



Food, Diet and Obesity Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Food, diet and obesity

Thursday 7 March 2024

11.30 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Walmsley (The Chair); Baroness Boycott; Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe; Baroness Browning; The Earl of Caithness; Lord Colgrain; Baroness Goudie; Baroness Jenkin of Kennington; Lord Krebs; Lord McColl of Dulwich; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Baroness Suttie.

Evidence Session No. 6

Heard in Public

Questions 66 - 76

Witnesses

[I](#): Bee Wilson, Co-founder, TastEd (Taste Education); Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools; Georgie Branch, Healthy Zones Programme Manager, School Food Matters; Anita Brown, National Chair, Local Authority Caterers Association.

Examination of witnesses

Bee Wilson, Naomi Duncan, Georgie Branch and Anita Brown.

Q66 The Chair: Good morning and welcome back to this public meeting of the House of Lords Committee on Food, Diet and Obesity. We continue our meeting with the sixth evidence session of the committee's inquiry exploring the role of foods such as ultra-processed foods and foods high in fat, salt and sugar in a healthy diet, and tackling obesity. We will hear from Bee Wilson, the co-founder of TastEd; Georgie Branch, programme lead of the Healthy Zones team at School Food Matters; Naomi Duncan, chief executive of Chefs in Schools; and Anita Brown of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and the national chair of the Local Authority Catering Association. You are all very welcome, and we very much look forward to hearing your evidence. I ask you to introduce yourself briefly the first time you speak. Today's meeting is being broadcast and a transcript will be sent to you for any corrections you need to make prior to publication.

I refer to the list of Members' interests, including my own, as published on the committee's website and as set out in the committee's first evidence session on 8 February. I repeat what I said at the beginning of the earlier evidence session: although it would be inconsistent with Lords committees' procedure to compel our witnesses to do so, for the sake of transparency we will give all our witnesses the opportunity to voluntarily declare any interest they deem relevant to the work of this inquiry the first time they speak.

I will now ask the first question. How prevalent are unhealthy diets among children and adolescents? What are the reasons for that, and what role does the food environment play?

Naomi Duncan: I run a charity called Chefs in Schools. We work directly with schools to help them transform food and food education, with a view to improving kids' health.

On the point about conflicts, I want to mention to the committee, although you may already be aware of this, that Henry Dimbleby is our chair and Baroness Boycott is one of our patrons. Some 90% of our funding comes from trusts, foundations and schools in local authorities that we work with. About 10% comes from businesses, I think only one of which supplies any product into schools. That is primarily olive oil, which it provides at cost price to the schools we work with.

To answer your question I will start with a statistic. You might have heard it before, but I ask that we spend a couple of seconds thinking about what it really means. One in three kids in the poorest areas in this country are leaving primary school with obesity. I just want us to reflect on that: the picture nationally is about one in five kids. It is bad for kids' health and well-being but also a ticking time bomb for society. We know that a lot of the reason for that is the food environment the kids are growing up in, which it is not weighted in their favour.

My experience is specifically in schools, so I will focus on that. I will start with packed lunches. We know from evidence produced by the University of Leeds that fewer than 2% of pack lunches meet the same nutritional standards that are applied to school meals, and in fact only about one in five of them are found to have any fresh veg or salad in at all. We recognise that there is a problem with the packed lunches going in, which will not surprise us when we look at the wider food environment.

On the issue of school meals, I want to say up front that all the evidence suggests that school meals are hands down better than packed lunches; they contain higher amounts of nutrition and lower amounts of processed food. However, that does not mean there are not issues in school food that we need to be clear-eyed about tackling. A study by Imperial College found that around 64% of the calories that kids were taking in from meals provided by the school were coming from ultra-processed food, and many of those were foods that were high in fat, sugar and salt—much worse in secondary schools, I have to say, because of the marketplace of food available. That is the scale and shape of the problem we are trying to tackle.

I will talk briefly about what I think some of the solutions are. I could take this committee to a state school in Streatham and you could watch a bunch of teenagers diving face first into a salad bar to top up their packed lunches. I could put you on the phone with a school chef in Hull who has just graduated from our training programme and has negotiated with her school employer to put oily fish back on the menu, because she now feels like she has the skills and knowledge to encourage children to try it.

There are lots of examples of great practice in school food across the country. We have a workforce of people working in kitchens that is the size of an army. They care about kids and want to do well by them, and we have to give them the environment in which they can do that. We need to give them the training and make sure that they are funded properly, and we need to give directions through every rule the Government set, through legislation and the government procurement rules, to make sure that the right baseline is in place to enable them to do their jobs well.

Bee Wilson: Thank you for having me. I am honoured to be here. As you mentioned, I am here for TastEd, which is a charity I co-founded nearly five years ago with a head teacher from Lincolnshire, who is also here today, called Jason O'Rourke, and a former teacher called Abby Scott. For my day job I am a food writer and journalist. I have written articles relevant to this committee, including on ultra-processed food, non-nutritive sweeteners, and the profound failures of food policy in the UK, in which I referenced a piece by Dolly van Tulleken that has already been mentioned a lot in this committee.

If that sounds depressing, my latest book was a cookbook. I believe to my core that cooking and eating are among the greatest joys in life—all my work with taste has confirmed this—and that you are much more

likely to lead a child or anyone else to healthy eating through the excitement of flavour and the pleasures of a shared meal than you are through lectures about fat, grams or sugar. When it comes to food, pleasure is crucial, because, apart from feeling wonderful, pleasure is the single greatest reason why anyone picks something up and puts it in their mouth.

To come back to TastEd, Jason and I independently found out about SAPERE, a system of what is sometimes called taste education and sometimes sensory food education, which has been tried and tested for decades in most of the Nordic countries—Sweden, Finland and Norway—and in many other countries, including the Netherlands, Singapore and Japan. We both felt independently, having looked into healthy eating initiatives in schools for years, that it was the missing part of the jigsaw in food education and equipped a child with new skills for eating that could protect them in an obesogenic world, such as a willingness to try new things and a preference for a range of real whole vegetables.

To come back to your question, which is about the prevalence of poor diets, Naomi summarised it far better than I could. The one thing I would add is that I sometimes think we talk far too much about an obesity crisis, a phrase that makes large numbers of people, children or adults, feel awful about their own bodies. I wish we would talk about a food crisis. The dictionary definition of food in the OED is: “Any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink in order to maintain life and growth”, but much of what children are eating is not doing that job.

I am by no means saying that we should forget obesity, but let us talk about teeth. Our chair of trustees is Jane Lockey, a former paediatric anaesthetist who came to TastEd partly because she knows what it is like when a child—I will start crying; I actually cannot talk about it—has all their teeth extracted at the age of five. Some 26,000 children aged five to nine were hospitalised for teeth extraction in 2018.

I will change the subject to TastEd, a happy subject. We knew that to make it work we could not just go to headteachers and say, “We’ve got this great idea from Finland. You should do it”. We knew we had to make it work to a UK context and the reality of teachers’ busy lives. We had a long piloting phase and we have now created a whole library of free lesson plans and resources that can be delivered in the classroom: minimal equipment, no kitchen required.

The beautiful thing about TastEd is that it is joy, pleasure and fun. We started thinking that this was a game for young kids and then found that adults enjoy playing it too. Everyone enjoys it. You bury different things in the bottom of a sock and they reach inside. Perhaps you have never felt that before. You can feel that it is round and has a kind of knobbly thing on the end, but is it a pomegranate or an onion? I do not know whether people want to go at this game. I could pass things around.

The Chair: I am afraid we do not have time for that.

Bee Wilson: You get the idea. Part of what is instructive about this again gets to the prevalence. What children say to their teachers while playing these games is very instructive. People have said, "I've never felt an onion before". That is just a basic lack in a child's life. It is not just about touch but about listening to things, which the more musical people in the room, like Lord Krebs, might appreciate—the music of a lettuce leaf or a spinach leaf; you tear it next to your ear. Again, it is instructive, because children will say, "I can't eat crunchy foods", and that comes back to the tooth decay question.

We have found that exploring food in this totally non-invasive, non-judgmental way—the two rules are: no one has to like and no one has to try—is very effective. There is a lot of data to back this up. Short-term interventions from Finland, France, South Korea and other countries show that this kind of sensory food education increases a child's willingness to try. Some of our own data supports that. A project led by the University of Roehampton offering children in three different schools 10 sessions of TastEd found that across those sessions 85% tried a new fruit or vegetable and 100% of children liked something that they tried. Also, a teacher in York reported that a child with autism and sensory needs, whose diet up to then had been mostly basic and devoid of vegetables, learned to enjoy lettuce during a TastEd lesson and now asks for lettuce every day with his food.

The Chair: Excellent. I do not think I would like lettuce for every meal every day, but I do like lettuce.

Georgie Branch: I work for the charity School Food Matters, which exists to teach children about food and improve children's access to healthy and sustainable food during their time at school. I have been at the charity for almost five years, during which I led a Covid food response programme that saw over 1 million breakfasts delivered to low-income families across London, and I currently lead on a programme called Healthy Zones, which aims to support schools to create sustained changes to the food environment that puts children's health first.

On the prevalence of unhealthy diets among children and adolescents, there is lots of evidence that they are not eating enough foods that nourish them. They are consuming too little fruit and veg, and too many foods high in fat, salts and sugar. The FUEL study done in the West Midlands found when looking at fruit consumption that 70% of adolescents were eating less than 100 grams, which is equivalent to an apple a day. It is also reported that British children have the highest intake of ultra-processed foods in Europe.

To reiterate the point that Naomi mentioned, UPFs accounted for 82% of calories in packed lunches and 64% of calories in school meals. Higher UPF intakes were observed in secondary school children and those in lower-income households. The study also found that the UPFs are heavily marketed in more deprived areas, so those children were more likely to choose the UPF foods in schools. Again, this reiterates the point Naomi

made that school meals are more nutritious than packed lunches, and it echoes the study done by the University of Leeds.

The food environment plays a role in this. Through our own surveys we asked thousands of secondary school students whether they think it is easy to eat healthily at their schools, and the majority say no, for reasons including the canteen layout, the queuing, the amount of time they have to eat, the cost of foods, and the availability of healthy foods and unhealthy foods in the school canteens. I am sure we will speak later about the specific influences on the food environment, but I just wanted to make the point that the food environment disproportionately affects children from lower-income households, and we have seen that children living in those most deprived areas are twice as likely to be obese compared to their peers who live in the least deprived areas.

Anita Brown: Good morning. I am the chair of LACA, the school food people. We have 1,000 members nationally and we support single-site schools, multi-academy trusts, private operators and local authority caterers in the delivery of a healthy school meal. We also support lobbying and various campaigns. For my day job, I am head of the catering operation at Stockton-on-Tees council, so it was a bit of a trek to get here. We provide 10,000 meals a day to schools and work alongside schools in offering a different offer as nationally we all try to make the school food standards; we are waiting for the new ones for this year. That is the focus in my day job.

On the question about the prevalence of unhealthy diets, the school meal is only around 30% of a child's actual intake of food, and although there are some ultra-processed foods on some menus in primary schools, there is a big focus nationally to get away from that. We are working with suppliers to make sure as best we can that every item we put into schools meets food standards. Some members are struggling with the funding element of it because food prices, as we all know, have exceeded what we get funding for.

One focus we have across LACA is educating children. We try to support schools with the farm-to-fork element because, as my colleagues have said, a lot of children do not know what things look, feel and taste like. As local authority caterers, we try to ensure that every child has access to things that they might not normally have, whether that is an affluent area or an area of high deprivation, particularly the area that I work in.

The Royal Society for Public Health has said that 28% of children aged between two and 15 are either overweight or obese. That statistic is dreadful for the future, because these are the people who will take over what we are doing now. That is the worry. We should be looking after the health and well-being of our children and young people. We work with suppliers on food manufacturing and packaging, and what out there is "sexy", if you like—the offers that people offer away from school. That is why we try to encourage children to stay in school, particularly in secondary school, although of course you can lead a horse to water, but—.

It is difficult in secondary schools. As Naomi alluded to, there is the element of queuing, so people want to come in, get something and get out. Working with schools will be a big focus.

The Chair: Anita, did I hear you say earlier that the school food standard would cost more than the amount of money that you are provided with, or did I misunderstand?

Anita Brown: I will give you an example. At the moment, the amount of oily fish that we have to put on every week is beyond the money that we are getting. We get £2.53 allocated for a universal free school meal while our neighbouring nations get in excess of £3. Not every local authority can meet the standards to that level because of that food cost and the cost of living crisis that we are all in.

Q67 **Baroness Boycott:** I chair Feeding Britain. One of our researchers found out a couple of years ago that, in all the budget squeezes, councils were removing a bit of the food budget as it went through, while teachers were also removing a bit to pay for textbooks, because food always gets squeezed.

I would like a comment from everyone about how important universality is to the school meal. When I have visited schools, some people have packed lunches and some people do not. Is it economically much better for you to do universality overall? How important is it psychologically in the way children eat?

Anita Brown: Ideally, we would love universal free school meals for all. That would be a fantastic and amazing solution. I am sure my colleagues will back me up on this, but we have issues with families who are at the benefit level—

Baroness Boycott: The seven thousand pounds.

Anita Brown: Yes. Once parents are over that and have two or three children, their perceptions are that a packed lunch is a cheaper option, but you will know from shopping that sometimes they are not. It is about parental awareness and education about what goes into a packed lunch and what people perceive to be healthy. You only have to look at the green labels. Not everything a child brings in which a parent thinks is healthy is. If we could do free school meals for all, that would solve a massive problem in this area.

