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# School meals, markets and quality

**UNISON**  
*the public service union*

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## Executive summary

The story of school meals is also the story of public services in Britain. The school meals service not only reflects the rise of the welfare state and universal public provision, but also the subsequent drive for deregulation, privatisation and the re-introduction of markets into the provision of public services.

The current public interest in the quality of school meals is part of an increased anxiety about food safety (following the scares relating to BSE, CJD, salmonella and E.coli) and growing awareness of the general decline in health of the population as a result of poor diet - not only of children but also of adults. There is particular concern about children's health as illnesses and conditions are appearing among them that are more associated with older people.

The Department of Health (DH) estimates that the cost of obesity is £3.7 billion per year, including £49 million for treating obesity, £1.1 billion for treating the consequences of obesity, and indirect costs of £1.1 billion for premature death and £1.45 billion for sickness absence. If the cost of being overweight is added, it is estimated this would rise to £7.4 billion per year (DH, 2004).

The history of school meals provision in the UK has always been highly political. It has involved controversy over the role of the state and the family in child rearing, the 'nanny state' and the state's duty of care, debates about welfare and education, industrialisation and military preparedness, the role of schools, sustainability and public procurement as an instrument of public policy.

The Education (Provision of Meals) Act was introduced in 1906 partly in response to government concern about the poor state of health of recruits to the army for the Boer War. School meals were seen as a means to combat malnutrition.

The 1944 Education Act introduced the welfare state approach to school meals – a universalist, national system making school meals an integral part of the school day for all children. An obligation on Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide meals included national standards and national pricing. School meals were seen as having a multi-functional role against poverty, disease and malnutrition and as a contribution to health, education and social welfare provision.

With the Conservative election victory in 1979, the 1980 Education Act formed part of a generalised attempt to dismantle the welfare state of which school meals were a part. School meals were relegated to a non-essential service, the obligation on LEAs to provide meals was removed (except for those pupils entitled to free meals), nutritional standards were abolished and national pricing ended. Further restrictions on eligibility for free school meals followed. Expenditure cutbacks, rising prices and the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) drove down costs and quality, saw the rise of school cafeteria systems and resulted in a massive decline in school meal take up.

The new Labour government elected in 1997 reintroduced nutritional standards in 2001 but these were largely unmonitored and criticised for being based on food groups rather than nutrients. Meanwhile Best Value, the successor to CCT, continued to emphasise contracting out. The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) was increasingly used in schools as a vehicle for new investment for new build schools or rebuilding and refurbishing existing schools.

Innovative approaches began to be developed by the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales, including large increases in funding in Scotland and free breakfasts for primary school pupils in Wales.

Delegation of school meals funding to English secondary schools in 2000 caused further problems for schools – particularly in relation to kitchen and dining area maintenance and replacement.

The accumulated effects on school catering staff of the last 20 years or so means that the service is understaffed with poor pay and conditions, with a need for a programme of reskilling through training.

Savage underinvestment has left schools with inadequate facilities for modern, healthy cooking. While a programme of refurbishment, rebuilding and new build of schools is underway, the emphasis on PFI causes concern. Far too many PFI school projects exclude the provision of full production kitchens, relying instead on 'regeneration' kitchens.

Contracting out continues to be used as the legacy of CCT lingers on, bringing with it many of the same problems – especially the continued existence of a two tier workforce in which workers receive different pay and conditions despite carrying out the same job.

Responding to continued public concern in March 2005 the government announced a series of new measures and funding. Reviews on nutritional standards and the school meals service are scheduled to report in September 2005.

Current positive attitudes among the general public and the media must not be allowed to dissipate but used to drive the transformation of the service.

The steady degeneration of the service over two decades can and must be reversed. That requires not only investment in ingredients and facilities but also in staff. The two tier workforce must be swiftly brought to an end.

Resources must be protected so that standards for staffing levels and training are high and safeguarded.

All new build secondary schools and all new build primary schools above an agreed size – whether PFI funded or not - should be obliged to include a full production (or prime) kitchen.

Quality not cost must be the focus. Competitive tendering and contracting out emphasised the driving down of costs at the expense of quality.

Directors of children's services and education should be responsible for incorporating food in schools into their plans for children's welfare. The government must ensure that the school meals service is returned to the heart of education and social policy.

# Introduction

The school meals service has changed many times over the last century. But how did we get from the 'health and welfare service' set up in the 1944 Education Act to the turkey twizzler?

In many ways the story of school meals is also the story of public services in Britain. The school meals service not only reflects the rise of the welfare state and universal public provision, but also the subsequent drive for deregulation, privatisation and the re-introduction of markets into the provision of public services. It is a story of links and connections. Any review of school meals has to refer to the link between diet and health, in particular between school children's diet and health and the role that school meals play in this relationship. But it also draws in the links between health and learning (Blades, 2001), between junk food and behavioural problems (NUT, 2004), and the fact that it is in childhood and adolescence that eating habits are established.

The debate over school meals has ranged beyond the dining area to embrace the question of sustainability in terms of the role that the school meals service could and should play within the community.

The links that exist in the current system – largely as a result of privatisation and increasing commercialisation of the service – are those associated with the notion of 'cheap food'. In reality it is not cheap because there are hidden and transferred costs in a system of poor quality, industrialised food production: costs in terms of the burden on the NHS; economic costs to local producers and the rural economy; and costs in environmental damage. And there is the very real cost paid by the staff who work within the service in terms of pay, conditions and job satisfaction.

The links that are possible in a sustainable model have been described as the multiple dividend (Morgan and Morley, 2003), that is: high quality food for healthier diets; local markets for local producers; lower food miles and less damage to the environment.

There is a growing literature on school meals and sustainability, to the extent that some researchers argue that the school meal 'has become a litmus test of our commitment to sustainable development' (Morgan and Morley, 2003).

What has received less attention is the very real link between a well paid, well trained, fully staffed workforce and a high quality school meals service. Part of that story of the last 20 years has been the clash of price versus quality in both the cost of labour and the cost of food.

This paper examines the current situation in the school meals service and the environment for change, within the context of the origin and history of school meals. It looks at diet and health, the effects of deregulation, markets and privatisation on the quality of the service and on the staff. It focuses on how the national drive for improvement may be hindered by the commercial interests now embedded in the education system, and finally concludes with a discussion on what needs to be done.

# School meals and children's health

The link between childhood diet and health (both in childhood and later life) has been acknowledged for some time – perhaps most significantly in the 1974 publication of the government report on Diet and Coronary Heart Disease (Passmore and Harris, 2004). The current public interest in the quality of school meals is part of an increased anxiety about food safety (following the scares relating to BSE, CJD, salmonella and E.coli) and growing awareness of the general decline in health of the population as a result of poor diet - not only of children but also of adults.

There is particular concern about children's health as illnesses and conditions are appearing among them that are more associated with older people (like diabetes type 2), and because obesity in childhood can contribute to serious health risks in adulthood (such as some types of cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease).

According to a recent study of obesity in children living in England (Jotangia et al, 2005), the proportion of children aged between two and 10 who were overweight (including those who were obese) rose from 22.7% in 1995 to 27.7% in 2003. The prevalence of obesity among children aged two to 10 rose from 9.9% to 13.7% in the same period. The increase in older children aged eight to 10 was even more significant, rising from 11.2% in 1995 to 16.5% in 2003.

In 2003 Sir John Krebs, then chairman of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), said that obesity is a 'ticking timebomb' and warned that 'if nothing is done to stop the trend, for the first time in a 100 years life expectancy will actually go down' (Ahmed et al, 2003).

Obesity is also related to poverty. Measured by income, area deprivation or socio-economic group, researchers found that children from working class or poor backgrounds were more likely to register high rates of obesity (Jotangia et al, 2005).

The National Audit Office (NAO) (2001) calculates that in 1998, 30,000 deaths in England were attributable to obesity – 6% of all deaths in that year. The NAO projects that by 2010, if current rates continue, a quarter of all adults will be obese.

The Department of Health (DH) estimates that the cost of obesity is £3.7 billion per year, including £49 million for treating obesity, £1.1 billion for treating the consequences of obesity, and indirect costs of £1.1 billion for premature death and £1.45 billion for sickness absence. If the cost of being overweight is added, it is estimated this would rise to £7.4 billion per year (DH, 2004).

For school age children, school meals still play an important role. For those aged between 11 and 18, school meals contribute between one-quarter and one-third of the daily intake of energy, fat, dietary fibre, iron, calcium, vitamin C and folate. This is usually greater in children in receipt of free school meals (DH, 2000).

However, according to the Department of Health (2005), most British children still eat too much saturated fat, added sugars and salt. 'Average salt intakes are up to 50% higher than recommended and only around 15% of all children meet the recommendations for added sugars, around 8% meet the recommendations for saturated fat and around 42% meet the recommendations for total fat' (DH, 2005). And although the government recommends that every child eats five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, on average children eat only two.

A recent Department for Education and Skills (DfES)/FSA survey of school meals in English secondary schools showed that even if healthy food is available, secondary pupils often make poor food choices for their school lunch, selecting food with too much fat, salt and sugar, and little or no fruit or vegetables (Nelson et al, 2004). Since the late 1980s, studies of the diets of British school children have consistently shown that they lack nutritional balance (Burgess and Bunker, 2002) and that diets have actually deteriorated (Gustafsson, 2002). This evidence, together with the recognition of the continuing role of school meals in children's diets, persuaded the Labour government of the need to reintroduce nutritional standards in 2001. The standards were weak and largely unmonitored making little difference to quality. However, a further review of standards and of the service as a whole is now taking place.

# History of the school meals service

## Introduction

The history of school meals provision in the UK has always been highly political. It has involved controversy over the role of the state and the family in child rearing, the 'nanny state' and the state's duty of care, debates about welfare and education, industrialisation and military preparedness, the role of schools, sustainability and public procurement as an instrument of public policy.

It is almost 100 years since the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act gave local education authorities (LEAs) the power to provide free or reduced charge meals for those children who would otherwise be unable to benefit from the education provided. In Scotland, the Education (Scotland) Act of 1908 fulfilled the same role.

