

Minutes from the Cross Party Group on School Food

Wednesday 2nd July 2025

Present *In-Person:*

Jenny Rathbone MS (Chair); **Simon Wright**, Cegin y Bobl (speaker); **Hazel James**, Cardiff & Vale University Health Board (speaker), **the Food Hour project**; **Judith Gregory**, LACA & Cardiff Council; **Helen Cottle**, Monmouthshire County Council; **Barbara Davies-Quy**, Size of Wales; **Emma Holmes**, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board

Attended Virtually:

David Smith, Co-ops & Mutuals Wales; **Cara Mai Lewis**, Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)

Apologies: **Gareth Thomas**, WLGA

Minutes of the previous meeting

Not sent out in advance – to be circulated by email after this meeting.

Presentation notes (part 1)

Hazel James, The Food Hour Project

The Food Hour Project was rolled out across six primary schools in the Cardiff West cluster over the past academic year to promote food education and healthy eating through a dedicated “food hour” each day. The programme was developed in collaboration with stakeholders including Food Sense Wales and focused on building good food citizens by integrating nutrition education, cooking, sustainability, and growing skills into the school day. Extensive consultation involved 41 staff, 197 pupils, and 21 parents, and the concept was widely supported by both children and families. Initial concerns from staff about resources and confidence were addressed through tailored training and support.

A comprehensive toolkit was created and delivered, including 16 themed activities, seasonal sessions, after-school clubs, and parent-child cooking workshops. These sessions improved home-school engagement and dietary knowledge and generated excitement about healthy food. Notably, all schools involved reported increases in staff confidence and pupil engagement, with nearly all pupils trying new foods and parents reporting improved skills in cooking and budgeting. The programme was well attended and enthusiastically received. It aligns with the Welsh curriculum and provides a sustainability model.

Discussion

Questions and discussion explored the funding, costs and training involved in the pilot programme.

The funding was initially provided through the Welsh Government’s “Backing Local Firms” fund, which was then allocated via the Innovations team. This funding covered the pilot phase and ended in March. A proposal has been submitted to continue the programme in the existing cluster and expand to additional schools. The estimated cost to roll out the initiative across 20 schools is approximately £510,000. However, the specific cost of the six-school trial has not been clearly detailed yet, as it involved both existing staff roles and additional

resources. The team acknowledged that further clarification on the additional costs would be provided.

Regarding staff training, nine members completed a Level 2 accredited course in community food and nutrition skills, offered through Agored Cymru (formerly the Open College Network). This course includes 30 hours of learning (20 hours face-to-face or virtual and 10 hours home learning), with an accreditation cost of £30 per participant. The qualification enables staff to deliver Level 1 training and is focused on nutrition education for children and young people, distinct from standard food safety training required for food service roles. The training can be delivered either in person or online, with urban areas like Cardiff preferring face-to-face sessions for peer support. Additional course details were offered to be shared via email for those interested.

Presentation notes (part 2)

Simon Wright, Cegin y Bobl

Simon introduced Cegin y Bobl, a not-for-profit project evolved from Cook 24, which aims to reconnect communities - especially school children - with real food through hands-on cooking and food literacy education. Originally targeting underemployed hospitality professionals post-COVID, the programme focused on leveraging their passion and expertise in schools. Now operating in four Carmarthenshire primary schools, the initiative combines curriculum-aligned food education, parental engagement, teacher training, and school-wide cultural change. Simon emphasised that changing school food culture is more than nutrition but about rebuilding a love and understanding of real food, a belief that has yielded high engagement from pupils and parents alike.

However, he highlighted serious flaws in current school food systems. Despite working with professional chefs and aligning recipes with new nutritional guidance, implementation gaps persist. He noted that food often ends up uneaten due to unappealing preparation or inefficient systems - Saffron software has its limitations - and excessive red tape that prevents, for instance, serving homegrown potatoes. Wright criticised the lack of proper audits, underinvestment in kitchen staff training, and the demoralising nature of the job. He argued that improving outcomes is less about increasing funding and more about addressing organisational inefficiencies, misplaced priorities, and outdated procedures that undermine the intent of nutritional standards. Without structural reform, he warned, changes to policy or guidelines will have little real-world impact.

Discussion

The discussion called for decentralised, community-rooted solutions that prioritise education, engagement, and sustainability - both nutritional and environmental. While the ambition for healthy, sustainable school meals is clear, current systems are fragmented. Significant investment, local flexibility, and alignment between policy and practice are needed to achieve lasting change.

Key Concerns:

- Top-down approaches and rigid nutritional guidelines are seen as prescriptive and unrealistic, hindering progress and community-driven solutions.
- There are regional disparities in cooking skills and food culture, but the pilot studies reveal valuable insights into how local conditions shape outcomes.
- The school catering workforce - predominantly women - is underpaid and undervalued. This requires investment in training, better pay, and the establishment of a centre of excellence for public sector catering in Wales.

- Current structures are disconnected from schools and communities, with many calling for a shift in control back to the local level, including parents, teachers, and governors.
- Despite good intentions, many initiatives remain pilot projects or isolated successes. For example, school nutrition action groups and menu co-design with students have existed for over 15 years, yet haven't been systematised.
- The rollout of the Future Generations Menu is hampered by under-resourced kitchen staff and lack of training. Without investment in skills and support, implementation risks failure.
- There's concern that government messaging can present these initiatives as solved problems ("smoke and mirrors") when in reality, they lack the infrastructure to succeed.

Catering Infrastructure and Software:

- The nutritional software Saffron is widely used but has limitations. It's primarily operational (stock management) and not designed for deep nutritional analysis. Other providers exist, and some local authorities use alternatives.
- There's confusion around procurement responsibilities—WGLGA manages it for some authorities, others do it independently. A major review is due in 2026, potentially offering more flexible, integrated solutions with cashless catering systems.
- Several participants questioned the cost and value of Saffron, with no clear data available. Requests were made to Welsh Government contacts to clarify this.

Community and Educational Benefits:

- Involving children in menu design and cooking has improved engagement, nutrition uptake, and learning outcomes across subjects.
- Projects like the Size of Wales / Monmouthshire County Council chickpea korma initiative have linked food choices to environmental impact, inspiring students to influence school policy and council decisions.
- Whole school approaches, which embed food education across curricula and activities, are seen as essential for building "food literacy," akin to physical literacy.

Concerns About Weight-loss Drugs:

- There is growing use of weight-loss medications among adults and even teens, driven by demand rather than need, without proper dietary support. This raises risks such as malnutrition and sarcopenia.
- Experts stress that lifestyle and dietary change - not just medication - must be central to any solution for obesity and related health issues.

Policy and Structural Issues:

- Some schools operate without sufficient oversight or contact from catering authorities, leading to unofficial but effective practices—like serving healthy dishes outside the official menu.
- There's frustration over the rigidity of nutrition software and centralised menu planning, which stifles innovation and responsiveness to student input.
- Regulatory constraints and unclear roles between Welsh Government and local authorities complicate progress. While the Welsh Government can set standards, local authorities retain autonomy in implementation.
- Participants advocated for more practical freedom in kitchens, enabling staff to apply common sense, adapt to seasonal ingredients, and innovate.

Systemic Solutions Proposed:

- Embed food education and cooking programmes as part of every child's schooling.
- Provide training for kitchen staff, and involve teachers and parents to build a whole-school approach.
- Use data and software efficiently but not as a barrier to innovation or community-driven initiatives.

Action: Jenny asked Cara Mai Lewis WLGA to confirm the total cost to Wales of Saffron software licences

Action: Jenny asked both presenters to provide more detailed information on their projects. Hazel agreed to circulate the Food Hour evaluation report.

Welsh Government consultation on Healthy Eating in Schools

The discussion centred on the challenges and opportunities in improving school food provision, food education, and regulatory frameworks in Wales in the context of the consultation on new nutritional regulations in schools.

Key Issues Highlighted:

Lack of Insight into School Food Practices:

There's significant variation in food practices across Welsh schools, particularly secondary schools. Even Welsh Government officials admit to limited understanding of what's happening on the ground, underscoring the need for widespread community feedback during the consultation.

Importance of Food Education and Literacy:

There's strong advocacy for embedding food literacy in the curriculum - for both pupils and teachers. Projects like Food and Fun during school holidays provide meals and create opportunities for children to engage with food preparation, something often missing during term time due to time pressures.

Barriers in Regulation and Implementation:

Health and safety regulations are cited as a major barrier to involving pupils in cooking activities, despite compelling evidence that these experiences improve children's willingness to try healthy foods. Current food safety frameworks are described as overly rigid and misaligned with the actual risks, with some arguing for a rethink of environmental health officer (EHO) practices, which often deter fresh food preparation in favour of pre-packaged products.

Undervalued Catering Workforce:

Kitchen and catering staff are seen to be underpaid and undervalued. The discussion included a call for investment in proper training and recognition of school catering as a professional career path, supported by college programmes and family-focused kitchen work.

Evidence from Community and Pilot Projects:

Pilot initiatives have shown success in shifting children's eating habits by involving them and their families in food preparation. Teachers have also benefited, reporting improved confidence and personal dietary changes. However, many of these successes are undocumented or only partially captured in evaluations, prompting calls for more comprehensive reporting and sharing of findings.

Urgency and Next Steps:

With only a month left in the consultation period, the call was to mobilise governors, schools, and communities across Wales. Participants emphasised the need for broader public engagement, better coordination, and policy advocacy, especially to challenge the powerful influence of the food industry and marketing.

Action: Jenny will set up a working group for the consultation for anyone who'd like to be involved. Month until consultation deadline.

1. Any other Business

Next meetings

Wednesday October 15, Conference Room C & D, 12:00 – 13:30

Wednesday January 14, Conference Room C & D, 12:00 – 13:30