

Bristol Green Party School Food Policy

Existing party policy

- School food is clearly an important issue for the Bristol Green Party.

Nationally, the Green Party is committed to

- local procurement of school food by local authorities (<http://tinyurl.com/m6klc>)
- banning all harmful additives in school meals
- focus on primary rather than secondary school food (<http://www.greenparty.org.uk/news/1906>)

The Green Party's recently approved policy on Health also includes a section on school food.

'The Green Party believes a good diet is so important in the promotion of good health that all schools will be obliged to have their own kitchen so as to be able to provide for each child a freshly prepared lunch each day, using fresh, organic and local produce wherever possible. Food provided by schools must include both vegetarian and vegan options. We would continue the school Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, with a strong preference for organic and local produce. Such meals will be free to all children and will be paid for out of increased taxation: we believe that the consequent improvement in health will dramatically reduce the costs of illness and social care to the NHS and other public services. Junk foods and vending machines will become unavailable in state schools.'

There is a great deal of research that shows that children's eating habits significantly affect their behaviour and ability to concentrate. Attitudes towards food and cooking are also shaped during childhood and it is extremely important that children get into good nutritional habits, e.g. eating plenty of fruit and vegetables. Favouring locally produced food is not only a way of stimulating the local economy, it also reduces food miles and the associated greenhouse gas emissions.

Our school food policy for Bristol should focus on concrete, achievable ways of putting these ideals into practice. This is an area where we can demonstrate our commitment to both local food and education.

Government policy

Having set up the Schools Food Trust (www.schoolfoodtrust.org) in 2005, the government has now introduced new standards for school food. By 2008:

- no confectionery will be sold in schools at lunchtime
- no bagged savoury snacks other than nuts and seeds (without added salt or sugar) will be sold in schools;
- a variety of fruit and vegetables should be available in all school food outlets. This could include fresh, dried, frozen, canned or juiced varieties;
- easy access at all times to free, fresh drinking water in schools;
- not less than two portions of fruit and vegetables per child per day
- oily fish at least once every three weeks
- manufactured meat subject to some restrictions
- no more than two deep fried items per week
- no fizzy, sugary drinks

More details are available at: <http://tinyurl.com/fpxy8>

These guidelines are fine as far as they go. However, they are clearly very minimal, and fall far short of the recommendations of the Soil Associations' Food For Life programme, both in

terms of nutrition, and in terms of sustainability. The Soil Association has done heroic pioneering work in this area, and is of course Bristol-based.

The Food For Life targets:

<http://www.soilassociation.org/foodforlife>

- School lunches should aim to provide food that meets the nutrition targets set by Caroline Walker Trust. (<http://www.cwt.org.uk/pdfs/eatingwell.pdf>). These have been largely incorporated into the government guidelines.
- At least 75% of all foods made from unprocessed ingredients
- At least 50% of ingredients sourced from local region (50 mile radius)
- At least 30% of food from certified organic sources.
- Better classroom education on food, and all children should visit a farm at least once during their time at school.

Under the government guidelines, school caterers can continue to serve large amounts of processed and pre-prepared food. See for example the sample menu for Bristol primary schools at: <http://tinyurl.com/rel7c> Most of the options are clearly pre-prepared, processed, and cooked from frozen, including vegetables. Food that sounds appetising in theory is often badly cooked and poorly presented in practice. For example, 'breakfast clubs' serve cheap white sliced bread, margarine and strawberry jam.

Bristol City Council contract caterers, who provide much of the food in Bristol schools, will be able to meet the government targets without substantially changing the way they prepare and serve meals. This will particularly affect children from underprivileged backgrounds, especially those on free school meals, who do not necessarily get nutritionally balanced meals at home. For many children, their school meal is the only hot meal of the day.

Schools who have managed to transform their food culture, both in Bristol and nationwide, have generally done so by terminated their contract with local authority contract caterers and taking catering 'in-house'. Bristol schools which have done this include Cotham, Withywood and the City Academy. The changes in catering in these schools appear to be very successful (although not necessarily in line with the Food for Life targets) and have generally led to large increases in uptake of school meals.

Taking catering in-house will not necessarily be an option for every school, though, especially smaller and primary schools, as it requires substantial financial investment and great commitment on the part of the head teacher. (Whitehall Primary School is in the process of taking its catering in-house and will be the first primary school to do so. Also in the primary sector, Southdown Community Nursery and Infant School in Bath was part of the Soil Association's Food for Life pilot.) It is therefore very important that BCC Contract Catering Services improve their provision within schools. Only in this way can we ensure that *all* Bristol children will eat well at school

There is also a need to review per child spend on school meals. At the moment, the spend per primary school child is about 55p. Schools that approach the Food for Life targets generally spend rather more than this, sometimes up to 85p per child. See the Soil Association press release at <http://tinyurl.com/o2wym>. The School Meals Review Panel recommended a minimum spend of 70p for primary pupils and 80p for secondary school pupils. (See also the recent *Observer* story at: <http://tinyurl.com/qfcq2>) Raising the cost per child may, however, only be possible in schools in affluent areas. Many parents cannot afford to spend more than the current £1.55 per meal, and would withdraw their children from school meals were they to become more expensive. Other local authorities do do better, though. According to the Soil Association, 'In Bradford, the amount spent on school meal ingredients per child has risen by 14p since May 2005 to 60p. 20% of the food served is

local, along with organic carrots and milk. Despite this, the price paid by parents has remained low (£1.25) and uptake is well above average, at 56%.'

Sustainability and food miles are also a major issue. One school involved in the Food for Life pilot reduced its average food miles per menu item from 330 to 99. There are also issues about certain ingredients e.g. overexploited white fish. See the excellent report by the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable on sustainability and school meals at:

<http://tinyurl.com/rdcch>

In terms of ensuring that schools serve local food, one option would be to develop a Local Food Strategy along the lines of South Gloucestershire's: <http://tinyurl.com/qwe36>

See also the Local Food Works case study on South Gloucestershire:

<http://tinyurl.com/lf238>

In relation to school food, this would involve sourcing as much locally produced food as possible. Particularly, food purchasing contracts need to reserve the right to purchase products which best meet requirements of price and suitability i.e. priority to local suppliers who source meat/vegetables in the area.

Policy suggestions:

1. BCC and Contract Services to work together towards Food for Life, rather than government targets.
2. BCC to develop Local Food Strategy, which would include guidelines on procurement of food for all Contract Services catering. This issue goes beyond school meals to include e.g. meal provision for the elderly.
3. BCC/Contract Services to review ingredient spend per child, with the aim of raising it to the 70p (primary school)/ 80p (secondary school) minimum recommended by the School Food Review and the Soil Association.
4. BCC/Contract Services to conduct regular sustainability audits of school catering.
5. Provision of adequate training and equipment for catering staff, for example as delivered by Jeannette Orrey at Ashlyn organic farm in Essex. Kitchen staff should feel valued for their cooking skills, and their ability to act as educators.
6. Vegetarian and vegan options to be available to all children.
7. No confectionary, savoury snacks other than unsalted nuts and seeds, or fizzy drinks to be sold in schools at any time. Vending machines selling unhealthy snacks to be banned.
8. Ban on harmful additives in school meals
9. Involvement of children and parents in planning and provision of school food, including e.g. advising parents on nutritional content of packed lunches.
10. Contract services to take action to minimise waste, and to either compost food waste on site, or make arrangements for it to be composted locally.