Although there were various local initiatives (for example in Glasgow, London and Manchester), the 1906 Act is generally seen as the foundation of the school meals service in Britain.

Over the last century, the focus of government school meals policy has changed in line with more general aspects of policy. In many respects, the attitude of the government of the day to school meals reveals its approach to wider issues of social and economic policy.

Gustafsson (2002) argues that it is possible to divide the years since 1906 into four distinct periods in relation to school meals policy:

- 1906 medical treatment
- 1944 nutritional standardisation
- 1980 providing choice
- 2000 nutritional guidance.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SCHOOL MEALS SERVICE

- 1879** Manchester provides free school meals to 'destitute and badly nourished children'.
- 1889** London School Board establishes a School Dinners Association.
- 1892** Bradford school board allows the use of school cellars to prepare and serve dinners to poor children. School meals are provided by 45 boards.
- 1893** An inter-departmental committee reports on the poor physique of volunteers during the Boer War. Compulsory education highlights the problem of underfed children. Over 350 voluntary bodies provide meals for underfed children.
- 1906** The Education Act empowers local education authorities (LEAs) to contribute to the costs incurred by school canteen committees. Boards of education are given powers (but not compelled) to provide free meals to the poorest children.
- 1914** The Provision of Meals Act gives the chancellor of the exchequer power to make available grants to cover half the cost of meals. However the First World War leads to a cut in the provision of free school meals from 400,000 in 1914 to 43,000 in 1918.
- 1920** Over one million children are provided with meals.
- 1924** Free milk in schools is introduced.
- 1939** Only half of education authorities (157) now provide a total of 160,000 free school meals.
- 1940** National school meals policy is introduced. The government initially provides 70% of the cost of meals, increasing to 95% in the following year. Recommendations for nutritional content, staffing levels, and the organisation of the service are established. Price of school meal is fixed at 5d.
- 1944** The 1944 Education Act requires LEAs to provide a meal to every child in a maintained school who wants one. Around 1.8 million children now receive a school meal.
- 1947** The full cost of school meals is met by the government.
- 1950** Price of school meals is increased to 6d.
- 1953** Price of school meals is increased to 9d.
- 1956** Price of school meals is increased to 10d.
- 1957** Price of school meals is increased to 1s.
- 1966** Circular 3/66, The Nutritional Standard of School Dinners, replaces Circular 1571 (of 1941).
- 1967** The 100% grant for school meals expenditure is withdrawn and replaced by a system of general rate support.
- 1969** Price of school meals is increased to 1s 6d.
- 1970** In England and Wales, 67.9 per cent of children (44 per cent in Scotland) now have a school meal. The government announces its intention to raise the price of a meal to 2s 10d in two stages.
- 1971** Price of school meals is 12p.
- 1975** Price of school meals is increased to 15p. The report of the Department of Education and Science (DES) working party, Nutrition in Schools, is published.
- 1976** The government announces its intention to reduce the cost of school meals by £9 million in 1977/78 and £36 million in 1978/79.
- 1977** Price of school meals is increased to 25p. On census day, 61.7% of all school children had a school meal.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SCHOOL MEALS SERVICE (CONTINUED)

- 1979** White Paper on public expenditure estimates the cost of school meals at £380 million and targets to reduce this to £190 million by lowering the quality of the service through greater use of convenience foods. Price of school meals is increased to 30p.
- 1980** The new Education Act gives LEAs the power to axe the school meals service. There are only two statutory requirements:
- LEAs must ensure that children whose parents receive supplementary benefit or family income supplement receive a free meal
  - facilities must be provided for pupils who bring their own food.
- Charges now range from 35p to 55p per meal. Cafeterias are introduced in secondary schools. The number of school children taking school meals drops to 41.7%. Dorset County Council votes to discontinue its school meals service.
- 1981** Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) publishes Badge of Poverty, a new look at the stigma attached to free school meals. Lincolnshire withdraws school meals.
- 1982** As more budget cuts are introduced, cash cafeterias are encouraged in secondary schools.
- 1983** The DES census shows that 51.4% of pupils now have school meals – free school meals account for 15%.
- 1987** The Social Security Act 1986 comes into force. Children of parents in receipt of income support are still eligible for free school meals; those in receipt of family credit have the price of the meal nominally included in the benefit. As a result, thousands of children lose their entitlement – 49.4% of school children now have school meals. CPAG publishes One Good Meal A Day: the loss of free school meals.
- 1988** The Local Government Act forces LEAs to put the provision of school meals out to competitive tendering. Buckinghamshire closes its service.
- 1991** The rise of compulsory competitive tendering leads to cuts in school meals services. CPAG publishes School meals fact sheet.
- 1992** The further tightening of eligibility rules for income support means that only people working under 16 hours a week are eligible to claim free school meals, compared with 24 hours previously. 11% of local authorities cease to provide school meals beyond their statutory requirement.
- 1995** Only 45% of children in England now take school meals.

**Source:** McMahon W and Marsh T (1999) *Filling the Gap: free school meals, nutrition and poverty*. Child Poverty Action Group: London.

## 1906

Gustafsson (2002) links the introduction of the right (but not the obligation) of LEAs to provide school meals to the needs of industrialisation and the military demands of empire.

Compulsory education was introduced in Britain in 1880 with the Elementary Education Act and this revealed the extent of malnutrition in children (Passmore and Harris, 2004). If compulsory education was part of the need to create the disciplined, literate and numerate workforce required for industrial production, then the fact that many children were 'unable by reason of lack of food to take advantage of the education provided for them' demanded action. It is in this sense that feeding children was seen as a medical treatment.

In Scotland, the provision of hot meals at school was in part a deliberate inducement for school attendance and compliance with the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 (Young, 2002).

In his study of poverty in York, the Quaker philanthropist, Rowntree commented: 'The relation of food to industrial efficiency is so obvious and so direct as to be a commonplace among students of political economy' (Rowntree, 1902, cited in Colquhoun et al 2001).

Concern about public health grew as problems relating to army recruitment for the Boer War (1899-1902) showed the poor state of health of working class men. The quality of recruits was so dire that the height requirement for infantry was reduced (Colquhoun et al 2001). Only one in nine recruits were healthy enough to serve in the armed forces (Passmore and Harris, 2004) and the report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration which was set up in response, led directly to the Education (Provision of Meals) Act in 1906.

So at this stage, children were seen as a form of investment for tomorrow's workers or soldiers and school meals were a means to combat malnutrition.

The legislation was minimalist in that it did not compel local authorities to do anything; it simply allowed them to provide school meals. But if they did so, there were limits. An expenditure limit was set by central government, the money had to be raised locally from the rates. Free or reduced charge school meals could only be provided for those children identified by medical experts as malnourished, all other children had to pay at least the costs of the meal.

## 1944

The next great landmark was the 1944 Education Act. Compared to 1906, it represented a revolutionary change. The act embodied the welfare state approach of the latter stages of the war which saw the influence of Beveridge and laid the basis for the reforming Labour government of 1945.

Section 49 of the 1944 Education Act placed a duty on all LEAs to provide school meals and milk in primary and secondary schools. The authors of the legislation intended that school meals should be an integral part of the school day.

In the spirit of the times, this was a universalist, national system. It was a move away from a system designed to feed the very poorest – a safety net against malnutrition – into a national scheme for all children. Nutritional standards were based on those established in 1941 by a team of nutritionists (incidentally the first ever national minimum nutritional standards in Britain (Colquhoun et al, 2001)), a standard price was stipulated across the whole country and school meals had to be suitable as the main meal of the day, providing children with one third of their daily requirements of nutrients and energy (Gustafsson, 2002).

LEAs' new powers were not limited just to the provision of school lunches. They were allowed to provide other meals and to continue the service on weekends and holidays.

The act was based on the experience of the inter-war and wartime years. Even before 1939, it was clear that the school feeding model was inadequate, but during the war, several issues brought the need for change into sharp focus: rationing failed to meet the special needs of children; civic catering facilities were set up in response to bombing and consequent population movement, including children's evacuations; meals provided at school became a necessity for many families as women filled the gaps in the labour market caused by men's conscription; the new family allowance included free school meals and free school milk (Sharp, 1992).

By 1945 over three million lunches a day were being provided to three quarters of British school children. By 1946, take up of school milk was 92.6% of the school population (despite its shortcomings in some areas, rationing allowed the state to make school children a priority for milk) (Passmore and Harris, 2004).

This welfare state approach based on collective and universal provision, rested on a view of citizenship with rights and entitlements. Children were citizens in post war reconstruction – perhaps more accurately future citizens or children of citizens (Gustafsson, 2004). It was a long way from the reluctant abandonment of *laissez faire* that characterised the 1906 act, and this welfarist approach survived until 1980.

## 1980

The Conservative election victory in 1979 has come to be seen as a turning point for public services in the UK. But this change did not come without warning. After the 1973 oil crisis and the resulting end of the long post war boom, there was an increasing questioning of the welfare state in Britain (Gustafsson, 2002). Pressure on public spending increased, especially after the then Labour government called on International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans and was obliged to accept IMF economic direction.

The election of the Thatcher government saw an overt rejection by government of the ideas behind the welfare state, of which the school meals service was a small but important component. It was part of the highly unionised local government sector. Not only that, but it was a very clear example of the post war Labour government's welfarist approach which – at its best – saw a service like school meals as having a multi-functional role against poverty, disease and malnutrition and as a contribution to health, education and social welfare provision (Morgan and Morley, 2002).

By contrast, Mrs Thatcher saw public ownership or public services and strong unions as the twin props of 'socialism'. She described privatisation as:

*"... one of the central means of reversing the corrosive effects of socialism... Just as nationalisation was at the heart of the collectivist programme by which Labour governments sought to remodel British society, so privatisation is at the centre of any programme of reclaiming territory for freedom"* (Thatcher, 1993).

### (HOBSON'S) CHOICE

When the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act was passed there was criticism that the state was interfering in the rights and responsibilities of the family. It was argued that making school meals available to the poorest families would remove any incentive for responsible parenting.

