



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Food in Schools Policy: Departmental
Briefing**

9 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Food in Schools Policy: Departmental Briefing

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mrs Brenda Hale
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

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|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Mrs Jill Fitzgerald | Department of Education |
| Mrs Eve Stewart | Department of Education |
| Mrs Jennifer McBratney | Public Health Agency |

The Chairperson: I welcome Eve Stewart, head of the participation and parenting team in the Department; Jill Fitzgerald, deputy principal in the Department; and Jennifer McBratney, senior officer with the Public Health Agency.

Eve, I ask you to comment on the paper. Members will then ask questions.

Mrs Eve Stewart (Department of Education): Before I start, I want to tell you, for your information, that Jennifer is a dietician. So, we have a professional with us.

The Chairperson: Jennifer, do you do private clinics? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Jennifer McBratney (Public Health Agency): That is always the first question I get asked. I do, for a fee.

Mr Flanagan: You will see that there is not a single scone left.

Mrs McBratney: I was having a little look at that.

The Chairperson: There is only fruit outside for us.

Mrs McBratney: I believe you.

Mrs Stewart: I will quickly run through the paper that we have sent you. The food in schools policy is a joint policy between the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We have been working on it for some time. The previous Education Committee saw a draft of the consultation document in November 2008. We have gone through the consultation process, and we are about to finalise the policy.

I will give you a bit of the background to us getting to this stage. We started to look at nutrition and food in schools back in 2004. There were issues at that time about obesity among young children and what could be done about that. A pilot project started in 2004 with 100 schools. From that, it was decided to introduce the nutritional standards for school lunches. Those standards have been in place since 2007.

After that, we looked at the barriers to implementing the nutritional standards for school lunches, and one of the issues was other food and drink being provided in school. The vending machines had unhealthy things in them, and kids were bringing in unhealthy food. So, in 2008, we introduced nutritional standards for other food and drinks provided in schools. I stress that they apply to food and drinks "provided" in schools and not to food that children bring into schools.

The current Programme for Government contains a Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety commitment to tackle obesity. Our food in schools policy is a major input to achieving the Health Department's targets.

When we went out to consult on the policy, we had a good response rate. We had 209 responses. The majority of the respondents were supportive of the policy. The main issues that the consultees commented on included the need to clarify the context, aims, objectives, roles, responsibilities, funding and timescales. They wanted to strengthen links to physical activity and healthy lifestyles, to strengthen the role of parents and the role of pupils and to have links provided to existing resources and websites that schools and teachers could use in their teaching on healthy eating. So, we have worked to revise the policy so that it takes all of those issues into account.

Both the Health Minister and the Education Minister have agreed the policy. The Health Minister submitted the policy to the Health Committee, which noted it. We are here to give you some information on the policy, to take questions and, hopefully, to answer them.

In revising the policy, we have two elements. There are certain things that schools must do, and there are certain things that schools have discretion to do.

Schools must adopt a whole-school approach to food and nutrition. What do we mean when we talk about a "whole-school approach"? We have nutritional standards for school lunches and for other food and drinks provided in schools. In the curriculum, there is teaching on healthy eating. Parents need to be advised about healthy eating and to be encouraged to make sure that their kids eat healthily. So, the whole-school approach is about bringing in everybody who has an interest in children's nutrition.

Schools have to comply with the nutritional standards for school lunches and the nutritional standards for other food and drinks in schools. Schools also have to ensure that pupils have easy access at all times to fresh drinking water. In the curriculum, from foundation stage to Key Stage 4, schools have to provide for teaching on nutrition and healthy eating. Schools also have to provide home economics to all pupils at Key Stage 3, which covers Year 8 to Year 10.

On the discretionary elements, there are decisions that schools can take at local level in relation to food brought into school by pupils, the way in which the school is managed at lunchtime — for instance, letting children go off the school site — and the advertising and sponsorship of products.

Within the compulsory elements, and even within the discretionary elements, schools have to regard the guidance issued by the Department. We have issued 'School food: the essential guide', which contains a series of practical booklets on various issues that a school might need some advice on.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) was very heavily involved in producing the guides. For example, there are guides for healthy breakfast clubs and healthy lunch boxes.

