

Scottish Trades Union Congress

Response to the Interim Report of the Scottish Executive's Expert Panel on School Meals

Introduction

The STUC is Scotland's Trade Union Centre. Its purpose is to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the Trade Union Movement in Scotland and, through the creation of real social partnership, to promote trade unionism, equality and social justice; the creation and maintenance of high quality jobs and the public sector delivery of services.

The STUC represents around 630,000 working people and their families throughout Scotland. It speaks for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace. Our affiliated organisations have interests in all sectors of the economy. Our representative structures are constructed to take account of the specific views of women members, young members, Black/minority ethnic members, LGBT members, and members with a disability, as well as retired and unemployed workers.

The STUC welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Report and the attention school meals have been given in Scotland. We believe the provision of a healthy, nutritious school meals service, widely used by pupils, would have a crucial role to play in improving the health, dietary patterns and learning capacity of children and young people in Scotland. Investing in such a high quality service is a sound use of public funds and will have a key impact on improving the wealth and well being of our nation for the future.

We feel there are many positive suggestions contained within the Interim Report and have set out below our views in response to the many suggestions, issues and examples highlighted.

STUC Policy on School Meals

Although the universal provision of free school meals was not an area that the expert panel was asked to cover within its remit, we feel it is important to outline our policy position in relation to this issue. The STUC is on record as being a key supporter of the wider campaign for the universal provision of free, nutritious, school meals and milk.

As part of its campaigning on this issue the STUC, submitted a Public Petition to the Scottish Parliament with over 10,000 signatures calling for free school meals to be implemented, gave evidence to Scottish Parliament Committees on this issue and met with the Scottish Executive's Minister for Education to urge them to support the Free School Meals Bill and to discuss what further action might be taken by the Executive to improve school meals provision and access.

While we welcome many of the suggestions contained within the Interim Report as being positive ways of improving the school meals service, we disagree strongly with the Expert Panel's view expressed within the Report that the Bill on the Introduction of Free School Meals was inappropriate. The STUC will continue to maintain our policy position in relation to the universal provision of free school meals, as the best means of tackling poverty, social exclusion, poor diet and health through the school meals system.

Once again, we would urge the Scottish Executive to give serious consideration to this preferred option, which has wide support across the trade union movement and is popular with service users and providers.

Membership of Expert Panel

The STUC, while welcoming the establishment of an expert panel, would wish to put on record our concerns that the membership of this panel did not include any trade union input either from the STUC itself, unions representing members involved in school meal provision, or specialist education unions with an interest in the effects of nutrition on learning.

We would hope that any future policy development undertaken by the Scottish Executive in relation to school meals provision would include a full trade union input.

Establishment of Nutritional Standards

The STUC strongly welcomes the proposals contained within the consultation document for the establishment of Scotland wide nutritional standards. Furthermore, we welcome the detailed proposals for monitoring and evaluation through the HM Inspectorate for Education.

We would however urge the Scottish Executive to implement these standards to the same timescale proposed for primary and special schools.

While we accept that it may not be possible to extend these standards to vending machines and tuck shops within schools, we believe that every effort should be made to extend the commitment to promoting healthy eating and supporting positive choices to these areas, and support the proposals to introduce guidance to that effect, including the proposals to make more vegetarian options available and ensure that children with other special dietary requirements whither for religious or other purposes are met.

Promoting Healthy Eating in Schools

The STUC strongly supports the recommendations contained within the Interim Report that schools should review their current practice in promoting healthy eating and establish strong links between teaching on healthy eating and food provision within the school.

We would also support the recommendation that pupils be consulted regularly on the content of school meals and believe that this would improve uptake of school meals, but that this should be undertaken within the context of learning about healthy options and the benefits of a good diet.

Improving the School Environment

The STUC supports the views expressed within the Report that much needs to be done to improve the environment within which children are served and eat school meals. We agree that this could improve uptake and support the recommendations set out within the Report for improving the dining environment of schools. We would urge the Executive to make the necessary funds available to education authorities to undertake any refurbishments necessary.

Tackling Stigma

The STUC believes it is totally unacceptable that any child should feel stigmatised or be abused by their peers for accessing free school meals. We believe the Executive must take strong steps to address this issue.

We support the recommendations for maximising the anonymity of free school meal recipients and the suggestion that education authorities tackle this as a priority. However, we would be concerned that if this is left to individual schools and education authorities then there will still be a piecemeal approach, with some areas having better systems than others. We would recommend that instead, the Executive undertake research into the best systems for tackling stigma and produces guidelines on how best this can be achieved to support schools in implementing a Scotland-wide standard of service.

Provision of Water and Milk

The STUC disagrees with the expert panel's view that current provision of milk within schools is adequate. We would urge the Executive to consider re-introducing free milk to schools, at the very least for children in primary schools, as we believe that there are substantial health benefits to be had from such provision, especially for younger children.

The STUC fully supports the recommendation that free, fresh chilled water should be made available to children with their school meal. We would also urge that steps are taken to make free, fresh, chilled water accessible to both staff and children throughout all schools.

Examples of Good Practice

The STUC is aware that many good examples of good practice exist in individual schools, including the provision of breakfast clubs, free school milk, free fruit, healthy eating incentive schemes etc. We welcome the fact that this has been acknowledged in the Report. However, we would urge the Executive to consider how these examples of good practice can be rolled out so that all Scotland's children can benefit from such good practice, rather than just the lucky few.

Best Value and Raising Standards

The STUC fully agrees with the Report's recommendations for improving the management of the school meals service and we welcome the view of the panel that to achieve the changes required in the school meals service requires a commitment to quality and high standards, which is not aided by competitive commercial pressures.

We would also support the recommendation that any Best Value review of the service should be undertaken with an understanding that the school meals service is an integral part of a local authority's education and health strategies and not simply a commercial activity.

Supporting Staff

It is the STUC's view that improvements to the school meal service requires the positive involvement of staff. Staff can play a vital role in encouraging positive choices and monitoring effectiveness of healthy eating strategies. It is vital that staff are trained and supported to undertake this role.

Furthermore, the STUC believes that the delivery of a quality school meals service, like all high quality public service delivery, depends on staffs' levels of pay and conditions of service also being of a high quality, which is not currently the case in this sector.

Widening Access

The STUC is concerned that the Interim Report did not look in any detail at the issues around widening access to free school meals, especially given the fact that a third of Scotland's children, whom the Executive classes as living in poverty are not eligible for a free meal. We feel that this is a very important issue that the Report had failed to even acknowledge.

We would urge the Executive to consider the options available to it for widening access to free school meals such as, for example, making them available to children of parents receiving family tax credits or, alternatively, targeting the youngest and most vulnerable children by making school meals freely available in nursery schools and primary years 1-3. We would like to see the Executive taking steps to cost such proposals and give them serious consideration, as we believe that this would complement their current 'Sure Start' initiative, which forms part of their wider social inclusion agenda.

R Foyer
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