



POLICY SUBMISSION

**Submission to the Department of Social,
Community and Family Affairs on its
evaluation of the School Meals Scheme**

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1. Introduction

The Agency, as the statutory advisory body on policy to combat poverty, welcomes the formal evaluation of the school meals scheme being undertaken by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. This is being conducted as part of the Department's ongoing series of expenditure programme evaluations under the strategic management initiative. The framework for the evaluation is most comprehensive. We also note the establishment of an inter-agency group to oversee the evaluation and to seek the views of interested parties. It is important that the review also applies the poverty-proofing procedure as set out under the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy* (NAPS).¹

This review is of particular interest to the Agency given the priority given to child poverty in our strategic plan.² The Agency's policy on child poverty is outlined in our recent submission on the National Children's Strategy to the Department of Health and Children.³ The Agency's submission is informed by our forthcoming research report on child poverty and our experience of measures to tackle educational disadvantage under the Peace and Reconciliation Programme and the Educational Disadvantage Demonstration Programme. The former includes a £90,000 subvention for Drogheda Schools Community Programme, under which school meals are provided throughout the school day. The Agency has also examined the UK experience of school meal provision, where the issue has been prioritised by the new Labour Government.

The Agency believes that the school meals scheme has considerable potential as a policy response to child poverty, in particular the problems of inadequate nutrition and educational failure. While currently a residual measure, the policy potential of the scheme is considerable. For this to occur, a major root and branch reform is required, based on a strategic and quality response to malnutrition in school children.

The Agency's submission has the following components:

- the social and policy context of the scheme;
- the operation of the scheme;
- the scheme's effectiveness and efficiency;
- other models of school meal provision;
- conclusions and recommendations.

2. The policy context of the school meals scheme

The school meals scheme has been a long-established element of welfare support for low-income school-going families. A key starting point in evaluating the scheme is

¹ Ireland (1999), *Social inclusion strategy. 1998/99 Annual report of the Interdepartmental Policy Committee*, Dublin: Stationery Office. See chapter 2 and appendix C in particular.

² Actions include research on child poverty using the Living in Ireland, increasing public awareness of child poverty (the *Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative*, operated in partnership with four child welfare organisations) and developing policy proposals to tackling child poverty. Drawing on these various actions, the Agency is organising a major conference in July 2000, along with a number of regional seminars, on the topic of child poverty.

³ Combat Poverty Agency (2000), *A better future for children: eliminating poverty, promoting equality*. The central proposal in the submission is the introduction of a minimum income payment of £30-£40 per week for children in need, based on a combination of an enhanced child benefit of £25 per week and an age-related, means-tested child supplement of £5-£15. It also proposed that the state should meet the full costs of educational participation for low-income children.

therefore to revisit its original policy aim of assisting children who are unable to benefit fully from education due to lack of food, and to assess its continued policy relevance. In effect, the scheme straddles two objectives:

- provision of an indirect income subsidy to cover the cost of a school lunch – an income support measure;
- supplementation of children's food intake so as to enhance their capacity to learn – a nutrition measure.

Before examining each of these two objectives, it is important to look at the wider social context for the scheme, in particular child poverty and educational disadvantage.

2.1 *child poverty and educational disadvantage*

Child poverty is a key backdrop to the provision of school meals, especially as it restricts children's consumption of food. Table 1 below reveals that one-in-four children (defined as under 14 years) live in households experiencing income poverty.⁴ The figure places Ireland amongst those countries with the highest levels of child poverty in Europe. Of particular concern are children who experience severe poverty, as measured by a combination of low income and (household) deprivation of basic necessities. The definition of basic necessities includes two food-related items: a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day and having to go without a substantial meal in the last 2 weeks. These are obviously of particular importance given the focus on the school meals scheme on lack of food. In 1997, 16.9% of children were in households below 60% of average income and experiencing basic deprivation. Unfortunately, measurement of individual deprivation indicators is not currently available, but would be worth investigating to ascertain food deprivation.

There has been a gradual worsening of the position of children in the last 25 years, peaking in 1994 with 29.5% in income poverty, and improving somewhat in 1997 to 26%, still up by half on the baseline 1973 figure.⁵ The trend in regard to poverty and deprivation is also downwards, falling by a third from highs of 24.8% (1987) and 23.5% (1994). It is interesting to note that children are up to twice as likely to be in poverty as are adults and that there are 50% more poor Irish children than on average in Europe. Poor children are concentrated (69%) in families not in work, reflecting adult unemployment as well as entire households with no one in paid work.

⁴ These and other figures re child poverty are taken from Nolan, B (forthcoming), *Child poverty in Ireland*, Dublin: Oak Tress Press and Combat Poverty Agency.

⁵ Taking a lower (40%) poverty cut-off line reveals a different trend, with a significant rise in the poverty risk for children (from 8% to 13.2%), while the adult rate also increases to 9.1%. Meanwhile, up-rating the 1987 60% poverty line by inflation to 1997, shows a marked fall in the poverty risk for children (from 37.8% to 17.2%), but still substantially higher than for adults (11.4%).

Table 1: Percentages of children in income poverty (50% line) and experiencing income poverty (60% line) and deprivation, 1973-97 (%)

	1973	1980	1987	1994	1997
Income poverty	16.2	18.5	25.5	29.5	26
Poverty + Deprivation	n/a	n/a	24.8	23.5	16.9

This deterioration in the welfare of children reflects a wider dis-improvement in the financial position of households with children, due to a combination of factors such as unemployment, lone parenthood, etc. These trends have been compounded by the low level of child income support, particularly for those reliant exclusively on welfare payments to meet basic necessities. Earlier research by the Agency on the minimum costs of a child, up-rated by inflation to 1999, indicates an income range of £19 to £43.70 depending on age, with an average of £32.10. (Inflation can be seen as a minimum increase, which does not take account of rising living standards for children).⁶ The current basic combined payment for children on welfare (child benefit + child dependant allowances) is much less than this figure, at £21.16 per week.

Another contextual issue for school meals is under-achievement in education or educational disadvantage. Educational disadvantage is widely recognised as a structural phenomenon in society, which involves children from low-income backgrounds performing less well in school than their better-off counterparts.⁷ Its significance is multi-faceted: education is the key to subsequent job prospects and earning capacity; it also shapes people's personal and social development. An estimated 16% of school children experience educational disadvantage.⁸ Disadvantage is reflected in lower educational achievement and shorter time spent in school. Two recent trends have enhanced the significance of educational disadvantage:

- **rising levels of educational attainment**

Educational attainment has risen in recent years, in particular in terms of third-level qualifications. In turn, the influence of educational attainment on job and career prospects has increased. Equally, the association between low education standards and the risk of unemployment and of poverty has intensified. Educational attainment is more and more recognised as the key factor in determining life opportunities. Hence, children who leave school before formal completion of junior and senior cycle are at a grave disadvantage in a credential-based society. Also of importance is the age at which schooling begins, with early education being reflected in subsequent performance.

