

# Public Sector Food Procurement and Sustainability in UK Schools

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## Abstract

The paper will consider national policies aimed at promoting health and sustainability in public sector food procurement for UK schools and how these have been interpreted by local authorities.

It will review the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative in 2003. and examine the work of the Food for Life Partnership [FFLP] which has been working with schools to enable children to eat good food, learn where it comes from, how it is produced and how to grow and cook it themselves. Independent evaluation has found evidence of success. The paper will assess how sustainable procurement initiatives are coping since the change of government in May 2010.

## Research Question

What have been the factors promoting the relative success of the Food for Life Partnership following the very limited achievements of the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative which preceded it?

## Methodology

This paper is based upon news reports, policy documents and websites and discussions with individuals involved in sustainable food initiatives. My analysis has been informed by the discussion of failure and success of sustainability initiatives set out in Booth & Skelton 2011.

## Background to the development of new policies for UK school food

The British public sector buys enormous quantities of food, principally for schools and hospitals. Total annual spend is around £1.8 billion. Quality has often been unsatisfactory (Morgan 2008: 91-92). In 1984 prime minister Thatcher abolished the nutritional standards put in place in 1944 (Morgan 2008:91-92). This has had costly consequences. The UK has the worst child obesity problem in Europe, raising a generation of children who may face a lifetime of ill-health

In recent years Britain's agricultural sector has been in crisis. BSE and foot and mouth have led to destruction of millions of animals. Import penetration has taken an increasing share of the national market. The stranglehold of the supermarkets has squeezed profit margins for food producers. Farm incomes have been falling below the cost of production – with farmers increasingly dependent on grants for survival (Lang & Heasman 2004: 147-167). The world has entered an era of volatile food prices. Growing demand from India and China and biofuels are mopping up the healthy food surpluses which has kept food cheap for most of the last twenty years. Within the UK there has been increasing concern over the lack of long term food security

implicit in the country's increasing dependence on food imports.

### **New Approach to School Catering**

The years 2005 to 2007 saw a radical policy shift towards school catering in the UK.. Jamie Oliver's campaign in 2005 obtained a high profile for its criticisms of poor quality school catering. In a TV Series he denounced cheap unhealthy school food, taking over the kitchen in a London school and introduced better quality meals with fresh ingredients at the same cost. The government responded by introducing stringent new school meal standards. These required nutritious foods and excluded junk foods. These new standards were made mandatory for every school and school catering had to change its practices to meet them. In September 2006 all schools had to implement Interim Standards – “green” foods to be provided daily “amber” foods limited and “red” foods banned. In September 2007 these standards were extended to vending machines and snacks served at break time. Nutrient-based standards were introduced: maximum amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugars, sodium and minimum requirements for carbohydrate protein fibre vitamins A and C, folate calcium and zinc. Primary schools had to implement these by September 2008 and secondary schools by September 2009. Schools were encouraged to prepare food from fresh ingredients rather than ready meals (School Food Trust 2008: 2-3; Morgan 2008: 93-95).

Takeup of meals initially fell and then recovered. New nutrition standards led some kids to stop eating school meals because they preferred the accustomed unhealthy foods. . This threatened the financial viability of the school meals service. It was an unanticipated negative response of a sort which can lead to failure of sustainability initiatives (Booth & Skelton 2011: 67). School caterers were obliged to develop a strategy for adverse public reactions. They made a strong effort to improve school meal takeup. Dining facilities were improved. Promotional devices were introduced such as meal deals and themed days and holding social events at lunchtimes

Cashless payment systems were introduced which meant that parents paid for the school meals electronically and upfront rather than giving cash to their children who could spend in takeaway shops. With every pupil using an electronic card the children receiving free school meals were no longer visibly distinguishable from those who are paying for the meals, which reduced the embarrassment felt by some children in accepting the free school meal. The software would track exactly what each pupil ate – helping with future menu planning. In some schools children – particularly older ones – might be offered takeaway containers imitating takeaway shops – so they could go and eat with their friends on the school grounds

The School Food Trust was established in 2005 – with a £15m budget to promote the spread of best practice among schools. The government provided £150m over 3 years to build new school kitchens.. Twenty new training centres were established for school catering staff. Almost £500m over 3 years of ring-fenced subsidy was provided to encourage children to eat school dinners. Due to these sustained efforts school meals takeup has recovered.- to around 41% of primary school children and 36% in secondary schools..

### **Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative [PSPFI] launched 2003**

PSPFI was launched in August 2003 . Its primary purpose was to encourage public bodies to procure food in a manner that considers the principles of sustainable development. The aims of the PSPFI included: increasing consumption of healthy and nutritious food, improve the

sustainability of production, processing and distribution, increase tenders from small and local producers, promote organic food, and animal welfare (Deloitte 2009:3).

