

STATES OF JERSEY



SCHOOL MILK: RESTORATION OF FUNDING

Lodged au Greffe on 8th June 2011
by Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

- (a) to express their support for the restoration of free school milk in nursery and primary classes in Jersey schools;
- (b) to request the Minister for Economic Development to reprioritise funds allocated to marketing in the 2011 Economic Development budget to provide £46,000 to fund school milk for the September 2011 term;
- (c) to request the Chief Minister, after consultation with the Minister for Economic Development, to bring forward for approval by the States provision for £138,000 to be inscribed in the budget of the Economic Development Department in the Annual Business Plan 2012 to fund free school milk for 2012; and
- (d) to agree that the funding for school milk should be provided for within the total States spending limits already agreed by the States for 2013 and to request the Council of Ministers to ensure that the detailed departmental spending proposals for 2013 brought forward for approval by the States in due course contain provision for this funding.

DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

The argument around the provision of milk to primary and nursery classes has long centred around 3 themes, involving –

- Health and diet
- Education
- Economic factors.

Each of these themes contributes something to what is a substantial and, I believe, a valid case for retaining milk in schools. But each theme does not provide all the answers, and so each Minister with some responsibility in this area can wash his or her hands of the issue. For each it is a matter of trimming the budget, and not taking in the wider view. I shall address each of these themes in turn to examine the detail and to urge members to take the wider view.

The subject of school milk has been the subject of debate in this Assembly since 2002, and until last year, each time the funding has been found. Members of the public were shocked and angry at the time of the Annual Business Plan debate that members had voted to cut school milk and yet were prepared to spend £400,000 extra on an office for Jersey Finance in the Middle East. Parents, grandparents, teachers, children and young people of all ages have flocked in their thousands to sign the subsequent petition calling for the restoration of school milk. Many have commented about how the home of the Jersey cow could possibly stop free milk on the grounds that there are no health benefits to be gained by young children drinking a third of a pint of low fat milk every day.

The class of 4 year-olds from FCJ Primary school who wrote to the Chief Minister earlier this year described themselves as “angry and sad” that their daily milk time had come to an end as part of this government’s cost-cutting programme. On Friday 4th March 2011, the Chief Minister went into the classroom to explain his actions by saying that it was like going into the sweet shop with some pennies and not being able to buy everything. He is wrong on 2 counts. First, milk is an essential part of a balanced diet, vital for the formation of good bones and teeth. Free school milk is important in ensuring that children get their daily needs for calcium, protein and vitamins. Sweets are a source of cheap calories and energy and are definitely not part of a healthy diet. Drinking milk at break-time may also mean that some children will not be drinking a far less healthy fizzy sugared drink.

There appears to be a complete conflict between the Medical Officer of Health and the Health Promotion Unit, who worked with Jersey Dairy and provided the health messages on the milk cartons. These messages stress why milk is good for you –“helps build strong bones; good for your teeth; gives you energy; contains vitamins and minerals and should be part of a healthy diet. Low in fat, high in goodness.”.

Healthy diet lessons in primary schools use what is known as the “eat-well plate”. This plate has been designed by the UK Food Standards Agency, and divides the daily plate of food that should be eaten into 5 food category groups showing how much of each category should be eaten in a day. One of the 5 segments is milk and dairy foods, which should make up around 14% of the food we eat each day. Yet the Minister for Health and Social Services claimed last year that there are no health benefits to be gained from it.

One of the most important aspects of young children having milk at school is that they learn at a very young age that low-fat milk is good for them. The evidence shows that a high percentage of children drink milk at primary school and enjoy it. In a survey last year of all the 25 primary and nursery schools receiving milk, there was an 88% take-up rate by the children. And it is not like the old days. The milk is served chilled, not warm. Those who don't like milk do not have to drink it; they may have water or fruit juice.

It is all very well to say, as the Minister for Health and Social Services does, that today most schoolchildren already get a balanced diet with sufficient calcium. There are many, especially in the town schools, who do not. A recent JEP survey showed that 10% of 10 year-olds went to school without any breakfast. If that were repeated across primary years, it would mean around 600 children arriving at school hungry. For these pupils, milk at break-time is essential.

But it goes further than this. The setting-up of healthy eating habits starts early. It is known that calcium can continue strengthening your bones until the age of 20 to 25, when peak bone mass is reached. After this point, your bones can only maintain or lose their density and grow weaker as a natural part of the ageing process. Inadequate dietary calcium intake before this age can increase the risk of brittle bone disease and osteoporosis, as calcium is drawn from the bones as a reserve.

Each year in the UK, over £1.7 billion is spent on treating osteoporosis. Health professionals estimate that one in 2 women and one in 5 men over the age of 50 in the UK will break a bone, mainly because of osteoporosis. Women are more affected as they have less bone mass than men, and may lose it faster as they get older, especially after the menopause when falling oestrogen levels result in the loss of the protective effect of oestrogen on bone density.

Calcium is an essential nutrient for all children to help grow strong bones and reduce the risk of developing osteoporosis when they're older. But many children and teenagers don't receive their recommended daily intake. Encouraging children and adolescents to drink more milk, rather than other drinks, can provide not only calcium, but also important proteins, carbohydrates and micronutrients.

Good habits, started in the primary years, may be developed into secondary school. The drinking of reduced fat milk is one such good habit. When a glass of milk replaces a packet of crisps and a can of coke, not only will it be contributing to a reduction in the worrying levels of obesity in our young people, it will be helping many to concentrate on their studies. Furthermore, if our young people are not encouraged to drink milk as part of a balanced diet, then where will the future customers for Jersey Dairy come from? Support for free school milk can be seen as a much-needed assistance with marketing for our dairy industry.

The dairy industry is far from fully recovered from its troubled past. The McQueen plan proposed the concept of an economically sustainable industry being one that achieved an average farm EBITDA (Earnings before Interest, Tax, Depreciation and Amortisation) of 20% of turnover. The 2010 figure stubbornly hovers around 6%.

In last year's Annual Business Plan debate, the Minister for Economic Development told the House that it was costing the taxpayer £183,000 a year to maintain free school

milk. What he failed to tell the House was that he had received a letter from Jersey Dairy saying that they were anxious to maintain free school milk, and although they were charging considerably less than the price they were getting from larger supermarkets, they were prepared to drop their price so that the cost of the project would be only £138,000. In addition, they would continue to cover the cost of all packaging and distribution.

Back in March, when the Minister for Economic Development was put under pressure by the representatives of the tourism industry, he was quite prepared to offer to reallocate his £4.5 million marketing budget, and offered £500,000 to boost advertising to promote the Island as a summer destination. He should therefore have little problem, given his commitment to promoting a diverse economy, in finding £46,000 from his budget to fund school milk for the September term.

Financial and manpower implications

This proposition will require £46,000 to be found from the Economic Development budget this year and £138,000 in the 2012 full year. There are no manpower implications.