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Kelly Silent on New Money for School Meals

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Education secretary unveils 'mini-manifesto' for children, but puts no figure on extra money for school dinners

Labour today turned its campaign spotlight on children, launching a "mini-manifesto" which pledged to improve school dinners, protect children from internet porn and make it harder for under-16s to buy cigarettes. The education secretary, Ruth Kelly, unveiled the manifesto today, but refused to put a figure on increased funding for school dinners. Despite welcoming the contribution made to the debate on children's diet by TV chef Jamie Oliver, Ms Kelly merely said details would be "available in the next few weeks".

Instead, there will be minimum standards on fat, sugar and salt in school dinners from this September, new nutritional standards from September 2006, and more money for building or revamping school kitchens.

Ms Kelly also promised a ban within five years on junk food advertising aimed at children, if a voluntary code proved insufficient. Meanwhile the children's minister, Margaret Hodge, announced that laptops leased to low-income families would come equipped with surf guards to disable unsuitable websites.

Ms Kelly told a Labour news conference that a School Meals Trust would be set up to help schools to provide nutritious diets and said Ofsted would be asked to inspect and report on the school meals service.

The Tories said the moves were "a gimmick" and the Liberal Democrats said they were a "cheap election stunt".

Today's announcements came after the Channel Four show Jamie's School Dinners highlighted the poor quality of meals. Mr. Oliver last night refused to back the government's

scheme, and Ms Kelly was forced to admit there was not yet money on the table to finance it.

She said that many schools already spend more per meal than the 37p figure denounced by Mr. Oliver. "All have the powers to do so. But I can confirm today that we will help them by making available more money for schools to raise the quality of school meals. I will make more details available in the next few weeks."

She added: "We will ensure extra resources are available to build the new kitchens and renew existing ones so that healthy, fresh food can be prepared in school - rather than cooked and chilled and then reheated.

"Alongside the investment in equipment we will support school dinner ladies and catering staff to continually improve their knowledge and skills to ensure they are preparing the best quality food for children in school.

"We want every child, whose parents choose it, to enjoy a healthy, high quality school lunch."

Labour brought in a scheme in 2000 of daily fresh fruit for school children under Tessa Jowell, which has seen two million pupils receive free apples, oranges and bananas.

On TV advertising, she said: "We are already committed to working with Ofcom to tighten the rules on broadcast advertising, sponsorship and promotion of food and drink to ensure children are properly protected from adverts promoting high-fat, salty and sugary foods during children's programmes and at other times when large numbers of children are watching.

"I can announce today that if these rules do not work, a third term Labour government will legislate to ensure children are not bombarded by junk food advertising when they are watching television."

Labour also said shopkeepers who sell cigarettes to under-16s could face fixed penalty notices and, if they offended persistently, a complete ban on selling cigarettes. The shadow education secretary Tim Collins said: "On school meals, what we need are genuine solutions, not more pre-election gimmicks.

"Conservatives would ensure we have more money given to the frontline and allow schools the freedom and resources they need to offer more nutritious meals.

"We have been doing substantive work on our policy, and we will announce our proposals shortly."

The Liberal Democrat education spokesman Phil Willis said: "I think this is nothing more than a cheap election stunt to hide the fact that, for eight years under [Tony Blair's] stewardship, our children have been eating the most appalling food, which has got low nutritional standards.

"Some of our poorest children are being fed stuff which, quite frankly, a lot of people wouldn't even put in their garbage can."

Labour's election coordinator, Alan Milburn, highlighted the government's plan for 3,500 new Sure Start centres, and criticised the Tories for having "no ambition to end child poverty".

He said: "By April we will have increased child benefit by 25% for the first child; Labour has helped lift 600,000 children out of poverty.

"Now we plan to increase the child element of the child tax credit at least in line with average earnings towards our goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020."

Last month Labour pledged to increase paid maternity leave from six months to nine months, with some of it transferrable to the father, and to increase it to a full year by the end of a Labour third term.