- **concentrated pattern of educational disadvantage**

⁶ Carney, C et al, 1994, *The cost of a child*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

⁷ Kelleghan, T et al (1995), *Educational disadvantage in Ireland*, Dublin: Department of Education, Combat Poverty Agency and Educational Research Centre

⁸ *op cit*

With the overall improvement in educational participation rates, differentials in education attainment have intensified, with early school leavers more disadvantaged than before. This polarisation in education is particular evident as children move up the school system, with a stubborn cohort of c5,000 children who continue to leave school early, including 1,000 who never attend secondary school. These are almost entirely drawn from lower socio-economic groups. Educational disadvantage is also more concentrated in particular schools, between national schools serving particular localities and between the vocational sector and other sectors at second level.

Extensive levels of child poverty and educational disadvantage provide the context for an indepth examination of the continued relevance of the two related objectives of the school meals scheme: income support and food supplementation.

2.2 an income support

The provision of additional support for low-income families/children to assist with school-related costs is the most obvious welfare aspect of the scheme. Education, while nominally free, has always assumed a significant parental contribution. This is evident in the responsibility placed on parents to meet various costs associated with attending school: uniforms, books, meals, transport, extra-curricular activities; as well as to make a 'voluntary contribution' to the operating costs of schools. Various bodies, including the Agency, have sought to measure the financial impact of education on low-income families.⁹ These reveal quite significant expenditure demands, both in absolute and percentage terms, on already tight family budgets. For example, an Agency study suggests that education costs represent 8 and 16 per cent of the weekly minimum costs of rearing a child. School lunch is a relatively modest component of the package of school related costs, estimated at between £1.37 and £2.74 per day in 1992.¹⁰ Indications of the burden imposed on low-income families by education costs are provided in the PAUL Partnership research and the Agency's (1988) study on moneylending.¹¹ These reveal the huge financial budgeting pressure placed on families and their extensive use of moneylenders to meet school costs.

There is however little direct evidence that the costs of a school lunch discourage children from attending school given the modest level of expenditure involved. It is more likely that collective school costs add to the financial pressures on families to make ends meet and intensify their deprivation of basic necessities. Such a sustained level of deprivation may in turn be linked to a gradual withdrawal from everyday activities including, in this instance, participation in education. Meanwhile, the costs of educational are likely to have intensified in recent years as:

- **increased expense in attending school**

Higher school costs derive from three sources: increases in the basic costs of school uniforms, shoes, lunches; expansion of the school curriculum, requiring

⁹ National Parents Council (Primary) (1990), *The cost of free education: a survey in the cost to parents of free primary education in Ireland*, Dublin: author.

O'Donoghue, M, *Educational costs and welfare provision for low income families*, Limerick: PAUL Partnership Limerick.

Carney, C, Fitzgerald, E, Kiely, G and Quinn, P (1994), *The cost of a child*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

¹⁰ O'Donoghue, M, *op cit*, p40

¹¹ Daly, M and Walsh, J (1988), *Moneylending and low income families*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

more books and other school materials (such as computers) to be purchased by parents; and the growth of extra-curricular activities, such as sports, drama, arts, most of which are funded through parental contributions. School lunches cost more as children demand more expensive products which are marketed at the school-going population. At the same time, the value of various school-going subventions has not kept pace with these rise in costs (including the higher education grant), thereby worsening the position of low-income families.

- **children are longer in the school system**

Attendance at pre-school education is increasingly the norm, a pattern recognised in recent government policy reports, such as the White Paper on Early Childhood Education and the Commission on the Family. At the other end of the education spectrum, children are staying longer in school, with participation in the senior cycle of secondary school is now close to 90 per cent. Again, this pattern has been endorsed by policy, including raising the mandatory school-leaving age to 15 years. There has also been a huge increase in participation in post-leaving certificate education, both certificate courses and third-level colleges. Longer time spent in school adds to the financial costs for those on low-incomes, a fact recognised by the retention of child dependent allowances for welfare-dependent families with children in education up to age 22 years.

- **higher opportunity costs associated with education**

This derives from the increase in employment opportunities for young people. Many of these new jobs require minimal qualifications and pay reasonably well. There are especially attractive to school-going children from low-income backgrounds, where parents are unable to provide spending money. The result is that the income foregone in attending school has increased.

The spiralling costs of education have increased the financial burden on low-income households with school-going children and made the provision of welfare support, such as the schools meals scheme, of even greater importance. This has been recognised in policy in recent years, with an enhanced package of education-related welfare supports having an important role to play in promoting participation in education.¹² For example, the NAPS identifies 'increased support towards the cost of participation in education for welfare dependent and low income families, thereby eliminating barriers to education' as a key policy action in tackling educational disadvantage (p10). This welfare approach is also reflected in the proposed establishment of an Education Welfare Board to address non-attendance at school.

The school meals scheme is also part of a wider welfare policy to improve provision of non-cash (secondary) benefits for those on low incomes as a means of assisting

¹² Other elements of this package are:

- clothing and footwear scheme
- school books scheme
- school transport scheme
- exemption from exam fees
- SWA exceptional needs payments for First Communion and Confirmation
- higher education grant.

There have been a few research reports on these school benefits, including work by the PAUL Partnership (1992), *Educational costs and welfare provision for low income families*, a review of the school meals scheme by Goodbody Economic Consultants for the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, and also a HEA study on the higher education grant scheme.

with specific living costs, eg healthcare, accommodation. These benefits have assumed a greatly enhanced role in the welfare system in the '90s and were valued at £491m in 1997 (10.4 per cent of total welfare expenditure), which is double the 1990 cost.¹³ Reflecting this trend, non-cash benefits have been to the fore in recent policy debates about the transition from welfare to work.

2.3 a food and nutritional supplement

A second objective of the school meals scheme is to counter a shortage of food among low-income children. Food and nutrition are crucial aspects of a child's development in terms of good health and cognitive development. While there is little evidence of children going without food in modern Ireland, inadequate food and nutritional intake among children is a major concern. Low-income can influence children's food and nutritional intake in a number of ways. First, low-income households spend less on food than high-income groups, even though in proportional terms, their expenditure on various food groups is similar to other income categories. This suggests that the main constraint on food consumption is inadequate income rather than incorrect choice.¹⁴ Second, if food costs rise or income falls, resulting in a significant reduction in the purchasing power of low-income families, food selection narrows to those items providing most energy at least cost. In this scenario, some essential nutrient foods are partially or wholly eliminated from diet and malnutrition is likely.¹⁵ Third, accessibility and storage issues can influence the choice of food items, such as a preference for frozen over fresh foods.

