

Scrutiny Food Strategy Recommendations from Scrutiny Sub-Committee B

Introduction

The purpose of this review is to make recommendations to the executive and senior officers to assist them with the development of a food strategy to improve public health and food security. Southwark must seek to develop the communities' responsibility for the health, environmental, economic, social, cultural and the security impacts resulting from the food choices that the population of Southwark make, and our role in ensuring that food and farming are an integrated part of modern life.

It is important that we respect our environment, people, the welfare of animals, businesses and others involved in providing our food

We took as our starting point the Mayor of London's food strategy which set out four key aims: 'In the light of the strategic objectives, the Mayor and the London Food Board have a vision of a world-class, sustainable food system for London. In 2016, London's residents, employees and visitors, together with public, private *and voluntary sector organisations will:*

- *take **responsibility** for the health, environmental, economic, social, cultural and security impacts resulting from the food choices that they make, and their role in ensuring that food and farming are an integrated part of modern life*
- *demonstrate **respect** for all the many elements involved in the provision of their food, and respect fairly the environment, the people, the welfare of animals, the businesses and others involved in providing their food*
- *be more conscious of the **resources** used in growing, processing, distributing, selling, preparing and disposing of their food, and be more engaged in minimising any negative impacts arising from this resource use*
- *benefit from the **results** of this effort, such that all Londoners have ready access to an adequate, safe, nutritious and affordable diet that meets their health, cultural and other needs, and better protects the environments in which we live and those which we visit."*

In April 2008, Southwark Council passed a motion with cross party support which set out the key areas that a Southwark food strategy should seek to address. These were:

- Reducing poverty and deprivation
- Reducing the negative environmental impacts of Southwark's food system
- Supporting a vibrant food economy
- Celebrating and promoting Southwark's food culture
- Enhancing Southwark's food security
- Encouraging health eating in schools

We have used this motion as the basis for our recommendations. We have not sought to write a food strategy but to make a series of recommendations that we suggest the executive might take note of in developing a comprehensive council food strategy.

1. Southwark's approach

Ben Reynolds from 'Sustain' came to the committee in July to provide his experience of food strategy development. He informed the committee that approximately half of London boroughs now had a food strategy and he felt that Camden had a particularly good model to learn from. Camden had formed strong working alliances with many relevant key stakeholder groups. These groups included partners from the Primary Care Trust(PCT), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the National Trust (NT). They also called upon representatives from local businesses and the community to contribute to the work by taking part in consultations. 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, who understood the importance of partnership working. It might be someone who already had an interest in the development of the work, who may or may not be paid but was adept at promoting the strategy, and able to identify the 'quick wins' to keep things interesting as well as working towards the longer term objectives.

Recommendation

Southwark should seek to create a partnership steering group of interested parties to help develop, monitor and implement the food strategy.

Recommendation

Southwark should seek to identify a food champion to promote and drive forward the strategy.

Recommendation

The strategy should be accompanied by a clear, realistic and costed action plan that should be regularly reviewed.

2. Improving the health and reduce the health inequalities of people living and working in Southwark

Dr Ann Marie Connolly, director of public health 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 and highlighted some alarming Southwark statistics:

- 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

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

It was suggested that the Southwark food strategy should link up with the healthy weight strategy developed by the PCT, providing a shared message to the community with leadership being shown at the highest level. 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.

Recommendation

It is essential that any food strategy should be jointly prepared by the PCT and Southwark Council as a factor in reducing health inequalities in the borough.

Recommendation

The Council/PCT joint board should consider this report and agree a timetable for developing a strategy, we suggest within the next six months.

3. Reducing poverty and deprivation

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.

4. Reducing the negative environmental impacts of Southwark's food system

With regard to waste; currently the Council do not collect domestic domestic food waste for recycling. There are difficulties finding an 'end market' (a place to take the waste). Specialist equipment is needed to ensure that domestic waste is successfully and hygienically broken down. At present, the Council encourage people to use other forms of waste processing such as wormaries. Wormaries will compost food waste very effectively. The Council is offering wormaries to households for a period of 6 years at a cost of £10 each. The uptake is high with around 300 in use to date. There is also a current initiative which illustrates the quantity of food purchased and how much we thrown away (Reduce the Waste Campaign). More campaigns such as this are needed to raise awareness of and to encourage people to steer away from excessive packaging. The people of Southwark need to consider whether the packaging on their food is recyclable or ideally, whether food can be purchased without packaging at all. More schemes such as the one in operation in Lordship Lane, are needed to encourage commercial outlets to think about recycling by offering them free collections for 3 months. It was felt that Southwark might undertake some best practice work to help speed up improvements.

