

Minutes from the Cross Party Group on School Food

Tuesday 11th February 2025

Present *In-Person*:

Jenny Rathbone (JR) (Labour - Chair), **Lynne Neagle (LN)** (Cabinet Secretary for Education), **Michael Maragakis (MM)** (Food in Schools Team – Education Directorate), **Rhys James (RJ)** (Caerphilly County Council), **Peter Fox (PF)** (Welsh Conservative Party), **David Smith (DS)**, Coops & Mutuels Wales, **Kevin Morgan (KM)** (Cardiff University), **Gavin Davies (GD)** (Harlech Food Service), **Carolyn Thomas (CT)** (Welsh Labour), **Helen Cottle (HC)** Monmouthshire County Council, **Judith Gregory (JG)** (Cardiff City Council), **Ed Morgan (EM)** (Castell Howell Foods), **Pearl Costello (PC)** (Food Sense Wales), **Niki Keegan (NK)** (Well Fed / Can-Cook), **Karen Coombs** (Welsh Government), **Kate Thompson (KT)** (Caerphilly County Council), **Barbara Davies-Quy (BDQ)** (Size of Wales), **Phoebe Nicklin (PN)** (Policy and Engagement Officer – Cynnal Cymru / Sustain Wales)

Attended Virtually:

Lauren Price (Farmers' Union of Wales), **Oona Buttafoco** (Soil Association Charity)

Apologies:

Sian Gwenllian (Plaid Cymru), **Heledd Fychan** (Plaid Cymru), **Peredur Owen Griffiths** (Plaid Cymru), **John Griffiths** (Welsh Labour)

AGM Proceedings:

- **Approval of Previous Minutes:** Minutes from the last meeting were reviewed and approved.
- **Annual Report:** The annual report was circulated, detailing key discussions, speakers, and financial contributions in kind (e.g., Soil Association funding previous lunch).
- **Election of Chair & Secretariat for next year:** Jenny Rathbone was nominated by Peter Fox and seconded by Carolyn Thomas for Chair. Soil Association have agreed to continue with the Secretariat role.

Discussion: Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM)

Lynne Neagle MS, Cabinet Secretary for Education, joined to discuss opportunities and challenges of UPFSM.

Key Updates:

- The rollout of Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) in Wales has been completed ahead of schedule, with over 35 million meals served. This was a significant task, requiring more than 1,200 primary schools to prepare for delivering meals to an additional 175,000 learners in a short timeframe.

- Challenges associated with taking forward a programme of this size have largely been recorded already, but included: infrastructure upgrades (school kitchens, ovens, dining facilities), changes to data and eligibility systems, workforce plans, and menu adjustments.
- The benefits for children and families are already clear, and will be explored in more detail as part of independent evaluation that is being taken forward. Evaluation field work is already underway and the first wave of findings should be available later in the year.
- However, there will inevitably be lessons to learn and the Cabinet Secretary is committed to using those insights to grow and adapt the way in which the scheme is delivered.
- While we are continuing to see improvements in take up, there are variations in different parts of Wales. Increasing take-up, particularly in disadvantaged areas, is a key focus. A local authority group has been established to ensure data can be captured and shared consistently, and provide better insights.
- The Get Help with School Costs campaign also continues to promote the offer to learners and families.
- The importance of public procurement to increase local food production and distribution was emphasised.
- An important opportunity is to consider how we can learn from pilot activity and best practice already being taken forward, including the Welsh Veg in Schools project or the Future Generations menu in Carmarthenshire.
- While the current Welsh school food offering is generous in the broader UK context, the intention is to go further, and to ensure free school meal eligibility features in Welsh Government Spending review discussions later in the year.
- School food and how learners are taught about healthy eating can make a very important contribution to reducing health inequalities. In response to this, a consultation on updated Healthy Eating in Schools regulations and guidance will take place in spring, aiming to improve food standards.
- Beyond the school gates, the Healthy Food Environments Regulations will help restrict the promotion of high fat, salt and sugar foods, and the Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales Delivery Plan for 2025 onwards will soon be published, setting out planned actions to combat obesity.

Key discussion points & contributions:

- **School food quality and nutrition** – Concerns were raised about ultra-processed foods (UPF), with calls for stricter regulations to limit their use.
LN: Welsh Government currently follows Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) advice on UPF. As far as the new regulations are concerned, there is going to be a focus on freshly prepared foods and a move away from some UPF.
- **Food literacy and education** – Discussion on integrating food education into the curriculum. Teachers need better training to confidently teach nutrition and cooking skills.
LN: There is a statutory requirement in the new curriculum for Wales that focuses on health and well-being which should be leveraged to address this challenge. The requirement is designed to help learners develop the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to make informed decisions

about their physical health, mental well-being, and overall well-being throughout life.

- **Procurement and supply chain** – Calls for better alignment between agricultural production and school food needs, ensuring a reliable supply of Welsh-grown produce.

MM: Part of the delay in joining up the dots across government and the food sector is trying to find the balance between tackling child hunger, improving health outcomes, and ensuring the system has the capacity to deliver new arrangements.

- **Monitoring and accountability** – Attendees called for stronger oversight mechanisms to ensure food quality and adherence to guidelines.

LN: There will be an implementation plan sitting alongside the new regulations, which will involve working with local authorities around implementation.

- **Social and environmental considerations** – It was noted that food policy should not only focus on nutrition but also on broader environmental sustainability, ensuring nature can continue to provide healthy food for future generations. The possibility of the Cross-Government Group exploring social and environmental sustainability criteria for school meals was raised, with potential legislative opportunities to be considered after the upcoming election.

- **Accreditation and certification** – Interest in adopting external accreditation (e.g., Food for Life Certification) to standardise school food standards across Wales.

LN/MM: Interest in receiving further details and evidence on Well Fed, Food for Life.

- **Whole school approach** – Calls for engaging parents, improving food culture in schools, and linking food policy with health and sustainability goals.

Next steps

- Await findings from the independent evaluation of UPFSM.
- Engage in the upcoming consultation on school food regulations.
- Explore opportunities for standardising school food policies and accreditation
- Continue discussions on a joined-up approach across government, education, health, and agriculture.