It is evident from the DEFRA website that the advent of PSFPI promoted considerable activity around the country during 2004-2007. Local authorities which did most to pursue PSFPI were rural ones with substantial local food production – with clear economic benefits from increased local food supply. A good example is Lancashire County Council, where

- The Catering service supplies 565 schools serving around 50,000 pupils a day.
- Specifying food standards has been a way of promoting animal welfare and has also tended to favour British suppliers. Lancashire was one of the first UK local authorities to specify free range eggs. Milk and cheese have to be Red Tractor or equivalent. In all cases non-UK suppliers can offer a similar product but in fact contracts have been awarded to British suppliers and much produce comes from Lancashire
- Techniques to encourage local suppliers to tender for work have included wide-scale advertising of contract opportunities, supplier engagement days and dividing tenders into lots (smaller geographical areas – more appropriate for a small supplier). Distribution has been separated from supply ie smaller food suppliers are able to make use of a distribution hub set up by Ralph Livesey, the countywide distribution contractor, to get their products distributed to schools (Lancashire County Council 2012).

The international consultancy Deloitte produced an evaluation of PSFPI which acknowledges that it is difficult to quantify PSFPI's success because it has not been measured or monitored regularly during its lifetime and quantifiable targets were not established at the outset. Deloitte concluded that there is evidence of limited progress towards PSFPI goals - a very slight increase in the proportion of UK food used by government departments and increased use of seasonal produce and small producers (Deloitte 2009: 14-17).

Deloitte also reported that buyers lacked necessary skills and the initiative relied on the heroic efforts of enthusiastic individuals for success - when these people move on what they have achieved may be lost. There was a perceived cost barrier - although Deloitte's research showed that PSFPI had often been implemented with reduced or stable costs. The initiative lacked political backing. There was unclear ownership of food policy at national level: split between six departments.. There was no clear definition of "sustainability" or "local food". There were too many PSFPI objectives and lack of prioritization..Deloitte recommended that there should continue to be some intervention to encourage the public sector to lead by example, monitored through Key Performance Indicators. (Deloitte 2009: 22-40 ; 43-55).

### **Food for Life Partnership 2007 to 2012**

The most important development in sustainable food procurement was the launching of the Food for Life Partnership [FFLP] early in 2007. FFLP is an alliance of four English NGOs - Soil Association, Focus on Food, Garden Organic and the Health Education Trust. It received funding - £17m over five years - from the Big Lottery Fund. This has enabled it to work with schools in every English region employing a total of around eighty staff. The core idea has been to enable children to eat good food, learn where it comes from, how it is produced and how to grow and cook it themselves. [www.foodforlife.org.uk](http://www.foodforlife.org.uk) The great strength of FFLP has been the grassroots approach – how it develops a community in and around each school. Children who learn about food consumption and production, have cookery lessons, grow food on the school

grounds and visit farmers and food producers. Parents who come into school and share cooking skills with children including the rich variety of ethnic food cultures to be found in England. Teachers who integrate food into the overall school curriculum. Head teachers who lead the process and receive the awards. School catering staff who prepare the food from fresh local ingredients. Local farmers and food producers.

At the outset 180 schools and communities were selected to become flagship schools, where they would showcase best practice FFLP was designed from the outset that school caterers could win a hierarchy of awards and progress would be publicly recognized at each level

Bronze Award criteria	Silver Award Criteria	Gold Award Criteria
75% of dishes on menu freshly prepared	Range of local items	At least 30% of ingredients are certified organic or MSC
Seasonal menus	Range of certified organic items	At least 50% of ingredients local
Eggs cage free	Poultry eggs and pork are Freedom Food	Emphasis on animal welfare
Meat Farm Assured as minimum	Only sustainable fish	Increased vegetarian food
Minimise additives and no hydrogenated fat	At least one Fair Trade product	

This is a much more structured approach to promoting best practice than was the case with the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative, where people worked largely in isolation, with little public recognition of their achievements. It also accords with Booth & Skelton's advice to "be realistic about what can be accomplished with the available time, resources and personnel...gaining acceptance with smaller proposals is crucial to building towards more ambitious ones" (Booth & Skelton 2011: 67). FFLP appears to adopt the approach recommended by Booth & Skelton that "sustainability initiatives should be targeted directly to the needs of the recipients...education should be provided in advance of implementation for all potentially affected parties" (Booth & Skelton 2011: 66).

A measure of FFLP's success is that by summer 2011 over 3,800 schools were enrolled in the programme and over 300,000 children eating Food for Life accredited meals every day. The Catering Mark is a Soil Association award scheme for caterers in all sectors. The number of caterers with Catering Mark is now over eighty and gives many a competitive edge. By summer 2011 over 400,000 Catering Mark-accredited meals were being served daily in the UK.

