

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 5 November 2008

Session 3

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE 26th Meeting 2008, Session 3

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP)
*Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)
Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Tam Baillie (Barnardo's Scotland)
John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)
Marion Macleod (Children in Scotland)
Ian Turner (Aberlour Child Care Trust)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

ASSISTANT CLERK

Andrew Proudfoot

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 5 November 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Subordinate Legislation

Provision of School Lunches (Disapplication of the Requirement to Charge) (Scotland) Order 2008 (Draft)

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Good morning. I open the 26th meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee and remind all those who are present that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off for the duration of the meeting.

I welcome to the committee Hugh O'Donnell, who is substituting for Margaret Smith.

The first item on the agenda is consideration of the draft Provision of School Lunches (Disapplication of the Requirement to Charge) (Scotland) Order 2008. This is the committee's second oral evidence session on the instrument. I am pleased to welcome our panel of witnesses. We are joined by Tam Baillie, the director of policy at Barnardo's Scotland; John Dickie, the head of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland; and Marion Macleod, the senior policy and parliamentary officer of Children in Scotland. We had hoped that Ian Turner, from the Aberlour Child Care Trust, would be able to join us; however, due to family circumstances, he is unable to do so. He has said that, if we want to pursue anything that is mentioned in his written submission, he will be happy to respond to the committee in writing. I thank all the witnesses for providing written submissions in advance of the meeting. We will move straight to questions.

I will begin by asking about the health effects of the policy. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has repeatedly said that the introduction of free school meals will improve the long-term health of Scotland's children. Can you give us a feel for how we can measure any such health improvements? Ipsos MORI Scotland suggested to the committee last week that the Scottish Government had not asked it to measure those improvements.

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): That is correct. In the nine-month period of the evaluation, there was insufficient time to evaluate the long-term health impacts on

children of the universal provision of free school meals. Nevertheless, there is now consensus on the role of the school in improving children's diet and ensuring that they eat healthily during the school day. That has underpinned the hungry for success approach and the implementation of the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007. There is evidence that those measures have improved the nutritional quality of school meals, but they have not succeeded in increasing the number of children who benefit from that healthy food in school.

The evidence from the pilot study shows that the introduction of the universal provision of free school meals in the early years has succeeded in boosting the number of children who benefit from healthy food at school. There is also evidence in the evaluation that the pilot helped to link what children eat to the wider curriculum and the approach to healthy eating in schools. For example, teachers have said that it is easier to explain some of the curricular aspects of nutrition and healthy eating when more children share in the healthy food that is provided as part of the school lunch. The evaluation also contains evidence of the impact of the pilot through children asking for healthier food at home and parents feeling more knowledgeable about healthy food and asking for healthy options. The evidence suggests that there have been impacts on people's understanding of healthy eating.

It is important that, as the policy is rolled out, we continue to evaluate the impact of the universal provision of free school meals and look for the direct long-term impacts on children's health and wellbeing.

Tam Baillie (Barnardo's Scotland): I have had the pleasure of being able to give evidence to the committee before. The convener has hit on one of the most difficult aspects of any school meals policy: the long-term impact on health. We have already said in our written evidence that the longer-term outcomes are mixed. John Dickie helpfully laid out some of the health-related behaviours that research into the most recent trials picked up on. However, that evidence is rather limited because of the timescale involved.

We always knew that a short pilot period would not provide evidence of the long-term impacts on children's health. That is why we examined the Hull evidence, which is a bit more substantial and a bit more long term. Even the Hull research recognised that a child's eating habits consist of many other things beside a school meal. Therefore, some attention needs to be paid to what else they eat during the day—for instance, what they eat at home. It is interesting that one of the councils in the Scottish pilot combined free school meals with some additional support for the

home environment. Such a measure would have to be considered if we were to roll out free school meals across Scotland, because it confirms some of the findings from Hull.

The pilot showed a significant increase in the number, or percentage, of children taking free school meals who previously had not qualified for them. In primaries 1 to 3, that is a shift from lunch-box meals to school meals—we know from Hull and some work that Barnardo's has done that the nutritional value of packed lunches is not all that we would want it to be.

