

Meat-free Mondays coming to all Surrey schools?

Meat-free and plant-based options could be mandated across Surrey schools every Monday according to new council guidance. Only some Surrey schools currently participate in a form of 'meat-free Monday' so the new food strategy would expand its remit.

The new policy forms part of the so-called Surrey Healthy Schools initiative. The initiative aims to address food insecurity, reduce climate impact of the local food system and support the local population to keep a healthy weight by improving the accessibility and affordability of nutritious food.

Speaking at a Surrey County Council (SCC) meeting on April 29, Officer Marisa Heath said: "I don't think meat-free Mondays is too much to ask for one day a week. We're still giving six days a week for people to make other choices so I don't think it is draconian or heavy handed."

Council officers said the preferred menu would prioritise fruit, vegetables and legumes- rather than processed, plant-based meat alternatives. Only schools signed up to the Surrey Healthy Schools will be part of the initiative, including all SCC public schools and some private schools.

Framing the programme as being to "educate and not dictate", Cllr Mark Nuti (Conservative/ Chertsey) said the policy is empowering individuals and families to make informed and healthy food choices.

The committee discussed the importance of sustainable and locally sourced farming, as well as cutting meat to decrease carbon emissions and environmental resources. It was noted that 'plant-based' food was not always "nutritional", but that children needed fibre from fruit and vegetables.

The new strategy aims to increase children's nutrition and combat obesity, as well as increasing sustainability and environmentally conscious eating. Around 1,210 of 9,355 Year 6 pupils measured in Surrey were classed as obese or severely obese in 2022-23, NHS figures show.

Healthy food, such as fruit and vegetables, are often out of reach for many parents on low incomes who prioritise affordability over nutrition. The amount of vegetables being purchased in the UK has fallen to its lowest level in 50 years, according to The Food Foundation.

"Levelling up is not just about buildings, it's about people," Officer Marisa said. "It's about their wellbeing, mental and physical, and allowing them to reach their [potential]."

Councillors argued the strategy must be adaptable to children who may suffer with eating disorders, have neurodiversity requirements or medical issues, and not be able to eat (or do not want to eat) plant-based food.

In a heated debate, concerns were raised about the policy going 'too far'. Cllr Trefor Hogg (Conservative/ Camberley East) said an extension to adults and elderly people with dementia could mean "being confronted with things they just can't cope with".

He added: "My particular concern of those who are in any form of social care have had their liberties and freedom restricted to some degree. It's very very important that they have a full choice. This is particularly important where there are neurodiverse and mental health issues as well. I think we should be very explicit on the subject. I would be very concerned about the adults and the elderly being confronted with things they just can't cope with."

Meeting documents stated the eating environment should be inclusive and social as restricting to plant based only options may make some feel excluded.

Image: Creator: Chris Radburn | Credit: Pa Photos, NTB scanpix License details