Q68 **Baroness Suttie:** I would like to know about the specific influences on the diets of children and adolescents that contribute to the risk of becoming obese.

Georgie Branch: Most urban schools are surrounded by lots of fast food outlets. Research has shown that more than 400 schools have upwards of 20 fast food takeaways within a 400-metre radius. At the request of schools, my team have been outside school gates with stopwatches clocking the time when ice creams are parked and trading to children at the end of the school day. On top of that, we know from research by our

friends at Bite Back that children and young people are exposed to multiple adverts on their way to and from school, and that translates into food-related to health. That is why the food environment within the school gates is so important and why School Food Matters has developed a programme that ensures that schools are a healthy zone. Children spend 190 days at school each year, so it is vital that the culture and provision of school food promotes children's health.

The three specific influences I will talk about are branding on food packaging, food labels and celebrities. The programme I manage, Healthy Zones, supports breakfast and after-school clubs to improve food provision. We witness first-hand the power that cartoons and colourful packaging have on children's food choices. We encourage breakfast club staff to decant cereals into glass dispensers to remove the association with brands, which helps to deter children from choosing those items. It also allows the clubs to save money by being able to buy unbranded supermarkets' own products, which are also often less sugary. The same can be done with many other foods: by simply taking them out of their packet and putting them on a plate, they become less attractive to children.

Labelling on food packaging, as Anita mentioned, is confusing. We offer training to after-school club staff in schools and talk to secondary school students about how to interpret traffic light labels and the health claims that are on products. To take yoghurt as an example, "low fat" often means more sugar. Then there are free-sugars, natural sugars, added sugars, labels listing the different types of sugars, sucrose, fructose, and glucose syrup, while some are labelled sugar-free but are sweetened with artificial sweeteners. We are expecting school staff who are time-poor and ordering these foods for clubs and older students to be able to interpret these to be able to choose the healthy choice.

Lastly, on the power of celebrities, when we speak to students about the importance of drinking water, we often refer to the famous Ronaldo clip where he publicly showed disdain for Coca-Cola, the brand that was sponsoring the tournament at the time. He removed the two bottles of Coca-Cola that were put in front of him, picked up his water bottle and said, "Drink water". That gets a really positive reaction from students and opens up the conversation about why drinking water is important. Unfortunately, that is one of the few cases where celebrities have endorsed the healthy option.

Baroness Suttie: Anita, you have already touched on the power of influences. Would you like to add anything else?

Anita Brown: Another big powerful influence for me is social media—speaking for children in my own family—as well as peer pressure. We have alluded to the time of getting in and out of school, but when you are with your mates and you want to come in and grab something quickly, bring a packed lunch and go or, if you are allowed, leave the school premises, you have time to do other things. There are also advertising

boards. So social media is a big issue, as well as advertising and packaging. It is something we struggle with and battle against.

Bee Wilson: Georgie spoke powerfully about celebrity and the ways in which the ultra-processed food industry marshals that power. It strikes me that they do that in a very targeted way with children's interests, including with sporting events. When young cricket fans switch on the TV to watch the Hundred over the summer, they are not really watching cricketers on the field; they are watching giant human crisp packets running around. That is just one example of many.

I want to speak about the role of preference. This relates to everything that has been said about ultra-processed food, marketing and social media. We need to look more at the fact that although the influence of these preferences is created by the ultra-processed food industry, as Vicky Sibson said this morning, those preferences can become set incredibly early. We know that a child is learning and becoming imprinted by positive flavour memories even in utero. Powerful studies have been done in the States by Julie Mennella and Gary Beauchamp in Philadelphia showing that if you feed mothers a lot of carrots during pregnancy, the baby will have a preference for carrot-flavoured milk after they are born, and there have been studies in France doing the same thing with garlic. However, you have to imagine that what many people are ingesting during that period before they are even born are the flavours of ultra-processed food. We know that that imprinting continues from earliest childhood onwards.

Following on from Baroness Boycott's point about free school meals, I found something incredibly striking about the pressure of preference. The wonderful infant free school meals that every four to seven year-old is entitled to has been one of the great reforms in recent years, and I have seen how that universality, which should mean that everyone is involved and brought in, has made life better and reduced the stigma for those on preschool meals. However, there is still not universal take-up. The Ofsted report into this in 2018 found that take-up was only at 82%, and it was lower in areas of high deprivation than in wealthier areas. Ofsted professed itself to be puzzled by that but then quoted caterers as saying, "A lot of parents find these foods unfamiliar and think their children won't like them".

So when we talk about influences, we have to talk about preferences and about shifting those preferences away from sweet, fatty and salty flavours on to wholefood and fruits and vegetables.

Naomi Duncan: I echo everything that everyone has said, but I will give a couple of examples of influences, such as the advertising that happens particularly in secondary schools. We still have prepacked products being sold to secondary schools, including yoghurts, snacks and so on. They are being sold under the banner that they are school-food compliant, as though that is a halo that means that, because they are not against the standards, they are therefore good for us. That includes biscuits, Mini Cheddars and muffins, which are all packaged up and available for sale.

On the subject of yoghurts, our friends at Food Foundation did some really good research on that. Obviously, yoghurt is a great source of calcium, but it is also one of the top 10 containers of sugar going into kids' diets. I had a look through one of the main wholesalers' catalogues, and of the eight yoghurt products that were being sold to schools only two did not have any added sugar. Some of them had as many as three teaspoons of sugar per 100 grams.

I say that, because we totally agree that to find solutions for tackling that issue we first have to look at education. We have to make sure that the education that we give kids in school is holistic and that what we teach them in the classroom about a healthy diet and nutrition is replicated in the food they are served in the dining room. I feel very strongly about that. There is more that we need to do on that. The key bit is that we need to beef up, freshen up and enforce the school food standards. We are 10 years on from the *School Food Plan*, but the standards have never been updated. In secondary schools, it is incredibly easy to create a product and label it as "suitable for schools".

Finally, we work directly with schools, and about 118 schools have gone through our core programme. In the schools that we work in, we are training up and empowering school kitchen teams to teach kids about food, as well as serving them up food. In those schools, 88% of school leaders tell us that they have seen an increase in fruit and veg consumption with the kids, 82% said that that is also leading to improved behaviour, and 65% said that they are also seeing an improvement in concentration. That is not that revolutionary: it is fresh food and nutritious. We do not generally call it healthy, because "healthy" has a whole bunch of stigmas attached to it. We just make tasty food. It is not all healthy-healthy. It is about balance and teaching kids that, although cake is great once a week, there is a whole bunch of other interesting things that they can eat.

Q69 Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: I declare my interests as on the website. I have visited a Chefs in Schools school, and I highly recommend it to colleagues. Although we took a long time to persuade one child to eat any vegetables at all, we did our best.

