



How to influence the uptake of school meals

A best practice guidance note

Why encourage eating school lunches?

- Evidence shows that a well balanced school lunch is now the most nutritious choice for children and young people.
- British children eat 5.5 billion packed lunches each year and of these only 1% meet the nutritional standards in place for school meals.
- Good quality school food improves children's health, behaviour and performance.
- Eating a healthy school lunch improves children's attention and achievement.
- School food is important to help children maintain a healthy weight.
- There is increasing recognition that school food is important for the long term health and well being of children and young people.

Kent County Council recognises the important contribution nutritionally balanced school meals make to teaching and learning within school. The Kent Children and Young Peoples Plan 2008-2011 lists Priority 2 in the plan as:

To draw on and improve resilience in children and young people, to help them make informed and healthy/safe choices and develop coping strategies.

Encouraging healthy eating through the provision of school meals is integral to the delivery of this key priority.

Getting started

1. Adopt a whole school approach involving all key stakeholders such as staff, parents and children. The catering provider is absolutely critical to success.
2. Set up a School Nutrition Action group (SNAG).
3. Identify what is currently working well with the provision of school meals; what could be improved; what are the barriers?
4. Identify key development targets to improve the uptake of school meals.
5. Develop an action plan for delivery to meet these targets.
6. Link this work with the development or review of a whole school food policy.

Where to get further help

- Healthy Schools - <http://healthyschools.gov.uk/>
- School Food Trust – general - www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk
- School Food Trust – Million Meals campaign and take up of school meals monitoring tool - www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/UploadDocs/Library/Documents/tracking_takeup_tool.pdf
- Kent County Council Client Services - www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/School/client_home.cfm
- Kent County Council Client Services online bookings for training and courses - <http://cpdonline.kenttrustweb.org.uk/cpd/>
- For more information about the community-based healthy eating pilot projects, including the pilot to increase the uptake of school meals - www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/community/healthy_eating_projects.cfm
- Food Standards Agency - www.food.gov.uk/
- Wellbeing South East - www.wellbeingsoutheast.org.uk
- Change 4 Life - www.nhs.uk/Change4life

Increasing the uptake of school meals – pilot projects in Kent

During 2008, as part of a larger body of work incorporating a diverse range of community-based healthy eating pilots, Kent County Council in partnership with catering contractors and the Kent Healthy Schools team piloted four interventions aimed at increasing the uptake of school meals with twenty schools across the County. The aim of the pilots was to develop a better understanding of the success factors leading to an increase in the uptake of school meals.

The interventions focused on:

- Midday meals supervisor training
- Partner support programme
- Improving the dining room environment
- Enhanced food offer

The impact of each intervention was evaluated by an independent research company, BMG. This guide builds upon the findings from the evaluation report, and identifies best practice and critical success factors to consider when addressing the school meals service in your school.

This guide focuses on the key outcomes arising from the four interventions that were piloted; however there are also many other aspects that could also be explored which impact on school meal uptake. School meals have a significant role to play within the school day as a whole so it is vital that a whole school approach is adopted when exploring how to increase uptake.

A recent survey found that children who ate a school lunch had a lower intake of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt and a higher intake of dietary fibre compared to children eating packed lunches.

- Source: School Food Trust (Dec 2007)

Children in primary school were over three times more likely to concentrate and be alert in the classroom when changes were made to the food and dining room.

- Source: School Food Trust (July 2009)

Changes to secondary school food provision and dining room environments increase the intakes of key nutrients and improve compliance with nutrient based standards.

- Source: School Food Trust (September 2009)

Secondary school pupils *were more likely* to concentrate and be engaged in the classroom after lunch when changes were made to the food and dining room.

- Source: School Food Trust (July 2009)

What the research tells us

All four different interventions had positive elements. The key finding from the evaluation was that no one solution or intervention in isolation will be guaranteed to lead to an increase in the uptake of school meals. To be successful it is vital to adopt a partnership approach and to involve all key stakeholders.

The greatest impact will be achieved by adopting interventions relevant to each individual school, and those which all partners and stakeholders are committed to. Achieving buy-in, leadership and support at a senior level within each school is critical to success, as is a commitment to investing time and resources in developing a blend of interventions and a whole school approach to embed long term change.