Recommendation

Southwark should seek to work with 'Veolia' (The Council's waste sub contractors) to produce food collection as early as possible and well before the current target date of 2015

Recommendation

There should be a more promotion of home composting to increase the numbers of bins distributed and used.

Recommendation

Southwark should continue to make strides to widen the types of food packaging collected making particular efforts to provide facilities for tetrapaks

Recommendation

Southwark should consider how it can positively encourage the collection of food waste from commercial premises

5. Supporting a vibrant food economy

Members said that they were concerned that local markets were now under threat and wanted to know if it was going to be possible for the Council to attempt to increase the number of existing markets by way of compensation. Representatives from the planning department thought extensions may be possible. However, if the site of the market stretched along the pavement the planning department would have to be involved and if it encroached on to the road, it would then be the concern of the highways department.

Recommendation

Southwark should promote and encourage more street markets.

6. Celebrating and promoting Southwark's food culture

It is important that the Council, in devising a food strategy, shows 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 across all its sites. For example, catering for meetings should naturally default to vegetarian options. Vegetarian food tends to be healthier as well as having the benefit of 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.

Recommendation

The Council should undertake a campaign of sustainable food awareness.

Recommendation

The council should seek to use its own purchasing power, particularly in the new Tooley street contract to ensure there is:

- fair-trade,
- sustainability & recycling,
- local providers and supply chain
- healthy eating.

7. Southwark's ethnic food imports

There was anecdotal evidence which suggested that the process of importing can have considerable costs both financially and environmentally. The extent to which countries depend on trading with the UK are not fully known, however, it is generally thought that making demands on poorer countries to grow food for importing to the UK, could mean that the cultivation of those crops contribute to the depletion to 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.

Recommendation

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8. Enhancing Southwark's food security

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that access to healthy food can be difficult to obtain in certain areas of the borough, with fresh fruit and vegetable shops located some way away from housing estates. Cheaper more unhealthy foods seem to be more readily available in those areas.

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, seeking to understand more fully the implications of food brought in from overseas; for instance, what are the economic and ethical considerations to the country of origin and what impact the imports might 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 might be needed for Southwark. It was felt that a Southwark strategy should detail ways in which to promote organic produce; linking it with seasonal production; the planting of fruit trees and the possibilities of utilising public space for these initiatives.

Recommendation

Southwark should continue to use its planning policies to promote and enhance local shopping parades.

Recommendation

Council owned land, housing and parks land in particular present ample opportunity for more creative use of open space to provide allotments and orchards.

Recommendation

Southwark food strategy should identify areas that can be used for these purposes

9. Encouraging health eating in schools

There were positive initiatives being taken to encourage young people to eat better by encouraging them to join breakfast clubs. However, the committee heard reports that breakfast clubs were not widely available in Southwark schools. 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 representations from the PCT stated 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.

Recommendation

The use of the curriculum to understand food and encouraging gardening and growing food particularly in primary school

Recommendation

Southwark would need to get a better picture of precisely what is going on in its schools with a view to providing free school meals.

10. Using allotments and other Council land

To increase the amount of allotments in the borough would mean taking over other public open spaces, and whilst this would not constitute a 'change of use,' under the current planning rules, the viability of putting allotments on to publicly owned space was questionable. Public land meant everyone would have access to it and the only way to ensure the safety of the allotments would be to invest in fences, gates and gate locks which would then require planning permission.

The evidence taken from Southwark's planning department pointed to the fact that there was little that could be done to enhance local food production. Recently there have been large developments of new homes being built on high density brown field sites, without a great deal of open space to use for anything but the provision of sustainable homes.

Members felt, however that under the sustainable communities act, planners and developers should start to think more seriously about integrating open spaces within new developments which might be suitable for growing vegetables as well as other recreational uses.

Recommendation

Members felt very strongly that the council must continue to use its planning policies to ensure adequate provision of outdoor space is provided in both private and public areas.

Recommendation

Developments should seek to design outdoor space to be used flexibly, maximising the ability of the community and individuals to use outdoor space for growing food.

Recommendations

1. Any food strategy must take into consideration the character of the borough and its individuality.
2. The Council should undertake a campaign of sustainable food awareness.
3. To ensure that healthy, sustainable food is being provided in Southwark's schools, it is recommended that an investigation into the current situation be undertaken with the formulation of a plan to address any issues arising.
4. Providing free school meals would ensure that all children get at least one nutritious meal per day.
5. Planners must start balancing the demand for homes with the needs for outside space for recreational and food production possibilities.