

Goodbye speech to the SFT Jan 2010

When I accepted the job as Chair of the Trust, I said that I thought it the most important job I'd ever done. And so it has proved.

But I did hugely under-estimate the task.

I had this naive idea that we could do the job and wind ourselves up in three years. That all schools needed to do was to teach children about food and how to cook, stop them bringing food or drinks into school, ban vending machines, close the school gates at lunch time, make the kitchens efficient and the dining rooms pleasant places to be, provide delicious healthy meals, and get the parents to refrain from rewarding their little darlings for eating up their greens by giving them a kit-kat.

And, I thought, in three years, almost every child in the country would have learned to like good food. Bingo, we could all go home.

I swiftly discovered it wasn't as simple as that. But we have made great progress. There are now many schools doing all, or nearly all, those things successfully.

We've stopped the fifty-year slide in school dinner take-up, and though of course it would be great to have got the numbers back to 1960 levels, it is no mean achievement to

have forty percent of children eating good healthy meals instead of junk.

I had also assumed that head teachers and governing bodies would see the point of a decent diet and good food education, would accept that healthy children would concentrate better, be happier, achieve more. And that they would be keen to upgrade their dining rooms and kitchens.

But I soon found that many teachers felt what children ate was a matter for their parents. And that available money would be better spent on something else. And that catering cost money so the less of it the better. My argument is that you would not have disgusting loos or dangerous playgrounds just because they do not cover their costs. Children should not have to spend half their break queuing, they should be able to eat in pleasant surroundings, have time to relax and not be bullied. And anyway, the better the catering operation, the more bums on seats and the closer to break-even or even profit.

But, thank God, attitudes have changed fast. Only last week I was on the Today programme expecting to have a barney with the General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers only to have her agree with everything I said. That would not have happened three years ago. Of course it is easier to effect change if the law is on your side, and the requirement to teach cooking in schools, and the statutory lunch standards have certainly helped focus minds.

Then I had supposed that all school cooks could cook. Wrong. Many cooks were hired in the Turkey Twizzler era when cooking wasn't needed. Well, we now have 29 SchoolFeast centres training, encouraging and inspiring catering staff. It was a struggle at first: it astonished me that schools and LA's, who would not dream of failing to update the skills of their teachers, seemed to think training catering staff a luxury they could not afford. But SchoolFeast is going like a train now, and delicious, nicely cooked, fresh food is the norm in schools, rather than the exception.

And then I had imagined that parents would be thrilled that their children could now get proper food at school. But persuading them that a £2 healthy lunch is good value when the chippy offers all-the-chips-you-can-eat for a pound is another matter. So of course we are pleased by the recent announcement of the widening of the eligibility for free school meals. Definitely a step in the right direction.

And our 3000 Lottery-funded Let's Get Cooking clubs, soon to be 5000, which are for children and their parents have been a cracking success with heartening research showing participating families not just learning to cook but changing the way they eat at home.

I am perfectly confident that the School Food Trust will continue to win over children, parents, teachers, Local Authorities, Governors and caterers. In the next few years,

while the press is still on our side, and Government is perforce focused on the cost of ill-health, eating school lunches will become, I believe, the cool thing to do.

But I would like to tell you, an audience that understands children and education, what scares me rigid.

It is the power of the manufacturers to sell junk to children.

With the demise of the family knees-under meal and the rise of the snacking-all-day culture, we could see our advances undone in the next generation. We need to go on teaching children about food, and how to cook, and how to eat, for ever. Until we accept that teaching children to LIKE good food is as important to their future success as being literate or numerate, children will inevitably succumb to the blandishments of the chip, crisp, and chocolate manufacturers, who have massive marketing budgets and know how to sell sand to Bedouins – selling sugar, salt and fat to kids is a walk in the park.

My message to Government is simple: do not drop your guard. Keep food a priority. But I would also like to acknowledge that in forty years of banging on government doors, bleating about the importance of food in schools, this government has been the first to grab the issue and do something about it. I know they had a little nudge from Saint Jamie, but they have really run with it. So thank you Ed.

I could bore for England on the achievements and dedication of the School Food Trust. I will never again complain, in a blanket way, about civil servants and bureaucrats. The 70-odd staff at the Trust, plus the Let's Get Cooking Team, are some of the hardest working, most passionate and dedicated people I have ever met. I wish I had time to laud them individually. But I will say that in 50 years, I have never worked with a better chief executive, or a nicer woman, than Judy Hargadon.

So you can see why I leave this job with reluctance. It has been fun and it's important. I am sure my successor will find it both. Please can I ask you to help him or her in any way you can.

Jan 19th 2010