Adopt an holistic approach to increasing school meal uptake

The South East region has the lowest percentage uptake of school meals at primary school level out of all nine Government Office Regions across England. Evidence from the evaluation of Pilot 4 – Increasing the uptake of school meals has revealed there is no individual specific intervention that is guaranteed to significantly increase the uptake of school meals. Rather, adopting a whole school approach with buy-in from a senior level within the school, an effective partnership with catering contractors and a willingness to pursue a range of initiatives relevant to the school can make a significant impact in raising the profile of healthy eating and health and well being more generally to support the delivery of the Healthy Schools agenda.

Ref: Recommendation 7 pg 44 from the BMG Evaluation Summary Report

The pilot interventions – what we've learnt

The following pages feature the key elements identified from the evaluation of each of the four pilot interventions.

Midday Meals Supervisor Training

Following the whole school approach and when built into a holistic package of interventions, midday meals supervisor training can have a positive effect on school meals delivery and uptake.

Bringing catering, teaching and other support staff together in pursuit of a shared goal or objective (i.e. healthy meals for children – making sure children eat their lunch properly) can have a significant impact. Collaborative working practices and improved lines of communication can ensure that in-house caterers and school meals contractors understand the food children enjoy eating, and this can mean that the school meal “offer” can be tailored, where appropriate, to make it more of an attractive option.

Being part of cohesive teams can enhance the dining room atmosphere. For example, for some children it can be daunting to approach the food counter. The midday meals supervisor can help with this by making sure the most vulnerable children are not rushed or scared of approaching the counter. They can enable and support children to communicate their choices to staff effectively.

Midday meals supervisor training - Points to consider

- Midday meals supervisor training needs to be introduced in conjunction with other changes and/or working in partnership with the school.
- All training should include an introduction food hygiene and to nutrient requirements and how different foods benefit children.
- When planning training, discussions should take place with catering staff about any shared issues or concerns such as queuing, behaviour, noise etc.
- Any issues or concerns raised by midday meals supervisors must be shared with school management and resolved as part of the intervention.

Partnership Support Programme

This is a programme that supports Head Teachers, Governors and teachers and is aimed at raising the profile of school meals within the whole school. This is achieved through improved communication between staff and partners and through creating and embedding positive relationships that can contribute to the development of a whole school food policy.

Evidence from the evaluation has shown the importance of facilitating improved communication and dialogue between stakeholders. A partnership support programme can be an effective tool to equip school staff and stakeholders with the skills to develop new ways of working.

Partnership support programme - Points to consider

- It is critical that the school senior management team is fully engaged with to secure commitment and buy-in.
- Expectations within the school need to be established at the outset.
- Appoint a “champion” to support and advocate any initiatives arising out of the partner support programme and assist in developing links between parents, children, the wider school community and caterers.
- In addition to the in-house catering team, or the catering contractor or supplier and KCC Client Services, other agencies and colleagues such as Healthy Schools, Environment and Waste, Family Liaison Officers/Parent Support Advisors need to be involved.
- Agree an action plan and record actions, outcomes and critical milestones as appropriate in order to understand how the programme enables change and improvement.
- Remember, organisational change is difficult and challenging – be patient. Be prepared to introduce changes slowly and remember to evaluate any changes in order to demonstrate and understand impacts and improvements.

Improving the Dining Environment

The aim of this intervention is to enhance the dining area, making a more appealing and a more inviting dining environment which can have a really positive impact and change negative perceptions of the school meal experience. This kind of intervention has been demonstrated to have positive impacts and has been credited with “kick starting” improved communication between schools and caterers, leading to improvements in the whole school food policy.

Improving the dining environment - Points to consider

- Be clear about what improvements can be delivered and the cost implications of delivering these improvements.
- Establish how the improvements will be funded.
- It is important to consult with and involve children in any changes.
- Children should be encouraged to take ownership of the changed environment. To that end children can be involved in design and development and parents teachers and support staff can all become involved.
- This intervention can help change behaviours in the dining hall. Music can be used, as well as more relaxed seating arrangements and good tables. It is essential that Midday Meals Supervisors and the senior management team within the school are involved.
- Some improvements will have wider implications for dining room management, such as the installation of new trolleys, clearing stations etc. It is important to ensure schools are aware of wider impacts and are able to manage and support resulting changes effectively.
- As part of this intervention the way in which the time spent queuing could be addressed. For example, could the main course and dessert be served separately, or could self-service trolleys be trialled?
- Proposed changes could potentially lead to knock on problems, such as how to maintain safe levels of food hygiene if children are allowed to self-serve. Issues like this need to be identified and addressed.
- Remember to evaluate the impact of this intervention.

Enhanced Food Offer

Introducing a new food “offer”, coupled with a flexible approach can reap real benefits. New food choices can really motivate children and can increase knowledge and understanding of healthy eating and a balanced diet. Increased choice, the provision of self service trolleys, pasta bars and salad carts have all proved to have a positive impact.

