

Active citizenship: learning resources for topical issues

3. The politics of food



Introduction for staff

Food and health are always in the news. The quality of school dinners, food inequality, childhood obesity, eating disorders, food miles and supermarket profits are all issues that make food a lively citizenship issue, with topical references in the newspapers and on television. It makes an excellent topic for post-16 citizenship, since young people can investigate an area that affects and interests every single one of us.

On the following pages there are some suggestions for classroom activities and follow-up actions that young people could take.

Citizenship learning opportunities

Many citizenship questions arise on the opportunities that people have to eat healthily, and what policy decisions should be made to encourage this. Among them are:

- What is the role of schools and parents in helping children understand food and diet pressures and encouraging fitness?
- How does the outsourcing of school catering help or hinder the provision of healthy food for children?
- How can politicians ensure that global food trade is fairer?
- What is the role of the media in promoting healthy eating while not glorifying the body shape of the anorexic supermodel?
- What impact do fast food restaurants have on people's understanding of portion size and healthy eating?
- Should we always be trying to make food cheaper, rather than improving its quality?
- What is the future of the farming industry in this country?



The materials are aimed at young people working at levels 1 and 2, but could be adapted for level 3. They help to meet learning objectives identified in *Play your part: post-16 citizenship* QCA guidance (QCA, 2004). The study of the politics of food can add understanding of the key concepts of rights, responsibilities and justice in the programme of study for key stage 4 citizenship (from September 2008).



Suggestions for using the materials

- Put students into pairs and give out the information sheet 'What are the issues?' Ask each pair to decide which of the topics they would like to investigate further by using the suggested resources at the end. Each pair could either:
 - make a presentation about their topic, or
 - design an exhibition using magazine/newspaper articles and information from their research.
- The whole group could work together to make a radio programme on the topic of food for the school radio station.
- Use the decision-making activity, 'The Healthy Eating Working Party', to encourage the young people to consider the possible policy initiatives that a government could take. The briefing notes suggest that the young people could put their final recommendations to a local MP, supermarket manager, doctor or restaurateur. This will need to be set up in advance.
- The bubble activity encourages the learners to form their own considered opinions about the politics of food. You could use these statements to develop their skills in responding to arguments. Ask them to work in threes and tell them that they are going to play three roles in rotation: 'A' arguer, 'B' responder and 'C' observer. Give each pair a set of seven of the statements in bubbles, cut up separately. Tell the students to select two of the bubbles each. The person playing role A should put the statement in the bubble and the person playing role B should try to respond as quickly as possible by presenting a counter argument plus a reason. The observer decides whether the argument is supported by a good reason. Everyone changes role and moves on to the next bubble, and play continues until all the bubbles have been discussed.
- Many young people have views on the quality, quantity, choice and price of the food served in their own organisation. The campaigning activity provides some ideas for how to take some action aimed at making their views heard and improving the provision.



What are the issues?

Food inequality

In some parts of the world, people are starving – 1.2 billion people in the world are living on less than \$1 a day. Their food might be one bowl of rice or maize for a whole day.

In richer countries people are eating too much food – and it's making them fat. Many people eat three meals a day and snacks in between. Most of us eat more than we need, and this is encouraged by fast-food restaurants and supermarkets who lure us in with large portions, and offers to 'eat all you want for £5' and 'buy one get one free'.

By 2025, it is estimated that 30–40% of the population of Britain will be obese. At the same time, magazines promote ultra-slim body images to young people through coverage of supermodels and celebrities.



Food quality



Low-quality, high-calorie and high-fat content foods make people ill. Obesity, coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes, bowel cancer, arthritis and diabetes are all related to diet. Cheaper processed food is often lowest in quality and more likely to contain too much fat, sugar and salt.

People have been shocked recently to find out that many school meals consist of cheap processed food and that the average price of a meal served in a school canteen can be as low as 39p. TV chef Jamie Oliver has brought this to public attention in his Channel 4 programme, *Jamie's School Dinners*.

There has also been debate about whether young children should be targeted with advertising for unhealthy foods, and whether schools should house vending machines for chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks.

Food safety

Some food is being produced as cheaply as possible, in factory-type conditions, and food scares have been the result, for example, BSE ('mad cow disease'), toxins in farmed salmon, chicken flu, or salmonella in eggs. There is also extensive debate about whether or not it is safe to eat crops that have been genetically modified (GM). The changes to the genes of crops can improve yield, pest resistance, or herbicide tolerance. But no-one is really sure what affect the changes might have on human health.

Food production

Food is produced on farms in this country and all over the world, which is then supplied to food-processing factories. The three largest food-processing companies in Britain are Unilever, Cadbury Schweppes and Associated British Foods, who between them own two thirds of the food-production factories. Competition between companies keeps food prices low which affects many poorer countries which have to produce goods so cheaply that workers are paid very low wages. Fair trade organisations try to make sure that producers are paid a living wage, which enables them to cover basic needs, including food, shelter, education and health care for their families.