There are some positive indications from the pilot, but it was rather too short to enable us to evaluate long-term health outcomes. If the policy is rolled out, we would advocate that a robust research programme be connected to it so that we can pick up better information on the long-term health outcomes.

The Convener: I apologise to Mr Turner. I understand that he has been in the Parliament for some time and I am glad that he has been able to join us. I am sorry for the confusion. Visitors to the committee will be interested to know that he represents the Aberlour Child Care Trust.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Tam Baillie made a particularly good point about the wider things that are going on in children's lives. Are the witnesses aware of any monitoring of the amount of waste in the pilot? Is there a methodology for getting some indication of what was wasted and what was consumed? I have some evidence from local authorities across Scotland that there are variable methods of monitoring waste. The same applies to the free fruit scheme that the previous Administration introduced. If we are to roll out free school meals nationally, it is important that we have a consistent methodology for assessing the policy's success.

Tam Baillie: One of the points that the researchers made was that they were not charged with the responsibility of monitoring what the children actually ate. I think that one of their recommendations for future research was for much closer monitoring of how much of the school meal the children eat and of everything else around that. That would mirror some of the evidence from Hull.

John Dickie: Although there would be more waste because more children got school meals, the evaluation was clear that the proportion of waste did not increase as a result of introducing universal free school meals. That is based on feedback from catering and school staff.

Marion Macleod (Children in Scotland): One of the points that we made in our written evidence is that, while we are disappointed by the controversy over the funding for free school meals,

there is evidence from other European countries that such provision is not necessarily as costly as people in Scotland have conjectured. For example, Sweden provides free school meals throughout pre-school, primary and secondary education, on a much more cost-effective basis. One way in which it does that is by not having a repertoire of foods for children, but having a single meal, without a choice. Choice comes in through the children's participation in the selection and preparation of menus, so that they feel ownership of and involvement in what gets served in school meals. Consequently, the level of wastage is less and the per capita cost of producing the meals is lower.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. I want to ask about something that ties in with evidence that was presented at our meeting on 19 September 2007, particularly by Children in Scotland and the Aberlour Child Care Trust. I think that it was Marion Macleod's colleague Paula Evans who made the strong point that the policy to deal with the school meals issue in primaries 1 to 3 was not going to be particularly effective unless we dealt with the food issue at a younger age and that part of the problem starts long before the age of five. We have extremely tight resources. Would you suggest that the policy should perhaps shift, in an attempt to target some of the younger children and deal with those of kindergarten age or younger? If not, are you content for the policy to be directed just at primaries 1 to 3?

Marion Macleod: As my predecessor articulated at that committee meeting, we are clear that it would be important to introduce children and, indeed, families to healthy eating and perhaps to a different approach to food preparation and dining from the approach that is taken at present. However, there are logistical difficulties in early years services that we would need to consider. For example, many children in full day care are not in state-provided full day care, and many children in state-provided pre-school nursery education are there for only two and a half hours in the day and do not receive a meal there. There would need to be a review of entitlement in early years, were provision for that area to be considered.

If we are looking at health benefits, there is persuasive evidence that, in many cases, people's eating habits and, indeed, their propensity to develop conditions such as obesity and dental decay and to have longer-term poorer health outcomes are already established before primary 1.

Elizabeth Smith: That point sends a strong message to people who may or may not legislate on the issue. We may be content that provision

should be at the level of primaries 1 to 3, which could help considerably, but we must also recognise that that approach does not get at the root of the problem, which obviously exists before children reach the age of five. Does the panel think that we could do more through central or local government policy to try to help younger age groups and to help with parenting and understanding? Could we do something in that regard to ensure that we have a better chance with children when they come to primary 1?

Tam Baillie: I am happy to answer that point. We have called for hungry for success measures to go downstream, if you like. The question is whether that will be done instead of or as well as other measures. We are on the threshold of the launch of an early years framework, and we hope that some attention will be paid to the eating habits of children in early years, who are in a complicated matrix of provision. Such a measure is certainly worth looking at, but its implementation would need careful consideration because there is not the same uniformity of provision for early years as there is for the primary school stage. However, I agree that eating habits are formed very early on and do not just start at the level of primaries 1 to 3.

