

# **Informing the Southwark Food Strategy**

**Scrutiny Sub-Committee B**

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## **1 Introduction**

In July 2009 scrutiny sub-committee B decided to look at what progress had been made toward the development of a food strategy for Southwark. The committee agreed that the purpose of the review was to make recommendations to the executive and senior officers to assist them in the development of the work. Evidence was gathered from a variety of sources including local markets and organisations such as the London Bee Keepers Association. Council officers and outside food agencies were also consulted on how they thought Southwark might develop a meaningful strategy, specific to the borough's needs.

The committee felt the main reason for commencing with a review of this nature was to highlight that affordable, healthy food should be available to all people, including the poorer communities within the borough. Some Members felt that often, it seemed that access to healthy food could be difficult in certain areas, with fresh fruit and vegetable shops located some way away from the homes of poorer families; families who may find themselves having to pay extra, drawing on already stretched budgets to travel to shops that sell healthy food.

The committee sought to understand what the Council intended to do with vacant allotments, undeveloped land and market gardens and whether these areas might be used to grow produce. Members also wanted to understand what kind of role the planning department might play in future regarding land allocation and the granting of licences for fast food restaurants. It was thought that independent food shops could play a more significant role in promoting healthy choices by increasing stocks of organic and fair trade produce and it was felt that Southwark must start to look at local food production possibilities, putting local food first whilst understanding the implications with food brought in from overseas; what are the economic and ethical considerations to the country of origin and what impact the imports may be having on local food supply. It was important to understand the quality and quantity of both local and overseas production and what kinds of supplies are needed for Southwark. It was felt that a strategy may also detail how to promote organic produce; linking it with seasonal production; the planting of fruit trees and the possibilities of utilising public space for these initiatives.

## **3 Southwark Innovation**

The London Mayors Food Strategy states that *'farmers, factories, restaurants and retailers ensure that, every single day, millions of people in London are able to choose from an unprecedented variety of food and drink. But this complex system has its failings, from negative impacts upon health and to environmental damage caused by CO2 emissions'*. Southwark's food strategy must consider how we reduce our CO2 emissions across all of our services. We must consider how we can make our meals on wheels and school meals services more environmentally sustainable as well as increasing the nutritional value. As a borough we must also ask, what more can be done

to better utilise the space on our housing estates and other public, council owned spaces and to use more informed and innovative planning decisions, making better use of its land. This may include land swaps and the utilisation of rooftops for agricultural use.

The committee felt that a Southwark food strategy should encompass seven strands of work:

- 1 Ensuring commercial vibrancy
- 2 Securing consumer engagement
- 3 Levering the power of procurement
- 4 Developing regional links
- 5 Delivering healthy schools
- 6 Reducing food related waste and litter
- 7 Using allotments and other Council land

### **Benchmarking**

Ben Reynolds from 'Sustain' part of the London Food Link came to the committee in July to run through his experience of food strategy development. He informed the committee that approximately half of London boroughs now had a food strategy and out of those boroughs he felt that Camden had a particularly good model to learn from. Camden had formed strong working alliances with as many relevant groups as they found necessary. These partners included the PCT, RSPB and the National Trust. They also called upon representatives from local businesses and the community to contribute to the work by taking part in consultations over a series of relevant issues. Camden Council and Camden PCT formed a steering group which ensured that the strategy was specific to Camden and its communities. The steering group also helped to bring about consensus from the partnerships and this acted to engender a sense of ownership across all of the working group participants.

Members were keen that Southwark also devised a strategy that was going to be specific to the needs of the borough. It might be that Southwark identifies a willing champion to take the work forward, understanding the importance of partnership working. It might be someone who already had an interest in the development of the work, who might be paid or unpaid but be adept at promoting the strategy, able to identify the 'quick wins' to keep things interesting as well as working towards longer term objectives.

### **The Council as a Lead**

It is important that the Council in devising a food strategy, showed leadership in its implementation. Using sustainable, ethically sourced and healthy food should become part of the culture of the council, making it standard practice in the working environment and across all relevant sites. For example, catering for meetings should default to being vegetarian. Vegetarian options tend to be healthier as well as generating less carbon emissions. The Council should not use 'red' list fish, (fish that is in danger of extinction) and should provide

detailed, accurate and up to date information about the food on offer and how it is produced. This information should be widely available across the borough, encouraging local businesses and the community to make informed choices about what to buy and what to eat. It was thought that providing good information about the food available in the borough would be a relatively low cost initiative and could act as a firm initial step on which to start building the momentum for the implementation of other aspects of the strategy.

The committee were aware that the catering service for the Tooley St building had not yet been commissioned and Members wanted to know at what stage the tendering process was now at. More specifically, they wanted to know what the selection criteria had been and whether and in what way ecological, environmental and ethical considerations had informed the process.

The vending machines at Tooley St mainly stocked unhealthy snacks and drinks and it was thought that these machines should be reviewed.....**[could we propose an alternative/s?]** It was not understood why so many vending machines had been installed, stocking high calorie options that contained very little nutritional value.