Today the argument against what the Conservatives call the 'nanny state' has shifted to claiming that school children should have the choice to eat what they want and that the market is the means to that choice.

This assumes that we make choices in a vacuum. Of course we do not, and the existence and shape of the food advertising industry reveals much about the social environment of food choice (Morgan and Morley, 2002).

The food industry claims simply to reflect changing taste but it is no accident that in 2000, less than 1% of the UK food advertising budget was dedicated to fresh fruit and vegetables and 28% to advertising cereals, cakes, biscuits, crisps and snacks. 99% of adverts for food during children's TV programmes was for products high in either salt, sugar or fat (Sustain, 2001).

It is not surprising that school children make poor food choices (Nelson et al, 2004) eating meals with too much fat, salt and sugar, and little or no fruit or vegetables. After all, much of the rest of society does so as well. However, one of the reasons for this is that a side effect of the deregulation of school meals in 1980 was to replace the concept of a set meal with the choice of an array of food items. So it is usually possible to choose exactly the same unhealthy mix of food almost every school day.

This transfer of responsibility to children for their own diet emphasises choice but in reality, price, the tendering process as well as the power of the advertising industry all play a part in restricting and directing that choice (Brannen and Storey, 1998).

If schools are to play a role in encouraging 'children to make informed choices by offering healthy food and drink options that reflect what is taught in the classroom' (DfES, 2004) then these questions have to be addressed.

The 1980 Education Act was a part of this drive to begin to remove the state from various aspects of life in Britain. It relegated school meals to a non-essential service, removed the obligation on LEAs to provide school meals (except for those pupils entitled to free meals). It obliged schools to provide somewhere for pupils to eat a packed lunch. Before this, heads had the power to prevent pupils bringing packed lunches to school (Bone, 1992). Nutritional standards were abolished and fixed pricing was ended.

The 1986 Social Security Act introduced restrictions on eligibility for free school meals. Rules were tightened again in 1992. In each case thousands of school children lost the right to a free meal. The 1986 act limited entitlement to free school meals to children whose families received income support and was removed from those receiving family credit. This resulted in 400,000 children losing entitlement to free school meals (Gustafsson, 2002).

The 1988 Local Government Act saw the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) that forced LEAs to put school meals services out to tender. This drove down prices and quality, regardless of whether the service was contracted out or not, as local authorities were obliged to let the contract to the tender offering the cheapest price. Local authorities were also prohibited from 'anti-competitive behaviour' through the use of contract compliance or any reference to 'non-commercial matters'. In other words, local authorities could not require bidders to meet certain standards seen as not directly related to the service, such as the pay and conditions of the workforce.

At around this period, secondary schools turned to cash cafeterias and away from traditional school canteens serving a standard lunch. Rising prices (following the abolition of national pricing) was combined with a significant drop in the proportions of pupils taking school meals – from 64% in 1979 to 47% in 1988 (Cole-Hamilton et al, 1991). With no obligatory nutritional standards, schools increasingly used their meals service as a revenue generator. In order to maximise sales, much of the same poor quality food as available in high street fast food outlets appeared in school cafeterias. Under the banner of 'choice', schools moved from a system in which the child was seen as 'a collective recipient of stipulated, standard provision to an individual consumer able to select from a range of alternatives' (Gustafsson, 2004). Although it should be pointed out that the focus on the consumer was much less important than the focus on reducing public expenditure.

Growing concern about the impact of the deregulation of school meals (Colquhoun et al, 2001) was ignored until the voters produced a change of government in 1997.

## 2000

The election of the new Labour government saw the eventual reintroduction of nutritional standards in April 2001 with the implementation of the 'Education (Nutritional Standards for School Lunches) (England) Regulations 2000' (Statutory Instrument 2000 No. 1777). However, the form chosen was based on food groups rather than nutrients as favoured by most nutritionists and advocated by UNISON. So for example, red meat must be served twice a week, but the protein, fat, iron and salt content of the food are not taken into account. Food-based guidelines in a commercialised school meal service mean that cheap, poor quality beef burgers can be served rather than high quality red meats, despite the low nutritional content (NUT, 2004).

No system of monitoring accompanied the move and there was a widespread belief that many caterers fell below the standards set. The new Labour government recognised the damage done by the removal of all nutritional standards but, in line with policy elsewhere in the public services, continued to emphasise 'choice'.

With devolution in 1999, Wales and Scotland began to develop their own school meals policy. The Welsh Assembly government is committed to provide all 285,000 pupils of primary school age registered in the 1,650 maintained primary schools in Wales with the opportunity of receiving a free, healthy breakfast at school each day during the school week by January 2007. It will involve parents but is not intended to replace breakfast already provided. It will allow all those, who, for whatever reason, have not had breakfast, to have one in school. The scheme began in Community First areas in nine local authorities in September 2004 (Welsh Assembly Government Cabinet, 2004).

Meanwhile Scotland powered ahead with publication of 'Hungry for Success' in November 2002, a report from the Scottish Executive's Expert Panel on School Meals (Scottish Executive, 2002). It recommended the 'whole school' approach to school meals. A large increase in funding was announced by the Scottish Executive (£63.5 million over three years). Other measures included free fruit for all pupils in primary one and two, standard portion sizes and product specifications, provision of drinking water, action to increase uptake of free school meal entitlement, improved facilities in dining rooms and an emphasis on new, tougher nutritional standards with monitoring built into school inspections (Scottish Executive, 2004).

There were few such initiatives in England although in 2000 the government delegated school meals funding to secondary schools (primary and special schools were also able to apply for delegation). There was no obligation for schools to spend all the allocation on meals and none to ensure that any surplus generated was spent on improving the quality of school meals.

In England the House of Commons Health Select Committee, in its report on obesity (2004), remarked that in contrast with Scotland's approach:

*...we were disappointed to learn that England's guidance specifically and conspicuously states that only the regulations, which do not require any specific nutrient content, are compulsory and that the guidance on good practice is "not required by law."*

The problem was underlined by a report on school meals in secondary schools in England, commissioned by the Food Standards Agency and DfES (Nelson et al, 2004). It confirmed that school meals were not healthily balanced, often failed to meet the nutritional guidelines and had too little iron, calcium and energy.

The concern over the quality of school meals forms part of a more general concern over food quality and health standards, which embraces the series of food scares under the Conservatives – BSE, CJD, salmonella, E.coli and the panic over childhood obesity.

This heightened awareness among the public and consequent media attention hit a crescendo in early 2005 with the broadcast of a television series, featuring the celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver – 'Jamie's school dinners'.

The programme focussed on the poor quality of food, the low level of financing, lack of training for an inadequate number of catering staff, and health impacts on school students. With an election looming, the government re-emphasised some of the initiatives already begun and announced a series of new measures.

At the end of March, education secretary Ruth Kelly declared (DfES, 2005) that an additional £220 million over three years was to be made available for school meals and training, and £60m for a School Food Trust which would prepare guidance. She also emphasised that the programme of building and refurbishment of schools would ensure that high quality kitchen facilities were available for the cooking of fresh food.

She drew attention (DfES, 2005a) to the existing reviews of school meals in secondary and primary schools, the fresh fruit scheme, the Food in Schools (FiS) programme and guidance for schools on the 'whole school' approach (the Healthy Living Blueprint, 2004). The government also announced that Ofsted would review the quality of school meals as part of regular inspections from September 2005 despite having earlier rejected this approach in response to such a recommendation from the Commons Education and Employment Committee (DfES, 2000).

A new School Meals Review Panel started work in May 2005 with a remit to develop and recommend new nutritional standards. UNISON represents school catering staff on the panel, which will 'strongly consider the introduction of nutrient-based nutritional standards, using the Caroline Walker Trust guidelines as a starting point' but are reminded 'to bear in mind issues of cost and implementation' (DfES, 2005). It will report in September 2005 and a consultation period will follow.

## CAMPAIGNING FOR HIGH QUALITY SCHOOL MEALS

The labour movement has been at the forefront of the struggle for a decent school meals service in Britain. It is part of the long tradition of collective responses to individual problems. As Wales first minister Rhodri Morgan pointed out, the school meals movement was not simply a battle against malnutrition:

*“... the Fabian Society launched its pamphlet **And They Shall Have Flowers on the Table in Cardiff at the turn of the last century. The title of that pamphlet made it clear that school dinners were to be a social and educational experience, as well as one which provided food for families where that was badly needed” Morgan, 2002.***

The 1906 Bill to introduce school meals was proposed by a Labour MP (Gustafsson, 2002). It became the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act and was part of a range of social legislation (including reforms relating to occupational health, housing and national insurance) brought in by the Liberal government. Fred Jowett, elected Labour MP for Bradford in 1906, made his maiden speech on school meals saying: ‘Education on an empty stomach is a waste of time’. The Liberals overcame their fear that provision of school meals could undermine family responsibilities because, as Young (2002) points out: ‘the Liberal politicians of that period were... nervous about the developing labour movement’. To a certain extent these reforms were a response to trade union pressure from outside Parliament.

Although the 1944 Education Act was passed during the wartime coalition, its implementation took place under the reforming Labour governments of 1945-51. Trade union influence ensured that the promises of a ‘cradle to grave’ welfare state were put

into practice through the legislation of that period. Strong trade unions were an important factor in the post war political consensus that existed over the welfare state even during the long period of Conservative rule from 1951 to 1964.

Trade unions joined a broad coalition of organisations in the School Meals Campaign to try to combat the deregulation and dismantling of the service after 1979. In the early 1990s, it published a series of booklets and a school meals charter.

Since 1997 and the election of a new Labour administration, expectations have risen among unions and other reformers that the school meals service can be revitalised. Devolution has also provided space for the devolved administrations to develop their own reform of school meals working with UNISON and other campaigning organisations.

This included a Free School Meals campaign in Scotland around the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. Although the Bill was not passed, the debate it provoked was undoubtedly a factor in the Scottish Executive increasing funding for school meals, adopting a requirement for detailed nutritional standards to be introduced and setting up monitoring mechanisms (Young et al, 2005).

