



## HULL VOTES TO CALL HALT TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME REPORTS CATERER & HOTELKEEPER MAGAZINE

Kingston upon Hull council has come under fire after deciding to scrap a pioneering free school meals programme on cost grounds, despite the health benefits the scheme has driven. Liberal Democrat councillors believe the £5m annual bill is money that could be better spent elsewhere, which has caused an outcry from parents, Labour councillors and headteachers at the area's 80-plus primary and special schools.

Supporters of the Eat Well Do Well scheme, which include Hull MPs John Prescott, Alan Johnson and Diana Johnson, point to an independent study by Hull University, which found the provision of breakfast clubs, free lunches and healthy afternoon snacks has improved both the diets and behaviour of the schoolchildren.

In addition, uptake of school meals has doubled in the past year to 64% across the region, compared with the national average of 43%.

Hull Labour councillor Mary Glew described the decision to end free meals from 31 March as a "retrograde step". "Early intervention makes so much difference to children's future diets. I can't think of a better way to spend council money," she said. Diana Johnson, MP for Hull North, added: "The long-term cost to taxpayers of not acting against childhood obesity now will be far greater than the cost of initiatives such as this."

Liberal Democrat leader of the council Carl Menzies has consistently opposed the scheme and moved to scrap it since his party took control of Hull last May. A Hull Council spokeswoman said: "Menzies' view is that those that can't afford to pay will still receive free meals under the existing means-testing system, and it is unfair to ask Hull's council taxpayers to foot the school meals bill."

Food service consultant Vic Laws agreed, saying it should not be up to councils to subsidise school meals. "It's disappointing that the local funding is set to stop," he said, "but the benefits of free school meals to the nation as a whole are such that the Government should fund the system nationally."

The council will take a final vote on whether to scrap free meals at a budget meeting on 1 March.

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