There is considerable evidence as to the inferior nutritional status of low-income families. A study by Lee and Gibney in West Tallaght in the late 1980s found that

(t)he range of foods consumed was very limited and there was little variation in the food eaten from week to week....Diets were characterised by high consumption of milk, bread and potatoes, and a low consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. Economic clearly played a role in the types of meat consumed which were of the cheapest variety, eg poor quality beef, mince, sausages, frozen beefburgers, chicken and bacon.....Tinned peas and beans were the most commonly used vegetables, but carrots were also regularly eaten in stews. Fresh fruit was considered a luxury; a bag of apples or oranges was the usual weekly purchase of fruit, whatever the family size.¹⁶

As a consequence, the researchers noted comparative deficiencies in vitamin C and iron intakes among children, in particular among adolescent girls.

Recent data (1998) on the food and nutrition intake of children are provided in the Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey of 9-17 year olds.¹⁷ In general, the survey revealed a major gap between recommended dietary guidelines and the eating habits of school children. It also showed significant age, gender and class

¹³ See Goodbody Economic Consultants report for the Department of Social, Community and family Affairs (1998) entitled *The disincentive effects of secondary benefits* for a discussion of what constitutes a secondary benefit.

¹⁴ Goodbody Economic Consultants (1998), *A review of the school meals scheme*. A report to the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, p15

¹⁵ Gormley, T.R (1988), 'Review of poverty, nutritional status and growth/health in Irish school children', unpublished study for the Combat Poverty Agency.

¹⁶ Lee, P and Gibney, M (1989), *Patterns of food and nutrient intake in a suburb of Dublin with chronically high unemployment.*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

¹⁷ Friel, S, NicGabhann, S and Kelleher, C (1999), *The national health and lifestyle surveys*, Dublin: Department of Health and Children and NUI Galway

differences in dietary behaviour. For instance, girls were more likely than boys to eat fruit or vegetables more than once a day. Class differentiation is apparent in the consumption of vegetables, with fewer children from unskilled classes, especially girls, eating these more than once a day. The greatest class differences emerged in regard to high fat/sugar foods, with more children from lower social classes consuming these foods frequently.

These findings are largely replicated in a similar health behaviour survey in the Eastern Health Board region.¹⁸ Again, in is in consumption of high fat/sugar foods that a class effect is most pronounced, with up to 50% more children from manual backgrounds consuming these items frequently as compared to children of professionals. Overall, both surveys demonstrate the need to increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables and to decrease the eating of high fat/sugar foods among school children, with poorer children requiring the greatest dietary change.

A study of the food and nutritional intake of low-income pupils attending five disadvantaged schools in inner city Dublin was undertaken for the Agency by Gormley et al in the late 1980s.¹⁹ Most children were found to have a moderate to good food intake in terms of quantity, but with a less than satisfactory nutritional quality. The weight/height measurements by age revealed a higher proportion of light and short children, though the effect was small except for two sub-groups. Meanwhile, a review of other health studies found that infants and school children from manual classes or from a Traveller background do less well in terms of growth and nutritional status than their better-off/settled counterparts.²⁰

How might under-nourishment affect children's education performance? There is specific evidence of the impact of inadequate nutrition on the educational performance of children in various international studies.²¹ For example, it has been found that under-nourishment can lead to greater risk of illness, making such children more likely to miss school and fall behind. Also, cognitive development and powers of concentration can be affect by nutritional deficiencies. In this context, a link between missing breakfast and inferior school performance has been identified. Conversely, the provision of an in-school breakfast can both boost attendance at school and enhance children's concentration. There are also anecdotal accounts from teachers that children who are hungry or endure poor nutrition are more difficult to teach and exhibit symptoms such as tiredness and aggression.²²

Policy concern regarding children's nutrition is reflected in the Department of Health policy guidelines on the nutritional requirements of school children, including recommended dietary allowances. They also advocate healthy eating in schools through the provision of positive in-school food options and the teaching of a comprehensive health education programme, both of which are relevant to the school meals scheme. Reinforcing the importance of these guidelines is the growing policy

¹⁸ Rhatigan, A and Shelly, E (1999), *Health behaviours of school pupils in the Eastern Health Board*, Dublin: Eastern Health Board

¹⁹ Gormley, T.R, Walshe, T and Cormican, K (1989), *Assessment of school meals and of growth, food intake and food likes/dislikes of primary school children in inner city Dublin schools*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

²⁰ Gormley, T.R (1998), 'Review of poverty, nutritional status and growth/health in Irish school children', unpublished report for the Combat Poverty Agency

²¹ Quoted in Goodbody Economic Consultants, (1998), op cit

²² INTO (1994), *Poverty and educational disadvantage - breaking the cycle*, Dublin: author, p113

concern over the legacy of inadequate food and nutrition intake during childhood on people's health status in later years.²³

2.4 the school meals scheme - still of policy relevance

This review has illustrated the continued policy relevance of the school meals scheme. Against a background of extensive child poverty and persistent educational disadvantage, school lunches provide an important support for poor school-going pupils. In the first instance, widespread level of child poverty can undermine the ability of affected families to afford the conventional costs of attending school. While the cost of school lunches per se are unlikely to pose an obstacle to attending school, they increase the school-related financial pressures on poor families, especially at time when such costs are multiplying and alternative income-earning opportunities are widespread. These pressures may make it more likely that poor children will withdraw from the educational system. Second, child poverty is also apparent in inadequate food and nutritional intake among low-income children, if not absolute levels of hunger. Again, while not a stand-alone barrier to education, poor nutrition can inhibit a child's capacity to learn. There is some evidence, mainly anecdotal in the Irish context, that better nutrition can improve children's powers of concentration.

While policy is increasingly concerned with these issues, the role of the school meals in delivering the policy response is in fact minimal. Thus, while the clothing and footwear and school books schemes have been considerably improved in recent years in an effort to minimise school costs, there have been no similar reforms in school meals. Similarly, no connections have been made between school meals and various school nutritional programmes, though the potential for synergy is obvious. Meanwhile, recent innovative education programmes have developed pre and post school food provisions, but have made no efforts to improve in-school meals. This lack of linkage can be related to two issues: first, the non-involvement of local authorities, who provide school meals, in the delivery of these new initiatives; and second, the residual importance attached by policy-makers to school meals as a policy instrument. Whatever the potential of school meals to meet contemporary needs, the operation of the scheme does not fit with current policy mechanisms and priorities. Reasons for this mismatch between need and policy response are examined next.

3. Operation of the scheme

We turn now to review the operation of the scheme. The school meals scheme incorporates two legal variants: one for urban local authority areas and one for the Gaeltacht. However, the substance of the scheme is similar in both areas. The scheme is only available in national schools, Early Start pre-schools and some special schools.