Mrs McBratney: There are guides to water in schools, looking at the dining room environment, vending machines and healthy breaks. There is information on useful contacts, such as voluntary and charity groups that provide support for schools. They are use-alone booklets. If a school is looking at one area in particular, it can lift the guide and use it to find advice on how and what to set up and on what to monitor and evaluate. There are links to the curriculum as well.

Mrs Stewart: We are here today to tell you what is in the policy and to answer questions. We will then go back and advise our Minister of the Committee's views. Hopefully, both Ministers will then be able to go to the Executive to get agreement to the policy. That would enable us to launch it, subject to agreement, maybe early in the first term of the next academic year.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Eve, for sharing the information with us. What sometimes happens is that we do not see much detail on policies until they go beyond the pale. This has been useful. I know that it is something that the previous Committee was well informed of. Whether or not that was because the Department thought it necessary for members of the Committee to be well informed of nutritional habits and dietary requirements, I do not know. Certainly, it is a very important issue for our schools.

Members have indicated that they want to ask questions, so we will try to get to them as quickly as we can. I just want to ask two questions. First, one thing that seemed to come up repeatedly in the consultation was the issue of clarifying the context, aims, objectives, roles, responsibilities, funding and timescales. Given that this is a joint policy, we have the age-old problem of whether the policy is health or education and of who will take the lead and who will take responsibility. How difficult do you think it will be to ensure that, if and when the policy is agreed, we do not fall into a bureaucratic debate about whether it is the local trust, school or whoever that implements this? Clearly, the implementation of the policy will be key to ensuring that the objectives are actually achieved.

Mrs Stewart: We have a food in schools forum, which is the overriding body in assisting the Department in developing the policy and working out how to implement it in schools. The forum has representatives from the Health Department, the Public Health Agency, the Food Standards Agency, Safefood and the education and library boards. We have been working together very closely on this, and taking account of issues that have been brought to our attention, to make sure that we can clarify for schools what they need to do and try to ensure that they do it.

The Chairperson: Do you think that there are any implications for the catering services in the education and library boards?

Mrs Stewart: I do not think that there are any difficult issues for catering staff. We have nutritional standards. The education and library boards are complying fully with those standards and supplying services in the schools that they have responsibility for.

The Chairperson: In a sense, they are easier to regulate and keep an eye on, because, at the end of the day, they are part and parcel of the system.

Paragraph 11 in our briefing paper states:

"The Food in Schools policy also makes reference to the standards required from Early Years settings. All registered childminding and day care services for children under age 12 must adhere to the standard on food and drink as set out in the DHSSPS Minimum Care Standards. This standard is based on the guidance set out in 'Nutrition Matters for the Early Years'."

Who has responsibility for policing that?

Mrs McBratney: 'Nutrition Matters for the Early Years' was originally a document from the Health Promotion Agency, which is now the Public Health Agency. We have just updated that and are about to

relaunch the booklet for childminders and nurseries. In a way, the Health Department takes the lead on that. We will be running a series of training workshops for nurseries and early years providers through our trusts' dietetic provision. So, it sort of links together in that area.

Mr McKay: Thanks for your presentation. At the moment, a number of Governments across Europe, in particular those in Denmark, Austria, etc, are looking at the issue of trans-fats and how to limit or ban their use. I know that concerns have been raised about the effect of trans-fats on young people's cholesterol levels, the risk of heart disease, and so on. Can you give an assessment of the situation with regard to the use of trans-fats in schools? Was any consideration given to limiting the amount of trans-fats in foods?

Mrs McBratney: I will try to answer your question. However, I cannot give a direct answer in relation to trans-fats provided in schools. Over the past year, we have been developing a new recipe book for schools, which is due to be launched next month. In the book, we have nearly 300 recipes, which, along with the ingredients list, have been analysed. From that piece of work, it is apparent that we need to look at the contracts for stock items used in schools; for example, in relation to trans-fatty acids in margarine and oils. We plan to have a look at that.