At Westminster, UNISON with about 140 other bodies, is supporting the Children’s Food Bill. It aims to ban junk food advertising aimed at children and unhealthy school vending and to promote healthy eating education, cooking skills and quality school meals.

In September 2004, UNISON launched its Appetite for Life campaign which aims to improve the quality of school meals.

## UNISON'S APPETITE FOR LIFE

- free school meals for all primary school children
- an extension of free school meals in secondary schools to all children living in poverty, provided in a cashless, integrated service
- hot “made from scratch” lunches served in a socially conducive dining environment
- nutrient-based standards set by the Food Standards Agency, restricting additives and contaminants and inspected by Ofsted
- whole school food policies including a breakfast service; healthy snacks at after-school clubs, fresh fruit, milk and water availability and curriculum changes to include nutritional studies and practical food skills
- a ban on the sale of unhealthy food and drink in vending machines and on or by school premises
- catering staff employed on terms and conditions and in patterns that recognise their skills and value
- a return of the public health role for the school meals service, which should be the responsibility of the children's director, using locally sourced food, directly provided.

*UNISON, September 2004*

# School meals today

In England and Wales there are 8.1 million pupils on the rolls and 45% of them use the school meals service. This is the equivalent of 663 million school meals a year. Every school day, nearly 3.5 million meals are served to English and Welsh school pupils (3.25 million in England and 235,000 in Wales). Based on the total expenditure by parents and LEAs on school meals in England and Wales, the market is worth almost £1 billion (LACA, 2004). Morgan and Morley (2003) point out that the figure is even higher – reaching £1.3 billion – if the food and drink bought going to and from school is included.

In January 2004, there were 7,712,600 pupils on the rolls of maintained nursery, primary, secondary and all special schools in England. Of those 1,251,540 were eligible for free school meals but only 987,180 were taking them (DfES/Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2004).

In Scotland, of around 665,000 pupils, 48.7% use the school meals service or approximately 325,000 pupils. Of those eligible for a free school meal, 71% took a meal on the day of the school census (Scottish Executive, 2002).

The UK government does not collect data on either the cost of school meals across the country or the amount spent on the food content of school meals. Individual local authorities publish details within their annual budget statements of the funds delegated to schools for school meals provision but do not break the figures down to provide details of the amount spent on food content (Hansard, 2005a). Neither does the government collect data on the numbers of children eating hot school meals (Hansard, 2004).

However, a survey by the Soil Association revealed that 75% of English primary schools are spending less than 50p on food for each school meal, and many spend less than 40p (Lawrence, 2005).

The education secretary's announcement at the end of March 2005 (DfES, 2005) promised that in England at least 50p per pupil per day will be spent on meals in all primary schools and 60p in secondary schools. However as was pointed out by Rodney Bickerstaffe, former UNISON general secretary, the minimum spent on school meals at primary level before the Conservatives abolished statutory local authority provision was 19p per child – or the equivalent of 58p today.

By contrast in Scotland, the BBC recently reported (BBC News online, 2005) a survey of Scottish schools showing that 66.2p was already being spent on average on primary school meals and 72.1p in secondary schools. Glasgow council reportedly allocates between 70p and £1 for each school meal (Lawrence, 2005a).

Meanwhile it is claimed that caterers are unlikely to be able to meet the nutrient-based standards favoured by nutritionists if they spend less than 70p on ingredients per pupil in primary schools, and 80p per pupil in secondary schools (2005 prices) (Caroline Walker Trust and the National Heart Forum, 2005). Although the government has pledged an additional £220 million over three years in England, the Soil Association estimates that £200 million is needed every year just for primary schools if England and Wales are to match the investment and programme of change that is occurring in Scotland. This figure would allow the current average ingredient spend to be doubled for 70 per cent of all English and Welsh primary school children. However the Soil Association also claims that further expenditure would then be needed to improve kitchens and dining halls, to train catering staff and teachers, to develop local supply chains and farm visits and to gradually expand school meal uptake to all primary school children (Soil Association, 2003).

## The school meals market

The three big private contractors in the school meals market are Scolarest (a subsidiary of UK-based multinational, Compass), Sodexo, a French multinational and Initial (a part of British multinational Rentokil-Initial).

There are various estimates as to how much of the market each of the top three control. According to the Observer, (Gordon, 2005), Scolarest leads with Initial next and Sodexo as the third largest provider.

Scolarest provides meals for 2,000 state primary and secondary schools (Revill and Hill, 2005) and feeds one in ten British school children (Macalister, 2005)

There are also a number of different assessments of the share of provision between in-house providers and private contractors.

The British Hospitality Association (BHA) estimates that the number of state education contracts run by commercial companies fell by 351 in 2004 as a result of insufficient funding. According to the BHA, contract caterers now hold a market share of 25.9%, compared with 27.4% in 2003 (Caterer and Hotelkeeper, 2005).

In 2004, it was estimated that in England 66% of the school meals market was provided by councils' in house service; 2% was self operated; 10% by Scolarest; 8% by Initial; 3% by Sodexo; and 11% by other private contractors. In Scotland 95% was provided in-house, and just 5% by private contractors (Walker, 2004).

The fact that there are so few serious competitors in the school meals market is a problem for local authorities. The position is even worse for schools or local authorities in rural areas.

Camden education department's head of contracts, Ian Patterson, believes that the lack of real competition weakens his negotiating position. Camden had only two bidders the last time its school meals went out to tender and only one of those came in on budget. Patterson says: "The level of genuine competition in the school meals market is very small. It is a complex service and there are financial barriers to entry... By contrast, when we tender for cleaning contracts we will have upwards of 20 expressions of interest" (Quarmby, 2005).

A study of school meals funding delegation (Storey and Candappa, 2004) found that despite the possibilities of delegation, in practice many found only a limited choice of suppliers. Small schools might be expected to struggle to make themselves commercially attractive to large contractors but even large secondary schools reported problems.

The most authoritative source for market share is the Local Authority Caterers Association (LACA), which claims that the school meals market in England and Wales is worth nearly £1 billion (calculated by adding the total expenditure by parents and LEAs on school meals). LACA reports that 69% of the catering contracts in English primary schools and 97% in Wales are operated by the council's in-house provider. In primary schools in England, 22% are operated by the larger private contractors and 9% by smaller operators or are self-operated. In English secondary schools, 60% of catering contracts are provided by in-house teams and in Wales the figure is 95%. 24% of English secondary contracts are run by the larger private contractors, 5% are self-operated and 11% by other smaller contractors (LACA, 2004).

The largest contractors are multinational companies and the lack of competition means that they operate within the market with distinct advantages over the smaller operators. The multinationals look for economies of scale. Therefore, it makes commercial sense for them to favour large scale food processing ('industrial' food production methods). However, what makes good commercial sense for the shareholders of multinational companies may not reflect the interests of the users of the school meals service.

# Markets, competition and change: the road to the turkey twizzler

After the 1944 Education Act brought in the modern school meals service, there was little change in fundamentals until 1980. From the 1973 oil crisis onwards there had been a growing questioning of the role of the state and public spending but it took the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 to sharply change the direction of the school meals service from a welfare service to a revenue-generating commercial operation.

It has been argued that the school meals service failed to respond to social changes taking place in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s (Bone, 1992) and it is certainly true that uptake had already begun to decline before the start of the Conservative assault (Gustafsson, 2004). The increased popularity and availability of fast food, the decline of the 'family meal' and the increased tendency to 'graze' are all identified as reasons for the beginning of a decline in take up (Bone, 1992). However, despite the rhetoric about choice and value for money, of much more significance was the drive to break up public services and to introduce markets.

The key developments were:

- deregulation of the labour market, including abolition of the Fair Wages Resolution
- deregulation of school meals under the 1980 Education Act;
- compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and its replacement, Best Value (BV);
- the private finance initiative (PFI); and
- delegated funding for school meals under the Fair Funding initiative

These various programmes and the general public expenditure cutbacks of the 1980s and 1990s combined to create a devastating impact on the school meals service – particularly on staffing, facilities and ingredients that, in turn, caused a crisis in quality. Both the costs of labour and food were driven down under the pressure of CCT and other initiatives for cheap meals.

## The effects on staff

The school meals service is almost entirely managed and staffed by part time women and has been consistently undervalued as a result. Catering staff have been affected by the changes in school meals in terms of jobs, pay, conditions, hours of work and training, as well as a process of deskilling as the work organisation of school meals has changed.

### Jobs

The 1980 act had a big effect on staffing. With the removal of the statutory duty to provide school meals and reduced expenditure, many local authorities cut staff, some even abolished their school meals service altogether (Kelliher and McKenna, 1988).

One estimate claims that 50,000 school meals jobs were lost between the passage of the Act and May 1983 (cited in Kelliher and McKenna, 1988).

The impact of CCT on school catering staff was equally dramatic. Substantial job losses took place and some local authorities reduced terms and conditions in advance of CCT and as a result of the tendering process: 'The threat of competition was used by management to negotiate changes with the trade unions' (Escott and Whitfield, 1995).

## THE SPIRAL OF DECLINE

- under investment in school kitchens and staff
- pursuit of the cheapest option in the name of Best Value
- cheap = poor menus over reliant on processed foods
- rising fat, sugar, salt and additive load in child's diet
- rising parental anxiety about junk food and behaviour
- drop in school meal numbers as more opt for packed lunches
- substitution of fresh food by processed snack items
- free school lunch consumers become more visible or 'exposed'
- decline in numbers claiming free school meals
- potential decline in overall health and nutrition of all pupils
- loss of viability for the hot meals service
- lack of management time among school heads or governors
- pressure for more teaching space
- closure of kitchens
- narrowing of lunchtime food choices
- loss of opportunity to try new cooked foods
- introduction of sandwich service only
- further decline in numbers
- downgrading of lunch experience to 'refuelling'
- downgrading of nutrition delivered to the most vulnerable children
- loss of socialisation opportunities associated with eating at table
- poor attention and behaviour in afternoon classes undermines attainment.