3.1 Beneficiaries and expenditure

The current number of beneficiaries under the scheme is estimated 70,000 (1997), roughly the equivalent of 15% of the total national school population.²⁴ This figure has varied only slightly over the last 15 years, from a low of 65,000 (1995) to a high of 78,000 (1986, 1996). At the same time, the last few years have recorded major

²³ Department of Health (1995), *Shaping a healthier future*, Dublin: Stationery Office; Department of Health and Children (1999), *Building healthier hearts*, Dublin: Stationery Office

²⁴ All these figures are quoted from Goodbody Economic Consultants (1998), *op cit*

shifts in the numbers of beneficiaries: down 7,000, up 14,000 and down 8,000, without any apparent reasons. Total food expenditure has increased by a half in this period to £1.74m, though the increase is only 7% in real terms. Interestingly, there is no correspondence between beneficiaries and expenditure, with a fall of 7,000 in beneficiaries occurring at the same time as an expenditure increase of £65,000. The average expenditure per beneficiary is £25 per annum.

The number of schools in the scheme is 400, again a relatively stable figure. These overall statistics hide a major decline in the beneficiaries in the Gaeltacht. Numbers here have fallen from 4,500 to 20, while the number of participating schools has dropped from 72 to only 1. In effect, scheme beneficiaries have become even more concentrated in urban areas in recent years. The reason for the fall-off in Gaeltacht schools appears to be related to a decision of four local authorities to terminate the scheme because of high administration costs. Included in the urban figures are 1,680 pre-school children and 1,200 children attending special schools, all in the Dublin Corporation area.

It is interesting to note that the beneficiaries are drawn from only 39 out of 88 eligible local authorities which are entitled to participate in the scheme. It is not known what proportion of schools in each participating local authority area actually participate in the scheme and whether all children are included from a particular school or only a proportion. (The eligibility criteria for inclusion in the scheme are discussed below.)

3.2 Content

The content of the meals is fairly standard: a drink (milk) and bun or sandwich. However, in Dublin, the corporation provides a hot soup supplement in the mornings to 8 inner city national schools (2,000 beneficiaries). Also in Dublin, hot meals are provided in 18 schools catering for children with disabilities (1,200 beneficiaries) and in a standard national school in Rutland Street, which had acquired special funding and equipment.

It is apparent that the quantity and the quality of the basic school meals differ considerably depending on school location. This is suggested by a number of factors:

- the wide variation in the average cost per meal of the scheme from 2p (Birr/Boyle) to 43p (Kells/Mallow), with only a fifth of local authorities spending near the 11p average;
- the extent to which local authorities use EU subsidies to maximise resources;
- the diversity of local suppliers involved in the scheme;
- the differences in school methods for storing and presenting the food.

Dublin Corporation appears to be exceptional in terms of food content, with a morning supplement, variable menu and Friday treat (a chocolate muffin), while the majority of local authorities just provide the standard bun and milk every day.

3.3 Eligibility criteria and application procedures

The legislative basis for the school meals scheme is permissive rather than obligatory. Therefore, local authorities are empowered but not required to operate the scheme. As such, there is no individual right of entitlement under the scheme. There are two main criteria of eligibility which relate to location and need. In the first

instance, the scheme is geographically confined to urban local authority and Gaeltacht areas. The one exception to this is national schools which previously were in the Dublin Corporation boundary but have since transferred to the remit of the three new Dublin county councils. However, it remains at the discretion of the local authority whether to actually administer the scheme in their locality. We saw previously how only a minority of urban local authorities and one-fifth of those in the Gaeltacht participate in the scheme. There is also discretion among schools as to whether they wish to participate in the scheme. As indicated previously, no figures are available on the proportion of eligible schools who participate in the scheme.

The second criterion refers to children who may lack the food to take full advantage of education. This is usually defined by reference to the income/employment status of a child's family. The precise definition of income eligibility is an issue for individual local authorities to decide. This is handled by local authorities in different ways: some leave definition and assessment of eligibility to the discretion of individual schools, while others require an individual application procedure, which is then considered by on certain criteria. In general, then, there is no automatic entitlement for children who might be considered in need of help by standard means-tested criteria (ie a passport-type system). At the same time, neither is there a separate application procedure, with an appeals system if a child is deemed ineligible. Finally, some local authorities deem entire schools to be eligible, rather than confine assistance to certain pupils.

3.4 Administration of the scheme

The school meals scheme has a dual administrative structure. At national level, the legislative authority and co-funder for the scheme is the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, which funds it in conjunction with its SWA scheme. School meals are also administered and co-funded by the local authorities, who are the lead players in delivering the scheme, deciding both content and eligibility. Local authorities in effect determine the costs of the scheme, which the Department then co-funds. Local authorities have to meet their own administration costs and a proportion of the costs of the schools, though they can also avail of the EU school milk scheme to reduce the food costs. Administration costs amounted to roughly £250,000 in 1997. In Dublin Corporation, administration costs represent 16% of the total expenditure or 1.76p per meal per day. Schools also play a role in administering the scheme, by assisting in the assessment procedure and by distributing the food to eligible children, for which they receive a modest administrative fee. Schools have no input into the content of the meals. In total, 440 organisations (government department, 39 local authorities and 400 schools) are involved in delivering the scheme.

3.5 Delivery of the scheme in a wider welfare context

The contrast between the delivery of school meals and mainline welfare provision is immense. The closest parallel is the supplementary welfare allowance scheme by the community welfare service of the health boards. While this scheme allows local discretion, there are also public information leaflets, an individual application process, an appeals system and guidelines as to eligibility. Furthermore, administrators are not allowed to decide not to provide a service. Nor is the SWA restricted according to administrative authority. Also, while there are examples of spatial targeting under other government schemes, this is done using objective indicators of need and is not pre-determined simply by administrative boundaries. It is also unusual that there is a local contribution to the cost of provision, a feature now only associated with the Poor Law. On this basis, it is hard to envisage a more dated form of welfare delivery, which reflects administrative inertia rather than contemporary welfare planning.

4. Effectiveness and efficiency of the scheme

This section considers the effectiveness and efficiency of the scheme based on the operational features outlined in the previous section. Issues covered are:

- the nutritional quality of the food provided
- the targeting of need for school meals
- the take-up of school meals
- the administrative efficiency of the scheme

4.1 *Nutritional quality of food*

What is the role of school meals in providing children's nutritional needs? As part of the guidelines on recommended dietary allowances (RDA), school lunches are expected to provide a third of daily nutritional requirements.²⁵ The guidelines in effect provide a policy benchmark for evaluating the nutritional benefit of school meals. However, studies quoted by Goodbody Economic Consultants highlight shortfalls in the RDA of the lunches of school children, including school meals. Indeed, one study suggests that school meals are less nutritious than the lunches supplied by home. On this basis, it can be argued that the standard school meal maintains differentials in children's nutritional intake and may, in cases where children could have brought a more nutritious home lunch, actually worsen their situation. Another issue of concern is the variation in the content of the basic meal, depending on local authority and/or supplier, which results in variable quality for children in different locations.