Overall, when you start to analyse school meals and look at what children eat, you find that we are hitting the targets for carbohydrate and fat. However, the use of saturated fat still tends to be slightly higher than what we would desire. So, over the next number of years, we will look at our contracts and, when they come up for renewal, will put in some specifications in relation to fat, salt and sugar.

Mr McKay: Do you see what is being proposed for school dinners as a radical change? Do many schools already carry out the policy, more or less?

Mrs Stewart: We are aware that quite a number of schools have been inspected over recent years and that the majority of them are complying with the standards. Only about 300 schools were inspected, and the majority were complying. We cannot say what the position is with the other 900 schools.

Mr McKay: Are we being ambitious enough? How do the standards that are being laid down now compare with those in other European countries, which are light years ahead in respect of public health?

Mrs McBratney: Within the UK, we have a UK school food network, and we meet once a year to share information. We have similar food-based standards to Scotland, Wales and England based on the eatwell plate model. However, the rest of the UK has looked at more nutritional standards.

Mr McKay: There are poor eating habits across those jurisdictions in comparison with the rest of Europe.

Mrs McBratney: The difference in Scandinavian countries in particular, such as Norway and Sweden, is that school meals tend to be provided as part of the school day, albeit free or subsidised. We have not looked at that element of it. However, if you look at where we were 10 years ago compared with now, you will see that there have been great improvements in the type and quality of food served. When new kitchens are placed into new schools now, for example, there is no room for deep-fat fryers, which would have been there 10 years ago. So, we can see the change. However, there are still challenges ahead.

One of the biggest challenges with children is eating more fruit and vegetables. We are nowhere near the five-a-day target that we really need to be at. We know that that helps to prevent cancers and other chronic diseases. So, there is work to be done. The focus on early years is particularly important, because, by the time children come to school, a lot of their eating habits have already been established. Schools maintain that and give them the knowledge and skills to equip them for lives as parents. There have been great changes.

One of the other challenges for us within Health is the parent and family environment; bringing the learning in schools out to families and trying to improve health that way.

Issues still need to be looked at, but school meals have dramatically improved over the past number of years.

The Chairperson: I saw or heard somewhere that Scotland has directed a considerable amount of its resource to early years. It might be useful if the Committee were to get some information on that. I am not sure, but it might be that every child in P1 is provided with a free meal. Obviously, there is the issue of free school meals here, but that is mostly at post-primary level. I am almost sure that Scotland specifically targeted P1 pupils and is providing a free meal for each child in that year group. Wales may also be doing some work in that area. I think that, if the Committee agrees, we should ask the Assembly's Research and Information Service to do a paper on that. That would be useful and would help to inform us.

Mrs Stewart: I am aware that something is happening in Scotland, but I do not have the detail on it.

The Chairperson: We will enquire about that, and, in an unusual position, the Committee will then forward that information to the Department.

Mrs Stewart: I was going to ask whether you would share that with us. We would be grateful, thank you.

Mr Craig: I am looking through some of this stuff with great interest. I want to stand up for the beef and poultry sector. Under standard 7, you restrict meat and chicken to the point that they will not be supplied at least twice a week. That is interesting. Does that mean that on two days out of five there will be no meat at all, or will fish or some other alternative be provided?

Mrs McBratney: That relates to meat and chicken products, such as chicken nuggets and sausages. It is processed meats. In theory, children will not have processed meats or products on more than two days a week, but they could still have red meat, chicken or fish. We have tried to encourage the provision of red meat three times a week in primary schools and up to four times a week in post-primary schools. That is because of its beneficial iron content, which helps to combat iron-deficiency anaemia in children. A variety of meats are encouraged, including red meat, fish, chicken and other forms of poultry such as turkey.

Mr Craig: So, it is processed meats.

Mrs McBratney: Yes. It is meat and chicken products that are defined as processed meats.

Mr Craig: I fully agree with that. I am married to a food scientist, and I would not recommend processed meats to anyone.

I think that this is a good idea, and I always have done. I have noticed the difference in my own child with healthy eating. However, there is a bigger problem in society. That problem does not lie in schools but in homes, especially those in deprived areas. Is this just one part of a strategy that schools should adopt? It strikes me that we are not very good at educating our children all the way through school on what is healthy and what should, ultimately, be provided to their children when they become parents.