What role does food in schools play in supporting healthier diets for children and young people? Can you touch on breakfast clubs? You talked about cereal, and we have heard quite a lot of evidence that cereal is not the solution. What are the main barriers to the availability, uptake and quality of the foods in schools? We have touched on some of that, too.

Naomi Duncan: Breakfasts should be regulated by the school food standards, as in fact they are. A sensible update to the school food standards would involve a sensible update to give a clear direction to breakfast club providers of what is, and is not, acceptable. That might say that the amount of sugar in a cereal could be limited, or that other products could be available.

On the impact that school food can have, there is good evidence that decent school food can lead to improved nutrition in the moment and can influence long-term food choices. There are three actions that this committee could recommend that would take away some of the barriers that are stopping great food going on to every school plate at the moment.

The first action we would recommend is a mandatory accreditation for every school that looks at food quality. There are some very good accreditations out there. Our friends at the Soil Association have an accreditation called Food for Life. We need something like that for every school so that we know that there is a minimum level of quality. Alongside that, the people who work in school kitchens need to have a minimum level of training. They need to understand the school food standards and a bit about child nutrition, and they need the same level of continuous professional development that everybody else in the school gets, which is culinary training.

The second recommendation is to update and enforce the school food standards. I have discussed that a lot already, so I will not say any more. The third is to review the funding that is going into schools to make sure that, alongside those two measures, there is enough funding going in to properly invest in the quality on the plates and in the workforce who are delivering it. Those are the three recommendations that we would make.

Bee Wilson: As Naomi said, as well as hugely improving the provision of food in schools, we need to look at the offering of food education. The FELL report—the most major review that has happened in this area over the past few years; it was published in 2017—found that there was nearly universal, excellent knowledge of the Eatwell plate among British children. However, that was not mapping on to their food choices or their eating behaviours.

On healthier diets for children, I point to Amartya Sen's theory of capabilities and freedom: that you cannot just give people rights and access to something without checking whether they are capable of using it. If you provide children with good food—that, in itself, is not necessarily a certain thing, but we have at least three people in this room who are doing excellent work in this area—you also need to equip them with the preferences so that they want to eat it. For so much food education to date, especially nutrition education—again, the FELL report goes into far more detail on that—there is a statutory requirement, in theory, to teach cooking and nutrition at primary school, but many schools were not delivering anything beyond making a fruit smoothie.

A huge amount of nutrition education, as the example of the Eatwell plate shows, is purely theoretical; it does not deal with the senses and does not ask whether they have ever held an apple in their hand, never mind bitten into one. Until we change food education to become something experiential and related to real food and what children are actually eating, we will not make the kind of progress that we should, even with improving provision. Improving the provision is essential, but we need to

get everyone to benefit from that. It is also essential to reduce food waste. There is a huge amount of food waste, even when there is a good quality lunch in schools, a lot of which is due to vegetables and salad being thrown away. It would be beneficial in economic terms, as well as for the children themselves.

Georgie Branch: Schools can play an important role in access, which I know Anita also feels strongly about. Providing quality free school meals for all children will address the inequalities in the access to good food. There is evidence that we will come to later about the positive impact that it has on children's health, too.

On breakfast specifically, there are school food standards for foods outside of the lunchtime meal, but they are quite complicated. We do an exercise where we get schools to print their menus—breakfast club menus, if they have them, after school club menus and lunch menus—and we get them to try to do their own checklist. For someone who has not been nutritionally trained, it is quite a complicated process. For school meals and clubs, the lack of monitoring and accountability of the uptake and quality of the food provision is a big barrier. Those are both strong indicators of where there is good practice, as well as where support is needed. The national indicators were the last dataset on school meal uptake, and that was 12-plus years ago.

Secondly, schools can adopt a whole-school approach to food. We have touched on food education a lot and how it can help to rectify the detachment that a lot of children have with where foods come from. One example we have had from a school is a maths lesson where they were measuring a cucumber that they had grown to check whether it was ready to be harvested. A boy burst into tears and said, "It's not ready yet. The plastic hasn't grown around it". That is the reality for a lot of children and young people. Schools can be a great place to connect children with where food comes from.

Finally, there is a barrier with regard to schools having the time, resource and expertise to go through the tendering and procurement process that draws up a decent catering specification that puts quality school food at its core. When we are out in schools, supporting them to make changes to their menu to improve the quality and uptake of school meals, the contracts in place are often the block, where they have been designed with a focus on cost over quality. We have also found that local authorities can be in a great position to support schools. Where we have seen a dedicated role in a local authority to support schools specifically on school food—for example, a school food improvement office—their value is really seen in local schools.

Anita Brown: As has been said, a whole-school approach is really important. At LACA, we have developed and made available workforce standards for all our members so that they can pass it on to their workforce. Our workforce are our diamonds, our gems. They are the ones who see the children we feed every day. There are some children you will never feed and who just take what they want to take. Our workforce is

the key. I cannot be in every kitchen every day, nationally, and my colleagues at LACA are exactly the same.

Funding in schools is a big issue, as are the limited resources we have in the way of kitchens. We want 100% of children to stay, but schools do not always have the right environment—the dining facilities, kitchens or equipment. We got funding for equipment 10 years ago, when universal free school meals came in, but that equipment is now 10 years old. All those things add to this. We all want to produce more and feed more children, but we have to have the infrastructure to be able to do it. Obviously, I agree with everything else that my colleagues have said.

Georgie Branch: On the point about breakfast and equipment and the barriers, toast can be great if the bread is not full of preservatives, but if it is, that is the one thing that lasts the week for school breakfast clubs. It is already sliced for them, and because it has packaging that the kids are familiar with they are more likely to try it. If we are to move towards buying more fresh bread, we need the scary knives that lots of teachers are reluctant to use and, going back to the equipment, schools need freezers so that they can freeze the bread and make sure that it lasts for the duration of the week. The lack of funding for equipment is affecting breakfast clubs as well as lunchtime provision.

Q70 The Earl of Caithness: What is the influence of the food industry on the diets of children and young people? What should it be, and how would you make the industry do what it should do?

Bee Wilson: First, the food industry is not just one thing but many. When you say the food industry you could in fact be talking about excellent school caterers or chefs. You could be talking about farmers in the horticulture industry. Given that we have talked so much about fruit and vegetables, the extent to which we have neglected the role of agriculture is astonishing. We should be growing a great deal more of our own pulses and legumes in this country. So there is that.

There is a benign side to the food industry. I would love to see people making money out of selling children and their parents food that gives them good health rather than ill health. There is huge potential for the industry, in this very diverse sense, to act in a benign way. We all need food—we cannot all grow all of our own food in an allotment, sadly—but, as we have touched on in relation to sports and social media, the influence of the ultra-processed food industry on children's palates from the earliest stages is profound, malign and hard to unpick.