**Source:** Soil Association (2003) *Food for Life: healthy, local, organic school meals*

### Hours

As secondary schools increasingly moved to cash caterias after the 1980 Act, there were implications for the working hours for staff. One study found that the contracts of the kitchen staff, became 'variable' so that the working hours increase or decrease with the demand for meals (Kelliher and McKenna, 1988).

In fact the widespread reduction in hours was perhaps as significant as any overall job losses. The employment of more part time and casual staff meant that fewer qualified for employment protection, and that employers could cut down on their national insurance expenditure. There were attacks on the holiday retainer formerly paid to school meals staff by both contractors and local authorities. This amounted to a severe pay cut for many catering staff – in some cases up to 25% of income (Escott and Whitfield, 1995).

### Pay

In a study of catering contractors at about the time the 1988 Local Government Act was going through parliament (Kelliher and McKenna, 1988), one contractor commented: 'A contractor can effect savings only by the way in which it deploys staff and by the rates of pay and conditions of service offered to staff'.

Contractors usually paid less than the local government rate (particularly to unskilled workers). A

greater use of casuals, an emphasis on local rates for the job rather than acceptance of national rates and decentralised pay bargaining (where bargaining existed at all) were all favoured by contractors (Kelliher and McKenna, 1987). However, the main difference was not in changes to basic pay but to other elements of the pay system. Bonus schemes and overtime were reassessed, and usually consolidated into the overall pay package. Where it existed, holiday pay and sick pay was far less generous, as was pension provision. After the Jobseekers Act in 1995, catering workers also became ineligible for benefit during unpaid school holidays (UNISON, 2002).

After strong union campaigns in the 1990s, legal decisions on the application of the European Acquired Rights Directive through the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations extended a limited degree of protection to those workers transferred to the private sector when their jobs were contracted out. Pensions protection has also since improved and contractors are now expected to provide a 'comparable' pension scheme to transferees. However, there is no guarantee against change over time and new employees were completely unprotected.

A two-tier workforce was created in which workers who transferred from the public sector to a private contractor retained their pay and conditions upon transfer. But new employees of the contractor could receive completely different (almost always worse) pay and conditions to their co-workers. Colleagues doing the same job, working side by side, found themselves paid different wages with different conditions, dependent on whether they had been transferred from the local authority when the service was contracted out.

Following intense lobbying by the trade unions, the government pledged to end the two tier workforce. In 2003 the Best Value Code of Practice on Workforce Matters was introduced into local government in England, with similar provisions in Wales whilst in Scotland a protocol was agreed for public private partnerships. These agreements provided greater protections for the pay and conditions of new employees on all new contracts.

Progress has often been resisted by contractors. Predictably they criticised the code, claiming that there is too much risk and red tape involved in transferring pension pots (Mullen and Walker, 2004). However, there appears to be general compliance with the code in new contracts.

This does not alter the position of the 110,000 school meals staff who are still suffering the legacy of 20 years of cuts and contracting out. David Taylor MP recently pointed out that the average weekly wage for school kitchen staff remains about £82 (Hansard, 2005b).

## **Deskilling**

A spiral of decline links cuts in funding, a decline in cooking from fresh (prime cooking), an increase in the use of processed food, a deterioration in quality of school meals and the deskilling of catering staff.

In many schools, catering staff do virtually no fresh food preparation. 'Regeneration' kitchens reheat cook-chill dishes made on a different day in a different place. Skilled cooking has largely been replaced by a factory style regime of adding water, defrosting, reheating or assembling ready prepared ingredients and processed food with excessive amounts of salt, fat, sugar, colourants, flavourings and preservatives (Soil Association, 2003). It inevitably leads to deskilling in the kitchen.

Former school cook Jeanette Orrey, now an adviser for the Soil Association, says that in such a system 'all you'll need is a pair of scissors and some tongs... You'll just cut open a packet of shapes, put them on a baking tray in the oven, take them out and serve them. That's it: job done' (Ward, 2005).

The legacy of such an approach – often driven by competitive tendering – is self perpetuating. With a deskilled workforce, it is difficult to move back to a system where meals are cooked from scratch (Morgan and Morley, 2003) even if the will exists.

## **Training**

Training becomes of vital importance. Unfortunately, training also became a victim of cutbacks. The government concedes that there is very little training available for catering staff (DfES, 2004).

A study of school meals in English secondary schools (Nelson et al, 2004) commissioned by DfES and the FSA found that only one quarter of staff responsible for the provision of school catering had any type of training in 'healthy eating or cooking' in the previous 12 months. Perhaps not surprisingly, most head cooks and catering managers were unable to name three or more of the current standards.

## The effects on facilities

One of the immediate effects of the removal of the statutory duty to provide school meals was that many local authorities withdrew from hot meal provision altogether. Kitchens were stripped out and converted to other use. Dining rooms were reclaimed or became dual purpose. According to the Soil Association (2003), a large number of English local authorities (including Dorset, East Sussex, Hillingdon, Kingston, Northampton, Somerset (part), Buckinghamshire, Harrow, Hereford & Worcester, North Lincolnshire, Lincolnshire (part)) took this option, serving only sandwiches.

The removal of national nutritional standards opened up other options for cost cutting. Cash cafeterias became increasingly common (Young et al, 2005) in secondary schools and CCT attracted the interest of private contractors.

With the removal of standards and the squeeze on costs (exacerbated by CCT) it became not only possible but essential to look for production methods and service techniques that would reduce the cost of labour. The government encouraged the use of cook/chill and cook/freeze technology (Kelliher and McKenna, 1987). Cash cafeterias became common in secondary schools (Young et al, 2005) and were also in tune with government thinking about efficiency, consumer choice and waste reduction (Gustafsson, 2002). This exacerbated the trend towards the deskilling of the workforce and the decline in nutritional value of school meals.

In turn, the increased use of processed, convenience food meant that full production kitchens were not necessary so they were 'rationalised' and many were closed (Kelliher and McKenna 1988).

The changes were not without problems. In 2000, Fair Funding brought in the delegation of school meals budgets in England as part of the 1999 Local Government Act (Storey and Candappa, 2004). Under the new regulations all English secondary schools received mandatory delegation. This reform was optional for primary and special schools, but many authorities delegated funding for meals to all schools.

While some head teachers welcomed this and saw it as a way of escaping from the problems associated with private contractors, many did not realise the implications in relation to kitchen and dining area infrastructure (Storey and Candappa, 2004). Before delegation, LEAs were able to operate a rolling programme of repairs and renewal. Under delegation, the relatively small budget for maintenance and replacement was simply divided up among all schools in the authority. This was something of a shock for some head teachers – particularly those whose school kitchens or dining areas were in need of repair. It was especially a problem for smaller schools in rural areas.

## PFI and school catering

### Introduction

The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) is being used for the building and refurbishment of hundreds of schools across the UK. Unfortunately the inflexibility of PFI is already becoming apparent with many school kitchens built without the facility to cook food from fresh. Given the promises made by the government and the emphasis on the need for a school meals service that encourages healthy eating, this is a serious setback.

At the end of March 2005, education secretary Ruth Kelly told television viewers that 'significant money' was now going into schools and specifically into kitchen facilities. She said that schools:

'will be able to cook freshly prepared ingredients. They will be able to prepare vegetables, they will be able to serve it to children, and we will see a really dramatic increase in the quality of food in school dinners that are served, particularly in those areas where they are not currently serving good school dinners at the moment' (Curtis, 2005).

In May the DfES reported that the government will invest £5.5 billion in 2005-06 improving secondary school buildings in England, rising to £6.3 billion in 2007-08. Additional funding of £650 million has also been announced for primary schools and 'new or upgraded school kitchen facilities where fresh produce can be prepared and served will be made a priority through the current school rebuilding and refurbishment programmes' (DfES, 2005a).

The need certainly exists. The Soil Association says this is a result of '20 years of savage under-investment'. After deregulation in 1980, many school kitchens and dining areas were allowed to run down if not close completely. Catering equipment is also often out of date and totally inadequate to meet modern healthy eating requirements (Soil Association, 2003).

However there is increasing concern that the methods of investment preferred by the government will be inadequate to the task. The government has relied on the PFI and now the Local Education Partnerships being pushed by Partnerships for Schools as part of the Building Schools for the Future programme.

PFI in particular has been subject to serious criticism wherever it has been used, especially in the health service (e.g. Pollock, 2004 and Edwards et al, 2004), but also in schools (Audit Commission, 2003; Audit Scotland, 2003).

For this paper, a survey of PFI schools was carried out using information gathered from LEAs under the Freedom of Information Act.

DfES lists 108 English schools in its UK Map of Schools PFI/public private partnerships (PPP) projects. All were contacted and asked a series of questions about school catering. Of the 108 listed by DfES, seven are not relevant having been abandoned (as in the case of Norfolk) or for other reasons (some only cover IT or sports facilities for example). Of the 101 relevant projects, 67 (or 66.3% responded).

These 67 English PFI projects covered 417 schools that were either new build, refurbished or rebuilt.

In terms of school meals, there are several critical problems with school PFI contracts:

- the lack of any kitchen in some new schools
- the type of school kitchen included in the PFI build
- the lack of competition within the catering part of the PFI contract
- the sheer length of the contracts, locking local authorities into relationships with private contractors for up to 30 years
- the inflexibility of the contractual arrangements, and the cost of amending or withdrawing from the contract.

## **Regeneration or prime cook?**

Of the 417 schools covered by PFIs in the sample, LEAs reported that 27% (113) of schools either do not have full kitchens that are able to cook freshly prepared ingredients or the LEA simply does not know.

In some instances, the lack of a kitchen able to do prime cooking was explained by the fact that facilities were shared with a nearby school, but in many cases it is clear that the intention from the start was to build or refurbish a school without the facility to offer children the option of on site freshly cooked food. This may provide economies of scale for private contractors but works against the principles of healthy school meals.

