

A quick guide to

reviewing your school catering service



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Balancing efficiency with quality

Today, schools are being given more freedom. With this, comes more responsibility and the pressure to do more with less money. The need to balance efficiency with quality is critical, and, not least, in the school dining experience. Clearly, these are exciting but challenging times.

While lunchtime has not, traditionally, featured as a school priority, the tide is turning. The major transformation in the quality of school food, over recent years, is taking effect. The 30-year decline in the take up levels of school meals is being reversed.¹ In other words, for the first time in three decades, more children are choosing school meals. The final food-based and nutrient-based standards for school lunches have been introduced for local authority maintained schools, in England. Furthermore, research has shown that improving the food on offer at lunchtime, along with improving the dining room environment, has a positive impact on pupils' learning behaviour during their lessons, after lunch.²

But schools are busy places with hectic schedules. So, how do you provide pupils with a nutritious appealing school lunch, in a pleasant dining environment, in an efficient way, which is good value and enhances the whole school day? And how do you know whether, or not, your current service is the best that it could be?

The School Food Trust is here to help you.



¹School Food Trust and LACA: Fifth annual survey of take up of school lunches in England: www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/documents/annualsurvey5

²School Food Trust: School lunch and learning behaviour in primary schools: an intervention study (2007) and School lunch and learning behaviour in secondary schools: an intervention study (2008). Read more at: www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/research/research-projects



Reviewing your catering service - what are your options?

The three main delivery options for school catering are:

1) An in-house school catering service - the school owns and manages the service.

2) Local authority provision - the school contracts with its local authority's catering service.

This may also involve the local authority, in turn, contracting the catering service with a private sector caterer, following an open and fair tendering process.

3) A private sector catering provider - the school contracts directly with a private sector catering company.

In all the above delivery systems, schools have the option to obtain some support from the local authority and/or the private sector and/or another public sector source to help with their catering service.

For any of the above options, schools can also work in clusters, as part of a federation or other partnership, to deliver their catering service.

Each delivery system has its advantages and challenges (refer to page 06), so how do you decide what is best for your school?



The advantages and challenges of different catering delivery systems - summarised

1) school catering service in-house

Advantages	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » the school will control the whole service, including the dining experience, the environment and the menu planning » the school can change any part of the service at any time » the school can incorporate the catering service into a wider agenda, such as healthy schools » the school takes ownership of the service » the school will be able to keep any profits that are made » the school can decide on what equipment, facilities and support to purchase » the school can break down the barriers that can occur between catering and other staff by fully integrating all staff and revising the working practice » the school has the ability to ethically source its own products. This means that it can purchase local and organic products and reduce food miles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » the management of the service can be time-consuming and hard work » the school can be liable for the purchase and maintenance of all equipment and facilities. Please refer to your local authority Scheme of Delegation document. » the school will be responsible for menu planning and for ensuring that the food and drink provision meets the school food standards » the school will be liable for any losses made » the school will have to manage the Human Resources issues, such as staff training, absences and pension contributions » the school will have to manage all legal requirements, such as health and safety

2) Local Authority (LA) provision

Advantages	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » the LA will manage the Human Resources issues, such as staff training and absences » the LA will manage all the menu planning, ensure the final food-based and nutrient-based standards are met and provide evidence to demonstrate compliance » the LA will manage all legal requirements, such as health and safety (however, the ultimate responsibility for health and safety, on site, still lies with the head teacher) » the LA will bring specialist knowledge to the provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » the school does not own the menu. Therefore, it might face difficulties when negotiating changes » the school might not be able to influence the contracts that the LA has with its suppliers » the school might have to agree with decisions that are not in line with its policies » it may be time-consuming to deal with problems that arise as the school will need to go via the LA rather than via the catering manager » the catering staff may not feel part of the school team as they are employed by an outside agency

3) private catering contractor

Advantages

- » the contractor will manage the Human Resources issues, such as staff training and absences
- » the contractor will manage all the menu planning to ensure the final food-based and nutrient based standards are met, and provide evidence to demonstrate compliance
- » the contractor will manage all legal requirements, such as health and safety (however, the ultimate responsibility for health and safety, on site, still lies with the head teacher)
- » the contractor will bring specialist knowledge to the provision

Challenges

- » the school does not own the menu. Therefore, it might face difficulties when negotiating changes
- » the school might not be able to influence the contracts that the contractor has with its suppliers
- » the school might have to agree with decisions that are not in line with its policies
- » it may be time-consuming to deal with problems that arise as the school will need to go via the contractor rather than via the catering manager
- » the catering staff may not feel part of the school team as they are employed by an outside agency



Next steps - deciding which option is right for your school

It is vital that you have as comprehensive a view as possible of the advantages and challenges within your school's current catering service and of what your school would like to improve or change. Gaining that view comes by first conducting research and consulting with others, which can then reveal important and unexpected findings.