One reason why it is hard to unpick and unravel that, which we have not really discussed so far, is that it insinuates its way into the most precious relationship there is—the love between a parent and a child—and into celebrations. It tells us that the way we express love is to give our child a treat. That is an extremely powerful message, because ultimately every parent wants two things: to see their child eat and to see their child made happy through food.

There is this problem with children's food. The short-term thing, where you want to see your child smile and have a full tummy, is what happens today. Then there is the long-term thing of the person your child will ultimately become. It is very hard for a parent to think about that long-term thing when they see a sad little face not wanting to eat what is in front of them.

Unless we engage with this love relationship, which plays out through ultra-processed food, healthy eating initiatives will run into difficulties. Jamie Oliver, who has done more than almost anyone in this country to improve school food, still gets berated for the moment in the school food revolution he was creating when parents fed chips and junk food to their children through the school gates. It was an iconic moment, but it spoke to a truth.

Years before I set up TastEd with Jason and the others, I came across this myself in schools when I was a school governor. I was endlessly organising healthy eating weeks at a local school. The head teacher asked me to come in and talk to the children about food choices. When I talked to them about school meals, it was fine, because I could say to them, "You've chosen a main course and this, but is there anything missing?", and they could go back to the salad bar and take some vegetables. But, with packed lunches, one girl cradled her lunch and said, "No, it's my mum". I realised that I did not want to intrude on that beautiful relationship.

In what we do at TastEd—this is not unique to us; I am sure Naomi is doing the same—you have to work with parents and make them feel supported. I want to mention some of the feedback that we have had. We have with us today our project manager, Fran Box, who has gathered all this feedback. Portland Kindergarten in Lincoln, which is an area of high deprivation, said that parents thank it for taking on the task of teaching their child to like fruits and vegetables. There is all this data saying that if you want to get someone to like something, they have to try it 10 to 14 times. For a parent, that is 10 to 14 times when you might be throwing food in the bin and seeing your child's little unhappy face, whereas you could have a nursery or school take that work on. It is not emotional for a teacher to do that. It is fine. It is very easy for them. What I have found with TastEd is that offering fruits and vegetables to other people's children is fine; you do not feel anything like as much as you do with your own.

The current influence of the ultra-processed food industry on children is huge and pervasive. We need to tread delicately and carefully. We also need to think about how it plays out in families as well as in schools.

Naomi Duncan: I associate myself 100% with all those comments. I could not agree more.

On what influence the food industry should have on children, in my world, the world of schools, I would say to the majority of the food industry: "None at all, thank you very much. We'd like you outside the door". To

the food industries that are involved in delivering food to kids and bringing the fresh ingredients for that to happen, I would say, "Excellent. Let's get you even more involved".

I want to give a couple of examples of where I think we are getting this completely wrong and the legislation urgently needs to step up. The first is a product made by a high-street brand called Wafflemeister. I do not know whether anyone here is familiar with it. It has a number of stores that you can go into to get a delicious treat or dessert. Last year, it brought out a product designed specifically for primary schools. In fact, it was marketed to the educational catering industry as "perfect for primary schools". The product weighed around 35 grams and about half of it was fat and sugar. The other half was made up of 17 other ingredients that I cannot name, or probably even pronounce.

Products like that—I do not think I am picking on them unfairly—do not belong in schools, particularly when the state is paying for a third of children in England to eat a school meal. The state has huge power in the £1.4 billion or so that it is spending every year on school food to make sure that that does not happen and that when kids have a treat in school it is a treat but something that is homemade with ingredients that we would all recognise. We could definitely do much better on this.

We are doing things in the schools we work with. When our co-founder started working in schools about 10 years ago, she decided to bring in rice farmers to talk to the kids about how rice is made. They gave every child in the assembly a single grain of rice. You can imagine how well that turned out. We have learned a lot in 10 years about educating kids on food, but a lot of it is still about bringing in fun and engaging things as well as showing kids, "There's a career in hospitality out there for you. Food is pleasurable and fun. It can also be a really great career". We are seeing only 3% or so of kids leaving school being interested in a career in food, because we are not creating food that is joyful, pleasurable and potentially a great source of a career. That is where I would like to see more of an influence in schools, with less influence from the high-street brands.

Georgie Branch: In the interests of saving time, I will not mention the other brands that are also reformulating their products to be compliant with the school food standard, but a bunch of them are doing it.¹ Although their reformulated products for schools are healthier, ultimately, we should be pushing for fresh, nutritious food for our children. These companies are part of the bigger problem causing the detachment that many children have about where food comes from, such as how a potato ultimately becomes the chip on their plate.

¹ Note from witness: Many big food corporations are developing products specifically for schools that are compliant with the standards. McCains are an example on this, whose products are deep fried, high in salt and sat fat. They have cartoons on the packaging of their smiley faces targeted at children, and most of them have ingredients which makes them UPF.

I want to mention Radnor Fizz as an example of a drink manufacturer that has developed school food standard-compliant drinks, just because there is so much panic in students' eyes when we mention that we will be removing it from their shelves. That shows the power of branding influencing children's food and drink choices. We do not want children spending their lunch money on drinks that have no nutritional value and are bad for their dental health when water fountains should be freely accessible as the drink of choice.

The published *National Food Strategy* showed that the market share of public food procurement is dominated by a few large suppliers, which creates little incentive for innovation and improvement. I agree with Naomi that it is unrealistic to expect the food industry to do better without some sort of regulation. These companies exist ultimately to make profit for their shareholders and investors, and tighter regulations are needed, particularly in schools.

Anita Brown: Food manufacturers have made great strides in reducing fat and sugar content. Until 10 years ago, not a lot of food was classed as school-compliant, so the food manufacturers have made great strides towards that. However, another issue is marketing strategies—on social media, in-store offers, special offers, BOGOFs, meal deals, places away from school that children can go to at lunchtime and can get a meal deal for £1, £1.50 or £2 that is extremely unhealthy. They are the outside elements that we also need to address.

Can we not have anything within a five or 10-minute walk of a school where fast junk food can be offered? Georgie mentioned the ice cream vans turning up at schools. They do not support what we at LACA are trying to do, which is to offer children a two-course, healthy, hot lunch. For some children, that is the only meal they will get. The focus has to be on the healthy meal that we and all our members strive to provide. But, again, we go back to the funding element. If families can get something cheaper, they will. But that also applies to operators. Some operators use buy-in products, but they are school-food compliant as best they can be, and we continue to work with food manufacturers to make sure that that happens.

Q71 **Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe:** How effective are current government approaches in supporting healthier diets for children and young people? I do quite a bit of work on school meals and regulation, and I am constantly told that the food that is served at schools is healthy and nutritious. What do you think about that?

Anita Brown: I agree. Like I say, we have done the work for school with school food standards and we work with the workforce standards that LACA has developed. We do an awful lot of work at LACA with allergens and supporting schools with children with special diets and allergens. A focus nationally is providing a healthy, nutritious meal. We work with suppliers, support our members and work with food manufacturers, but we are up against marketing, offers and social media. The school food standards should be monitored better.