John Dickie: It is not too late by primary 1, but I agree that we need to look back and see how we can ensure that children eat healthily and have access to healthy food before they reach primary school. There is no question but that deficiencies in that regard have an impact on children's ability to attain at school. However, there is evidence that suggests that appropriate interventions can help to make up for those deficiencies.

Elizabeth Smith: My real concern is about resources. If we take a universal approach to free school meals in primaries 1 to 3, we will be helping some children who are perhaps less in need of that targeted approach. There are genuine cases of children who are desperate for help. I am concerned that, if we make provision universal in primaries 1 to 3, we will take up resources that might be better used in another age group or for more specific targeting of areas where the real problem lies.

10:15

Marion Macleod: Children in Scotland is absolutely in favour of universal and destigmatised provision. However, the argument that we need to ensure that take-up reaches those children who are most in need has some validity. There is slightly concerning evidence that, in some of the pilot areas, take-up was proportionally higher among children who were not previously eligible for free school meals than among those who were. That issue needs attention.

It is not a question of having either provision in early years or provision in primaries 1 to 3. We do not say that we would rather have early years provision than the measure that is proposed; we desperately need both forms of provision to be in place. In early years, more support, advice and direct practical help need to be offered to parents who need assistance in providing healthy food. We are unequivocally in favour of early interventions such as encouragement and support for breastfeeding of children, support with early nutrition, and appropriate advice on and support with parenting. However, we see those measures not as substituting for but as complementing the provision of free school meals in primaries 1 to 3.

Elizabeth Smith: You are absolutely right—I understand the point that you are making. However, we must deal with the reality of the situation, which is that we have a tight budget. A large number of councils say that the measure will be difficult to fund. The choice is not between provision in the pre-school age group and provision in primaries 1 to 3, but between targeting children who are most in need and provision for those who, in my view, are less in need. That opportunity cost is the crux of the matter. We will not be able to provide enough resources to deal with the whole issue at once.

Tam Baillie: The Government is committed to both approaches. It is committed to universal provision in P1 to P3. We have given considerable support to measures to alleviate the situation of children who are living in poverty. Like the commitment to provide free school meals in P1 to P3, those measures are part of the concordat. We hope that concordat commitments can be implemented across the board.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): The issue of wastage has been raised. The evidence from the trial was that there was no proportionate increase in wastage compared with the pre-trial situation. Marion Macleod gave us some insight into how that came about. Would other members of the panel like to comment on the issue?

Tam Baillie: It is good if there is no increase in wastage.

John Dickie: The results of the trial ran counter to some peoples' expectations. If something that people would not normally get for free is given to them free, there is a risk that they will throw more of it away, but that was not borne out in the trial. An important finding of the evaluation was that there was no proportionate increase in the level of waste.

Ian Turner (Aberlour Child Care Trust): It is recognised that the level of wastage in primaries 1 to 3 is slightly higher than among older children,

because younger children do not eat as much. When the scheme is extended, we should try to find ways of monitoring wastage and encouraging children to eat as much of their meals as possible. We should also look at whether children are differentiating between the healthier and less healthy things on their plates.

John Dickie: Some of the evidence from the Hull research and the free school meals pilot there was that, when teachers sat down and ate with pupils, that had a big impact on whether and what children ate. That is part of the wider approach. How meals are delivered can help to ensure that wastage is reduced as far as possible.

Marion Macleod: I agree. Although it may not be possible to deliver a raft of measures in support of the provision of free school meals, schools could actively consider their approach to school meals and the context in which they serve them. There could be a change from the queuing-up cafeteria-style approach to something that is much more of a social learning opportunity. That would have nutritional and wastage reduction benefits, as well as benefits for social learning and behaviour.

Christina McKelvie: On a slightly different topic, we have heard about uptake among children who were previously entitled to but unregistered for free school meals and general uptake among children who would not normally be entitled. Can the panel give an insight into the impact that uptake has on stigma?

