is free will attract a lot of people to it.

Jackie Baillie: You probably know more about the middle class than I do, John.

Mr McAllion: If we are going to exchange childhood stories, I can say that I had an outside toilet—how about you?

Jackie Baillie: I am driving at the behaviour of the children, not at the behaviour of the adults or the professionals, because I think that we would all sign up to the idea that if you make it free people will take it. We are not factoring in the behaviour of the children and that is what concerns me most.

Tommy Sheridan: Read what you have just said in the *Official Report* tomorrow, Jackie. You said:

“I think that we would all sign up to the idea that if you make it free people will take it.”

Jackie Baillie: I meant as adults, professionals and parents. Do not misquote me.

16:45

Tommy Sheridan: The evidence—even from those who are opposed to the bill or are lukewarm about it—is that it is much easier to direct the behaviour of children at primary school than it is to direct the behaviour of children at secondary school, particularly in relation to eating. Jackie Baillie is suggesting that if school meals were made free and uptake was encouraged as part of our school curriculum, people would take them. We are saying that that could improve and change the eating behaviour of our children—goodness knows, we need to.

I have visited 15 different schools—members visited one today. Each and every one of the head teachers of the primary schools that I visited in Glasgow—six of the schools that I visited were primary schools—said that the free fruit initiative had increased the demand from children for fruit in their homes. Parents are recording that because the fruit has been not only free, but has been part of the curriculum, consumption of fruit has

increased. I heard that evidence last week and thought it was great. Why is there such a Chinese wall between our thinking on the one hand that we can integrate free fruit into our school curriculum, and our thinking on the other hand that we cannot integrate healthy eating into our curriculum as part of a free food initiative, which would improve health?

The committee has evidence from David Conway, who is a dentist who has been involved in research for the Executive in Sweden on water fluoridation. On his trip to Sweden he was absolutely astounded by the improvements in health that have been delivered as a direct consequence of the healthy eating strategy and free school meals. He makes the point that in Scotland, only 45 per cent of five-year-olds are free of tooth decay. In Sweden, 72 per cent of six-year-olds are decay free. He links that figure to the encouragement of providing milk and water in schools.

The committee visited Leith Academy today and will have seen the prevalence of fizzy drinks. The situation might be different in Edinburgh, because in a community high school that I visited, water was available in a jug. However, in Glasgow and in most of the other local authority areas that I visited—I visited Alva Academy yesterday—water is not free; flavoured water costs 47p and still water costs 60p. That is absolutely disgraceful. We think that there is an overall attitude that has to be changed and I think that the committee agrees, although we perhaps disagree on where to start. Our argument is that we talk a good game, but we are not starting anywhere and we should start with our radical proposal.

Jackie Baillie: I would like to pursue some of the financial questions, because we have all been guilty of bandying about the figure £174 million. The evidence from 11 of the local authorities that have responded so far suggests that their revenue costs alone would be £70 million. I am not suggesting that you could easily multiply that by three to give you the total for all local authorities, but there is some dispute about costs. I acknowledge that that might also be an issue for the Executive, not just in the context of the bill. One council said that the additional capital, over and above the revenue, would be about £20 million. Multiplying that by 32 gives us quite a sum of money. I am conscious that £174 million is—you are right—about 1 per cent of the Scottish Executive's budget, but I am not convinced that we have the costs right.

The other question that I want to ask—which is important, because it relates to evidence that you led—is whether you or anybody else has conducted a cost-benefit analysis. For every pound that I put in up front, I want to know about

every pound that it will generate in future in savings. You are arguing that there will be off-set savings. What are they?

Tommy Sheridan: On your last question, I am disappointed that the committee has not invited others to give oral evidence today. Health economists from Dundee University and the University of St Andrews have submitted papers in which they argue that there are clear cost-benefit analyses that can be done to show that the investment would more than pay its way. Frankly, I had hoped that they would be given the opportunity to make those arguments. Those papers are available and I can provide follow-up references.

In relation to the costs, I hope that Jackie Baillie will understand that the costings that we made about 18 months ago, when we started the process, were based on the excellent work conducted on our behalf by the Scottish Parliament information centre. The initial costing was about £235 million. I pressed the education department to provide its cost analysis, because until then it had not participated in the process. The then Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, now the First Minister—and therefore his word must be firm—

Jackie Baillie: Of course it is.

Tommy Sheridan: Jack McConnell gave us the estimate of £174 million because we had not taken on board the cost of the current provision of free school meals. Therefore the net cost of the proposal is an extra £174 million.

I am sure that some members felt—perhaps you did not, but I did—that some of last week's evidence on capital costs was deliberately top-heavy. That is perhaps due to the nature of the evidence. Today, I asked the minister and the food co-ordinator what the Executive's target is and they said that the target is to improve the number of children who take school meals. The costs in relation to administration, school management and capital will be higher in relation to universal free provision, but the costs of improving uptake will also be significant.