Again, going back to funding, adequate free school meal values are a big consideration in schools. If we look at the four nations, as I alluded to before, in Scotland they are getting £3.30. In London, they are getting £3 from September. The rest of us in England are getting £2.53, so we have to do the healthy and nutritious two-course meal for significantly less than other nations are getting. Even London is getting much more now anyway than the rest of us. So for us all to be able to do the school food standards offer, we should be getting the same amount of funding.

There are lots of issues. In particular, Ofsted used to check on food, but it does not do that anymore. Action for Children supports parents and carers with guidance to work on a healthy lifestyle, but more needs to be done with that too, particularly as families suffering from deprivation and those with a low income do not have a choice, in some cases, in what they can offer their children to eat.

Georgie Branch: I want to talk about the evidence that shows the things that are working. The national universal infant free school meal scheme, which has been rolled out in England since 2014, has been shown to reduce obesity rates among children in their first year in primary schools. There is also more recent evidence, published in February 2024, about the universal free school meals for children up to the age of 11, which was rolled out in several local authorities in London before the mayor's fund came into play this academic year. That research also shows that it reduces the proportion of reception-age children living with obesity by between 7% to 11%, and reduces the proportion of year 6 children living with obesity by around 2% to 5%. Both are really encouraging bits of evidence showing that universal free school meals positively impact children and young people's health. The research also found that there was an increase among the number of already eligible children once all their peers could also enjoy the same provision, so it helps those who are from lower-income families as well.

Naomi Duncan: I have talked a lot about the regulation that is necessary, but regulation alone is not enough. We also have to set the tone that what we feed kids in school is important, and that the food and the food education kids receive in school can be a big part of the solution. Part of that is funding. Some schools that we work with—the state school in Streatham that I talked about earlier—are managing to break even with the funding they have at the moment by encouraging 100% participation. They have phased out packed lunches entirely. They are trying to reduce the cost burden for some parents who cannot afford to pay, and the chefs who are running the kitchen are baking bread and selling it to other parents, making fermented hot sauces, being creative.

However, in reality, it is incumbent on government to make sure that there is enough funding available to put a decent meal on every plate. Anita talked about the funding for free school meals, and I do not disagree that that funding needs to increase, but that accounts for only a third of the people accessing the school meals system. Two-thirds are parents. When we polled parents last year with Survation, a full third of

parents said, “We can’t afford to buy a school meal at all anymore because it is too expensive”.

So there is something clever to look at in terms of how we fund and support schools, particularly smaller ones. But funding alone is not everything. You also need inspiration and a workforce who are equipped and empowered to deliver great food and to link it to food education. The only way we will do that is through training and believing in and investing in them.

Bee Wilson: There are two areas in which government approaches and supporting healthier diets for children and young people are lacking. One is something I have already discussed: the failures of food education, especially at primary school, to be practical enough. I want to talk more about what a huge, missed opportunity this is. It is just one of the very few chances we have to intervene, to positively influence a child’s lifelong nutritional habits and to turn their health outcomes around.

That has benefits not just for the child but for society. Part of why school is such a golden window of opportunity is not just the hours they spend there—something like 32 and a bit hours a week—but something we do not talk about enough, which is the potential power of positive peer pressure. We see time and again in the TastEd classroom that it is sometimes much easier for a child to try a new fruit or vegetable away from the slightly emotionally charged atmosphere of a family dinner table and instead being surrounded by friends.

This has been extensively studied in the secondary literature. There is a huge literature on the ways in which human appetites are fundamentally social. A brilliant psychologist in the 1930s called Karl Duncker went into a couple of London nurseries and got slightly older children to make a food choice between some different types of fruit, some brown bread or a carrot, I think. Without fail, when the older child in front of the queue chose something, the slightly younger child behind them would immediately plump for the same option.

We can take this peer pressure, which is one of the things that have been harnessed by the ultra-processed food industry to influence children, and use it for good. There is such a golden opportunity there that is getting missed. So there has been a failure of government to harness food literacy as something that needs to be taught in schools. Jason can talk about this better than I can, but we judge a school as having failed if they have not taught children about fronted adverbials and lots of things that you do not need in adult life—I am a writer, and I never talk about fronted adverbials—but we do not judge a school to have failed if someone has reached the age of 11 and has never tasted a raw tomato or felt an onion. That is one thing.

The second way in which government has hugely failed to support children and families with healthier diets is through the HFSS description of foods. I know it came up again this morning, and I have been following the Chris van Tulleken session with interest, which was excellent, as well

as the Anna Taylor session. The following is one of my examples of why HFSS is a very poor concept for children and families. Change4Life, on the NHS website, offers nutrition advice; it is the official advice coming from our own national health body. As an after-school snack for children, it suggests a sugar-free jelly. Coming back to the dictionary definition of food, that is just not food. How can that be a good snack for children?

If you look at ultra-processed food and the NOVA definition through the lens of children, we have to remember—as was pointed out by Vicky Sibson, who has now left—that children need food. That should be obvious. Grown-ups need food too. NOVA has sometimes been misunderstood, because the part that in a way is almost more important than category 4, which, as you know and as we have heard extensively, is ultra-processed food, is category 1. How do we shift the balance of diets back towards those whole and minimally processed foods—there is no such thing as “unprocessed” foods—so that even a child, once they have been taught it, could recognise it, name it, hold it, smell it and tear it apart? It would do them good and nourish them. That is a huge area of government failure.

Q72 Baroness Boycott: What are likely to be the most effective strategies for improving child and adolescent nutrition and reducing associated health inequalities in the future? What evidence supports your proposals? Anita, I want to check something that came up before that I am puzzled about. Some schools do not have water fountains, because part of how you allocate the price for a meal includes a drink.

Anita Brown: In primary schools? Yes.

Baroness Boycott: So in some primary schools children end up buying a bottled drink.

Anita Brown: We would not put bottled water into primary schools. Most primary schools have water fountains, and they get jugs of water.

Baroness Boycott: What happens to the money allocated, within the £3 or whatever, for a drink? Someone told me that in some schools children ended up buying bottled water. That is insane.

Anita Brown: That happens in secondary schools. There is a cash cafeteria system, so children buy a bottle of water there. They would get their allocation whether or not they use cash. If they use a payment card, for example, they will put cash or their free school meal allowance on it. That helps with anonymity. They can choose to buy the drinks that have been mentioned.

Baroness Boycott: Is it true that some schools do not have freely available water fountains, or is that absolutely not true?

Anita Brown: I do not know nationally, but I could find that out for you. Coming back to the question, we used to work a lot with a company called ParentPay. In 2023, it did a huge a survey—in fact, it does it annually with us—with all the parents who use their system, which is

around a quarter of a million parents. The information that came out was that 58% of children take up a full school meal provision, 84% have a school lunch once a week, and 96% of those eligible for free school meals take that only once a week. So, again, that it is strategy that needs to be developed more. Some 24% take a packed lunch because their friends have one, so that is another thing that we are up against.