**[More evidence from Cllr Tim McNally, Stephen Platts, other officers.]**

### **Food Diversity**

Councillor Columba Blango wondered how work on the strategy might address issues of diversity within the strategy. African and Asian food tended to be imported but the process of importing came with considerable costs both financially and environmentally. The extent to which countries depended on trading with the UK were not fully known, however, it was generally thought that making demands on countries to grow food for importing to the UK, meant that the cultivation of those crops depleted the country's water reserves. It was felt that by and large it was the multi national companies promoting the growth and export of food who were reaping large profits at the expense of local economies, the growers themselves and the health of their own food supply.

**[ More evidence to come ]** Cllrs Blango and Situ to seek a community representative to inform the committee further.

### **The Future of Health in Southwark - Findings**

Dr Ann Marie Connolly, director of public health also came to the committee in July and spoke about how the strategy needed to be embedded within the Council and the PCT. She also spoke about how important it was that the strategy was specific to Southwark. For example, Southwark has the highest population of child obesity than in any other part of the country. 26% of children are obese by year 6; 14.3% by reception year and 95% of children overall. Overweight children can be more at risk of cancer, diabetes, heart

disease and arthritic problems in later life. It is part of Southwark's LAA targets to reduce levels of obesity and Southwark must do more to address this situation. The PCT have devised an action plan and strategy - the Southwark Healthy Weight Strategy - which covers four strands:

- 1 Early intervention and prevention
- 2 Shifting the curve of overweight
- 3 Targeting those at risk of an unhealthy weight
- 4 Effective treatments of anorexia, obesity and other weight disorders.

In the early years many parents need help to make the transition from breast feeding their babies to a healthy more solid diet. Moves to lend such assistance to parents must take into consideration other determinants such as; play, environment and exercise. It is also important to consider how parents access and cook food, making them aware of the normal weight ranges for children. It was an important factor that parents felt they had support and the Council, PCT and other agencies needed to help families to help each other.

From recent studies it was believed that a quarter of 14 – 17 year olds miss breakfast completely. This is despite findings suggesting that there is a strong link between nutrition, attention and attainment

The Southwark food strategy should link up with the healthy weight strategy developed by the PCT, providing a shared message to the community. The messages should endeavour to help lay down better patterns of eating and attitudes towards food. The modelling of good practice and willingness to change is essential across the PCT and the Council if we are to be at the forefront of change, setting an example to our communities.

For families that are on a very tight budget, finding and affording healthy food can be very difficult. The culture of our society seems to be tied in to extensive marketing; product placements push forward the more unhealthy, options. Often, foods with low nutritional value is cheaper, more filling and comforting, making them more desirable to young people and adults alike.

### **Accountable Schools**

The committee questioned whether it would be a good idea to bring all schools meals under local government control. In Southwark, unlike other boroughs, there isn't a single contractor and it is left to the schools themselves to commission school meals services independently. It is therefore, very hard for Southwark to measure and monitor what is going on. The Director of Public Health made the point that if there were to be a centralised decision making body for the procurement of school meal services, it would enable better consensus amongst concerned agencies which would, in turn, enable the establishment of contracts which offered better quality food and value for money. To correctly assess the situation,

Southwark would need to get a better picture of precisely what is going on in its schools. [REC?]

There were positive initiatives being taken to encourage young people to eat better by joining breakfast clubs. It was reported to the committee that these clubs were not always very widely available. There was also significant concern that vending machines in schools were selling fizzy, high sugar drinks and according to PCT reports, children were getting through on average 3 – 4 fizzy drinks per day.

The committee heard that providing free school meals would ensure that all children get at least one nutritious meal per day. However, it was realised that the expense of providing such a service for all schools would be extremely high. [REC?]

### **The strategy and its influence on planning decisions**

Food strategies devised by Barking and Dagenham and Waltham Forest have directly influenced their respective planning departments. Both departments exercise more discernment regarding where and where not to put fast food restaurants. Restaurants have not been granted permissions to open within 400 meters of any school. This was viewed by the committee as a very positive step in the right direction and hoped that Southwark would follow suit. [REC?]

### **Bees**

The committee heard from the London Bee Keepers Association (LBKA) who felt that Southwark could be doing more to assist them in finding new places to set up Aviaries. The aviaries need very little space and both the bees and the sites are not resource heavy. The LBKA offered their services, free of charge, to Southwark and anyone else who wanted to set up sites and help increase the dwindling bee population by keeping bees themselves.

The LBKA said that they were very willing provide advice and guidance to Southwark to help cultivate more sites for the borough and its community. [REC?]

Borough Market [next meeting]

Utilisation of Spare Council Land [next meeting]

Waste Disposal [next meeting]

### **Conclusion**

The strategy could sit in one of a number of areas including the Chief Executive's office, sustainability or an environment team, planning and regeneration, policy, children's services or trading standards. The important thing however is that the work is taken forward with commitment and drive.

Also during the course of the review, the committee touched briefly on subjects such as:

- The importance of engagement with Supermarkets with a view to improving the quality and sustainability of food stocked.
- Southwark would need to ensure buy-in from the voluntary sector and other relevant groups by investing in the resources to support strong communication mechanisms.
- Southwark needed to do more to encourage children to exercise, and the strategy might want to outline that there are foods which can aid and enhance exercise and performance by way of 'selling' the healthy food idea to young people.
- It was strongly felt that food in hospitals had to improve considerably both on the wards and in more public areas such as the outpatients department, where food options can be limited to cakes, biscuits, chocolate bars and fizzy drinks.

[to be completed after further evidence]

## **Recommendations**

[Committee to agree what the wording of the recommendations will be].