

Minutes from the Cross-Party Group on School Food

Wednesday 20th September 2023, 12:00 – 13:30

Present:

Jenny Rathbone MS (JR), Cardiff Central; **Peter Fox MS (PF)**, Monmouth; **Sian Gwenllian MS (SG)**, Arfon; **Marc Tierney**, Office Manager for Eluned Morgan MS

In attendance: **Marianne Fisher (MF)**, Monmouthshire County Council; **Rhys James**, Caerphilly CC; **Judith Gregory**, Cardiff Council; **Andrew Tuddenham**, Soil Association Cymru; **Gareth Thomas (GT)**, WLGA; **Edward Morgan (EM)**, Castell Howell Foods; **Alex Cook (AC)**, **Christopher Pugh**, Carmarthenshire County Council; **Caroline Campbell**, Gwynedd Council; **Becky Green**, (guest); **Mark Lawton**, Harlech Foods; **Holly Tomlinson (HT)**, Landworkers Alliance; **Katie Palmer (KP)**, Food Sense Wales; **Niki Keagan**, Can Cook; **Gemma Roche-Clarke**, **Matthew Thomas**, **Karen Coombs**, Welsh Government;

Apologies:

Prof Kevin Morgan, **Becca Jablonski**, Cardiff University; **Jason Rawbone**, Welsh Government; **Pearl Costello**, Food Sense Wales; **Hannah Caswell**, Soil Association; **Gareth Ayers**, **Yvonne Cole**, Carmarthenshire County Council; **Jen Griffiths**, Flintshire County Council

Agreement of the Minutes from the meeting 16th February 2022

Minutes were agreed.

Presentation Notes:

Marianne Fisher, Sustainable Food Projects Manager, Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) presented how MCC are scaling up the supply of healthy school food, locally sourced and cooked from scratch in 39 school kitchens catering for 40 primary schools, and some of the constraints experienced.

Key issues raised:

- MCC is aiming for more local food in schools, sourced through wholesalers in either England or Wales, - 'local' can include cross-border. Seasonal ingredients such as tomatoes are home processed into sauces, pizza toppings and Bolognese to enhance vegetable intake. Lentils and pulses extend meat dishes, keeping costs down. Some processed items, like bread and custard, remain. Environmental health standards mandate pre-cooking roast meat.
- Menu development relies on approved supplier products on the Saffron database, checked for allergens and nutrients. Kitchen staff order from a central team's list. A dynamic procurement model doesn't suit the current system. Monmouthshire joined the Welsh Veg in Primary Schools Pilot. A Shared Prosperity Fund allocation supports local supply chains. MCC has hired a corporate catering manager focused on innovation and local sourcing.
- Challenges include small kitchens, time constraints, and associated plate waste risks. MCC subsidizes each meal by ~85p and is seeking budget savings. UPFSM strains costs, especially staffing and subsidies. The purpose of 'locally sourced and cooked from scratch' remains unclear—employment, carbon emissions, or health? Clarity of purpose if key to support

decision-making and understand/justify potential trade-offs. Defining 'local' by volume or value and identifying responsible parties for data capture and monitoring remain questions.

Discussion

SG – the Cooperation Agreement refers to enhancing local food production and distribution chains to benefit local economies, and this is also the aim of the Universal Free School Meal offer. Does Monmouthshire have a view as to what good school food looks like or how to define it?

MF – depends on who you ask. There's broad agreement that sustainable, environmentally sound, affordable and healthy are important. But the trade-offs are managed inconsistently. Conventional supply chains are also supplied by local family livestock producers. Conventional supply chains need to be made more accessible for smaller growers but this will need input from wholesalers as local authorities don't have the time and knowledge to shop around from individual producers.

SG - And what is the uptake of UPFSM in Monmouthshire? Question referred to MCC.(see attached info)

PF – A critical issue is the lack of accessible data on food supply and the opportunities.

MF – A lot of data may exist in the supply chain for public health purposes and local authorities may be more interested in this now, but it is not being captured and shared. And crucially, in terms of demonstrating effective change, we don't have a clear handle on where we're starting from.

PF - Given the current financial climate in local government, what does a meal without subsidy look like?

MF – It's very hard to see that if you're talking about reducing costs, you're going to do that without compromising quality. Some reasonable compromise is possible, such as bulk-preparing tomato sauce when in season and bolstering meat dishes with pulses and lentils. Other potential economies raise questions of choice: not all parents would be happy or comfortable with the idea that their children were fed meat only once or twice a week.

JR – Bread, one of the most ultra-processed foods is still bought in. Is this due to lack of staff capacity to make bread?

MF – Our kitchen staff are part time and have only a short window of time to prepare school lunches. Bread and butter has also become a filler for children who may be still hungry after lunch. There is a good health case for cooking baked beans from scratch though.

JR - Are you tracking food waste?

MF – Schools have done some work monitoring plate waste but finding the people, budget and equipment to do this is challenging. Schools that serve both courses on a flight tray tend to waste more food as the dessert gets eaten first. Question to be referred to MCC.