To begin with, consider:

- » speaking to your current service provider. They may be able to meet your specifications
- » speaking to various service providers about what they offer
- » visiting schools that use delivery options which differ from your own. Ask them about the advantages and challenges and for data and information to help you make an informed judgement
- » consulting a range of people within your school community about the service and the improvements they would like to see

"Working with the students to design the menus was loads of fun...and there is a real sense of ownership and pride in the new menu now on offer, which is evident from the fantastic improvement in school food take up we have seen."³

Tasha Jones, PSHE Teacher and Healthy Schools Co-coordinator at The Queen Katherine School, Cumbria.

Research can be fairly quick and simple or you may need a more in-depth, detailed approach, but it is important to get it right.



³ Queen Katherine School saw a 24 percentage point increase in school meal take up between December 2008 and December 2009.

Seeking help and moving forward

Once you have researched the issue and agreed what is needed, you may be faced with a range of “next steps”. This could include anything, but, typically, might be any one of the following:

- » managing a fair and open tender process for a new contract
- » drawing up a brief or specification
- » recruiting a new catering manager and catering staff
- » introducing a cashless system
- » improving the kitchen and dining area infrastructure
- » improving the marketing of school meals
- » monitoring and reporting, more efficiently, the quality and take up levels of school meals
- » setting the price for a school meal
- » costing of the whole operation and service



The School Food Trust – how can we help you?

The School Food Trust offers a wide range of services and products to support schools with the improvement of all aspects of school food provision. Here are a few examples of what we can offer.

Online support – Use one of our three handy online check lists as you go through a delivery change process. They include a check list of things to consider 1) when evaluating your current service, 2) when changing delivery service and 3) when preparing a tender specification.

These are available free of charge and can be found on our website at:
www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/resources/ryscs

Independent and objective advice and guidance - We can work with you to assess your existing school food provision, your current service and your whole school approach to school food. We are able to highlight areas in need of, development, review or alteration to improve the service, and make recommendations where further support would be beneficial.

Small Step Improvements Programme - This programme offers low-cost solutions to improve the lunchtime experience for everyone. Industry experts provide advice and guidance to help you implement small changes, which offer big results, fast. These include increased turnover, (schools have seen an average return of £3.93 for every £1 invested), less waste, less queuing time, a more pleasant lunchtime environment and improved concentration and behaviour of pupils in the afternoons.

For more information, please visit:
www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/ssi

“The theme of the programme, Small Steps, is an important one, you don't have to make gigantic changes you can just look for small changes and they have a big impact.”

Janet McKinnon, Business Manager, Holy Family RC and CE College Heywood, Lancashire

Support to improve your kitchen and dining spaces - Did you know that, according to latest research, unappealing dining spaces are, consistently, the biggest barrier to children choosing to have a school meal? We can provide expert, independent, advice, guidance and recommendations on this important issue. Tailored to suit individual schools' needs, we offer a comprehensive, on-site, review of your current kitchen and/or dining environment, equipment and supporting processes. We produce a detailed report of recommendations and an action plan for you to implement.

For more information, please visit:
www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/improvingkitchenanddiningspaces

Why work with us?

We are the experts on school food. Our board members range from food suppliers to head teachers and from school cooks, to catering companies and management experts. They bring to the table, a whole range of perspectives about school food. Our staff includes caterers and teachers, as well as experts in child nutrition and marketing.

We work directly with all local authorities and with thousands of schools to help them implement the changes needed and to find practical solutions that will assist them to improve their school meals service day-to-day.

We have many years' experience in advising the Government, at both national and local level, on robust - but deliverable - standards for improving food in schools. We have turned around a food culture, in a country that had registered the need for change and improvement, but had no idea how to make that change and improvement happen.

As an organisation our skills include:

- » expertise in the national monitoring of the implementation of standards
- » detailed understanding of the levers and blocks to change at individual school level and at local government level
- » expertise on the steps that need to be taken to improve school food
- » motivating reluctant parties
- » implementing changes in school meal delivery services
- » successful national, regional and local campaigns to attract attention to the importance of the issue and to support local action
- » insight into the attitudes of young people towards food and food in school
- » producing expert scientific research and evidence on children's food issues published in peer review journals
- » national data collection and a monitoring system to ensure that we can track progress, well into the future
- » techniques for evaluating the success of children's food projects.

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- » Malmesbury School, Wiltshire

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Contact us:

To find how we can support your school, please contact the School Food Trust:

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