The survey also highlights that families who do not take a free school meal but are entitled to do so, particularly in secondary schools, do not do so because their children want to "grab and go", to take something quickly and go. So that is another issue. We would like a meal service that is funded consistently throughout the four nations of the UK.

Another issue to look at is the physical education in schools, because a longer education time means that there is a shortened lunchtime to do sport and activity, so we would want to work with schools to change that. We need to be mindful of the grab and go culture that I mentioned. Some people just like to grab and go, and it has become a struggle.

A big focus is children needing role models. As busy parents, we all ask: are we also educating our children at home? Is that happening at home? Is it a social activity? When I was a kid, we sat down, and if you did not eat your dinner you did not get anything else. Now, children can go off with a tablet or iPhone or watch telly while mum is doing something quick and easy. It is not just about education in schools; it is about education at home. That is something that we could work on with schools: combining the education that has been mentioned already with the knowledge that our children need.

Baroness Boycott: What about the proliferation of fast-food outlets very close to school gates, meaning that children whip out at lunchtime or post school?

Anita Brown: The Royal Society for Public Health survey showed that 65% or 68% of respondents said that they should be banned within a five-minute walk of any school gate. Most schools have a closed-school policy now, so they do not allow children out at lunchtime, which is a huge benefit. The children then bring a packed lunch, or they stay for school lunch. That is a big focus for us, because we obviously want them to stay for a school lunch. You will never get away from the fast-food offers that are tempting children away from school at lunchtime.

Baroness Boycott: From when I worked on London food policy, I know that fast-food companies would apply for planning to be near schools. They would actually target them.

Anita Brown: They will do that unless there is a policy to make sure that they do not.

The Chair: Unfortunately, although a lot of schools have the closed-school policy, the delivery people are delivering to the school gate in some cases. What do you think about that?

Naomi Duncan: It is completely shocking. I have seen that: kids ordering on Deliveroo and then the Domino's arrives at the school. If you want a single, effective strategy with every child eating a hot meal, not a grab and go meal, they need a decent, full-balanced meal in school every day, family-dining style. I have seen it done in secondary schools very effectively. That is the best way. Then you know, for your money, that the child is getting a nutritious meal. They are not going to do what a lot of kids in secondary school do, whereby, even when there is a closed-gate policy, they will come in, buy a couple of slices of pizza and a chocolate Yazoo at breaktime, and then wait until the end of the day to go to the chicken shop. If you go outside any school at 3.30 pm, you will find all the kids in the chicken shop five minutes down the road, regardless of the closed-gate policy.

A whole bunch of things need to happen to make sure that that happens effectively. The first is school lunchtimes in secondary schools. Again, this is about signalling: we are signalling that food in schools is not important, that we will not fund it very well, that we will not increase the funding in line with inflation, and that we will see it as a cost burden to reduce. It would be good if we could switch that around and say that it is all well and good that we educate kids and they come out with great scores in maths and science, but if they are too unhealthy to work, the state has not done its job. I am much more interested in the moral argument, but you have to make the argument economically, too.

The Chair: We are also looking for your practical solutions to the problem that we face.

Q73 **Baroness Boycott:** Yes, how would we achieve that? What do the Government need to do to get the whole school eating a healthy meal together?

Naomi Duncan: I have talked about the power of regulation and what needs to happen there. I have talked about the fact that lunchtimes in particular need to be extended, so we would have to work with schools to make that happen. Investment needs to be made in kitchens and dining rooms to make sure that they are big enough to accommodate. Those things have been modelled financially.

Baroness Boycott: How much would it put on the Budget?

Naomi Duncan: The universal provision of school meals over a 20-year period would return a significant net benefit to the Exchequer, but there would be an up-front cost. I can write to you with the specifics on that.²

Baroness Boycott: As well as the return on it and how many schools do it.

Naomi Duncan: Absolutely.

² Note from witness: See this report from PwC commissioned on behalf of Impact on Urban Health: [FSM Report \(Updated Exec Summary\)](https://urbanhealth.org.uk) (urbanhealth.org.uk)

Georgie Branch: I have the return. For every £1 invested in school food for all, £1.71 will be returned over a 20-year period, which is almost £100 billion.³

Baroness Boycott: Naomi, do you have more to add on this question?

Naomi Duncan: Sometimes it takes a Baroness double-daring you to eat your vegetables in schools. Sometimes it is difficult, but it is possible to get kids eating better in school. We must take the actions necessary to make that happen.

Georgie Branch: I want to pick up on your water fountain query earlier. I do not think we have ever come across any schools that do not have a water fountain, but quite often the students, when we survey them, say that there are only two in the school, even though it is huge. Some of that comes down to funding, but a lot of it is stuff that can be solved with quick wins. They talk about the cleanliness, the taste of it and not having bottles and cups. It is a thing that can change with a bit of educating about the importance of water, and by removing physically the other drinks available they will drink it.

As I have already discussed, one of the most effective strategies would be to invest in free school meals for all, starting with an immediate extension to all those in receipt of universal credit. We have evidence from the national universal infant free school meal scheme, conducted by the University of Essex, that this would reduce childhood obesity and health inequalities.

The quality of school meals is also important, as has been touched on a lot, and that would be improved by updating the school food standards to reflect SACN's advice on fibre and sugar intake in children's diets. We know the standards are associated with improvements in children's diets: our surveys of secondary school children show that three-quarters of them do not feel they need a sugary dessert after every meal. In 2016, the Government committed to updating the standards, but that remains an ongoing review.

The third proposal is the mandatory reporting of school food. The framework needs to be in place to provide accountability and ensure quality provision. When we are out and about in schools, it is hard to have a conversation with head teachers about prioritising school food when there is no regulatory framework to refer to, whereas we know what is required by Ofsted gets a response from schools. We were pleased to hear about the positive results from phase 1 of the school food standards compliance pilot that was co-ordinated by the Food Standards Agency, and we look forward to the report later this year.

³ Note from witness: This was calculated from a cost-benefit analysis of extending free school meals by PwC, commissioned by Impact on Urban Health commissioned. Extending to all those on universal credit will cost £6.4 billion and return £25.1 billion. Extending to all school children will cost £24.2 billion and return £99.5 billion.

Q74 **Baroness Boycott:** Should this come under Ofsted or a separate body?

Georgie Branch: Hopefully, whether someone else can do it is what the pilot will reveal. However, we know that Ofsted is recognised by schools, and it works when it comes to improving other stuff.

Naomi Duncan: I entirely agree. It could be as simple as Ofsted asking governors about their legal responsibilities.

Baroness Boycott: And whether they are up to speed.

Naomi Duncan: And whether they are up to speed, absolutely.