Food distribution and retailing

The supermarkets are the biggest distributors of food (Tesco made over £2 billions in profit last year). All supermarkets try to buy their food from producers at the cheapest possible cost, so that they can attract customers with low prices.

Small farmers in this country are suffering, as well as those in poorer countries. The pressure from supermarkets for them to produce milk, vegetables and meat at the lowest cost, is pushing many of them out of business. Some are selling their produce directly to customers at farmers' markets to try to get a fairer price for freshly produced food.



Soil Association (2004), Rob Cousins

Which of these issues will you investigate?

The Healthy Eating Working Party

In this activity, you can make decisions about the future health of our nation. We know that many people do not understand about the importance of eating healthily.

If action is not taken soon, we also know that:

- people will continue to eat too much unhealthy food
- more people will become obese, with all the misery that causes
- more people will be ill from heart disease, strokes, cancer and diabetes, and die younger
- the costs to the NHS will soar
- children will not learn about healthy eating and so will not be able to pass this knowledge on to their own children.



What should we do? This is a democratic country, and people cannot be forced to change their eating habits. However, governments can make policies that encourage change.

1. You have been appointed by the government to look into action that could be taken. Elect a chair of the working party, and then divide into small sub-groups to consider the options.
2. In your small group, discuss each of the following options and decide which THREE to recommend to the whole working party. Although the options provided relate only to healthy eating, you should also make recommendations about how to encourage people to take more exercise (such as walking, cycling, or taking part in sport).
3. The whole group must decide what to include in its report to the government, and produce a presentation to explain its decisions.

You could invite your local Member of Parliament, a supermarket manager, a doctor or a restaurateur to listen to your presentation and make comments on your final recommendations.

Option 1 – A calorie tax

The Treasury could place a tax on high-calorie foods to try to deter people from buying and eating them. One penny per 100 calories would add 7p to the cost of a double quarter pounder with cheese, 5p to a large portion of fries and 2p to a medium cola, whereas a Caesar salad with grilled chicken would cost 2p extra with iced tea at no extra cost. The extra tax raised could be spent on school meals. The main advantage would be that people can see exactly how many calories they are taking in as a result of the choices they make.

Option 2 – Changes to the National Curriculum and provision in schools

The Department for Education could insist that every child from age 5–16 be taught a compulsory course on food studies. The course would include: learning about the production and distribution of food; the different food groups (protein, carbohydrate, fats, fibre, minerals, and vitamins); the calorific values of different foods; and how to prepare and cook foods. All schools would require new teaching kitchens and additional food studies staff. School meals would reflect the healthy eating message in their canteens and vending machines selling unhealthy snack food would be banned from school premises.

Option 3 – No free health treatment for people who are designated obese

The Department of Health could instruct all doctors and hospitals that anyone who is obese and has contracted an obesity-related illness would not qualify for free treatment at NHS hospitals. There would be a scale of charges depending on the degree of obesity. The charges would reduce as patients lost weight.

Option 4 – Stricter planning controls

Local councils could be given powers by the government to refuse planning permission to fast-food outlets within a certain distance from school entrances. They could also refuse to grant permission for more than one fast food outlet in any high street.

Option 5 – Warning labels on high calorie foods

The Department of Trade and Industry could insist that all high-calorie foods carry a warning label stating in large print how much fat, sugar and salt certain foods contain. This would apply to processed foods bought in supermarkets and also to foods on restaurant menus. People would be able to compare the contents of different foods. The calorific value would also have to be displayed in large letters, in the same way that health warnings are currently displayed on cigarette packets.

Option 6 – Tax incentives to farmers

Farmers in this country could be helped to distribute fresh, healthy food (meat, fish, fruit, juices, vegetables, wholegrain bread and cakes, etc.) at farmers' markets in every town and city in the country. They would pay minimal tax on the income from these sales and would be able to offset the transport and staffing costs of taking part in the markets. Government bodies would be set up to assist in the running of the markets.

Option 7 – Advertising campaign backed by celebrity chefs

Spurred on by the likes of Jamie Oliver, other celebrity chefs could be encouraged to take part in a nation-wide advertising campaign, funded by the Department for Health, stressing the importance of eating well. The campaign could consist of posters on high streets, advertisements on television and radio, wristbands, pop concerts, free laminated recipe cards in supermarkets, and celebrity appearances in high-street stores. At the same time, advertising of certain foods, such as chocolate, crisps or sugary drinks, could be banned.

Option 8 – Healthy eating lottery

Every person could receive a special free lottery ticket for every £20 worth of food designated as healthy that they buy from their supermarket. The qualifying foods would be clearly marked on the shelves. A prize of £500 would be allocated by the government to each supermarket every week and the draw would be made on Sunday afternoon, just before closing.

What do you think about the politics of food?

1. Work in pairs for this activity, and decide which of the following statements you agree with and which you disagree with.
2. Choose one of the statements you agree with and research it further by using the internet and the library, interviewing local people, writing to relevant organisations and carrying out a survey of your family and friends.

