

Six steps to transform school food culture

How a school food culture revolution can beat obesity and climate change

food
for **life**
PARTNERSHIP





Introduction

In this pamphlet, the Food for Life Partnership sets out the policy steps needed for a truly visionary and joined-up approach to food in schools.

The Government's Cabinet Office Strategy Unit has issued an urgent call for a more joined-up approach to public health, food culture and climate change in food policy.

"Looking forward, we face twin threats:

- *That existing patterns of food production are not fit for a low-carbon, more resource-constrained future;*
- *That existing patterns of food consumption will result in our society being loaded with a heavy burden of obesity and diet-related ill health."*¹

Nearly a third of our climate impact as consumers comes from the food we eat. The annual cost of diet-related disease to the NHS is now estimated at £10bn and rising. Two key Public Service Agreements commit the Government to 'Improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people' and 'Lead the global effort to avert dangerous climate change.' But indicators on both are still going in the wrong direction.

In 2007, the Government was forced to concede defeat on their target to halt increases in childhood obesity by 2010, and postponed the deadline to 2020. Meanwhile, nothing is being done to tackle the big climate change culprits in our diet, such as too much meat and dairy and too little fresh in-season produce, despite the links with dietary health.

As the Strategy Unit has said, if we are to correct both these worrying trends, "the diet of the nation and our food culture should be considered in the round." Addressing the health and climate impacts of our diet will be a huge educational and cultural challenge. No arena of food policy could be more critical to success than food in schools.

"With an annual purchasing bill of £40bn, local government is a crucial partner in delivering on our commitment to make the UK a leader in the EU on sustainable procurement by 2009."

Parmjit Dhanda, *Communities Minister*, February 2008, quoted in *Government Opportunities* magazine.



Joining up food policy in schools

There is much to be done. The current agenda of improving school meal nutrition standards is happening in isolation from climate change considerations and without connection to the broader educational activity of the school.

In response to the obesity crisis, and Jamie Oliver's campaign, the Government has taken the important step of introducing new food and nutrition standards for school meals. Disappointingly, the climate impact of eating habits learned in school has been overlooked. Meanwhile, the opportunity for educating children by example through school meals is being allowed to disappear. Only 41% of primary schoolchildren and 38% of secondary pupils are eating school meals and take-up is still falling. According to the Local Authority Caterers Association, the majority of local authority caterers are now running their school meals service at a deficit which they will not be able to sustain. Caterers are poised to pull out of school meal contracts, leaving no provision beyond free school meals for those on the lowest incomes. Unless policy-makers start viewing school meals as an education service, not a commercial service, they will end up serving no one.

Teaching on healthy eating is too often theoretical, not practical, and is failing to capture the imagination of young people and influence their eating habits.

The neglect of practical food education and skills in schools – beyond the welcome, if long overdue, announcement of compulsory cooking for 11 - 14 year-olds – means that young people still emerge with little interest in food and no notion of where food on the supermarket shelves has come from. It would appear that climate change resonates more with young people than healthy eating messages, and yet no effort is being made to capitalise on this to move their eating habits in a direction that is both healthier and more climate-friendly.

The Government should give clear and urgent priority to the role that school meals and practical food education can play in delivery of public health and climate change goals. The six steps below will deliver this joined-up vision, and put the school meal service back onto a sustainable footing.



Six steps to transform school food culture

- 1 Every pupil to eat healthy and climate-friendly school meals by 2015.**
- 2 School meals to be run as an education service, not a commercial business.**

The Government should reinstate the obligation on local authorities to 'provide a school meal suitable in all respects as a main meal of the day' by 2011 – this means 4,025 new school kitchens.
- 3 Government to invest 50p per pupil per school meal to achieve a £1 ingredient spend while allowing take-up to rise.**
- 4 More paid hours for school cooks to prepare fresh food.** The existing £240m funding over three years from 2009 - 2011 should be allocated to this alone.
- 5 At least 12 hours of cooking lessons a year for every pupil up to Key Stage 3 by 2011.**
- 6 Every pupil to have direct experience of food growing and production, in school gardens and on farms, by 2011.**

■ What will it cost?

The 50p per pupil per meal policy will cost:

£291.5m a year at current meal take-up rates (41% primary and 38% secondary pupils).

■ If the School Food Trust 'One million meals' target is reached it will cost **£386.5m** a year.

■ If the 2015 goal of 100% take-up were reached, it would cost **£734m** a year.

This can be usefully compared with the **£10bn** annual cost to the NHS of diet-related diseases.