Mrs Stewart: In the curriculum, children are taught about healthy eating through the personal development module, from foundation stage up to Key Stage 4. At Key Stage 3, they have to do home economics. Today's children are learning about healthy eating and how to cook well, and the hope is that they will continue with that theme when they become parents and, as a result, their children will be healthier than they are.

Mr Craig: What I am really asking is whether we are putting enough emphasis on that area in schools, right across the spectrum and especially in post-primary schools. I do not feel that enough emphasis is put on this subject in our post-primary schools.

Mrs McBratney: You are absolutely right that this goes hand in hand. We are aiming to provide healthy food in schools, but we also have to ensure that the knowledge and skills are there as well. Over the past number of years, we have done a variety of things with our colleagues in Safefood and the Food Standards Agency.

As regards primary schools, last year, the Public Health Agency launched Eat, Taste and Grow, a curriculum resource from foundation to Key Stage 2 that looks at where your food comes from, how your food grows, healthy eating and being active. It is an interactive resource, and it has been heavily promoted in schools. The Food Standards Agency also has Activ8, which is another programme that looks at nutrition and being active.

In post-primary schools, we support the home economics curriculum. The British Nutrition Foundation provides a range of resources for home economics teachers, and we also have a food-labelling resource.

As well as that, this summer, we are providing, through the Regional Training Unit summer school, two one-day courses for primary school teachers and post-primary school teachers to make them more aware of all the resources that are there. We are also trying to do some work with Learning NI around the marketing of the resources and making it easier for schools to look at that. It is a very important area, and we are trying our utmost to provide teachers with the resources needed to teach this in the classroom.

Mr Craig: I will end by saying that, if anybody out there wants a career in teaching, they should take up home economics, because we just cannot get teachers for that.

Mrs McBratney: Yes. Every school now has to provide home economics, and there are teachers who are teaching home economics without a home economics or nutrition background. That has been highlighted as a gap. This year, with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Food Standards Agency, we are running a diploma in nutrition for home economics teachers who do not have a home economics qualification. It is a 10-day accredited course for teachers that is facilitated by registered dietitians. We are trying to support teachers in that role as well.

The Chairperson: Jennifer, policy standard 7 on page 52, which Jonathan referred to, is open to interpretation. Therefore, would it be easier and clearer if it were to specify processed food? The first point in standard 7 states:

"Foods high in fat or deep fried foods are restricted across the whole school day and should not be offered in total more than twice a week."

Why offer them at all? Meat, chicken, pork and so on should be offered in a healthier way than it is presented. Would it not be easier to put that in?

Mrs McBratney: There are two things to that. First, we were tied down to the legislation in relation to what is described as a meat and chicken product. On that, we took guidance from our Food Standards Agency colleagues. Secondly, when we started the process in 2001 and carried out initial conversations in the pilot in 2004, there were concerns from our school catering colleagues about meal uptake numbers and the impact that that would have on their staffing and their meal numbers. Through training and support over a number of years, we have managed to maintain a good school meal uptake, and, in addition, we have changed cooking practices in schools. Therefore, although there may be a chicken nugget on a menu, that chicken is 100% chicken breast, is often done in a crumb that does not have any added fat and is often done in a dry oven. In fact, it is nearly as healthy, but there is a perception of those foods. There was a bit of compromise. In an ideal world, they would not be on any menu, but we had to have a try at it.

The Chairperson: As someone who worked in the food-processing business before I became a politician, I can never understand the European legislation, especially with bacon products. When you lift a bacon product, you will see that it states on it that it has not more than 10% added water. What

the customer is not told is that the first 10% is undeclared, so you can go up to 15%, because, technically, that is only 5%. The fact that the first 10% is undeclared means that you can go right up to the limit. A bit of a bluff goes on in how some of this is marketed to the public. If you buy a product, you buy a considerable degree of water, and that is the same with processed chicken and so on. We had better not stray into that field, but I thought that it was an interesting point in relation to the one raised by Jonathan.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you. It is fantastic to see this policy coming forward, and I concur with the Chair about seeing the timescales, dates and detail on it so that it will hopefully come in at the end of the year.

