

Conclusions of the joint meeting of the Management Committee on CMO and the Advisory Committee regarding the School Fruit Scheme

Brussels, 24 March 2011

This was the second meeting of the extended Advisory Committee ("the stakeholder group") regarding the School Fruit Scheme (SFS). In the public there is wide-spread support for the SFS with a number of initiatives taken at national, regional and local level.

We have had a very interesting day with important contributions from speakers and from the audience.

Some difficulties have been noted regarding budget, co-financing, implementation, control and timing of the different decisions.

In 2009-10 the first year of application of the EU SFS, 23 MS out of 27 participated. The funds, which were not taken up by the MS not participating, were re-allocated proportionally to the other MS. It should be recalled that the total EU budget is 90 million € which taken together with the national contribution amounts to 156 million €. The EU finances in general 50% of the budget, however with 75% in convergence regions, giving an EU average co-financing of 58%.

In spite of all the 90 million € being allocated, unfortunately only 33,3 million € or 37,6% of the budget was actually spent in 2009-10. The reason seems to be start-up problems together with the question of co-financing working as an impediment. However, already in the first year, 32 000 schools have participated with almost 5 million schoolchildren benefiting from the scheme, corresponding to 18,4% of the core group of schoolchildren in the EU.

Concern was expressed in the meeting that spending had not been sufficient in the first year of implementation.

In the second year of implementation 2010-11, 24 MS are participating (not participating UK, Finland and Sweden) it will be crucial that the budget put aside results in corresponding expenditure, knowing that most of refunding of expenditure takes place in the second half of the school year.

Improvements have been recorded in the functioning of the Scheme in its second year of application where certain problems inherent to the initial year of application were overcome.

In this connection has been noted the Commission's move to simplify, in light of the experience gained, certain administrative requirements with the latest modification of Regulation (EC) No 288/2009 in order to facilitate the implementation of the Scheme.

This on the background of the particular challenges related to the implementation of the Scheme in several Member States, most notably the administrative and logistical difficulties, securing of co-financing at the national level.

From the side of stakeholders a number of critical points were mentioned regarding:

- The delay in the timing of decisions
- The delay in updating and putting in place the website on SFS, which is considered as a key tool in the dissemination of information, including on best practices.
- The delay in setting up the expert/scientific group to assist the Commission in following the latest developments in regard to science, advice on changes to the schemes and the important task of carrying through the monitoring and evaluation of the scheme.
- The need for the Commission to be more active into research on obesity and its causes and how fruit and vegetable consumption can contribute in the fight against obesity.

The exchange of information and best practices in a forum like this is considered to be very important and should continue in order to contribute to the better functioning of the Scheme.

A number of comments were made in order to increase the effectiveness of the Scheme:

- It should be further simplified and improved but workable as regards the procedures. The meeting was informed of an evaluation of the administrative burden undertaken by an outside consultant based on a contract with the Secretariat General of the Commission. Results of this evaluation should be available by summer. It was clear also that this should be one of the key aspects looked at to be undertaken in the evaluation by an outside contractor for next year, leading up to the report

that the Commission has to make by August 2012 to the Council and European Parliament.

- A further difficulty was underlined with regard to funding, where sufficient funds should be provided, but in particular the co-financing rules, which are seen as the biggest obstacle to the higher uptake of available funding. Some delegates were also asking for a change of the scope of the EU financing to include accompanying measures. Questions were raised as to whether an EU financing was possible.
- It was noted that half of the MS participating have a distribution of once a week, whilst the other half has a distribution of two or more per week. Doubts were raised whether a distribution of once a week was sufficient to provide long-term effectiveness of the EU SFS. Once a week might bring about an increase in consumption, but the key to success was the change of mind set, changing the habits which would have long-term effect.
- Once again it was underlined the importance of monitoring and evaluation, where clear criteria for the evaluation should be provided.
- Questions were raised as to the focus of the EU SFS, where there were some suggestions that one should target low socio-economic groups, where on the one hand consumption of fruit and vegetables is very low and the rate of obesity on the other hand is rather high compared to those more well-off.
- Further importance was given to strengthening the communication initiatives in order to step up the visibility of the EU SFS, where there was still insufficient knowledge amongst the public, the schools and the local governments.
- As another difficulty was raised the issue of logistical problems, i.e. to contract with a provider of fruit and vegetables in a situation where fresh fruit and vegetables are perishable products and therefore not apt to storage compared to the competing alternatives.

The stakeholder group agreed that a yearly meeting for the time being was sufficient. As concerns timing of the next meeting it was suggested by Interfel that it should take place in November/December, when MS are finalising their national programmes. However, the Commission has to undertake an evaluation of the functioning of the Scheme in 2012 and submit a report to the Council and the EP by August 2012. Consequently the Chairman thought it would be preferable that the next meeting should take place more or less at the same time next year, which would allow taking stock of the situation and providing input to the report.