



Save the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme

Background information

The UK's School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme is part of the 5 A DAY programme to increase fruit and vegetable consumption. Under the scheme, all four to six year old children in LEA maintained infant, primary and special schools are entitled to a free piece of fruit or vegetable each school day. Around two million children at Key Stage One in over 16,000 schools receive a free piece of fruit or vegetable every day, securing extensive coverage of around 99 per cent of eligible schools. In addition, the Scheme is benefiting a significant number of younger children at nursery schools.

Many UK fresh produce businesses, members of the Fresh Produce Consortium (FPC), have been involved in the successful UK School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme since its introduction in 2004. Currently there are around 20 companies involved in supplying/distributing under the Scheme, mostly small to medium sized businesses, located around the English regions. For many of these companies the Scheme is a significant part of their trade, and its restructuring or removal could have a devastating impact on overall business viability.

The School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme in the UK has contributed to a successful increase in consumption: a September 2007 report found that five-a-day consumption among school children had risen from 32% in 2004 to 44% in 2006, and the number of portions consumed increased to a point where on average 50% of children in the scheme were close to achieving their 5 A DAY target.

At that time Health Minister, Ben Bradshaw said: "The SFVS is important in underpinning the Government's commitment to healthy eating in schools. It provides an opportunity for children to try out new food particularly vegetables, and for them to become accustomed to eating them as part of their daily diet."

An evaluation of the Scheme undertaken in 2008 concluded that:

- compared to measures taken in 2004 (before the implementation of the Scheme) children who received the Scheme eat more fruit and vegetables than those who did not;
- the Scheme has greater influence in increasing consumption through the school environment than in the home;
- children are encouraged to try new fruit and vegetables that they might not have tried otherwise;
- the Scheme supports the efficacy of focusing interventions on younger children to shape longer term eating behaviours.

The average consumption of fresh fruit and vegetable among young children in the UK is woefully below the recommended 5 A DAY at around 2.5 servings a day, and this Scheme has quickly established its credentials to establish healthy eating habits at an early age and raise consumption levels among participating schoolchildren.

Obesity and poor diet among children is a rising epidemic across Europe; nearly one in three 10-11 year olds in the UK is overweight, and NHS costs to tackle obesity in England are over £3 billion. An ambitious programme is needed to tackle this public health issue, and the School Fruit

and Vegetable Scheme is ideally placed as a means of encouraging young schoolchildren to eat more fruit and vegetables. The Scheme has been recognised for its potential to contribute to a reduction of heart disease, stroke and cancer later in life. Support for the scheme is significant both nationally and locally due to its successful delivery and proven results, and any potential reduction or loss is likely to have a significant long-term backlash from schools, parents and local businesses.

If the scheme is devolved to the 150 PCTs the scheme will become less cost effective, losing critical economies of scale, for example, volumes of produce supplied, flexible distribution system via depots and resourcing. This will entail significantly more resource for suppliers in terms of approaching and securing contracts on a piecemeal basis, contradicting the Government's aim to reduce bureaucracy for the food industry and simplify trade.

The Schools Fruit and Vegetable Scheme supports the delivery of home grown produce, whilst recognising the need to include imported produce to provide a diverse range of products available throughout the year. Devolving to individual PCTs could lead to a misled but well-intentioned aim to source as much locally grown fresh produce as possible, which would prove extremely difficult to achieve throughout the school year, and which would result in unnecessary limitations in the variety of produce available to schoolchildren. This in turn could switch off many pupils to the enjoyment of eating a wide range of fresh fruit and vegetables. It would be nonsensical to insist that a local supplier should only provide the school with fresh produce grown within the region. For example, UK apple production takes place mainly in Kent, which would mean that the majority of the UK would not be able to enjoy this product.

Defra's Fruit and Veg Task Force has recognised the value of the Schools Fruit and Vegetable Scheme in delivering its key objectives of increasing UK production of fresh produce and encouraging greater consumption of fruit and vegetables among the UK consumers.

Alternative schemes which aim to deliver fresh produce into the classroom are often more resource intensive for schools and more costly to sustain. If the UK Government is seeking effective alternative ways of managing the Schools Fruit and Vegetable Scheme we would be pleased to discuss options for the UK's trade association to become involved. The UK's Scheme led the way and encouraged the development of the EU scheme. There could be an opportunity for the Exchequer to minimise costs by using available EU funding, with the industry's Eat In Colour campaign providing the required educational element of the EU funding requirements.

Given the recent media coverage of the Government's decision not to continue its support of Change4Life and to seek funding from the larger food producers, there is concern that the essential focus on eating fresh fruit and vegetables, particularly among young children, could be lost. The fresh produce industry's Eat In Colour campaign to encourage people of all ages to enjoy eating fresh produce – www.eatincolour.com – is well placed to help promote healthy eating messages to key audiences.

We urge the UK Government to maintain its support of the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme including the central procurement strategy as an established and proven initiative to deliver the establishment of healthy eating habits at a critical age. We look forward to discussing with the Government how the industry can play its part in addressing this critical issue of public health. For the cost of around 10 pence a day do we really want to compromise the future health of our nation?