Schools without the facility for prime cooking are part of both very large and relatively small PFI projects. Examples include the following:

- Lewisham has a PFI that is specifically focused on school catering. But of the 87 schools in the scheme, 25 only have regeneration kitchens (that is they are set up to work with cook/chill rather than cooking from fresh). Meanwhile the contractor, Scolarest, has a 10 year contract that does not end until 2009
- while all of the schools in the Lincolnshire project have 'some kitchen facilities', three of the seven just have facilities for the preparation of 'light snacks'
- the Northamptonshire schools PFI project covers 41 schools, five of which are secondary schools. The output specification requires the PFI contractor to provide a catering facility at the five secondary schools. The LEA states that 'Our preference is that there are production kitchens which will prepare and supply hot food onsite. The volume of meals on a large secondary school should easily justify this'. However, it appears that the LEA has no control over whether the kitchens are prime cooking or regeneration, and does not even know whether they will be or not. Given the choice of a cheaper regeneration option, it is difficult to see why a contractor would choose a more expensive prime cooking facility
- Redcar and Cleveland proclaims that the catering provision in its PFI scheme (which covers five schools) has been developed to provide nutritious meals and that the council promotes healthy eating in all its schools. However, it concedes that 'the primary method of meal provision is through cook/chill/regenerate' although 'there will also be facilities to enable minor prime cooking'
- the Richmond Upon Thames group schools PFI involves six schools, none of which has a prime cooking kitchen. 'All sites are designed primarily for regeneration of 'cook-chill' with facility for addition of limited fresh ingredients'
- of the five schools in the Sandwell group schools PFI, only one has a full production kitchen. The LEA reports that all have the facility to undertake prime cooking although the other four have 'equipment limitations'. Regardless of the capabilities of the kitchen facilities, the contract method of service is cook/chill.

## Lack of competition

The driver for improved quality in the use of private sector providers is supposed to be market competition. However, this survey reveals some serious questions about just how much competition exists in relation to the catering part of the PFI contract.

The original justification for CCT was that local authority in-house provision needed competition to improve it. Yet, in a number of cases, the PFI contractor uses its own in-house facilities management division to run the soft facilities management (FM), including catering, and often uses its own catering unit to deliver the school meals. In these cases, as the catering operation is part of the same company, there is often no separate tender or contract and hence no competition. Sometimes there is a contractual obligation under the main PFI contract to market test the service after a set period (say five years), but this type of provision is not universal.

In 14 of the 67 PFI projects examined (21%), the main contractor awarded itself the catering contract. In Bedfordshire Galliford Try gave itself the catering contract; in Brighton, Bridlington, Dorset, Debden Park in Essex, Cardinal Heenan School in Leeds, Sunderland and the Wirral, Jarvis did the same; as did HBG in Bristol and Crawley; Accord in North Yorkshire; Mowlem in Redcar and Cleveland and Exeter; and the Robertson Group in Stockton-on-Tees.

Much the same lack of competition exists where the school meals are provided by a member of the successful consortium. Again there is no separate tender for the catering operation.

- the catering service which is held by Scolarest is 'integral' to the Merton group schools PFI contract and was not tendered separately by the council. A clause in the PFI contract provides for a review of soft services, of which catering is one. A review in the form of a benchmarking exercise service will take place at five yearly intervals. According to the LEA, this 'may result in the termination of sub contractors by the

Operating Contractor', but this is beyond the control of the LEA

- Sodexo was part of the bidding consortium for the Swindon-Northern Area Schools PFI, and has the catering contract. The catering arrangements will run for 'five years before being market tested, and five yearly thereafter for the length of the contract'
- Derbyshire-Group schools (Phase 2) PFI consortium appointed Eden - again part of the overall PFI tender – with a contract duration of 25 years
- the PFI consortium for Chapel-en-le-Frith and Tupton Hall in Derbyshire also appointed Eden as catering contractor as part of the competitive process for the overall PFI and so the catering contract is also very long (26 years). But here at least there is provision for 'bench marking' after five years.

## Lack of LEA control

In a number of cases the local authority does not know the details of the catering contractual arrangements (if any) and some of the local authorities surveyed see it as none of their business. There is a clear lack of control and accountability within a critical area for the provision of healthy school meals:

- the school meals service for the Northamptonshire PFI had not been awarded at the time of the survey but the LEA pointed out that the PFI contractor will normally tender the catering contract unless they have an existing partner. However, the implication was that it was an issue for the PFI contractor rather than the council
- for the Ealing group schools PFI, the LEA simply suggested contacting the PFI consortium to find out whether the catering contract was a result of competitive tender. Sandwell also did not know and suggested contacting the PFI contractor
- Lambeth was unable to say whether the catering contract awarded to Scolarest in the Lilian Baylis School PFI was as a result of competitive tender or not. Newham took the view that whether or not there was a competitive tender for the catering contract was irrelevant to the council. 'We presume it was, but... our contract is with the PFI Consortium'
- Richmond Upon Thames saw the issue of competition as one for the PFI consortium and not for them. This approach was shared by Wiltshire County Council who said that whether or not the catering contract was tendered; 'is a commercial matter for the PFI Consortium and the County Council is not directly involved in selecting the sub-contractor'.

Some local authorities (such as Barking and Dagenham and Derby City) ensured that they are not caught in this dilemma by removing soft FM from the PFI. This allowed the council to retain school meals provision in-house.

In some other PFI schemes the in-house provider won the sub contract – such as in Cornwall and Kirklees. In an unusual case, Rotherham's in-house school meals service, Education Catering Services (ECS), partnered up with a private company in the original bid.

## Length of contract

PFI contracts are commonly long term (often 25-30 years). This is usually justified on the basis of large scale investment in infrastructure and the need for the companies to make a return on their investment over the lifetime of the long term contracts. However, there is really no similar justification for 25 or 30 year catering contracts. And outside of PFI, such long term contracts in catering simply do not exist. Nevertheless, the survey revealed that there are many examples of extremely long catering contracts in PFI projects.

- for the Caludon Castle Secondary School PFI in Coventry, the LEA reported that CEP, the PFI consortium had subcontracted school meals to Redcliffe catering. As far as the LEA was aware the catering contract was for 30 years as it forms part of the wider PFI contract

- similarly, in relation to the Darlington Education Village PFI: Mitie has the FM contract and has subcontracted catering to Scolarest. As the catering contract is part of the overall PFI contract, it lasts for 25 years
- in Stockton-on-Tees, the FM contract (of which catering is a part) began operation on 1st September 2003 for a period of 25 years. The catering arrangements for Sunderland-Sandhill View School PFI last for 25 years 'subject to satisfactory benchmarking/market testing at five year intervals'
- although the LEA reports that the catering contract for the Lammas Community school PFI in Waltham Forest went out to tender, the end result was OCS gaining a 25 year contract for the length of the PFI
- In North Tyneside, FM provision (including catering) was part of the overall PFI contract, which is for 30 years. In North Yorkshire, as the catering contract was awarded as part of the PFI contract, it is effectively a 25 year contract.

As with the issue of tendering, a number of local authorities either did not know or did not think it their business to know the length of the catering contract serving their schools.

- for the Ealing group schools PFI, the LEA suggested contacting the PFI consortium to find out the length of the catering contract. In Lambeth, the LEA were unaware of the end date of the catering contract for the Lilian Baylis School PFI
- the catering contract for the Merton-group schools PFI began on 14th April 2003, but does not have a fixed end date. Newham reported that the PFI contract which was signed with the Mill Group is for 25 years, and that the schools covered by the PFI require catering for all of this period. However:  
*'Our contract is with the PFI Consortium, we do not need to know and have not been advised of the length, period and details of any of the sub-contracts (including catering)'*
- Northamptonshire noted that a catering contract would normally be for five years but that it was 'down to the PFI contractor and the catering contractor to agree the individual contract term'
- Richmond Upon Thames took a similar view. In response to a question on the length of the catering contract for the PFI schools, the response was: 'Not known, as not our concern; our concern is that the relevant KPIs are met'
- the length of the catering contract for the Wiltshire-group schools PFI is described by the local authority as 'a commercial matter between the PFI Consortium (White Horse Education Partnerships) and the sub-contractor (Aramark). The County Council has no direct relationship with the contractor'.

### **Cost of amending or cancelling the contract**

The National Audit Office (2003) has warned about the potential cost of contract amendments and that this represents an opportunity for the contractor to earn significant additional revenue over the period of the PFI and thereby reduce the original estimated value for money (VFM) for the public authority.

Referring to the Merton schools PFI, The Guardian (Lawrence and Quarmby, 2005) reported that the option of cancelling an unsatisfactory contract was effectively blocked by the fact that schools would face 'substantial financial penalties' under the terms of the contracts if they tried to do so.

At the end of 2004 it was reported (UNISON, 2004) that governors at the Harry Carlton School in Nottinghamshire decided to remove the vending machines providing crisps and chocolates as part of a push for more healthy eating in school. They quickly found out some of the problems with PFI contracts. The PFI deal with Alfred McAlpine Business Services requires the school to operate the vending machines on site and to pay for the electricity that powers the machines – despite the fact that the school receives no income from them. All profits go to the subcontractor

Nestle and the main contractor Alfred McAlpine. If the school wishes to remove the vending machines it must compensate the contractor.

It is common for a PFI consortium (with which the council has contracted to build the school) to subcontract all 'soft' services like catering to an FM contractor who then subcontracts individual services. So the catering contractor can be at the end of quite a lengthy contractual chain. In this 'triple lock' situation the school can feel powerless in being able to call poor performance to account. If private companies are able to take advantage of 'post-contractual lock-in' then the private company becomes dominant in the relationship (Lonsdale, 2005). Risk is then passed back to the public sector rather than transferred to the private company as suggested by the supporters of PFI. As Lonsdale (2005) argues: 'The first priority of any buying organisation is to have control over its supplier. This is often not the case under the PFI and a willingness to try other options will be required.'

## **Other problems**

Annual PFI charges are 'ring-fenced' and have 'first call' on both the school budget and on the local authority budget over the 25 or 30-year contract period. In other words the costs of the PFI comes before any other demands, raising concerns about budget flexibility, changed priorities or funding basic educational services in a period of budget contraction. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has pointed to potential problems of this kind in catering contracts in which forecast meals take-up, and therefore contractor profits, has not materialised.

