

22 March 2005

Penny Jones  
Department for Education and Skills  
Mowden Hall  
Staindrop Road  
Darlington  
DL3 9BG

Dear Penny

### **DfES School Food Consultation**

I am pleased to respond to the current school food consultation on behalf of the Children's Food Bill Campaign, which is co-ordinated by Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming. A draft of this response has been circulated for comment to all 126 national organisations which currently support the campaign (see Appendix I).

Our response does not address the questions outlined in your letter, as these presuppose that we see the proposed School Food Trust as a positive step forward. Rather, we are concerned that the proposed Trust is an unnecessary diversion away from the implementation of clear measures to address the poor quality of food in schools.

We believe that DfES should lead improvement, rather than passing responsibility to the proposed body, which represents an unnecessary additional layer of bureaucracy. We point to the improved quality in the school meal provision in Scotland following 'Hungry for Success', which has been achieved by the implementation of meaningful, mandatory standards and a substantial £65M investment in infrastructure, but notably without the establishment of a School Food Trust.

Parents are concerned about the poor quality of school meals, as shown by the overwhelming support we have received for the Children's Food Bill. However, this concern does not necessarily equate to support for a School Food Trust. Instead, it highlights the need for decisive Government action to implement mandatory criteria and to provide sufficient funding. We are disappointed that the recent Department of Health's Food and Health Action Plan does not specify any additional funding for school meals.

We note that the Government's strategy to "strongly consider including nutrient-based standards" is not a firm commitment to make sure this happens. In addition to nutrient-based standards, the Government should implement mandatory criteria which take account of all factors which affect children's food and health. These include the presence of food additives, contaminants and agrochemical residues, and consideration of food production processes, such as genetic modification. The Government should also ensure that all food provided in schools is sustainably produced and, wherever possible sourced locally, in line with Defra's Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative.

The Children's Food Bill aims to introduce such stringent criteria and in so doing will ensure that all school meals improve the health of children, and that food and drink products which undermine their health are not available in schools. In addition, the Bill will support a whole school approach by ensuring that all children learn practical food skills, like cooking and growing. Please see the enclosed campaign leaflet and visit [www.childrensfoodbill.org.uk](http://www.childrensfoodbill.org.uk) for more information.

We strongly support the commitment in the Food and Health Action Plan that Ofsted inspects food in schools. DfES should work closely with other Government departments and all the relevant interested and representative organisations to ensure that the mandatory standards to be inspected by Ofsted are comprehensive and meaningful.

Moreover, if DfES does take forward the idea of a School Food Trust, the central involvement of organisations working in the public interest would be essential. Without this involvement, there is a danger that industry interests would overly influence the Trust's work. As long-term advocates for healthy school food environments, Sustain and its membership would be well-positioned to ensure that the Trust's policies were in the best interests of children's health.

Finally, we are concerned that this consultation has not been afforded the normal period of three months for response set by the Government. This presents a problem for alliances, such as ourself, which need to consult internally prior to formal submission of their responses.

Yours sincerely

Charlie Powell  
Project Officer, Children's Food Bill  
Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming