

Date: 17 May 2021
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Dear Gavin Williamson,

I'd like to draw your attention to the current School Food Standards for lunches in schools.

We are living in the throes of a climate emergency, and targets to reduce our emissions and improve our health and wellbeing will not be met without exploring the issue of food. To mitigate against both the worst effects of the climate crisis and a future health crisis, we need to move to a food system that maximises the health of our children along with that of our planet.

It is clear that sustainable food and farming should be at the heart of our response to the climate crisis and our health, yet school meal guidance does not reflect this. As you know, the serving of animal-derived products is currently mandatory within the School Food Standards guidelines. They state that a portion of meat or poultry must be provided in schools at least three days a week. The current standards also stipulate that children should have a portion of milk or dairy food each day.¹

However an increasing number of studies show that the best way for an individual to reduce their impact on the planet is to cut down on meat and dairy, noting the additional health benefits that can be derived from a transition to a plant-based diet.² Studies also show that an over-consumption of meat can have adverse health effects. Furthermore, the inclusion of milk as a mandatory requirement in school meals does not take into consideration the fact that more than 65% of people are lactose intolerant³, with a higher ratio among people of BAME descent. While we would not wish to prescribe a diet on any particular child nor ignore their health needs, the current school meals guidance appears out of step with the choice and variety that many children may wish to avail of, and does not align with concerns about the impact of food consumption on our climate crisis.

Here in Brighton and Hove, the wellbeing of our residents and future generations is of primary importance to us and we have committed to becoming a carbon neutral city by 2030. To help us achieve this, we'd like to be able to reduce the carbon footprint of our food as much as we can. Moreover, an increasing number of parents have told us they are keen for school meals to reflect the diversity of food and eating habits that now take place at home, and that many young people would appreciate a wider range of plant-based options.

We would like to be able to give the governing bodies, staff and most of all, children in our schools the option of going meat free if they so choose, or to at least be able to increase the number of plant-based options in schools. However, the current National Food Standards

¹ [School-Food-Standards-Guidance-FINAL-V3.pdf \(schoolfoodplan.com\)](#)

² [Science Journals — AAAS \(josephpoore.com\)](#)

³ [Country, regional, and global estimates for lactose malabsorption in adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis - The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology](#)

on school meals means we are unable to go as far as we'd like to.

I can see that the Government has acknowledged this and there is a way forward. I'm very pleased that the Government's advice on a healthy, balanced diet, the Eatwell Guide, acknowledges the benefit of plant-based eating by putting beans and pulses first in the proteins section, and advising people to eat more of these.⁴ Applying guidelines based on the Eatwell standards to schools would make it possible for schoolchildren to be served plant-based meals at lunchtimes. But unfortunately, the somewhat anachronistic requirement that mandates schools to serve animal-derived food limits schools' capacity to offer different, varied and more climate-friendly foods to our children.

Therefore, my request is for school meals guidelines to be brought in line with the government's own nutritional advice to the public outlined in the Eatwell Guide.

This could be achieved by:

- Updating the School Food Standards for lunches in schools by removing the requirement for meat and poultry to be served a minimum of three times a week and for milk to be served daily. The nutritional requirements could remain the same, but schools should have the option of serving foods from non-animal sources with a similar nutritional content.
- Suggesting that all schools have one meat-free, plant-based protein day per week, with animal product-based meals still available, as a "special meal" on such days, ensuring that dietary requirements are met.
- Allowing schools to serve a plant-free menu on more than one day, should they choose to.

The high number of children attending climate strike protests in recent years has shown how passionately young people care about the impact our lifestyles are having on the planet. It's our responsibility to improve the provision of plant-based meals in schools, to make it easier for young people to eat in a way that is kinder to the world that they will inherit, and that also broadens choice and variety in our school meal offer.

By improving the school meals guidance, I believe we can also seek to simultaneously educate our children about the whole cycle of food production and consumption. Learning about the impact of food on our health and on our planet at an early age, through education and offering more varied food choices, has the potential to become fundamental to our children's education; and can help future generations develop good eating habits.

I would be grateful if you could consider changing the standards to incorporate these suggestions so that we are able to feed our children in a more sustainable way. It would send out signals that, as a Government, you are serious about addressing the climate and biodiversity crisis - and improving the health of our children.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Elaine Hills
Deputy Chair of the Children, Young People and Skills Committee, Brighton and Hove City Council

⁴ [Eatwell guide 2016 FINAL MAR29 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)