Enhanced food offer - Points to consider

- When introducing a new food offer it is important to ensure the headteacher is fully on board and supportive of the changes.
- Positively communicating any food changes is essential. It is important to ensure the school management team and parents are comfortable with any changes and children cannot be disadvantaged if the only meal choice available is the “special”.
- Nutrient and food standards need to be maintained. Please be aware that a regularly enhanced menu offer cannot be classed as a celebration or special day.
- An enhanced food offer has the potential for increased food costs and all partners need to be aware of this from the outset in order to be able to plan effectively for how any extra costs will be met.
- Be flexible. You might like to consider changing the food offer to meet seasonal needs and customer requirements.

Improving the uptake of school meals – a case study of best practice

Willesborough Infants School took part in a pilot project to identify factors that influence the uptake of school meals. The key outcome measure was meal numbers but through the course of this project, it became apparent that there were significant additional benefits for the school, the pupils and the wider community.

Brief Description of the Project

Kent County Council Client Services and Healthy Schools worked with the five school meal contractors in Kent primary schools to identify interventions aimed at identifying factors that influence the uptake of school meals. Four intervention methodologies were developed and each one was delivered in 5 pilot schools.

- 1 Modernised food offer
- 2 Partnership Support Programme
- 3 Dining room environment
- 4 Midday Supervisor training

The intervention piloted by Willesborough Infants School was the Partnership Support Programme. It was designed to build on and improve working relationships between all the stakeholders involved in the school meals service. This included the Client Services team, the contractor and the school based catering staff, the Healthy Schools team as well as pupils, parents and school staff.

Methodology

It is acknowledged that head teacher engagement is paramount to supporting and developing a school meals service. This intervention wanted to particularly work and develop on from this by involving all other stakeholders through the head teacher. This school was chosen to be part of this project specifically because the head teacher was passionate about school meals and she felt that the service was not to the standard she required. The head teacher was unhappy with the service and was not convinced a change could be made, the catering staff were feeling demoralised and the meal numbers were low. The contractor, Chartwells felt however that there was scope to improve.

The overall aims identified by the school were:

- 1 For lunchtime to be positive experience for all children
- 2 To provide healthy meals which are both tasty, attractive and good value
- 3 To allow children to make choices that are well informed and provide a balanced diet to enhance their health and well-being.

Initial consultations were undertaken with pupils via the school council. Parent sessions were held to ensure they too were fully informed of the changes being introduced and to ensure they realised the improved nutritional value of school meals as well as the opportunity for these infants to develop social skills.

A School Nutrition Action Group was established with representation from the schools Senior Management team, governors, parents and catering staff. A whole school food policy was developed through wide consultation.

All the school meals have been photographed and scanned into the software currently used by the school for children to register attendance in the morning via an interactive white board. The meals are colour coded- red for meat and green for vegetarian and the children are then given a correspondingly coloured wristband denoting their choice. Puddings are chosen in the same way and identified by a coloured sticker. In the dining hall airline trays have been replaced with coloured plates and bowls to match.

The main meals are served separately with the hot meal being served at the counter by staff and the children self serving desserts.

New equipment has been purchased to support this new service with coloured salad and fruit bars and a clearing station.

The kitchen receives accurate meal numbers early in the morning which greatly helps their production.

Children have time in the morning to think about their choices and classroom teaching helps them to make informed decisions and to be responsible for their choice.

As a result the lunchtime service is quicker for the children and children get the meal they want. Overall there is less waste and more fruit is being eaten and enjoyed.

As there is an element of self service the children spend less time waiting for adults. With the introduction of plates and bowl rather than the airline trays there is more room on the table.

The children report that they:

- 1 Like the changes
- 2 Love having plates
- 3 Enjoy having a choice
- 4 Like to choose the fruit they want
- 5 Like doing things for themselves

The school are proud to promote the school meals service and invite parents in to have a meal.

Outcomes

- 1 Good partnership working
- 2 Increased meal numbers-one year on numbers have doubled
- 3 The school achieved Healthy Schools status during the course of this pilot
- 4 There is a commitment to the continued development of joint projects with all the contractors

The future

The school and catering staff will continue to monitor the new systems in place.

They will review and evaluate the pilot, taking everyone's views into account to help plan the next steps to ensure quality provision and happy lunchtimes. The school have recognised that they need to continue to develop children's awareness of healthy lifestyles so they can make informed choices.