AC – Bridgend Borough Council have baselined their plate waste

HT – As a producer, we found that it wouldn't be practical under existing arrangements to directly supply schools. Procurement hubs offer an alternative model, and working with Castell Howell has been valuable.

AC - I'd advocate for establishing short, medium and long term targets for the amounts of local food that we would serve as through provision. The economic, environmental and social value of local, scratch cooked healthy food should be recognised in the cost of subsidy, but it's a challenge to track and monitor these outcomes using longitudinal studies. But wherever we are now, we know that the system is broken. We have to make some change - it's just how we prioritize and fund a transition.

EM - Aligning everything in terms of what can be grown and what's on school menus is challenging and needs to be responsive to harvest disruption and seasonal oversupply. A pragmatic, open-minded and experimental approach is needed to make the most of local supply. Contract growing with multiple growers offers efficiency and resilience but taking a strict approach to seasonal menus isn't helpful - we're pretty good at growing tomatoes in the summer when the schools aren't open.

We're trying to identify which fruit and veg can be grown profitably in the climate and the soil types of Wales, and if availability is not aligned with school terms we have to do something with them to extend that life. For example, three types of bolognese sauce were made to make the most of what we had available - a standard Bolognese sauce, one with 10% spinach and with 20% spinach. In Cardiff we've looked at how to utilise the entire cauliflower, not just the 40% of yield that is the floret. Tackling efficiency and food waste requires creativity.

KP – The Welsh Veg in Primary Schools pilot found that small growers lack funds for capital equipment. Horticulture operates on tight margins with limited ability to generate reserves. The pilot has generated lots of evidence for Welsh Government on how grants work. There's a real challenge with grants and loans. School supply chains also involve a lot of accreditation paperwork for small growers. Food Sense Wales are working on that with Farming Connect. The food partnerships are building the connections across the supply chain, developing relationships between growers, wholesalers and catering managers.

HT – Welsh Government's horticulture capital grants have been welcome, but the volume of detail required from applicants, and the timings and minimum funding requirements made the take-up a lot lower than expected. We're concerned that WG may assume that there is low demand for this sort of support. We're talking to Kevin Taylor in WG about how these issues can be addressed. Regarding loans, high interest rates are a challenge to small growers, even with the progressive banks such as Welsh development Bank.

EM – capital investment brings efficiencies. A new harvesting machine has enabled one grower to harvest three times as much of their spinach and leafy lettuce in half the time. When you're fighting against the weather this can save the harvest. The value of robust and resilient indigenous supply chain is going to increase in the next 5 or 10 years – the cheaper prices of imported food is irrelevant if it can't get here.

MF – In terms of menu planning, compliance and quality assurance the school meal system is quite rigid, whereas global and local supply chains are dictating a move to a more agile approach, where we can take advantage of seasonal availability. At the moment the system is not geared up for this. Menus can take six months to develop, and substituting an item requires multiple checks. It's a real policy challenge to find the sweet spot between a system that keeps consumers and staff safe whilst allowing more agility than we currently have.

JR – Many families continue to use packed lunches because the child is accustomed to this. How have you encouraged children to taste new things?

MF – How the dining room is managed and plate waste is monitored is relevant to this issue. As is providing children with food-related activities, using the flexibility of the new curriculum for Wales to enable children to become more familiar with food by providing them with opportunities to handle and smell vegetables. There's been some resistance to this approach as its seen as encouraging children to play with or waste food. Cardiff and Carmarthenshire local authorities are also trying farm visits, to allow them to see where vegetables are growing. All of this normalises otherwise unfamiliar foodstuffs.

JR – Alex Cook noted in the Teams chat that school food standards currently rely on quite outdated nutritional data, and that locally produced vegetable have a higher nutrient density than commercially imported, something that is not recognised in the Saffron system. Clearly WG need to work on this.

AC – Saffron could be improved if the product codes contained some objective measures of sustainability, such as provenance, traceability, production method. Local authorities would end up with a proxy sustainability score.

JR - Measuring what we're doing is important for the outcomes we want to see, which relates back to what Katie Palmer's also put in the chat about people in deprived areas being a lot shorter than people in better off areas.

JR – Thank you to Marianne, and for persevering through Covid. We found your presentation really fascinating and it presents us with lots of food for thought.

MF – Offered appreciation and thanks to catering colleagues who have been open and generous with their knowledge with her and with the Monmouthshire Food Partnership and projects. Final reflection is that the greatest challenge is to simply maintain the quality of service in the face of financial constraint, let alone improve it.

Topic for next meeting

Following suggestions from meeting attendees, JR resolved to invite both Gareth Thomas, Welsh Local Government Association to hear further insights into Saffron, bread and some of the issues touched in the meeting, along with hearing from Public Health Wales as they prepare to review the school food regulations. Intention is to hold the meeting in Cardiff, date tbc.

Action: Chair and Secretariat to liaise with main speakers on suitable date and circulate invite date

Concluding remarks from Chair:

- Thanked the MF and all present for their contributions to the discussion.