

Speech: Nadhim Zahawi's speech at the Children's Future Food Inquiry

It is a pleasure to be with you today for the launch of the recommendations from the Children's Future Food Inquiry. Thank you so much for inviting me to this event.

I am particularly pleased to be hearing from the Inquiry's young food ambassadors today and I believe it is critical that young people have a strong voice in shaping provision. I welcome this opportunity to listen to your views on how we can build a healthier future for children.

I also know that this report has been informed by the experiences of teachers, youth workers, carers, GPs and other practitioners, alongside hundreds of children and young people. I welcome the dedication and expertise that has contributed to this report.

The government will reflect carefully on the report over the coming months and will consider how we can best respond to the important issues raised.

This morning, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight several significant actions that the government is currently taking to support healthy eating, particularly among families on lower incomes. I believe that many of these actions relate very closely to the recommendations highlighted in today's report, and firmly believe that we are working towards a shared overall ambition.

The government is committed to ensuring that children are well nourished and develop healthy eating habits that stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Healthy eating not only supports children's health but also has an important contribution to make in ensuring children are able to concentrate and learn in schools, and therefore achieve their potential in life.

My department plays a critical role in providing healthy, nutritious food for children, delivered through a range of programmes targeted towards the most disadvantaged children. This is part of our strong commitment to promoting social mobility and ensuring equality of opportunity for every child.

The government is keen to support children during the school holidays, and today's report highlights the issues that may arise during these breaks.

For most children, holidays should mean fun experiences and a chance to make lasting memories. We want to make these opportunities available to all children, regardless of their background, and we also want to make sure that children are eating healthily during the holidays.

In summer 2018, our new holiday activities and food programme supported more than 18,000 disadvantaged children – giving them access to nutritious meals

and fun activities.

Following this successful programme we have now increased funding to £9 million for this summer and aim to improve further on the success of the 2018 programme.

I am exceptionally proud of this programme, and I would like to thank everyone who has been involved – including Lindsay Graham, here for her work with Feeding Britain, one of the seven organisations that received funding last year.

We know that these clubs are located in a range of different types of setting and staffed by a wide range of people, often giving their time for free. We want to help these clubs, and the people who work in them, to improve what they can offer to children. We are particularly interested in establishing what type of provision works best and how provision can be effectively coordinated locally.

I am very proud that also, under the Childhood Obesity Plan, my department is investing up to £26 million in the National Schools Breakfast Programme, as delivered by the charity Family Action in partnership with Magic Breakfast. This programme is setting up or improving more than 1,700 breakfast clubs in schools in the most disadvantaged areas across the country.

A healthy breakfast can play a vital role in ensuring children can concentrate, learn and reach their full potential.

I recently visited a breakfast club in Battersea, and its school leaders, teachers and children were overwhelmingly positive about the whole-school impact of their club.

The government strongly values the importance of providing a free healthy school meal to the most disadvantaged children.

Last year, over a million disadvantaged children were eligible for and claimed a free meal at school. In recent years, the government has expanded free school meals provision in several important ways.

Firstly, from September 2014 free meals were extended to disadvantaged Further Education students for the first time.

We have also given free meals to all infant children in England's state-funded schools; resulting in 1.5 million more infants receiving a free school lunch.

In addition, under our revised criteria for free school meals – introduced last April – we estimate that more children will benefit from free meals by 2022, compared to the previous benefits system.

We have also introduced generous transitional protections so that all children will keep their free meals during the change to the new criteria.

Through these free meals, the government is making an important and positive

contribution for many disadvantaged children.

Today's report rightly highlights that children should not feel in any way stigmatised in receiving their free school meals. We know that many schools have found positive ways to address this issue, including engaging well with families and making the most of new technologies available.

To support this, my department provides an online Eligibility Checking System – a simple and rapid online portal for determining children's eligibility for free school meals. We also provide schools with a model registration form and guidance to make it as easy as possible for children to be registered.

Of course, if we are providing free school meals to the most disadvantaged children, we must ensure that those meals meet a high standard of nutrition and quality. Foods high in fat, salt and sugar are restricted by our School Food Standards, and we are now updating them to reduce sugar even further.

This is one of the key ways the Government has committed to improving children's health under the Childhood Obesity Plan, which involves a number of key departments such as the Department of Health, Ofsted and Department for Culture Media and Sport working together to improve health outcomes for all children of all backgrounds.

As a result, we will continue to ensure that the meals children receive in schools are healthy, nutritious and of the highest quality. And as today's report highlights, I know that many children are keen to be involved in shaping the menus offered in schools. I would encourage them to make their voices heard by their school leaders.

Today's report has also highlighted the importance of healthy meals in early years settings.

I would like to take this opportunity to promote the menus and guidance that Public Health England published in November 2017. This guidance supports settings in meeting the Early Years Foundation Stage welfare requirement to provide 'healthy, balanced and nutritious' meals for children.

Before I finish, I would briefly like to touch on a couple of other interesting aspects from today's report.

The report proposes placing a tax on unhealthy foods and using the proceeds to support children. Of course, our government has already taken an important action in this area by introducing the Soft Drinks Industry Levy in 2018.

This incentivises industry to reduce the sugar content of soft drinks. The proceeds from this levy have been used to support important programmes for children's health, including investing up to £26 million in school breakfast clubs in disadvantaged areas, as well as investing in our £320 million 'PE and Sport Premium' for primary schools.

The report also made recommendations around the marketing of unhealthy foods and the availability of these foods near schools. The government is keen to protect children from advertising that encourages demand for unhealthy food,

and is currently consulting on proposals to reduce children's exposure to such advertising.

And finally, I fully understand the importance of listening to the views of children on this issue.

It is vital that government considers children's views, alongside expertise from practitioners and the best available evidence. In addition, I know that many school leaders and local partners are taking positive steps locally to involve children in shaping provision in their schools and communities.

Overall, the Government is truly committed to delivering a country that works for everyone. We are determined to ensure that we target our support as effectively as possible towards the children that are most in need. I am very keen to hear from you about what we can all do to help address these issues, and we will reflect carefully on the recommendations contained in this report.

Thank you again for inviting me to this launch event today and I hope that we can continue to work together to ensure all children are healthy and well nourished.