In its review of schools projects in England, the Audit Commission criticised results, saying, 'PFI has not yet delivered some of the most important benefits expected of it' (2003) and that the average cost of catering was higher than in non-PFI schools. Although this meant that the standard was higher, it came at the expense of the non-PFI schools.

## **The effects on quality**

### **Budget cuts and the squeeze on costs**

Many of the present day problems of the school meals service stem from the Thatcher government's ideological opposition to collective public provision and its efforts to cut the costs of the service. The removal of outdated guidelines and improvement in financial viability may have been the claimed justification for deregulation (Ruxton et al, 1993) but school meals were a soft target and with net expenditure of over £400 million per year in 1980 (Nelson et al, 2004), were identified by the government as a cost where significant savings could be achieved. Quality of service inevitably suffered.

The reduction in funding not only altered the budget but also the management philosophy of the school meals service. It became necessary to stimulate demand (Kelliher and McKenna, 1988) in order to ensure the survival of the service.

Instead of being a welfare service, it began to become a commercial service (Passmore and Harris, 2004) and cash cafeterias were introduced in which children bought individually priced items rather than meals. 'Choice' was the byword and if an item did not sell, it was not stocked by the cafeteria. With no nutritional standards, cafeterias began to offer a limited set of options every school day – fast food, sugary desserts and fizzy drinks.

According to data collected by LACA, some schools and LEAs have used commercial success in the school meals service to subsidise more general education budgets and avoid some of the worst effects of the spending squeeze. LACA (2004) estimates that around £154 million per year of savings made from school catering budgets have not been ploughed back into the school meal service but have been used to subsidise other education costs. LACA says that aggregate figures from 1994 mean that £1 billion which could have supplied additional funding to school meals – increasing the amount spent on food per head by 25p – has instead been used to fill some of the gaps in education budgets.

For the school meals service, the cost of labour forms a large part of the overall costs so any option that cut labour costs was seen as attractive. Unfortunately there is a clear link between

staffing levels, working hours and good quality food. It is possible to cut staff levels and the amount of time spent preparing food by reducing or eliminating the amount of food that is cooked from fresh and relying instead on processed and pre-prepared foods. These are associated with high levels of salt, fat and sugar, so while 'choice' may appear to have increased in the school cafeteria, it is all too often the choice of several equally unhealthy options (Church, 1997).

The emphasis on the commercial viability of the school meals service, and the subsequent continued decline in nutritional quality was underlined by the introduction of CCT and its successor Best Value, and later the delegation of school meals funding to individual schools. Some authorities and schools have made attempts to reverse the decline of service with significant investment. Hull's Eat Well Be Well initiative offers free, healthy school meals to all primary school children and has resulted in a reported doubling of the number of children taking school meals (BBC News online, 2005a).

### **Compulsory Competitive Tendering**

The Local Government Act 1988 introduced CCT to a range of services provided by local authorities including school catering. Councils were obliged by law to put out to tender designated services and in-house providers were included in the competitive process. A municipal authority could only retain an in-house provision if its own Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) or Direct Services Organisation (DSO) won the tender in open competition. The tendering took place at fixed periods and was subject to national guidelines. It became unlawful for local authorities and other public bodies to use 'contract compliance' or to engage in 'anti-competitive behaviour'.

There is a great deal of research on the effects of CCT on cost and much of it presents evidence that costs were reduced but at the expense of the workforce, quality of service and 'externalised costs' such as the impact on the health service and the environment (see Davies, 2005 for a discussion of these issues in relation to hospital contract cleaning).

CCT is now widely considered a disaster for public services in general and school meals in particular. It has been described as:

*'a regulatory regime which extolled price over value, quantity over quality, and a noxious regime as regards health, well being and sustainable development'* Morgan and Morley, 2003

In a report to the Scottish Executive (2002), the principles of CCT were identified as being in conflict with the healthy living strategies that local authorities were attempting to develop. The focus on cost led to a reduction in attention to health, diet, choice and portions.

Supporters of competitive tendering claim that competition can improve quality. Steve Thorns of Sodexo says that contracting out 'allows teachers to concentrate on children and education. We add value because we are specialist caterers. The market can drive up standards' (Quarmby, 2005). Disregarding the fact that in-house provision also 'allows' teachers to concentrate on education, there is little evidence that contracting out has driven up standards in school meals. Contractors have enthusiastically embraced cook/chill, cash cafeterias, limited menus, 'liquid candy' vending machines and many of the other innovations associated with a decline in nutritional standards and school children's diets.

CCT entrenched a low cost culture within school catering which is even now deeply rooted. The squeeze on costs caused by CCT resulted in a series of changes in the school meals service:

- the reduction in the use of fresh and locally produced food
- the increase in the use of frozen, pre-prepared and processed foods
- the loss of kitchen infrastructure and the decline of prime cooking
- reduction in the numbers and skills of catering staff
- purchasing on the basis of lowest price
- the preference for large suppliers to reduce transaction costs

(Morgan and Morley, 2003)

## A TURKEY TWIZZLER CONTAINS:

turkey (34 per cent)

water

pork fat

rusk, coating (*sugar, rusk, tomato powder, wheat starch, dextrose, salt, wheat flour, potassium chloride, hydrogenated vegetable oil, citric acid, spices, onion powder, malt extract, smoke flavourings, garlic powder, colour [E160c], mustard flour, permitted sweetener [E951], herb, spice extracts, herb extracts*)

vegetable oil

turkey skin

salt

wheat flour

dextrose

stabiliser (E450)

mustard

yeast extract

antioxidants (E304, E307, E330, E300)

herb extract

spice extract

colour (E162)

**Source:** *Victory for Jamie in school meal war: TV chef jubilant as lunch supplier takes Turkey Twizzlers off the menu / Jo Revill and Amelia Hill, Observer, Sunday March 6, 2005*

Over the years there has been a steady stream of complaints about contractors' quality from school children, teachers and parents. Earlier this year headteachers in Wiltshire were scathing about the quality of school meals provided by Sodexo (Caterer & Hotelkeeper, 2005b); Scolarest has had problems in Camden, County Durham, Islington, Lewisham and Norfolk and walked away from a £2.5m-a-year contract in Wandsworth (Gordon, 2005; Mullen and Walker, 2004); and Initial is reportedly moving away from school contracts (Gordon, 2005).

When faced with their record many contractors argue that 'you get what you pay for' and that they are perfectly able to supply healthy food options but it will cost a lot more. In Camden after much criticism, Scolarest agreed to introduce a new menu that included fresh salad and yoghurt but would not agree to include fresh vegetables or unprocessed meat or fish, because this was 'logistically difficult' and too expensive. Tony Sanders, Scolarest's managing director of primary schools, explained that to have fresh vegetables, schools would have to pay for an extra hour's labour per day, and meal prices would have to increase by 15p each (Davies, C. 2005).

There is some truth in the contractors' claims that more funding is needed but several other points should be noted: first, the tendering process itself is expensive; second, although the cost of labour goes up with fresh food preparation, the cost of ingredients goes down; third, contractors answer to shareholders and obviously build a profit into their calculation of costs; and fourth, there are examples of successful in-house operations that provide healthy menus on the same budget as contractors. It would be a disaster if any additional funding for school meals was largely channelled into contractors' profits instead of being used for improving staffing levels and staff conditions (including training), ingredients and facilities.

## Best value

Because of the bad experiences of CCT, its replacement by Best Value was widely welcomed. The new Labour government brought in Best Value in the 1999 Local Government Act in which it was defined as ‘the optimum combination of whole life cost and quality (or fitness for purpose) to meet the user’s requirement’. The 1998 white paper explained Labour’s reasoning:

**“... the current framework for service delivery has proved inflexible in practice, often leading to the demoralisation of those expected to provide quality services and to high staff turnover. Concentration on CCT has neglected service quality and led to uneven and uncertain efficiency gains. In short, this framework has provided a poor deal for local people, for employees, and for employers.”** DETR 1998

But it was the ‘compulsory’ element of CCT that appeared to distress Labour ministers rather than the contracting element, so its replacement – Best Value – retained contracting out as an essential component.

The Best Value regime came into effect in England in April 2000. The arrangements were slightly different in the devolved government areas of the UK (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). Under the new regime, Best Value Performance Indicators - a national measure of performance - are set by central government.

Best Value has a wider reach than CCT, applying to all services. Although municipal authorities are no longer obliged to put designated services out to tender, they must seek continuous improvements in economy, efficiency and effectiveness. All services must be regularly reviewed (a five year cycle) using the four ‘C’s (DETR 1999):

- challenge purpose
- compare performance
- consult community
- compete with others.

So although the *obligation* to tender has been removed, there remains a heavy emphasis on competition.

The Best Value regime was heralded as a change in procurement policy that would permit councils to look beyond cost alone, and consider other issues including quality, service, training and after sales care, in the broader interpretation of ‘value for money’ (Soil Association, 2003).

However, in practice contracting out has continued and problems remain with the meaning of Best Value. The legacy of the primacy of cost in the definition of Best Value can be seen from a study of the experience of Carmarthenshire County Council’s school meals service (Morgan and Morley, 2003).

According to a Performance Networks study carried out by the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE), Carmarthenshire had extremely high rates of daily school meal take up – 67%, paid meal uptake in all schools (56% in primary and special schools and 80% in secondary schools). This compares very well with the UK average of 42% (some schools in the county had 100%). Its costs were relatively high, but then so was the quality which, of course, was related to the cost (most meals being cooked from fresh on site). However, when the service was subjected to a Best Value inspection, the limits to change since the days of CCT became quickly apparent.

The school meals service was graded as providing a ‘good level of service’ (the range is poor, fair, good, and excellent). The Audit Commission (2001) praised the facts that:

- its customers enjoyed a good standard of service
- primary school pupils received healthy and nutritionally balanced food and individual pupils often received particular help to change dietary habits
- secondary schools provided a range of food that most pupils thought was of good quality

- staff were clear about what the service was trying to achieve and there was an unmistakable customer focus, attention to quality and a common sense of purpose
- much of the service's performance compared well with similar authorities.