In addition, a one-off investment in cooking facilities is needed of **£262m**. Steps 2, 4 and 6 can all be achieved through a reallocation or ringfencing of existing Government funding, including the £21bn Building Schools for the Future and Primary Capital programmes.



Every pupil to eat healthy and climate-friendly school meals by 2015

1

■ Why is this needed?

Given that school meals are the only direct route by which the Government can influence the eating habits of young people in line with obesity and climate change imperatives, there should be a clear commitment to achieving 100% take-up of healthy and climate-friendly school meals by 2015.

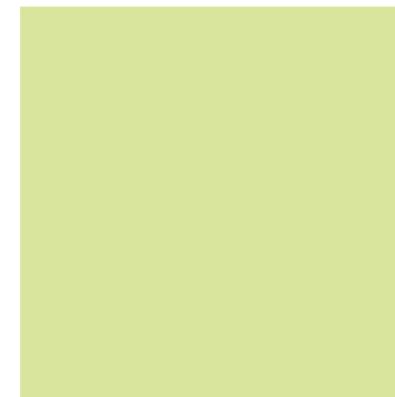
This commitment, to both 100% take-up **and** the goal of healthy and climate-friendly meals, is needed to give a clear framework within which all decisions relating to school meals will be made. In Scotland, for instance, free school meals are currently being piloted. The decision over whether free school meals for all is an appropriate policy step in England should be subject to the test of whether the quality of meal provision would be compromised by the need for meal costs to be wholly met by the taxpayer. 100% take-up must not be achieved at the expense of delivering meals that are both healthy and climate-friendly, or the educational goal will have been missed.

■ What needs to happen?

In order for school meals to be both healthy **and** climate-friendly, Government policy needs to look beyond the important new nutrient-based standards to ensure that meals are freshly prepared from largely unprocessed, seasonal, locally sourced and organic ingredients, with meat and dairy served in moderation.

■ What will it cost?

Affordability among lower-income groups will be key to ensuring all pupils can benefit. Free school meal provision should be – at a minimum – extended in line with food price inflation. In step 3 we set out the additional investment needed to make healthy and climate-friendly meals for all a reality, while retaining levels of affordability needed to support progress towards 100% take-up.





School meals to be run as an education service, not a commercial business

2

The Government should reinstate the obligation on local authorities to 'provide a school meal suitable in all respects as a main meal of the day' by 2011.

■ Why is this needed?

The 1980 Education Act stripped away nutrition standards and the obligation on local authorities to provide a decent school meal for all. School meals became a purely commercial service subject to compulsory competitive tendering, and least cost ruled. Jamie Oliver exposed the shocking results two decades later for all to see.

Finally, the Government has reinstated school meal standards, but this is not the end of the story. What many overlook is that school meals remain a commercial service. There is no obligation on local authorities to provide anything more than free school meals for children from low-income families. Rising costs combined with falling take-up mean that school meal provision is in crisis. Many caterers no longer anticipate a commercial return and are considering pulling out of all but free school meals.

School meals are an essential education service and one of the very few routes by which the Government can influence the eating habits of young people. Already, after decades of underinvestment, only 41% of primary pupils and 38% secondary pupils eat school meals. It will take time and the joined-up vision and investment we set out in this pamphlet to reverse that decline. In the meantime, it would be shortsighted in the extreme to allow school kitchens to close across the country under commercial pressures.

The Government must move quickly to reinstate the obligation on local authorities to provide a school meal service for all who choose to take it up. They must then have the vision to invest in school meals as an education service (see p4).

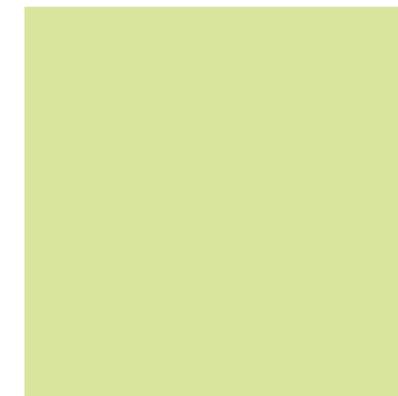
■ What needs to happen?

A 'school meal suitable in all respects as a main meal of the day' should be a meal freshly prepared on site from seasonal ingredients. In the summer term this need not be a hot meal. By 2011 all schools should have full production kitchens or be serviced with freshly prepared meals by a nearby catering facility. Currently, 23% primary schools need new production kitchens and 8% need kitchens upgraded from regeneration to full production.