John Dickie: There is some evidence from the evaluation of the pilot that children are enjoying eating school meals more—even those who already took school meals. The evaluators posit some explanations for that, although they cannot prove those. Part of the reason may be to do with children being able to sit alongside their friends who now get a school meal but who previously did not. There is evidence that the approach has removed a barrier that stopped children taking the school meals to which they were entitled and that children are enjoying them more than they did previously. To return to the issue of the proportionate increase, among those who were not previously registered for or entitled to free school meals, the proportionate increase is massive. We cannot underestimate the huge impact of the measure—there was a 22 percentage point increase across the board and a 28 percentage point increase among those who were not previously entitled.

There was also a significant increase in uptake among those who were already entitled to what is a crucial benefit. The figure is not as dramatic as 22 or 28 percentage points, but, among the local authorities involved, it was between 3.4 and 8.5 percentage points. It is significant that the

measure has boosted take-up of what was a previously means-tested benefit for some of our poorest children and families. With any other means-tested benefit, such as child tax credit, we would be delighted if take-up had increased so significantly. Ensuring that children from very poorest families who are already entitled to free school meals get them has been a significant outcome of the trial.

Tam Baillie: Stigma has been recognised as a barrier to uptake, particularly among the older age group, although not so much in the primary age group—the uptake in primaries has tended to be higher. There are potential public health benefits as a result of the switch that I mentioned from packed lunches to school lunches, especially if we pay attention to the nutritional value of the school meals that are served up through the hungry for success initiative. We need to capture data on that through longer-term monitoring. The most significant increase was among pupils who were previously not qualified or did not register for free school meals.

Christina McKelvie: One interesting impact that is mentioned in the evaluation report is the increase in uptake between primary 4 and primary 7. When I saw that evidence, my immediate thought was that that was because parents who could not afford two school meals were now getting one free, which meant that they could afford to pay for their older child's school meal. Have the witnesses picked up on that impact from speaking to parents?

Tam Baillie: I have not spoken to any of the parents whose children were involved in the pilot. However, the increase in uptake is quite modest. The situation to which you refer is one of the unintended outcomes of the pilot and, without knowing the detail, it is quite difficult to comment on it. We know, however, that the policy may have some knock-on effects on parents of older children who are living in poverty, in terms of increased uptake in the later years.

John Dickie: The evaluation highlights the fact that some parents said that they were able to pay for a school meal for an older child only because they were getting a free meal for a younger child. Although I have not received any direct additional feedback from parents on that issue, the evaluation is quite clear on that point.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I would like to clarify some figures that John Dickie has already half-clarified. In your written submission, you suggest that the increased take-up among children who already qualified for free school meals was 8.5 per cent. That contradicts the Barnardo's submission, which puts the figure at 4 per cent. I am not trying to catch you out.

John Dickie: It was up to 8.5 per cent.

Ken Macintosh: Exactly. I think that it varied from 3.4 per cent; however, across the board, the average was 4.4 per cent. Tam Baillie has expanded on the reason why that matters. The evidence shows that, if free school meals are introduced, there will be a big uptake—we all expected that and there is no doubt that that has been proven. However, what is the benefit of that? If many of the children were already eating nutritious meals, in a packed lunch or whatever, is not the policy an expensive way of targeting a small number of pupils? You have suggested that it is better for pupils—even for those who eat packed lunches and who did not qualify—to get a free school meal. However, Marion Macleod earlier expressed concern over the smallness of the increase in uptake.

Tam Baillie: That question really gets at the two policy objectives of providing good, nutritious meals to children, free or otherwise. The first of those is to address the public health agenda, for which we have hungry for success. The universal provision of free school meals to all pupils in primaries 1 and 2 is an extension of that work. However, we have stated in our written evidence—and I have said today—that the evidence is rather mixed on the long-term outcomes of the policy for the public health agenda.

The second objective is to alleviate the burdens of families who live in poverty. In that context, we welcome the additional measures that the Government has in the pipeline to extend the eligibility criteria for free school meals. There may be a modest increase in the number of families who live in poverty who benefit from the P1 to P3 pilot; however, many more families will benefit from the extension of the eligibility criteria.

Those two policies are unfolding at the same time.

John Dickie: It is crucial to remember that it is not just those children who are currently entitled to a free school meal who live in poverty. Fewer than half of children who live in poverty get a free school meal. Extending entitlement to those who were previously not eligible for a free school meal will benefit substantially children who live in poverty. The problem is with the current, very narrow means testing.

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