Inspectors identified various positive features including good performance management in relation to training and a willingness to try out new ideas. The inspection team also noted that Carmarthenshire had taken part in a national benchmarking study and that its paid meal uptake (at 67% in all schools) was the highest in the study and free school meal uptake was in the upper quartile for all schools.

Yet the inspectors were critical of productivity in primary school kitchens, reported that pupils pay more for their meals than in most Welsh authorities and that there needed to be a demonstration of the competitiveness of the service.

The review concluded that Carmarthen's staff costs were too high and needed to be cut as they were higher than other local authorities. This was because, unlike some councils, Carmarthen had retained national conditions of service. Pay and conditions were superior to the private sector.

The inspectors characterised the service as high quality, high cost and that if productivity could not be improved and competitiveness demonstrated then the solution lay in 'engaging the private sector or other partners in the delivery of the Service'.

Morgan and Morley (2003) provide a devastating critique of the narrowly focused, 'widget-counting' mentality that is unable to see the sustainable wood for the trees. They challenge the idea that terms like 'high cost' and 'low productivity' are value-free and argue that one of the main causes of low productivity in Carmarthenshire's primary school meals service is the fact that the 'catering staff devote time and effort to changing the eating habits of their children' and that the Best Value inspection is guilty of 'creating the absurd spectacle of higher productivity at the expense of a lower health dividend. Furthermore, [the council] sets a high premium on sourcing local food wherever possible for its school meals, and this makes a significant contribution to local economic development in a poor rural county like Carmarthenshire, but of course none of this was taken into account in the Best Value report'.

## Funding delegation

School meals funding was delegated to all secondary schools in England in 2000. Delegation to primary and special schools was optional for LEAs, although many delegated to all schools. In some areas delegation made things worse and schools closed their kitchens as they lost the cross subsidisation that existed before delegation. Others achieved commercial success at the expense of nutritional standards by offering popular fast food items in the cafeteria. Quality deteriorated and choice decreased (Storey and Candappa 2004).

Delegation reduced the public procurement leverage of the LEA (Morgan and Morley, 2002) and where a number of large secondary schools opt out of area wide contracts, it also reduces the ability of the LEA to use cross subsidy to assist small primary schools – especially in rural areas (Soil Association, 2003). The DfES recognises that there is a danger that delegation could lead to an LEA being responsible for 'a rump of high cost schools' but says that 'delegation arrangements can be tailored for this situation' (DfES, 2004).

Finally some schools use their school meals budgets (particularly from unclaimed free school meal entitlement) to finance other school provision (Storey and Candappa 2004).

## THE WIDER EFFECTS OF COMMERCIALISING SCHOOLS

In its Healthy living blueprint for schools (2004), the DfES argues that schools 'can encourage children to make informed choices by offering healthy food and drink options that reflect what is taught in the classroom.' Unfortunately, this sensible aim is likely to be jeopardised by the increasing commercialisation of schools.

Despite the public investment since 1997, many schools still face budget problems. Sponsorships and installation of vending machines are increasingly relied upon to generate revenue to fill the gap. According to Geraint Davies MP (Hansard, 2005), £10 million of revenue comes from vending machines alone.

The National Audit Office (2001) has warned that the government is in danger of sending out conflicting messages with its healthy eating campaign running alongside its encouragement of the market playing a more important role in state schools: 'There is... a risk of inconsistency between certain sponsorship activities of schools and initiatives to promote a balanced diet for young people'.

The most blatant such attempt by a company was Cadbury's 'Get Active!' project which aimed to get children to exchange chocolate wrappers for school sports equipment. To the surprise of many, the scheme received the support of the Sports Minister, Richard Caborn. The Soil Association calculated that to get enough wrappers to exchange for a single netball, worth around £5, primary school children would need to spend just under £40 on chocolate, consume over a kilogram of fat, and over 20,000 calories (Soil Association, 2003).

Although the Cadbury scheme was withdrawn after a storm of protest, it is unlikely to be the last. The DfES encourages companies to produce more commercial materials for schools, and its EBN website, promoting business and education links, tempts the private sector with the prospect of gaining 'new and more loyal customers' (NUT, 2004).

Such developments have been taken further in the USA, where the social environment of food choice is 'shaped almost entirely by private commercial interests' (Morgan and Morley, 2003). One example cited by Morgan and Morley is a case where a Colorado school district agreed to change its vending machines from Pepsi to Coke as part of a 10 year \$8 million dollar contract. The deal included bonuses for exceeding sales targets. In other words the school district became complicit and had a direct financial interest in encouraging the consumption of sugary, fizzy drinks by school children.

Things have not yet reached this stage in the UK but vouchers for Tesco's computers programme or from Walker's crisps are commonplace in schools these days. Many schools accept 'free' exercise books from companies like Jazzymedia which carry large adverts for high-sugar food and drinks brands such as Vimto. Since 1996 Jazzymedia has distributed over 10 million 'free' exercise books to schools in Britain and claims that its methods are highly effective in boosting 'brand awareness' (Rowan, 2003).

Guidelines for schools exist. These include the suggestion that schools ask themselves whether 'children and teachers can participate without buying the sponsor's products', and whether it is 'free of incentives to children to eat an unhealthy diet'. As this would seem to rule out virtually all forms of sponsorship, it is not much of a surprise that there is no information available on the extent to which schools use the guidance.

*NAO, 2001*

# Discussion and conclusions

Since the Conservative decision to deregulate school meals in 1980, the service has been in decline. CCT did incalculable damage and mixed a poisonous cocktail of budget cuts, attacks on staff pay and conditions, and poor quality food. Best Value did little to reverse the trend. The abolition of nutritional standards and national pricing led to a dramatic fall in take-up of meals and cuts in staff and quality.

It appears that in 2005, we have an opportunity to begin to remove this disastrous industrialised, cheap food culture that we have allowed to take root in schools. Thanks to the years of hard work of school catering staff through their unions, campaign groups and the response of nearly 300,000 people to Jamie Oliver's 'Feed me better' petition, ministers have moved on funding, training and standards. It is not yet sufficient and much of it has yet to be implemented, but it is a start.

The government needs to ensure that it ends the confusion of sending mixed messages about healthy eating. It is not possible to create an atmosphere that encourages healthy choice in school meals if ministers encourage confectionary companies' sponsorship of school sports or exercise books are covered in advertisements for sugary, fizzy drinks.

It is also not possible to support a system like contracting out, with its emphasis on driving down costs, if we are interested in driving up quality.

Competitive tendering has failed the school children of Britain but it has also failed the staff that work in the school meals service. Low pay, poor terms and conditions, little training are all too common among a workforce that has been progressively deskilled as both contractors and LEAs have tried to drive costs ever lower.

It is a welcome move that the government has recognised the need for high quality training for school catering staff. Scotland showed the way by recognising that catering staff 'have a vital influencing role in encouraging uptake of meals and choices made' (Scottish Executive, 2002), and that staff should be properly trained, rewarded and consulted.

Catering staff have been described as 'health workers in disguise' (Morgan and Morley, 2003) and the DfES (2004) acknowledges that pupils in schools with well-trained catering staff eat healthier food, and the new vocational qualification promised in the Health White Paper is long overdue (DfES, 2005c).

Another important step was education secretary Ruth Kelly's pledge in March, repeated at UNISON's annual school meals conference, that from September, 15,000 kitchen staff in England would begin courses in how to prepare fresh food (UNISON, 2005).

Of course, reskilled kitchen staff will need kitchens able to cope with prime cooking and not simply reheating. The government claims that new kitchens and refurbished kitchens will form part of the general school building and renewal programme. However, the experience of PFI new builds to date is not encouraging with many new schools built without the facility to cook from fresh, instead relying on regeneration kitchens or centralised off-site provision.

The government must also begin to put its talk of joined up thinking into practice. The Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSFPI) was launched in 2003 and has the potential to make a real difference but only if ministers develop imaginative ways of using and assessing public services. The school meals service is an investment in the future health of our children as much as a cost, which is why organisations from the Caroline Walker Trust and the National Heart Forum to UNISON have called for the extension of free school meals coverage. It also potentially saves billions in terms of future expenditure on the NHS, the economic effects in local communities and the environment.

Many unsung heroes in local authorities have already led the way at local level. There are increasing numbers of councils intent on avoiding the race to the bottom associated with competitive tendering, and are working with their staff and local producers to improve the school meals service. Huge progress has been made in Scotland, Wales is piloting free breakfasts to

primary school children, in Hull there is free provision of school meals, Cornwall's in-house provider won the service back from a contractor on the basis of high quality and local suppliers, and others (like South Gloucestershire, Bristol City, Carmarthenshire, Somerset and Pembrokeshire) base their service on good quality and local provision.

Suzi Leather, the chair of the School Meals Review Panel said in May that:

***“No one should live a shorter or unhealthier life because they ate school food. No child should disrupt their and others' learning because they are hungry and cannot concentrate. No child should leave school knowing only how to open a packet or tin. No child should be bamboozled into eating a diet which harms them. Standards for school food should be the best we can do, not the most we can get away with.”***DfES, 2005a

We can begin by removing the market's focus on profit and cost to the detriment of quality. Instead healthy eating must be at the centre of the school meals service. We can ensure that the school meals service is funded at a sufficient level to allow fully trained, well rewarded catering staff to serve high quality, freshly cooked food to school children in pleasant surroundings and that our education system links the home, the classroom and the school dining room. In summary and as a first step:

- current positive attitudes among the general public and the media must not be allowed to dissipate but used to drive the transformation of the service
- the steady degeneration of the service over two decades can and must be reversed. That requires not only investment in ingredients and facilities but also in staff. The two tier workforce must be swiftly brought to an end
- resources must be protected so that standards for staffing levels and training are high and safeguarded
- all new build secondary schools and all new build primary schools above an agreed size – whether PFI funded or not - should be obliged to include a full production (or prime) kitchen
- quality not cost must be the focus. Competitive tendering and contracting out emphasised the driving down of costs at the expense of quality
- directors of children's services and education should be responsible for incorporating food in schools into their plans for children's welfare. The government must ensure that the school meals service is returned to the heart of education and social policy.

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