■ What will it cost?

The £150m capital fund for kitchens 2008 - 2011 will pay half the cost of new kitchens (ie half of £300k) for 1,000 of the 4,025 primary schools needing them.

The £454m needed to subsidise by half the remaining 3,025 kitchens needed should come from the £21bn capital investment over three years allocated to Building Schools for the Future and the Primary Capital programme. Match funding should be required from local authorities that allowed kitchens to close post-1980.





Government to invest 50p per pupil per school meal to achieve a £1 ingredient spend, while allowing take-up to rise

3

■ Why is this needed?

The £240m committed by the Government from 2009 - 2011 for ingredients and catering staff pay and hours is a welcome start but will not go nearly far enough. If all £240m were allocated to ingredients alone, it would represent a subsidy of less than 14p per child per meal at current take-up rates (falling to 5.5p per child per meal if 100% take-up were achieved). If all £240m were allocated to catering staff hours and pay alone, it would represent £20 per school per day, ie three additional hours per catering team per day on current average pay to support more fresh food preparation.

It is clear that divided between these two important goals this money risks being spread too thinly to make any meaningful difference to either.

Meanwhile, food price rises and the need for investment in better quality ingredients to meet the nutritional standards mean that meal prices will continue to rise. This could lead to take-up declining still further, in a vicious circle that cuts off revenue for reinvestment in ingredients.

■ What needs to happen?

With take-up and revenue low, catering overheads currently constitute a significant proportion of the average £1.68 school meal price. If take-up could be encouraged to rise, overheads would come down per meal and ingredient spend could increase without higher meal prices.

How can school meals escape the current vicious cycle of falling take-up, rising meal prices and falling ingredient spend, and instead move into a positive cycle of stable or falling meal prices, rising ingredient spend and rising take-up?

If the Government were to invest 50p per child per meal, paid to the school meal provider on the basis of take-up figures, there would be a massive incentive to move school meals onto this positive circle leading to rising take-up. Crucially, caterers would be given scope to achieve this higher take-up by increasing ingredient spend without increasing meal prices, or even while allowing them to fall.

The current average ingredient spend in primary schools is 57p, so a 50p investment should secure ingredient spend of at least £1 a child, while allowing for a cap on meal prices.

Transparency from school meal providers will be an important *quid pro quo* for this investment. All caterers should have to account for how they have spent the 50p per child investment, and demonstrate that none of this additional funding has been taken as profit.

■ What will it cost?

£291.5m a year at current meal take-up rates (41% primary and 38% secondary pupils).

If the School Food Trust 'One million meals' target is reached it will cost £386.5m a year.

If the long-term goal of 100% take-up were reached, it would cost £734m a year.

This can be usefully compared with the £10bn annual cost to the NHS of diet-related diseases.

School meal services should be formally exempted from the 3% annual efficiency saving target placed on local authorities. Any efficiency savings should be reinvested in the school meals service.



More paid hours for school cooks to prepare fresh food

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■ Why is this needed?

School cooks hold the key to transforming the quality and take-up of school meals in this country. For too long, many cooks were reduced to opening packets and reheating frozen ready meals, while their skills in fresh food preparation fell into disuse.

Now the new Government school meal standards have taken many of the old junk food staples off the menu, and the Food for Life Partnership is championing caterers that ditch the packet mixes and frozen meals in favour of fresh food preparation. Many caterers are responding to this call.

However, many school meal providers, caught between rising food prices and falling take-up, are not funding increased hours for catering staff to cover the time needed for fresh food preparation. Nor are the skills needed being rewarded with increased rates of pay.

■ What needs to happen?

At the very minimum, the £80m a year committed to school meals by the Government from 2009 - 2011 should be allocated in its entirety to support increased catering staff hours and pay. Currently this money is also to be shared between ingredient spend, nutritional analysis software and light equipment. The total funding would represent £20 per school per day, ie three additional hours per catering team per day on current average pay to support more fresh food preparation. Any less funding than this would make little or no meaningful difference to a school catering team.

Local authorities in receipt of this £240m funding should direct school meal providers to conduct an equipment audit and replacement plan before allocating them the funding.

■ What will it cost?

From 2009 - 2011 the entire existing commitment of £240m over three years should be allocated to support increased catering staff hours and pay.





At least 12 hours of cooking lessons a year for every pupil up to key stage 3 by 2011

5

■ Why is this needed?

There can be no more important skill for life than the ability to prepare healthy food for oneself and one's family. The rise and rise of obesity and diet-related disease is closely connected to our growing reliance on ready meals and takeaways high in salt, sugar and fat, rather than nutritionally balanced home cooking.

Despite these alarming trends, most young people leave school without basic cooking skills. Their heads are full of health messages, but they have no means of taking real practical control of their food lives.

The Government's announcement of compulsory cooking for 11 - 14 year olds is welcome, if long overdue. But to be meaningful in practice, it must constitute more than the eight hours of cooking a year currently proposed.

And the job must not be left half done. This first welcome move must be swiftly followed by a return of cooking to the curriculum in primary schools. There is currently still confusion and a lack of a coherent policy on cooking for all pupils throughout their school life. Cooking clubs and other extra curricular food and cooking activities are to be encouraged as a support. They should not be regarded as a substitute for mainstream curriculum teaching.

■ What needs to happen?

Teacher training for all primary teachers should include the skills to teach cooking at Foundation, and Key Stages 1 and 2, and this should be backed up by continuous professional development. All pupils in primary schools should be taught basic cooking skills, including safe techniques for the use of sharp knives. They should be introduced to a range of familiar and less familiar ingredients and taught to make simple nutritious dishes that can form part of healthy meals. Secondary students should be taught to develop and hone the basics learned during their primary years, so that no student leaves school without knowledge of the foundation recipes and a repertoire of at least ten nutritious and affordable dishes.

All primary schools and secondary schools need appropriate equipment and facilities for teaching cooking. An estimated 85% of primary schools and 15 - 20% of secondary schools do not have such provision.

■ What will it cost?

An estimated investment of £6k per primary school is required to provide specialist teaching facilities in primary schools. This ballpark costing is based on £1k for equipment, and a further £1k for a cooker and refrigerator and microwave. The remaining £4k will cover work benching/units, tables and stools and any plumbing or electrical work.

For the estimated 15% of secondary schools without specialist food teaching rooms or specialist food teachers, this will mean an estimated minimum investment of £500k for new build per school and the training of an extra 525 food teachers. This would mean an investment of over £262m. Even then, the initial impact of this will not be felt until 2011 or 2012 at the earliest.



Every pupil to have direct experience of food growing and production, in school gardens and on farms, by 2011

6

■ Why is this needed?

School food policy is currently trapped inside silo thinking that cannot meet public health and climate change imperatives.

- The agenda of improving school meal nutrition standards is happening in isolation from climate change considerations and without connection to the broader educational activity of the school.
- Teaching on healthy eating is too often theoretical, not practical, and is failing to capture the imagination of young people and influence their eating habits.

As a result, young people are leaving school with no regard for the healthy eating rhetoric and with no notion of where food on the supermarket shelves has come from. This growing disengagement from food in the general population will make it ever more difficult for the Government to drive behaviour change via marketing messages about dietary ill health and climate change.

There is no better way to capture the imaginations of young people about real food, and where it comes from, than by giving them the opportunity to grow food for themselves and get involved in its production on farms.

■ What needs to happen?

The Ofsted Self-Evaluation Form should incorporate a question on how the school is providing pupils with direct experience of food growing and production.

All new and refurbished schools, funded through the £21bn Building Schools for the Future and Primary Capital programmes, should have dedicated space for pupils to grow food.

A rounded school food education will link practical food education, like cooking, food growing and farm visits, with the example set by a freshly prepared and carefully sourced school meal. The Food for Life Partnership Mark provides an action framework and award scheme to support this approach by schools.

■ What will it cost?

The Government is investing £21bn capital funding over three years via the Building Schools for the Future and Primary Capital programmes. Building bulletins should clearly require that designs incorporate space for food growing.



The Food for Life Partnership is a network of schools and communities across England committed to transforming food culture. The Partnership is led by the Soil Association with the Focus on Food Campaign, Garden Organic and the Health Education Trust. Together we work to revolutionise school meals, reconnect young people with where their food comes from, and inspire families to cook and grow food.

The Six Steps to Transform School Food Culture will fulfil the following Government Public Service Agreements:

■ **PSA Delivery Agreement 12:**

Improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people
(held jointly by DCSF & DH)

Indicator 2: Percentage of pupils who have school lunches

Indicator 3: Levels of childhood obesity (reduce the proportion of overweight and obese children to 2000 levels by 2020, focusing first on children under 11)

■ **PSA Delivery Agreement 27:**

Lead the global effort to avert dangerous climate change

Indicator 4: Total UK greenhouse gas and CO² emissions

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