

From the news that children taking school meals has fallen by 15% in Sunderland, it is obvious that the Government's plans for healthy school meals are under-funded and hurried.

With only £280 million in extra funding over three years, the Government has offered an average of only 12 pence per school meal which is inadequate considering healthier food is likely to cost much more to purchase and prepare. Another problem is that Labour have again failed to appreciate that bans have unintended side effects. As with a ban on smoking, which will now need an army of enforcers to carry it out, such a heavy-handed ban can only work if it is vigorously policed.

The side effects here should have been clear. Pupils, denied their favourite food, have simply taken their custom elsewhere and, with seemingly every school in the City built next to a fast food outlet, there has been no shortage of providers.

Far better would have been a balance rather than a ban, with a range of options to introduce pupils to healthy foods whilst retaining a moderate supply of fast food. In time such fast foods could be phased out as healthy food becomes more accepted. In that way, pupils, many of whom will be unaccustomed to healthy foods, could have gradually got used to new ways of eating without the drastic clampdown which has seen many now simply leave their school and eat even more unhealthy food elsewhere. The suggestion that pupils might be forced to stay at school at lunchtime is hardly likely to lead to an uptake in school meals. It is more likely to see pupils bringing in their own food from home, putting additional burdens on parents and requiring staff to give up their lunch time to patrol the school (which the unions are unlikely to support). Culture just cannot be changed overnight by banning what is undesirable and throwing money at a solution.

With an undeniable link between family income and quality of diet, it is not healthy but traumatic to force people away from what they are used to and to do it so quickly.

Councillor Robert Oliver
Conservative Education Spokesman.