

When is the right time to teach food hygiene?

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When is the right time to teach food hygiene? Many have argued that it should be taught in schools because it is a basic life skill.

The UK experience of comprehensive surveillance data for foodborne illnesses and related studies show that a significant number of infections apparently occur in the home, therefore it is not unreasonable to teach everyone this topic and not only those who work or intend to work in the food industry.

Introduced to curriculum

In the 1990s, after much discussion, food hygiene was introduced into the Scottish school curriculum not as a subject, per se, but as one of a range of topics to be taught in a more general subject area.

It was felt at the time that it was an important step in trying to reduce the number of cases of foodborne illnesses – all of which are expensive, to a greater or lesser extent debilitating and preventable.

Has it worked? Is the impact of food hygiene teaching to school pupils measurable and is anyone actually trying to measure it? Or is it still just 'a good idea'?



To try to answer these questions we take an in depth look at Dingwall Academy – the alma mater of one of the authors and the school where the other author both studied and has been a teacher of Home Economics for nearly 40 years and then take a broader Scotland wide view.

Dingwall, a town of around 5,000 people, lies in the Highlands of Scotland. Its name derives from the Norse for a 'meeting place' or parliament but its origins pre-date the Vikings by many centuries.

After being the county town of Ross and Cromarty for much of its existence it is still a meeting place – as a cultural centre, shopping centre and market town and for its secondary school which is one of the largest in the Highlands with a role of over 1,000 pupils testifying to its catchment area which extends way beyond the rather modest acreage of the town itself.

History of food hygiene

Food hygiene teaching is not new to Dingwall Academy. The Home Economics department has been teaching it in one form or another for over 40 years. However, unlike the early days when the subject was very much a 'girl's' domain, these days all pupils in their first and second year study Health and Food Technology; the integral food hygiene lessons, inter alia, allow the pupils to cook in a safe and hygienic manner.

From the third year onwards Health and Food Technology becomes an optional subject alongside the popular 'Hospitality' course. The uptake on these courses in Dingwall Academy is exceptionally high and the pupils have had the opportunity until now of studying for and gaining the Royal

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Environmental Health Institute of Scotland's (REHIS) Elementary Food Hygiene Certificate.

Until the end of 2011 over 140 pupils had gained this certificate. This year it is proposed to also teach the non-examinable Introduction to Food Hygiene course which is better suited to the more 'exam-challenged' pupils. At Higher Level (A Level) the Health and Food Technology course also covers HACCP.

The uptake on these courses varies year on year but as an example in 2012 there will be approximately 60 third year pupils and 57 fifth/sixth year pupils.

The pass rate is high with few pupils failing to meet the success criteria. By a special arrangement with REHIS, as part of their 'Training in Schools Initiative', teachers of Home Economics are deemed qualified to teach this level of food hygiene course in schools making it relatively straightforward for any school to take part; it is understood that this type of arrangement is unique to REHIS and they are to be congratulated on their pragmatism which removes something which would otherwise have been a significant barrier to certificated hygiene training in schools.

REHIS

Perhaps understandably, Graham Walker, the director of training for REHIS, is enthusiastic about food hygiene training in schools. Since the start of the 'Training in Schools Initiative' they have issued 56,500 certificates throughout Scotland.

The Institute recognised the need to 'catch them young' with regard to imparting food hygiene knowledge. The Scottish Schools Food Hygiene Training Initiative was set up in 1993 to facilitate that and with the aid of Scottish Home Economics teachers and funding from the Food Standards Agency Scotland has been extremely successful in helping to achieve that aim.

Funding

Until 2007 Dingwall Academy funded certificated food hygiene training through the use of its relatively limited school funds. The local demand and enthusiasm for this form of practical training always ensured that, if not extensive, at least some funding was available.

In 2007/08 the Food Standards Agency in Scotland, following requests from Home Economic teachers in Scotland, committed £90,000 a year over three years for a project to help with food hygiene training in schools.

The aim was to provide funding towards the cost of student registration and course booklets. It was quite clearly the intention, however, that this project was to meet local demands that already existed and not to



divert schools and teaching staff to a new area of work that was not seen as a local priority. In addition, it was and remains the intention to support pupils who seek to become the caterers of tomorrow so that they leave school with a good basic knowledge of food hygiene and a recognised qualification.

It became clear over these years, judging by the applications from schools for such funding, that the project was both successful and popular with schools, pupils and businesses. As a result of this perceived success a further one year extension, of £70,000, was approved.

For 2011/12 an annual budget of £94,000, now administered directly by REHIS, has been granted and the project has been extended to cover not only schools but also Special Educational Needs units and secure units.

Beyond 2012 the future, as with all public expenditure, is a matter of uncertainty. However, the commitment of the FSA in Scotland can be judged by the words of Charles Milne, director, Food Standards Agency: "This project has proved immensely popular and highly effective in providing secondary school pupils with a firm foundation of food hygiene knowledge, with around 10,000 pupils completing the training every year. It provides pupils with a nationally recognised qualification and ensures they have the knowledge to handle food safely, not only at home but also at work if they gain employment in the food industry when they leave school."

Effectiveness

In the Scottish Highlands tourism is a major factor in the local economy and the hospitality studies combined with food hygiene play a big role in pupils gaining employment in this sector on leaving school. Employers apparently appreciate that the recruits come to them already having the underpinning knowledge even if they still need on the job training.

Fiona Devlin, who is a co-owner of the very popular Rocpool restaurant in

Inverness, where a former pupil of Dingwall Academy is now employed, enthused, 'It is highly essential that young chefs coming into a modern day catering environment are fully aware of all aspects of food hygiene as this is all part of being a chef. Neil completed his REHIS training in Dingwall Academy and this, along with his excellent practical skills, enabled him to smoothly slot in to working in our kitchen.'

Parent's evenings at Dingwall Academy also show how much the pupils educate their parents with comments from parents about reprimands, for example, for not using the correct chopping boards and improper handling of foods such as raw eggs.

Further South in Scotland Judith Kennedy for Boclair Academy said, "Several former and present pupils have managed to secure part-time work in local cafes or in garden centres as well as fast food restaurants like McDonalds. Our recent success for our current S6 pupils has been securing part time work with the Hilton Hotel group in Glasgow as front of house staff and the restaurant area. This continues to be an effective asset to the UCAS applications for further education."

The future

None of these 'measurements of effectiveness' are anything other than qualitative anecdotes, no matter how positive and well meaning they may sound, but has there been any form of quantitative assessment of its effectiveness. The short answer is No, not yet! The FSA, however, have expressed their intention to carry out a formal evaluation of the project within the next year.

The result of this evaluation should prove interesting not only because it is notoriously difficult to measure the effectiveness of food hygiene training but also for the impact it may have on the funding of this popular project beyond 2012. ■