The quality of the food can also be judged by parents' reactions. As reported in a study in Limerick, two-thirds of parents of beneficiary children considered the school meals provided (standard bun and milk) to be inadequate.²⁶ To compensate, parents provided supplementary lunches, which were met from the family budget. By contrast, hot school lunches have been found to fulfil an important dietary need of recipient children.²⁷ While the provision of a hot soup supplement in Dublin is seen by school management as improving attendance, its impact on the perceived nutritional deficit in the beneficiary children has not been scientifically quantified.

A key difficulty here is the absence of an explicit statement of what is the expected nutritional value of school meals. Even if the scheme is only designed to assist with basic needs and not to cover the full amount, a benchmark is required in order to agree the nutritional contribution of the scheme. This situation is even less tenable when basic welfare payments are widely benchmarked by reference to 'minimally adequate levels'. There is a clear need to perform a similar exercise with regard to the nutritional requirements of school meals, so as to provide a basis for assessing the level of provision under the scheme. Furthermore, it is debatable whether the scheme should in fact be restricted to only a contribution towards the recommended nutritional allowances, given the low incomes that welfare-dependent families are

²⁵ Nutrition Advisory Group (1995), *Food and nutrition policy for Ireland*. Dublin: Stationery Office. These include eating a wide variety of foods, balancing energy intake with physical activity, a minimum of four servings of fruit and vegetables per day, consumption of various starchy foods daily, avoidance of frequent consumption of foods with sugar, and reduction in fat intake. More recent nutritional guidelines for specific population groups have been produced by the Food Safety Advisory Authority.

²⁶ O'Donoghue, (1991), op cit, p66

²⁷ Gormley et al (1989) op cit

living on and the dietary shortfalls that exist. It begs the question of how the full needs are to be met and also what onus is on policy to ensure that this is done?

Other issues pertaining to the adequacy of the school meals are a) whether it is provided at the optimum time and b) whether it is sufficiently attractive for the children to eat. The norm is for school meals to be provided at lunchtime. However, there is evidence that some children are coming to school without a breakfast, which leaves them hungry and impedes their ability to learn. Already, this has prompted Dublin Corporation to provide a start-of-school hot soup supplement. This suggests that the standard school meal may be too little, too late to make a discernible difference. Meanwhile, an issue noted in the Gormley study was the significant level of non take-up of school meals, with up to 30% of children in some schools not consuming their bun/sandwich. This mainly relates to children's dislike of cheese. There are also anecdotal accounts that some children have a low appetite for school buns, especially where this is the standard food item supplied. Clearly, both content and presentation of food matters in regard to take-up. It would appear that, outside of experimentation by individual local authorities, eg Dublin Corporation, there has been no attempt to address these issues.

In general, the Department takes no responsibility either for defining minimum nutritional standards or for identifying food products with greater appeal. This seems out of step with the efforts by the Department of Health and Children, the Food Safety Authority and the health boards to improve the nutritional standards of children. It also ignores the changing trends in children's food consumption, such as the popularity of yogurts, fruit drinks, etc., which makes the school bun appear old-fashioned and undesirable. Neither are there any requirements in terms of the storage and presentation of school meals. An input from the health authorities - both nationally and locally - is therefore needed in order to enhance the nutritional content and presentation of school meals.

Finally, there is a question about the scheme's impact on educational attainment. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest it can make a contribution. However, it is unlikely that the scheme on its own is the determinant of whether a child remains on in school beyond an age at which it might otherwise have left. Also, it is doubtful whether the limited nutritional boost provide by school meals is sufficient to enhance children's learning capacity. The impact of the scheme on educational attainment is more hoped for than planned, especially as there is no structured attempt to link the provision of a food supplement with remedial educational measures.

4.2 Targeting of need

A key measure of the effectiveness of the scheme is the extent to which it targets all those in need of a lunchtime food supplement. Currently, 70,000 children in 400 schools benefit under the scheme, though there is no estimate of all eligible children. To assess the extent to which this represents the full extent of need, the figure must be placed in the context of other measures of child disadvantage (see table 2).

Table 2: Various measures of children in need

Recipients of clothing and footwear scheme ('98) (aged 2-11)	Recipients of school books scheme ('97) (primary)	Children in welfare families ('98)²⁸ (est for aged 4-12)	Children with medical cards ('97) (est for aged 4-12)	Poor children²⁹ ('97) (est for aged 4-12)
119,100	177,000 (3,021 schools)	e220,000 (e161,600 on means-tested payments)	e153,400	e132,016 (50% line) e85,811 (60% line + basic deprivation)

Allowing for restrictions and non take-up (discussed next), the scheme reaches far fewer children than indicated by other measures of need:

- 60% of children in receipt of clothing and footwear payments
- 40% of children receiving free school books
- 46% of children with a medical card
- 32% of children in welfare-dependent families, rising to 43% on means-tested payments
- 53% of children in income poverty and 82% of experiencing income poverty and basic deprivation

It is also worth noting that only 13% of schools in the school books scheme provide school meals.

The scheme has design features which automatically restrict its coverage:

- it is only available for children in primary schools
- children in rural areas are excluded.

It is hard to justify an objective basis for these restrictions. Originally and for a long time after the scheme was introduced, only attendance at primary education was the norm. Nowadays, children are required to attend school until age 15 years (soon to be 16) and are expected to complete secondary education in order to ensure minimal job qualifications. It is also as likely that a nutritional deficit exists for older children as well as younger. In fact, the evidence from recent children's health surveys shows that nutritional standards decline as children age and also that class differentials increase.³⁰

Similarly, the exclusion of pre-school children, except those on the Early Start programme, is hard to justify given the increased provision of early education and the

²⁸ This includes full and half rate CDAs, which may give rise to some double counting in the total.

²⁹ The 50% cut-off point is the weekly per child equivalent of £25.89.

³⁰ Friel, S, NicGabhann, S and Kelleher, C (1999), op cit

recent recognition of this sector in official educational policy, including the prioritisation of provision for children who are disadvantaged.³¹

The exclusion of 'rural' children, including those in recently urbanised areas such as county Dublin and the suburbs of major cities (eg Limerick) is anomalous on two grounds. First, local authority boundaries are archaic structures and often do not reflect recent population trends and, second, poverty is as extensive in rural as in urban areas (e.g., the poverty risk in open country and small towns is between 20% and 26%, as compared to a national average of 19% or 15% in Dublin). This spatial targeting approach also contradicts that of government policy in terms of the designation of areas of disadvantage under the local development programme. These includes many county council areas such as Clondalkin, Tallaght, Monaghan, West Limerick.