I hope that such expenditure is not a significant feature in relation to cost. You are in danger of defeating your own argument if you are saying that universal free provision will lead to 100 per cent uptake. That would be brilliant. We are not arguing that. We are saying that universal free provision will improve the uptake, but I do not know that it will lead to 100 per cent uptake. There will be capital costs and questions for school administration and management. However, we think that those are worth addressing and facing up to in return for the health benefits and inclusiveness of such an anti-poverty measure.

Jackie Baillie: I have a small request for follow-up information. I would appreciate some information on cost-benefit analysis. I am aware that the Health and Community Care Committee also took evidence on the bill, and I would expect that committee to ask for such information in health terms. A set of figures would be most useful.

Irrespective of whether the Executive's proposal has a price tag or your proposal has a price tag or they cancel each other out, the committee has a responsibility in scrutinising legislation effectively to find out what its cost would be. Therefore, whoever it is incumbent on to deliver that information should have a better handle on it.

Mr McAllion: It is important to remember that the figure of £174 million, which we cannot possibly question as it comes from such a pristine source, is the net cost if the Executive does nothing. However, if the Executive intends to implement the recommendations of the expert panel, the net cost would be much lower than £174 million. We should not get too hung up on that figure.

Karen Whitefield: We all agree that we want to shape children's eating habits as early as possible. How do you think that the bill can do that effectively? We have heard at great length that at Leith Academy, many of the children chose to have chips and cheese for their lunch, rather than a healthier option. Would the bill take away such choices and force children to eat what we consider to be healthy food? If so, what are the additional costs of that?

What effect would that have on children? Inevitably, children would decide not to eat lunch or would put pressure on their parents to pay for other food. We have talked a lot about stigma but, unfortunately, there are many communities in Scotland where 70 to 90 per cent of the kids are on free school meals and where free meals do not have the same stigma. I would hate us to introduce legislation that places additional pressures on parents. Instead of taking one free school meal during the day, children may ask their parents for extra money so that they can have a meal either on their way to school or on their way home at night, as a result of choosing not to eat a meal at lunch time that they do not want.

Tommy Sheridan: Your question directly bypasses the issue of the 100,000 children who come from the poor families to which you refer but who are not eligible for free school meals. The pressure is already on the parents of those children, some of whom we visited at Wester Hailes Secondary School. Those parents, who work in the dining area, told us that they are worse off in terms of disposable income now that they are working, because they have lost the free

school meals entitlement for their two children and have to give their kids £2.50 a day. Some parents give their kids £3 a day.

The bill's aim is to remove stigma as a whole. Evidence from across local authorities suggests that, in those schools where there is a high level of entitlement to free school meals, less stigma is attached to receiving free school meals. However, in those schools where there is a low level of entitlement to free school meals, the stigma attached to receiving free school meals is greater. We want to remove stigma altogether.

Probably inadvertently, Karen Whitefield referred to our seeking to force kids to eat things.

Karen Whitefield: We cannot force kids to eat things.

Tommy Sheridan: We are clear about the fact that we cannot force kids to eat anything. However, we are trying to promote children's right to a healthy, nutritious meal. We can provide choice and a variety of nutritious meals. It is not beyond us to make meals attractive. I suggest that members visit Rothesay Primary School, in Argyll and Bute. There children can choose between lentil soup, melon and prawn cocktail as a starter, between fish, chicken and baked potato with tuna, cheese or chilli as a main meal, and between carrot cake and custard—to which, unfortunately, I succumbed—and a fresh fruit goblet of sliced strawberries, grapes, pear and apple as a sweet. That is a fantastic, healthy, nutritious choice. Why is that standard not on offer in all schools?

We must challenge the myth that our children will not eat healthy food. They will eat healthy food if it is presented well, promoted and made attractive. If Karen Whitefield is suggesting that, in order to compete with the high street—which is only too willing to feed children poison—we should provide poison in our schools, I oppose that. We must provide the healthy option. If a parent decides that they do not want their child to eat that food and that they would rather give them money every day to buy a roll and chips or chips with curry sauce, there is very little that we can do to prevent that. However, we can provide a healthy choice for every parent and child, so that parents are not forced to give their children money every day.

Karen Whitefield: Rothesay Primary School, to which you referred, is already providing nutritious meals. Providing free meals to every child in that school would not make a difference, because nutritious meals are already on offer there.

The bill is being sold on the basis that it would improve nutritional standards. The expert panel also wants to do that. Providing free school meals to every child may not be the most effective way of improving public health in the long term and of

encouraging children to participate in the school meals service. I was struck by your suggestion that the bill represents a new, radical approach to tackling child poverty. I am not convinced that you have outlined anything particularly new. School meals have always been provided. We may need to consider ways of improving nutritional standards and making school meals more attractive to children. We could also examine other ways of encouraging children to make healthy choices, but at the end of the day, none of us can force children to eat things that they do not want to eat.

