

CHILDREN GET LESSONS IN REAL FOOD

Schoolchildren are to be given lessons in where their food comes from to encourage the next generation of shoppers to buy local produce.



Westcountry pupils launched the scheme in the region yesterday as Environment Secretary David Miliband announced plans for a Year of Food and Farming in Education.

Schools will link up with farmers to give youngsters a better understanding of where the food on their plate comes from. And there will be more emphasis on the environmental as well as financial benefits of cutting food miles and buying from local producers.

The Prince of Wales has agreed to act as patron for the industry-led Year of Food and Farming.

Crediton farmer John Lee was among the members of Food and Community Education who attended the London launch yesterday alongside ministers from the health, environment and education departments.

He said the problem of children not knowing where their food comes from "is not just an inner-city thing, it is right across all sectors of education".

Mr Lee, who is also appointed chairman of the Farming and Food Futures Group, added the programme would encourage children to see how their food is produced and passes through the food chain while also understanding job prospects in the industry.

Mr Miliband told the launch: "As consumers, we have a great deal of power when it comes to buying food. As well as influencing our health, the choices we make really do make a difference to our countryside, the environment, and to tackling the biggest challenge we all face: climate change.

"Consumers need to make informed choices, and where better to start than in educating the next generation."

Children from across Devon visited Highfield Farm, near Exeter, yesterday to mark the launch.

Writing for the WMN today, Mr Miliband praised Highfield Farm for hosting educational visits for young people to carry out projects on farm related to science, maths and geography, as well as learning how animals are reared and crops grown.

And he stressed such ideas would help "reconnect" consumers, farmers, food producers and suppliers to "safeguard our environment and landscape for generations to come".

There will also be a drive to encourage the businesses to "buy local". The public sector spends about £2 billion on food and catering services each year which Mr Miliband described as "a fantastic opportunity for producers".

"This year Defra made available £500,000 to support projects to encourage local producers

to collaborate and increase their capacity to bid for contracts. I am pleased to announce similar levels of funding for next year. It is crucial that the public sector shows leadership by increasing tendering opportunities for small and local producers."

Ian Johnson, from the National Farmers' Union in the South West, said the scheme would build on work already being done by the NFU to train farmers to visit schools and to host school trips: "We are way ahead of the game."

Despite the venture's backing from the industry, the Liberal Democrats last night accused ministers of "saying one thing and doing another", citing the 8 per cent cut in the budget of Food For Britain - the Government agency which is responsible for promoting British food. The party's environment spokesman, Chris Huhne, said: "If David Miliband wants more local food produced in Britain, why on earth is he cutting the food promotion budget? It is time that Defra practised what it preaches.

"Explaining the benefits of local food to a new generation of consumers is welcome. But this will be too late for the current generation of farmers suffering the double whammy of late farm payments and Defra budget cuts.

"Local food is healthier, tastier and greener than processed imports. Yet instead of trying to cut food miles, Defra is cutting the very spending that should help reduce them."