At the same time, poverty has become more concentrated in local authority housing estates, with a poverty rate of 67% in Dublin public housing. There is evidence that this concentration is also translated into schools, especially at primary level where catchment areas are very localised. The *Breaking the Cycle* initiative on educational disadvantage is premised on the belief that children in certain schools experience more intensive levels of need. This understanding is also reflected in the hot soup initiative of Dublin Corporation, which was responding to a view that deprivation was worse in inner city schools, and in the establishment of school-based food projects by various urban local partnerships.

This suggests two conclusions: first, the scheme should be extended to all primary schools and ultimately secondary schools; and second, that a higher level of intervention should be provided in schools where poverty/disadvantage is concentrated, whether under the Dept of Education or the Dept of Tourism/ADM classifications.

4.3 Take-up of scheme

A related question to targeting is the take-up of the scheme amongst those whom it seeks to help. Given its restrictive eligibility criteria, it is even more important to consider from an efficiency perspective if the scheme goes to all targeted children. Non take-up of the scheme can be for two main reasons: (i) eligible children who do not receive a school meal because of administrative deficiencies; and (ii) eligible children who do not receive a school meal because the costs of so doing outweigh the benefits. The scheme is characterised by flaws relating to both of these reasons:

- a majority of urban local authorities do not participate in the scheme, which can exclude schools with eligible children from benefiting from the scheme, e.g., Dundalk does not operate the scheme, though a designated disadvantaged area (i);
- because it is primarily a school-based scheme, eligible children in need in well-off schools are unlikely to benefit - this pattern is likely to strengthen as more mixed-population 'community of interest' schools are established, e.g., gaelscoileanna (i);
- there is a general lack of promotion of the scheme so children (and schools) may not know about the benefits (i);
- there is discretion within schools as to whom the food is distributed (i);

³¹ Department of Education and Science (1999), *Ready to learn. White paper on early childhood education*, Dublin: Stationery Office

- the stigma associated with the scheme can be off-putting for beneficiaries (ii);
- consumption of the meals may be discouraged by the minimum quantity/range of the food and the variable quality of the food, given variations in costs between local authorities and the limited storage facilities available (ii).

It is impossible to quantify the full effects of these various issues. In the Limerick study, a third of low-income parents never applied for the school meals scheme. The main reasons were a belief that they were not entitled to assistance, a refusal by their children to eat the food and a perception of stigma associated with the scheme. The archaic administration of the scheme, together with the relatively low number of beneficiaries, suggests that low take-up is an endemic feature of the school meals. Addressing these administrative weaknesses should be a priority for reform.

4.4 Administrative efficiency

The scheme is a stand-alone administrative scheme, cutting across three unconnected realms of public administration: the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, local authorities and primary schools. It also is based on discretion rather than entitlement. The rationale for these attributes is historical and the scheme's administration is significantly out of line with current policy. The implications in terms of the efficient delivery of the scheme include:

- poor delivery of service, in terms of conventional welfare standards relating to awareness of entitlements, clarity of application procedures, existence of an appeals procedure, mechanism for client feedback and consistency of treatment;
- lack of strategic planning and co-ordination, as evidenced in the large number of local authorities (and also schools) not participating in the scheme, the lack of attention to quality control and the failure to monitor the scheme's impact;
- higher administration costs: Dublin Corporation spend 13% of total expenditure on administration and, while similar to the costs of the clothing and footwear scheme, exceed those of departmental run welfare schemes (5%);
- inadequate linkage with other education-related initiatives, in particular other welfare benefits, in terms of targeting and delivery, which ultimately diminishes the collective impact on educational performance (see for example, the integrated approach reflected in the breakfast club concept).

Many of these issues were flagged in the NESF report on quality delivery of social services, which specifically considered the provision of school-related benefits, and in various value for money administration audits carried out by the CAG.³²

5. Alternative models of school meals provision

There are possibilities for radical reform of the scheme, based on alternative models of provision in Ireland and the UK.

5.1 breakfast clubs

The provision of in-school breakfasts has been as feature of recent initiatives to address educational disadvantage, such as *Early School Leavers Initiative*, the *Local Development Programme* and the *Peace and Reconciliation Programme*. Under the Local Development Programme, a number of partnerships are operating breakfast

³² NESF (1995), *Quality delivery of social services*, Dublin Stationery Office and Comptroller and Auditor General (1998), *Report on value for money examination: the administration of Supplementary Welfare Allowances*, Dublin: Stationery Office

clubs as part of their educational programmes. For example, in Clondalkin, the local partnership funds breakfast clubs in 9 local national schools with over 100 participating children. The breakfast clubs includes as standard fare cereal, juice, tea and toast, with cooked breakfasts provided on special days. Support is also provided with homework. The clubs targets children with high rates of absenteeism. The programme is co-ordinated by staff of the Clondalkin Partnership and three special project teachers and employs a teacher and an assistant to run each breakfast club.

The Drogheda Community Schools Programme provides meals to children from three adjacent schools, two national and one secondary. This includes breakfast for 30 children consisting of a wide range of food items, including sausages etc. A further 40 pupils attend for little lunch (around mid-morning), from one of the schools only. The main provision is a lunchtime hot meal, availed of by 100 pupils from all three schools. The meals are funded under the Peace and Reconciliation Programme and staff (mostly parents) are employed under the community employment programme. The project is also support by the local partnership. Pupils pay a subsidised amount for the meals. The programme is directly managed by the schools.

The provision of a food supplement is feature of all projects in the Early School Leavers Initiative. One of these is the Dublin 17 project on the northside of Dublin. It operates a breakfast club for pupils from 6 local schools, including one secondary school. The clubs are supported by the schools, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, local food stores and parents and is co-ordinated by the Dublin 17 project. Approximately 900 meals per day are provided at no charge. The annual cost is £60,000, though this does not quantify the major voluntary input of parents.

The primary aim of the breakfast clubs is to enhance children's educational capacity, with minimising financial costs and improving children's food and nutrition intake as secondary goals. This is achieved by through meeting three objectives:

- improving school punctuality and attendance
- providing a social and learning support
- improving interaction between parents, children and teachers

Improved attendance correlates with anecdotal evidence regarding the incentive effects of the hot soup supplement and the Friday muffin provided by Dublin Corporation. Breakfast meals thus seek to overcome a general disinclination to attend school among low-income children that is not specifically linked to financial barriers. There are also socialisation benefits in terms of children interacting with their friends in a positive environment before school begins. As such, the clubs provide a bridge for the transition between home and school. Another element of this bridge is assistance with homework. A final element is the creation of a more positive attitude and better relationships between children, teachers and parents, which results from the way the service is provided as a school community initiative.

As well as breakfast clubs, another recent innovation is homework clubs. Again, these include a food component, as part of an educational support for children. Surprisingly, none of these initiatives are linked with the school meals scheme, despite an attempt to make a formal link in the case of Drogheda. This suggests that there is considerable scope to strengthen the educational dimension of the school meals scheme by incorporating breakfast/morning meals into mainline provision.

