

Edinburgh councillor blogs – Councillor Mary Campbell on school meals

Mary Campbell welcomes progress on school lunches but says there is an opportunity to go so much further.

This week my son will eat the first school lunch he has had in 2018. While he had a few meals when he started Primary 1, he soon asked to stop, preferring packed lunches instead. I will watch with interest to see if this attempt lasts longer than the last. I imagine similar choices are being made in thousands of families across the city. However, I also have a slightly wider perspective on school meals as I also sit on the Education, Children and Families Committee, which has oversight over the lunches produced for our city schools.

Green councillors have been driving for improvements to school lunches for the last five years – beginning with the horsemeat scandal in 2013 and focused on expanding “[Food for Life](#)” accreditation to more schools. While schools as a whole sit at bronze level only a handful have achieved silver. While progress is being made, almost every meeting I attend with parents and carers, I’m told that things could still improve.

✘ When I was at school, food was produced on site for us to eat. Now we have only some schools with production kitchens, which deliver hot food to other schools nearby. This causes issues with food quality, as some items do not sit well, even in specialised transport containers. It also leads to a more limited range of options, as the focus is on mass produced, easily transported items. There have been improvements, with more fresh fruit for puddings, less sugar in meals, and many schools offering a salad bar. There is still much that could be done to give children more freshly

prepared food, and the council is looking into reopening school kitchens where it can.

Green councillors have also been pushing to reduce the amount of packaging involved in school meals, and at the last Education, Children and Families Committee we heard how the council is working with partners to reduce the amount of plastic waste. This ranges from new biodegradable packaging solutions, to simple solutions like water bottles being optional in the Friday packed lunches.

At the most recent Committee meeting I also secured agreement to roll out a parent survey on school meals, and a feedback card for pupils. While the current menu does offer an email address that could be used for feedback, currently the council does not actively seek input on school meals. Feedback from children and families is key to learning which areas of the service most need improved. It may be everyone loves the pasta bolognese and falafel pitta breads, but struggles to eat the baked potatoes and roast chicken dinner. While menu selection does offer a clue into what children like (and unpopular options are dropped from the menu), it may be that an item is popular just because it is the least worst option. Actively gathering feedback will allow the council to tease this out, and discover which meals need the most improvement.

Council staff are doing amazing work delivering 18,000 hot school meals a day. As a parent and as a member of the Education, Children and Families Committee, I want to see that we are always looking to improve our children's lunches. At a time when, for some children, this is their only hot meal in a day, it is our responsibility to make sure it is the best and most appetising that it can be.

Mary Campbell is Green Education spokesperson.