Baroness Boycott: Would you recommend that it should be carried through by Ofsted rather than something independent?

Naomi Duncan: The pilot the FSA did with the Department for Education looks as though it is showing good results, so it looks as though there is a good route there. However, I ask every head teacher we work with what would be the most effective way of getting head teachers who are not as engaged with food to be more engaged, and they say Ofsted. So there is a route there, even if it is as simple as asking governors about their responsibilities. It is another indicator that food is important.

Bee Wilson: I agree with everything that has been said. Yes, there should be free school meals more widely—ideally, universally at primary and secondary level.

I totally agree with what Anita said about role models and how, when we talk about food education, we need to look at the home as well. I know Henry Dimbleby referenced South Korea as an example of a developed nation that managed to pass through economic development with lower rates of obesity than the UK, and one reason was that their government invested in cooking workshops. I would love to see families supported in that more.

I completely agree about water in schools. It is crazy that water is not the universal drink in schools. In the city of Amsterdam, which was one of the first places in the world to bring down childhood obesity, one of the measures was saying that water was the only drink. That seems so straightforward and obvious.

On my proposal, I have two versions, a more ambitious version and a less ambitious, more pragmatic one. Both of them are to do with food education. The ambitious version is this: we need a complete overhaul of the food education curriculum in England. It is hugely unhelpful, because food as a subject is currently spread across design and technology, which seems a very odd home for it, and it does not really link to any of what we have been discussing today—science, and relationships and sex advice, where a section on healthy eating and calories came in a few years ago.

However, if you look at the content of food education in the curriculum, you see that it is almost completely empty. That is both a reflection and a cause of the fact that, as Naomi said, food is simply not valued highly enough by the Department for Education and therefore by schools. The cooking and nutrition curriculum, which came in in 2014, was a step forward, and I believe the wording was written, in part or in full, by Henry Dimbleby. It begins with this wonderful declaration: “Instilling a love of cooking in pupils will ... open a door to one of the great expressions of human creativity”, but it does not go on to say anything about how to do that. The entire curriculum for key stage 1—that is, ages five to seven—reads: “use the basic principles of a healthy and varied diet to prepare dishes” and “understand where food comes from”. There is just no concrete guidance for teachers. How do you do this? What are the concrete steps?

Contrast that with the guidance for the maths curriculum. It does not have some huge statement about maths being human creativity; it tells you that by the end of key stage 1 a child should know their number bonds from one to 20, should be able to count to 100 and should know the plus and minus signs. If we were to properly overhaul the food education curriculum, we would do the same, and it would be about food literacy. We should not have a situation where children are leaving primary school not having tasted basic fruits and vegetables. You could say that they should have tasted 10 fruits and vegetables in reception and a further 10 in year 1. You could specify and quantify that.

We need to do the same for cooking. We should not just say that pupils need to “use the basic principles of a healthy and varied diet to prepare dishes”. Jason’s school is astonishing: they have three year-old children learning knife skills, and they are safe because they are wearing gloves. So they should be learning knife skills in one year and grating the next. They should learn soup and salads, and that should be quantified. We could also add in growing projects.

My evidence that this would work is that, first, the secondary data shows that the only food education interventions that really seem to affect healthy eating in practice are experiential ones. Secondly, when it comes to reforming school food, as several people have mentioned, a multicomponent or whole-food approach is what is needed, so we have to join up what happens in the canteen with the education.

That is my real proposal, but the non-ambitious version is that, because we have worked so hard to make TastEd a totally pragmatic tool for teachers’ busy lives now, we could do it without changing anything about the existing curriculum. We could recommend that taste education—a minimum of five lessons for every year group—was a required scheme of work for all age groups from three to 11. That could happen immediately. Our lessons are already designed to tick the boxes of the existing curriculum in D&T, science and RSHE. They also deliver other things. We have, for example, produced a five-week course of lessons where you can

deliver year 3 plant science through food or the Great Fire of London through food. Those are my two proposals.

- Q75 **The Earl of Caithness:** I want to pick up the point about free school meals, because it slightly contradicted Bee's point about the love of a packed lunch. Is that a detrimental effect? What would be the cost of producing free school meals for all primary school children and all secondary school children? It is all very well having a wish list unless it is costed.

Baroness Boycott: We asked for that.

Georgie Branch: It exists.

Naomi Duncan: That has been costed, but I do not have it in front of me.⁴

The Chair: Perhaps you could write to us with the costs. I know it has been costed.

- Q76 **Lord Krebs:** Mine is also a cost question and, indeed, is part of the same question: what would it cost to reconfigure the infrastructure in schools in order for there to be enough space to provide all the children at primary and secondary levels with the opportunity to eat free school meals? This is a point that Anita raised. It is not just about the dining room; it is about the kitchens and everything else. I know from my experience at Oxford that, even in a posh area of Oxford, although the comprehensive offers school meals, there just is not enough space for all the kids to eat them, because there is not a big enough dining room.

Anita Brown: Dining rooms are an issue. Schools have multipurpose rooms as well, so it is not just a case of having a dining room; it is usually a school hall.

Lord Krebs: It has to be a space big enough to have everyone sitting down.

Anita Brown: It does indeed.

The Chair: Does anyone know whether upgrading the facilities has been costed?

Naomi Duncan: The work that PricewaterhouseCoopers did on costing universal provision included the capital investment required. We will submit that.⁵

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: You do it on a rota system.

⁴ Note from witness: See this report from PwC commissioned on behalf of Impact on Urban Health: [FSM Report \(Updated Exec Summary\)](https://urbanhealth.org.uk/FSM_Report_(Updated_Exec_Summary)) (urbanhealth.org.uk)

⁵ *Ibid.*

Naomi Duncan: The schools that we work with tackle this issue—a lot of the schools, particularly in London, have gone from 70% to 80% uptake to nearly 100% uptake with the rollout of universal primary meals—by having staggered lunch breaks, and that manages it quite effectively. In London, our experience is that it has not caused a great many issues, and even the infrastructure in the kitchen has coped, but I accept that London is not necessarily always the best test case for the rest of the country. When we go to parts of the country outside London, it is obvious that investment would be needed if we want to do this properly and not just do it as a half measure.

I fully agree with Bee's point about education. Again, I could take you to the Hackney School of Food, a cookery school that we built, and I could show you 11 year-olds there who two years ago did not know what a courgette was but now know how to dig it out of the garden and turn it into a delicious fritter that they want to eat.

Food education is really important, and we should be ambitious, and the recommendations you make should be ambitious too. One in three kids in the poorest parts of this country are leaving primary school with obesity, and the scale of our ambition should be the same as the scale of the problem.

Baroness Boycott: That is a really good thing to say.

The Chair: Thank you very much for the evidence you have given us this morning. It has been very interesting. I remind you that a transcript will be sent to you. If you have any corrections to make, please do that.