5.2 *in-school nutritional education programmes*

Regional health boards have actively promoted better food and nutrition behaviour among school children in recent years. Health boards also employ community nutritionists, who provide advice on healthy eating options. Meanwhile, the Department of Education has developed the social, personal, health education programme (SPHE) for implementation in all national schools.

There are a number of schools initiatives developed by individual health boards. In the Eastern Health Board, the following actions take place at primary level:

- implementation of the Nutrition Education at Primary School (NEAPS) project for children aged 8-10 years, with training for teachers in disadvantaged schools;
- pilot training programmes for home school community liaison officers on a health eating and cooking programme called *Cooking for health*.

Also, the Mid-Western Health Board has produced *Bi Follain*, a guide to healthy lifestyle for school-going children. Despite this concern with nutrition, there would appear to be no connection between these health promotion programmes and school meals, including the supplementary hot soup scheme in Dublin.

5.3 *UK experience*

School meals have traditionally played a more significant role in the UK welfare and education systems. School meals for all children are provided by local authorities in the UK, with subsidised provision for those on low incomes. It is a more substantial meal than in Ireland, with hot meals provided by school cafeterias. The importance of school meals was recently emphasised in a government report on health inequalities which noted their contribution to relieving pressure on the family food budget and improving family nutrition.³³ Another government report reached a similar conclusion, suggesting that for many children the school meal is the main meal of the day and that a school meal can make an important contribution to healthy eating and a balanced diet.³⁴ The link between nutrition and education is also emphasised:

*Being hungry at school may perpetuate the social exclusion that the education system itself is trying to overcome.*³⁵

The provision of school meals has been associated with enhanced cognitive development, improved pupils' behaviour and reduced rates of youth offending.³⁶

However, a some problems have been associated with UK school meals provision:

- not all low-income families are entitled to benefit, in particular those in work;
- there is low take-up of entitlement, with stigma the main cause;
- the nutritional standards of school meals is poor.³⁷

There has recently been a number of initiatives to enhance school meals, both at central government and local levels. These include the following:

³³ Acheson, D (1998), *An independent inquiry in inequalities in health*, London: Stationery Office

³⁴ Department for Education and Employment (1997), *Eating well at school*, London: Stationery Office

³⁵ McMahon, W and March, T (1999), *Filling the gap. Free school meals, nutrition and poverty*, London: Child Poverty Action Group

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ *Ibid*

Healthy school initiative: Pilot programme which aims to ensure that schools use resources at their disposal to improve the health and wellbeing of children and staff. Food and diet is one of the main concerns of the programme. Models of best practice will then be disseminated throughout schools.

School nutrition actions groups (SNAGs): These in-school initiatives encourage the development of better relations between a school, its community and health professionals regarding food, nutrition and health.³⁸ It is a whole school, whole day approach which impacts not just on school lunch, but also on breakfasts and snacks (see annex 1 for more details). The whole school approach links health education in the classroom with the provision of a quality food service. The involvement of children and their parents in the decisions regarding food is seen as vital.

There are also initiatives in specific local authorities and schools. For example, the *Edinburgh community food initiative* is piloting a school fruit shops in order to encourage children to develop a habit of eating fruit from an early age. The fruit is provided at cost price to all children in a school, with those in receipt of free school meals receiving free vouchers.

Many agencies, including the Caroline Walker Trust and the regional healthy promotion agencies (including that in Northern Ireland) have produced guidelines on healthy eating in schools. In addition, the UK government has published a consultation document on nutritional standards in school called *Ingredients for success*. This examines compulsory standards, national guidance and how improved standards should be introduced. Subsequently, the government announced that all providers of school meals would have to meet mandatory nutritional standards from April 2002. These will be the legal responsibility of the school meal provider. Finally, a report, *Healthy English schoolchildren*, recommends that a quality standards approach should be adopted to improving nutritional standards.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The Agency views the school meals scheme as an important support for low-income children and their families in minimising school-going costs, providing a nutritional supplement and encouraging participation in education. However, the potential of the scheme is far from realised due to various design faults which impinge on its effectiveness and efficiency. The core problem is the archaic nature of the scheme, which has not been modernised since first introduced in the early part of the 20th century. The scheme currently operates in a policy vacuum, without any clear sense of leadership or direction at a government level.

At the same time, the scheme has considerable potential in the context of high levels of child poverty and a persistent pattern of educational disadvantage. However, a new vision is required to revitalise the scheme and to make it relevant to current policy priorities. One obvious vehicle for this is the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, which identifies 'increased support towards the cost of participation in education for welfare dependent and low income families, thereby eliminating barriers to education' as a key policy action (p10). A second is the growing concern with children's diet and nutrition and the implications of this for future health and well-being, which is associated with the health promotion work of the Department of Health and the regional health boards. The current review of the NAPS presents an opportunity to

³⁸ Harvey, J and Passmore, S (1994), *School nutrition action groups. A new policy for managing food and nutrition in schools*, Birmingham Health Education Unit

link the related issues of child poverty, inadequate nutrition and educational disadvantage in a coherent programme of action with relevant targets.

In this context, the Agency makes proposals in regard to

- improving the financial position of low-income families
- maximising the added-value of the school meals scheme
- enhancing the content of school meals
- increasing eligibility to and take-up of the scheme
- strengthening the administration of the scheme.

These proposals are discussed in detail below.

6.1 Improve the financial position of low-income families

It is important to be cognisant of the wider policy context in which school meals are provided, notably the scale and persistence of child poverty. Child poverty is the root cause of school-related financial pressures, inadequate nutrition and low educational attainment. Efforts to address child poverty must be intensified by:

- providing a minimally adequate level of child income support of between £30 and £40 per week, to be made up of an weekly child benefit of £25 and a weekly age-related means-tested supplement for children in low-income families;
- helping unemployed families to avail of work opportunities through labour market programmes and financial supports;
- provide assistance with child-care costs, especially for those on low incomes.

These measures would, in the first instance, improve the financial position of low-income families and enhance their ability to purchase food. Secondly, by targeting additional resources through child-related payments, it would enhance the likelihood that the additional resources would be spent on the needs of children.