I want to explore two areas. How much learning about how to cook and look after foods will be included in the home economics side? On the back of everything else, that is vital.

We heard last week that quite a few people do not claim free school meals because they see a stigma attached to them. How will we deal with that?

My third point relates to the cook on television — I have forgotten his name, but I think that it is Jamie Oliver — and the programme when we saw parents passing food to their children through the school railings. How are we going to ensure that that does not happen and that we make sure that, when you get the food wonderfully healthy, they do not all prefer a burger or processed food? Is there a view on how we will deal with that?

Mrs Stewart: Your first question was about how long children spend cooking in home economics. I am sorry; I do not know the answer to that, but I can find out and let you know. You mentioned free school meals and stigma. We are aware of research — I think by the PHA — that said that the kids themselves do not feel a stigma but that the parents and other people feel it.

Mrs McBratney: When we started out on this process back in 2008, we went out to about 100 schools and sent questionnaires to parents and pupils. About 1,200 parents and 3,000 pupils replied, so we were able to gather good information on their knowledge and on what the barriers were. Although we thought that the stigma of free school meals was maybe one of the main reasons why there was not 100% uptake or close to it, it would seem from the children's point of view that it is more to do with what their friends are doing. If their friends have a packed lunch, they want to have a packed lunch. If they are slightly particular about the foods that they eat and do not really like what is on the menu, they will not go that day. Stigma does not seem to be as big a problem as we think. It tends to come from the parents' perception, and that is a difficult issue to overcome. It is a case of educating the parents about that. In this climate, there is probably more need for free school meals.

Mr Kinahan: What about the Jamie Oliver problem?

Mrs Stewart: It is difficult to stop parents from coming to the school gate and passing food through. It is a local issue for the school to decide whether to let kids out at lunchtime and to decide the rules that they may have for what they can bring in their lunch boxes. I honestly do not have the answer to how you could stop parents from coming to the school gates and handing food through.

Mr Kinahan: I just wonder whether there should be a campaign along with all this.

Mrs Stewart: There should just be more education.

The Chairperson: I remember the Committee visiting a school, which shall remain nameless, and it was so obvious in the drive there that, on either side of a very busy road, there were fast food outlets. The children were on both sides of the road visiting them. One suggestion at the time was that planning should not allow any of those outlets to be anywhere within a certain distance of schools. It is very difficult to police that. The practicalities of principals and teachers putting that in place are very difficult.

Mrs Stewart: Ourselves, the Department of Health and the Department of the Environment's (DOE) Planning Service are starting into some work to look at whether it is possible to ban fast food outlets from being within so many metres of a school. We have not had a meeting about that yet, but we have all agreed that we are going to meet to see whether we can do something about that.

The Chairperson: On the other point about the stigma of free school meals, there are schools in Northern Ireland that use thumb imprints in the canteen. We saw an example of that, and it is excellent. Basically, nobody knows that you are there, because you have to scan your thumb when you go into the canteen. That is what you use to pay. So, nobody can be identified by that process. The use of that technology in some schools has made a huge difference to the uptake of free school meals.

Miss M McIlveen: You have asked all my questions.

The Chairperson: Who has? Danny?

Miss M McIlveen: The two of you.

The Chairperson: Sorry.

Miss M McIlveen: I am very encouraged by this. Going back to my own school days —

The Chairperson: As a teacher.

Miss M McIlveen: No, when I was at school, a long, long time ago when school meals were quite vile. I valued the fact that there was a fast food outlet very close to the school. I would not be the athlete I am today if it were not for Julie's Kitchen and its burgers and chips.

The question that I was looking at was about free school meals, the entitlement and the stigma that is attached. You said that you do not think that that is the case. However, I have spoken to a number of principals who feel that, where there is anonymity, whether that is in a thumb print system or a cashless card system, there is not any differentiation between any of the pupils. Given that we are in an economic downturn, there are families on low incomes, and that impacts on healthy eating. There may be children who get their only healthy meal in school. It would be useful if we could investigate some way of encouraging schools to change the system so that they can disguise that in some way.