It is not fair that people in poor countries earn so little for producing food

The government should ban the advertising of junk food to children

Food is necessary to life and it should be as cheap as possible for everyone. Factory farming helps keep prices low.

Eleven farmers in this country go out of business every day. We should be protecting our farming industry.

It is not the job of schools to teach children about healthy food – this should be up to the parents

The National Health Service cannot cope with increases in illnesses related to unhealthy eating

Fast food restaurants encourage people to eat more than they need

What can YOU do? Campaigning for better food in your organisation

You may think that the food you eat every day at the facilities provided in your organisation could be better. If you think this is the case and you want to do something about it, here are some ideas.



Download the Make a Difference information from the Channel 4 *Jamie's School Dinners* website (www.channel4.com/schooldinners). It is aimed at parents, but is useful for students too. The downloadable information 'arms you with the information you need to persuade schools that it is in their interests as educators to ensure that the students eat well. It tells you who makes the decisions and the best way to let them know your views, plus a host of ideas to help you organise an effective campaign.'

1. You'll need to do some background research. Find out the following:

- *What do other students think about the food? Is it healthy?*
- *How would they like the food to change?*
- *What do they think about the vending machines, if there are any?*
- *What do the staff think about the quality of food?*
- *Who provides the food at your organisation?*
- *Who decides on the menus?*
- *What are the average prices of meals?*
- *Is there any provision for vegetarians and the food requirements of different religions?*

2. Raise the matter with the school, college, youth or trainee council. Encourage the council to pass a motion for specific changes.

3. Discuss the motion with senior managers and those responsible for providing food.

4. Write a report making recommendations and present it to relevant people.

Student action case study

At B6 Brooke House Sixth Form College in Hackney, London, the students have a key role in decision making. Students are represented on a range of committees in the college, including the catering committee. They took an active part in the process of tendering for the college catering contract and have two-weekly meetings with the contractor appointed to agree menus. The student reps have also persuaded the contractor to make more use of local suppliers who are sensitive to the multi-cultural nutritional needs of the students at Brooke House.

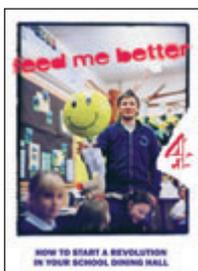
Resources

Channel 4: *Jamie's School Dinners*

Downloadable information sheets on running a campaign to make a difference to school dinners and information on how to get the *Feed Me Better* starter pack for schools.

(FMB Hotline: 0871 222 5678)

www.channel4.com/schooldinners



The Fairtrade Foundation: *Fair Trade in Action*

Introduces and develops the concept of fair trade as an alternative to conventional trade. Includes a video, producer case studies, a board game and teachers' guide. Price: £15.00.

Also available is a free resource that aims to enable teachers to introduce and develop the concept of fair trade in the classroom from Key Stage 2 to 16+ across a range of curriculum areas.

To order telephone: 020 7440 7676

[www.fairtrade.org.uk/
resources_education_packs.htm](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/resources_education_packs.htm)



Fat Land : How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World

by Greg Crister. Penguin (paperback) 2004

The USA is now the most overweight country on the planet (apart from a few South Seas Islands), with nearly 60% of the population overweight. Britain is catching up fast and rates of obesity continue to increase at an alarming rate. *Fat Land*



reveals why it has happened in the United States: how cheap imports of fat and sugar made junk food and fizzy drinks its staple diet; how ruthless marketing by big business ensures portion sizes (and waistlines) keep on growing; and how every aspect of American life – from TV dinners to advertising in schools, from 'baggy fit' clothes to wonder diets that don't work – is contributing to the supersizing of the nation.

Food and Farming Partnership

A website provided by the Food and Farming Partnership to raise a series of topics updated regularly, each with a range of viewpoints attached. These viewpoints enable you to consider differing perspectives of an argument.

Examples of topics are:

- Food miles
- Recovery after foot and mouth disease
- Organic food production
- Fair trade for all?
- Genetically modified organisms

www.foodandfarming.org.uk

Food and Drink Federation: *Food Future Teachers' Pack*

This resource gives the point of view of the food and drink industry. The resource comprises:

- Two copies of the booklet *Food for Our Future – Genetic modification, food and farming*
- A set of six units suitable for use primarily with students aged 14–16
- Teachers' notes and specific curriculum links.

The teachers' pack can be ordered online from

www.foodfuture.org.uk

Oxfam: *The Coffee Chain Game – An Activity on Trade*

Buy online at www.oxfam.org.uk
(publications) price £4.50

Coffee companies make huge profits, while the farmers who grow the coffee beans make barely enough to live on. *The Coffee Chain Game* is a role-play activity which helps participants explore why the money made from coffee is so unevenly distributed. Playing time: 30 to 50 minutes; for 10 to 20 players.

The material provides up-to-date facts and figures on fair trade based on recent research and fieldwork, recommendations for action by governments, coffee companies, and consumers, and case studies of people in Uganda, with background information.



Oxfam