Tommy Sheridan: Karen, you said that the aim of the bill was to improve nutritional standards, and it is, but that is not the only aim of the bill. As you know, the bill aims to provide a healthy and nutritious meal for all children. The reason I used the example of Rothesay Primary School is that 85 per cent of the children there pay for their meals; only 15 per cent qualify for a free school meal. I visited 15 schools in six local authorities and found that the schools with the largest free school meal entitlement unfortunately offered the lowest quality food. In the schools with the largest number of paying pupils, the standard was higher. We should not accept that in Scotland. We should have a high standard for all children, regardless of whether they can afford to pay.

17:00

At Rothesay Primary School, I thought that with my £1.35 ticket I was entitled to a baked potato with my lasagne, because someone suggested that I was. When I got to the checkout I was told, "I'm sorry. You will have to give me an extra 20p." That was fine, because I could go into my pocket for the extra 20p, but someone with a free meal ticket who made the same mistake could not go into their pocket for the extra 20p. What could they do? Take their baked potato back? Is that the type of embarrassment that we want for children in this day and age?

Mr McAllion: The provision of free school meals to all pupils is not new and radical if the comparison is made with Finland or Sweden, where it has been the norm for the past half century, but it is new and radical if the comparison is made with Scotland or Britain where, in the past 25 years, the school meals service was deregulated and opened up to private competition, and nutritional standards were removed to allow the school meal service to go down to the level of the high street alternatives outside schools. I thought that there was agreement—even among those who oppose the School Meals (Scotland) Bill—that nutritional standards would outlaw chips and cheese in the school meals service. Whether kids want chips and cheese or not, that is not what a school meals service should provide. That is an

important point to remember.

The Deputy Convener: I will sum up my problem with the bill. We should have better standards and kids should have access to free school meals when appropriate—obviously, I support that. As a mother, I had to do all sorts of things to encourage my teenagers to take school meals when I was working, but I failed miserably. My experience of teenagers is that they want to make their own choices. They want to decide to go to the shops or take their own packed lunches.

How can we make sure that the teenagers whom you are trying to target take the opportunity of free school meals, when statistics show that they do not take that opportunity, even when excellent school meals are available? I agree that excellent school meals are not available across the board, and that we have to deal with that—drinks and all the rest of it. When all that is done, how can 14, 15 and 16-year-old boys and girls be encouraged to take school meals?

Tommy Sheridan: In many respects, I would welcome that question 14 years from now, because if the bill's provisions are implemented and the desired effect is achieved, the greatest impact will be on the next batch of teenagers. We have to start now in order that 14 years from now people like you are not asking the same question, "How can we change teenagers' eating habits?"

We know that their eating habits are wrong. We know that they are bad and that they are damaging their health. The question is, what are we going to do about it? We are suggesting one way to do something about it. If this bill is implemented by 2003-04, we may not be able to convince the 14, 15 and 16-year-olds who are at school to take the healthy options and engage in the process, but we will be able to encourage the five, six and seven-year-olds. By the time they are 14 or 15, we could change their habits. If I am wrong, so be it.

Gillian Kynoch used the term "crystal ball gazing." Perhaps that is what is happening, although I think that that is an unfair analogy. Our desire is to tackle the horrendous dietary health record in this country. The problem with your question, Cathy, is that in some respects there is no answer. You are not giving an answer either. We are saying that this bill provides a potential answer. If you think that it is wrong, fine, but what is your answer? We do not see much else happening on the scale that is required to address the problem, which is huge and requires a huge response.

Mr McAllion: It is important to remember that members are divided by the fact that the meals will be free, but the bill is not just about providing free school meals, although that is an essential

element of the package. With a free school meals service we could make available to children a wide range of quality choices, perhaps in a buffet style. Of course, that will not work with every single school pupil in Scotland, but it will work with a significant number of them. If they see that quality choices are available in school and do not cost them anything out of their pocket, they will go for school meals and, as a result, will begin to learn about health and diet.

Remember, even the Executive is talking about the whole school experience, and the fact that the school meals service should be integrated into the curriculum and all other aspects of the school, and should send out the same solid message about healthy eating. A free school meals service would do that, not just for the poor but for everybody. Although the poor would be the biggest beneficiaries—those pupils who get free school meals now would get an even better school meal in future under this bill—those who are cut out just now, who do not get free school meals, would suddenly start getting free school meals.

We have a long-term aim. The expert advice in the pamphlet “Even the tatties have batter!”, which was produced by food nutritionists in Dundee, Glasgow and elsewhere, makes the case solidly that the provision of free school meals for all children would be a radical measure that would have a significant impact on the health of the Scottish population in the future. I hope that the Parliament will support the bill.

The Deputy Convener: I thank Tommy Sheridan and John McAllion for giving evidence this afternoon. That concludes the public part of today’s business. The committee will now move into private session.

17:05

Meeting continued in private until 17:15.

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