Mrs Stewart: I agree that we should be doing something in that area. However, we also have to think of the cost of introducing biometric systems. It could cost £30,000-odd for each system that you put into a school. Where does that money come from in these days when budgets are being tightened? There could be other methods by which you achieve that anonymity. However, again, as Jennifer said, in a lot of cases it is not that the children themselves feel any stigma; it is that they want to sit with their friends who have brought a lunch. I think that some work has been done on allowing kids who bring in lunches to come into the canteen to sit with their friends who are having the school meals. I do not know how widespread that is, and it may depend on the facilities that a school has and the room that it has. It has to be very much a local decision.

Mrs McBratney: Also, there are lots of reasons why a child chooses to have a school meal over a packed lunch. It can be to do with timing or queuing. It could also be to do with the school environment: some of our schools are older, and their dining rooms may not be the most modern places to have a meal. So, the children themselves cited lots of reasons for not going into the dining room.

We are going back out to have a look at the research. We are going back to the same schools to re-evaluate where we have been, what we have done and any changes that there have been. So, it will be interesting to see whether there has been any move on that, because schools have invested in improving their dining rooms by painting them and installing LCD TV screens in different areas. The rooms now look more functional and similar to what children see outside. School catering companies

have realised that, to keep up with the companies that they are competing with, such as Subway and other fast food joints, they need to be doing something like that, particularly in post-primary schools.

Miss M McIlveen: It is quite interesting that this is the first time in all the years that I have been on this Committee that we have discussed home economics on the curriculum. Is home economics open to all first and second formers? Is it accessible to everyone? I am not really sure how to frame this question, but is it compulsory for all pupils to take home economics?

Mrs Stewart: My understanding is that it is compulsory for all pupils in Key Stage 3 to take home economics.

Mrs Jill Fitzgerald (Department of Education): That applies to Year 8, Year 9 and Year 10 pupils, boys and girls, at all schools.

Miss M McIlveen: Do we know what the uptake is for GCSE home economics?

Mrs Stewart: We do not have those figures with us, but if you want more information, we can come back to you on that.

Miss M McIlveen: It might be useful to get that information to see what the interest is.

Mrs Stewart: Yes, to see how many go on to do a GCSE in home economics, having done three years of it when they started post-primary school.

Miss M McIlveen: I did home economics in first and second form, and I still use my pavlova and fresh fruit salad recipes.

Mrs Stewart: I suppose it depends on what a child intends to do afterwards. There are only so many subjects that you can do at GCSE, although, with the new entitlement framework, that is widening out a bit. It might not be possible for them to continue with home economics.

Miss M McIlveen: There are celebrity chefs and a lot of programmes like 'MasterChef', so it is much more accessible. There might be an interest in schools in home economics that may not have been there in my day.

Ms Boyle: Thank you for the presentation and for bringing the policy to us. Like Michelle, I am excited talking about home economics. We have never had this discussion before; I think that it is great.

I will go back to the question of why children prefer to have a lunch as opposed to going to the dining room to have a cooked meal. I have two small grandchildren, and I think that it has something to do with the cool lunch box and whether Dora the Explorer or whoever is on it. That is one of my grandchildren's reasons for wanting a lunch as opposed to a meal.

I am delighted that we have moved on from liver and semolina in schools. My semolina days are not nice to remember. I welcome that you mentioned the possibility of the Department of Education (DE) and the DOE having a meeting about planning and fast food outlets near schools. Lunchtime management needs to feature very highly in the policy. Some schools are quite close to fast food outlets; some of them are quite literally across the road or beside the school. It is a big issue for the children who leave the school premises at lunchtime. That happens particularly in post-primary schools. It is a big issue, because they are not getting proper nutrition or value for money. It is an issue that starts in the home; when you send your child out with their lunch money in the morning, you do not know where that money will end up. That is another issue. Will the food in schools policy be included in the school admissions criteria?

Mrs McBratney: It might be in a prospectus, but not in the admissions criteria.