6.2 Maximise the value-added of the school meals scheme

The school meals scheme addresses but one element of the wider issue of school costs for low-income families, the others being clothing and footwear, books, exam fees and transport. There are also related measures which are funded through local programmes (eg scholarships, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs). The current piecemeal approach to providing these benefits lessens the scope for added value and synergy between the various components given their similarity of aim. It is proposed therefore that the various elements are linked together in a comprehensive school benefits package. Linkage needs to take place at three levels:

- policy co-ordination between lead government departments (education, social welfare and health) in terms of the adequacy, funding and targeting of services, with input from representative groups and regional/local service providers
- integrated provision at school level in order to maximise impact, involving parents, management, teachers, community organisations and service providers
- client-oriented application procedures, with eligibility to a flagship scheme - the clothing and footwear scheme - to act as a passport for all other benefits

In addition to the overall package of school benefits, there are two supporting measures that would enhance the impact of the school meals scheme. The first is to develop a **whole school nutrition education programme**, using the school meals as an exemplar of what a nutritious meal should be. The delivery of this programme

should be prioritised in schools participating in the school meals scheme, providing the necessary back-up resources and extending it to all children. The programme would also include physical exercise, safety and avoidance of drugs, thus creating links between school meals, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. The programme should also be extended to include a home-school dimension, inviting parents (in particular mothers) to attend courses on healthy eating and cooking. The involvement of parents could be done in conjunction with the school parents association, the home-school-community liaison officer, the public health nurse and local community and voluntary groups (e.g., community development projects, SVP, Crosscare Food Bank).

A second supporting measure is to provide a **food educational support programme**, incorporating provision of school meals. Obviously, the scope for doing this during the regular school day is limited. However, it is easier to achieve when providing a breakfast supplement or after-school meal. Already, there is a number of pilot breakfast and after-school clubs supported under local educational initiatives. These projects provide a positive reinforcement between food, social activity and learning, which can enhance children's educational performance in the longer term. They go beyond simply providing a food incentive for children to attend school, to using food as an occasion for learning enrichment and social development. Another possibility is to provide a special food treat for children based on school achievements, both individual and collective.

In order to develop good practice in these areas, the Agency recommends that pilot whole school nutrition education and foods educational support programmes are established. The former would be developed in conjunction with on-going nutritional work of the health promotion departments of the health boards. The latter could be tried out in a selection of schools in an existing educational disadvantage programme, such as the Early School Leavers Initiative or the Breaking the Cycle programme.

6.3 Improve the content of school meals

There is currently no minimum nutritional standards or nutritional quality control in the school meals scheme. This haphazard approach to the nutritional content of school meals undermines the achievement of a key objective of the scheme, to compensate for the dietary deficiencies among poor children (and their knock-on effects on children's capacity to learn). It is also out of step with the major advances in scientific knowledge regarding the nutritional requirements of children. In addition, the school meals scheme does not take account of the media and other influences on the dietary habits of children. School meals must acknowledge these influences in reviewing the content and the delivery of the scheme. A high quality food service would therefore include the following components:

- better quality of food, based on specific nutritional requirements, including the provision of new items, e.g., fruit or fruit juice to provide vitamin C
- increased amount of food, in particular through the introduction of a breakfast supplement and a hot lunch for severely disadvantaged children
- improved variety and presentation of food, making it more appealing to children

An input from the health authorities - both nationally and locally - is required in order to improve the nutritional content and the presentation of school meals.

6.4 *Increase eligibility and take-up under the scheme*

The scheme is not reaching all those who might justifiably be considered in need of assistance. This is for two reasons: some children are specifically excluded from eligibility; and other children are just not claiming assistance for various reasons. Clearly, the scheme should be available to children attending all national schools irrespective of where they live. There is no empirical basis for the current restriction on 'rural' schools and it is probably illegal under anti-discrimination legislation. Equally, confining the scheme to primary level is outdated as children spend longer in school and poor children in second-level should be included. At the same time, the Agency recognises that concentrations of poverty can give rise more to greater needs and would propose a higher level of provision in disadvantaged schools. In particular, there should be a structured link between a reformed school meals scheme and school-based programmes to tackle educational disadvantage, e.g., Breaking the cycle, scheme of assistance for schools in disadvantaged areas.

The relatively low take-up of school meals compared to other benefits highlights administrative weaknesses in the scheme. These problems could be fundamentally rectified by linking entitlement to school meals to the clothing and footwear scheme. This is preferred over the school books scheme in that it has a well-defined individual application procedure, incorporates transparent eligibility criteria, provides an appeals process and is a widely known and accepted welfare benefit. Also, it is not dependent on intermediary bodies, whether local authorities or schools, to determine eligibility. As well as benefiting the claimant, this approach would also reduce administrative costs and minimise the number of means tests in public administration.

6.5 *Strengthen the administration of the scheme*

The administration of school meals is archaic in a number of respects:

- the absence of a lead agency who is responsible for promoting and developing the scheme (the Dept of SCFA operates mainly as the legislative and funding body);
- its permissive and discretionary nature, with no statutory statement of who is entitled to benefit and on what criteria;
- its devolved administration, with up to 88 local authorities who have primary responsibility for operating the scheme;
- the minimal role played by education and health authorities, especially given its function as a school-based nutritional supplement.

The Agency recommends that the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs retains but enhances its primary management responsibility for the scheme. The scheme is primarily a welfare benefit for low-income families and the department is the lead government agency in that regard. At the same time, it would have to strengthen its management of the scheme by making it a statutory entitlement, having defined eligibility criteria, meeting the full costs of the scheme and actively promoting and monitoring the scheme. In addition, the Department would manage the scheme in conjunction with an inter-departmental committee involving relevant government departments and other agencies, notably the Department of Education and Science and the Department and Health and Children.

The alternative option is to give the scheme to the Department of Education and Science. This has some attractions, given its responsibility for schools and its administration of the school books scheme. However, this would involve legislative

and financial changes in the scheme. Also, the Department has limited competency in administering welfare entitlements, as demonstrated in the school books scheme which is primarily operated at the discretion of the school principal. This model has a number of weaknesses which the Department has failed to resolve over recent years.

There is also a need for improved local administration, as the involvement of central government in the administration of the scheme would be regressive in terms of efficiency and devolution of decision-making. The local authorities clearly are unsuitable to fulfil this role (though with the reform of local government their capacity in this and other areas may be improved). The obvious choice would be to give the role to the regional health authorities. This is premised on two factors: first, their capacity on health promotion issues and second, their experience in delivering welfare services. Health board administration would ensure that the quality of food is enhanced, economies of scale are achieved in the tendering process (only 8 regional health boards), the scheme is linked to an overall health promotion strategy and the welfare aspect of the service is improved. An alternative consideration, the Vocational Educational Committee system, would have the same problems as local authorities.

Already, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs has a contractual relationship with the health boards for welfare services. This could be broadened to include the school meals scheme. Health boards would have autonomy to experiment with the content of school meals within a certain budget and once minimum nutritional standards are ensured. They would also have discretionary resources to fund additional programmes on a pilot basis, which could, if successful, be mainstreamed over time.

At school level, there should be no role for school authorities in deciding eligibility: this should be assessed independently by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, ideally in conjunction with the clothing and footwear scheme. However, schools should be more involved in promoting healthy food, nutrition and leisure and also in enhancing the education linkages of the scheme (see 6.2 above). There should be scope for schools to seek supplementary school meal provision, e.g., as part of a breakfast or after school club. In such cases, proposals could be made by a school to a health board for the provision of an extra food supplement.