

**Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs
27 June 2018**

**Opening Statement by Mr John Conlon, Assistant Secretary, Department of
Employment Affairs and Social Protection**

Check Against Delivery

Chairperson, Committee Members,

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before it today on the matter of tackling childhood obesity.

Introduction to the school meals programme

One of the main roles of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is to promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports.

In the context of childhood obesity, this Department administers the school meals programme which is a targeted intervention for children at risk of food poverty and educational disadvantage.

This programme provides funding towards the provision of food services to some 1,500 schools and organisations which benefits up to 250,000 children at a total cost of €54million in 2018. An additional €6.5 million was allocated to the programme as part of Budget 2018.

In recognition of the benefits that this scheme provides to children Government has significantly increased its funding since 2012 - increasing it from €35 million to a current figure of €54 million over a series of budgets (representing a 54% increase).

In line with the national policy framework for children and young people, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, priority for new applications for funding has been given to schools which are part of the DEIS programme.

The extra funding provided under the scheme in recent years has supported the improvement of the scheme to DEIS schools and its extension to some schools outside of DEIS. There is a particular focus on the provision of breakfast clubs within the scheme which provide very positive outcomes for

vulnerable children in terms of their school attendance, punctuality and energy levels.

Healthy Eating

Under the scheme, schools have a responsibility to implement healthy eating policies. The Committee may be aware that new Nutritional Standards for School Meals were devised and published under the auspices of Healthy Ireland in September 2017. These standards were developed by a Working Group led by the Health and Wellbeing Programme in the Department of Health, on which this Department was represented. The implementation of these standards will ensure that children and young people are offered healthy, nutritious and balanced meals and snacks. These standards will be fully implemented in all schools participating in the school meals scheme from September 2018 and build on the previous healthy eating guidelines in place.

In terms of compliance, schools and organisations must reapply for funding in advance of each school year and are required to submit detailed records to the Department. Expenditure on unhealthy food items is deducted from the following year's funding allocation. The Department also undertakes on-site inspections of schools and part of this includes inspecting the type of food provided. Some 1,260 schools and organisations have been inspected at this time. Compliance with the new standards will form part of the inspection process from the 2018/2019 academic year and also forms part of the Service Level Agreement in place with each school/organisation in the scheme.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to assure the Committee that the Department is committed to the ongoing development of the school meals programme and recognises that proper nutrition can improve children's ability to concentrate, improve disruptive behaviour, encourage school attendance and help in the fight against obesity. I am confident that the new Nutrition Standards will be a valuable resource in educating and supporting children to embrace healthy eating to grow and develop into healthy adults and to be a healthy weight.

I trust the presentation is of assistance to the Committee and I am happy to discuss any issues raised.

Ends