Mrs Stewart: We have a requirement in the policy that, within a year of its being published, all schools should have a written policy statement. Quite a few of them have one now, even before the policy has

come in. A lot of elements of the policy are already in place: nutritional standards are in place, home economics is available at Key Stage 3, and healthy eating is in the curriculum. The policy is really like an overarching banner to introduce the whole school approach to the matter.

Ms Boyle: That is key when people are making a decision. There are students from many cultures in our primary and post-primary schools. How do the schools meet the needs of those children through the food that they are acquainted with?

Mrs McBratney: I can answer that generically. If there is a child who has a particular need, be it a medically, religiously or culturally special diet, usually, the school catering manager is advised of that and the school caterers work with that family and the school to provide the necessary food. An example of that is halal food. Our southern board has a high percentage of children from a Muslim background who require that type of food. The board has worked very closely with that community in accessing the required food. So, there is a section of the nutritional standards that looks at diets for special medical conditions and that cater to religious and cultural viewpoints. No concerns have been raised about not being able to meet that need.

Ms Boyle: Another issue with the policy is ensuring that pupils have access at all times to fresh drinking water. I feel that that might be a problem in some schools. It is great, and it is right. It is every child's human right to have that. However, I believe that teachers will have a problem working around it, because children will be running to the toilet, disrupting class and all that. So, I feel that it might be an issue.

Mrs McBratney: A lot of primary schools allow children to have water bottles on their desk, and if they do not, they often have water fountains in the classroom. The issue of children running to the toilet if you let them have drinks is often raised. However, that, in fact, does not seem to be a problem at all. As long as children are encouraged to go to the toilet before they go to school, at break time and at lunchtime, it seems to manage itself. So, that has not been raised. I think that a lot of schools provide water and run water-is-cool-type campaigns. Many post-primary schools have water bottles with their logos on them, and a lot of the vending machines in schools sell water. So, it is promoted quite well, and, compared with years ago, water seems to be a drink that children now drink.

Mr Rogers: Thank you for your briefing. An interesting by-product of compulsory home economics is that there is a better approach to healthy eating in schools now. I see two challenges for schools. It is great to see a policy statement for schools, as everything they have to do is on one page, which is very useful. The first challenge is to do with the fact that a child's education is not necessarily given on the one site. Children, particularly those in area learning communities and so on, have to move from building to building, so as well as needing buy-in from home we need it from all the providers, including the likes of our colleges. So, I think that that is a challenge. Perhaps the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) should have a look at it, although that Department will possibly be defunct soon. That is an important point.

The other challenge is to do with the provision of water. I see some problems with having free access to water, particularly for schools or units that deal with challenging behaviour.

The Chairperson: Do you have any comment on that?

Mrs Stewart: I will come in on the first point about area learning communities. Some children go over to the local further education (FE) colleges for some classes, and I will need to come back to you on what happens at lunchtime in that case. I do not know whether children go back to their home school for lunch or stay at the FE college. I am not aware of any move towards healthy eating in the FE colleges. I take your point: if children in mainstream schools are going over to FE colleges, you would like the healthy eating message to continue over there. I can come back to you with what happens with the lunchtime arrangements for mainstream school children who go to FE colleges for classes. As I say, I do not know the answer to that.

Your next point was about the provision of water —

Mrs McBratney: That is an issue. The essential guide has a booklet on water in schools. It talks about where to site water fountains, vending machines and various things. There have been instances of vandalism to such things. A section of the booklet looks at water management and at how to make it safe for schools and pupils.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. The session has been very useful. Again, thanks for the information that you provided and the answers that you gave. We wish you well. We look forward to seeing you some time later in the year after this has gone out to consultation, when we will have the responses and the policy in place.

Mrs Stewart: I just want to explain that this is not going out for consultation.

The Chairperson: So, the consultation has been done, and now you will approve the policy.

Mrs Stewart: Yes. We have taken account of the comments. I think that the previous Committee asked to be informed of what we were proposing to do. So, this is now the final policy, subject to Executive agreement. If we get Executive agreement, we hope to launch the policy at the beginning of the next school year.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. It is much appreciated.