Detailed evaluations of FFLP's work was done by three groups of researchers, whose studies were published in June 2011 (Food for Life Partnership 2011). The University of West of England/Cardiff University did a pre and post cross sectional study of 111 FFLP Flagship Schools over a 24 month period and the National Foundation for Educational Research carried out a qualitative impact evaluation (Teeman et al 2011; Orme et al 2011). The studies showed that FFLP had led to improved eating habits - eating more vegetables - among primary school age children. There was increased take-up of free school meals among children from low-income families - a group which suffers above-average levels of obesity. Inspector's ratings of overall performance of the schools involved had improved..

The New Economics Foundation carried out a social return on investment study for two areas – Plymouth and Nottinghamshire – which quantified the benefit to local economies from increased spending on local food (Kersley 2011). The emphasis under FFLP Gold on promoting organic food has important environmental benefits. FFLP has played a significant role in promotion of organic suppliers for school caterers at a time when organic sales to general consumers have been falling (Soil Association 2012a:5). FFLP Gold also requires increased use of vegetarian food – reducing red meat content usage greatly reduces carbon footprint.

### **UK government policy since May 2010**

Since the new government was formed in May 2010 the overriding priority has been to reduce public spending. The ring-fenced school meals grant has been removed. This has put pressure on school caterers to increase prices and reduce costs. The worst case scenario would be that price rises and poorer quality could cause many children to stop buying their school meals and the school meal services in many areas would go into a downward spiral. Another important policy development has been the government's push to encourage schools to break away from local authority control and set themselves up as academies. This could lead to the weakening or collapse of local authority catering services. The government has said that it would like the public sector to buy more food within the UK as long as this does not increase costs.

At the time of writing (March 2012) important decisions are awaited which will shape future sustainable food activities. At national level the government is carrying out a consultation on the future national curriculum which will decide whether or not food skills – nutrition, cooking, growing – will be given a place in the compulsory school curriculum (Clark 2012).

At local authority level new public health bodies are being set up as part of the government's NHS restructuring and these will have to decide their spending priorities – which will in some cases include work with children along the lines pioneered by Food for Life Partnership.

### **Food for Life Partnership continues to expand**

The way FFLP was designed makes it possible for individual schools to follow FFLP. This flexibility means that any break up of local catering services resulting from the government's new policies need not necessarily prevent the expansion of Food for Life.

FFLP has had marked success in London. More than half the London Boroughs now have Food for Life Catering Mark menus in the majority of their schools. A November 2011 report by Sustain says that seventeen of thirty three boroughs have achieved at least FFLP Bronze Standard and eight have been awarded Silver – or have a catering contract stipulating that the Silver Standard must be attained (Sustain 2011). Success of FFLP in London is partly attributable to the enthusiasm shown by ethnic minority communities bringing their food traditions into school.

In the London Borough of Richmond the leadership role has been taken by a local campaign – School Food Matters – which has been active since 2007. A new catering contractor took over in September 2011. All school meals are now cooked on site from fresh ingredients, meeting the FFLP Silver criteria. In the first month of the new contract [September 2011] takeup was 18 per cent up on the previous year. It has been possible to reduce the price of the school meal by 35 per cent even though quality is much better (Wood 2012).

FFLP has developed well in a number of rural counties notably Norfolk, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Gloucestershire. On 9th September 2011 education caterer Edwards & Ward

were awarded Food for Life Gold award for all of the 168 primary schools they manages in Gloucestershire, serving 10,000 meals per day. The caterer is the first in the UK to be recognised as providing freshly prepared, locally sourced, organic, free range and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) meals to an entire county group. This has helped increase uptake by 26%, said the company. Three days later Edwards & Ward were awarded a catering contract for 78 schools in Somerset - providing fresh locally-sourced menu(Marshall 2011).

Urban local authorities where there has been strong support for Food for Life include Kirklees, Oldham York and Plymouth, where it was announced on 22<sup>nd</sup> February that it had become the first local authority inhouse caterer to serve Gold menus to all of its schools. Once again improved food quality has led to increased sales (Soil Association 2012b).

FFLP's five year funding was due to expire at the end of March 2012. However the Big Lottery Fund has now provided funding for a further year which will maintain a core team and during this period it is hoped that funding for local projects will be provided by new public health bodies

### **Sustainable Food Cities**

On 12<sup>th</sup> October 2011 a conference was held in Bristol which launched a UK-wide Sustainable Food Cities Network. The conference, was organised by the Soil Association in partnership with Cardiff University and Bristol City Council and was attended by representatives from 20 UK cities.. The Network will lobby nationwide for healthy and sustainable food policies (Soil Association 2011). In Manchester - for example - the City Council published a Sustainable Food Delivery Plan in September 2011 which envisaged developing commercial agriculture within the city limits – four projects by 2015 and ten by 2020. Training in food--growing will be provided and agriculture and horticulture will be promoted as careers for school leavers. Public sector purchasers will endeavor to buy locally (Manchester City Council 2011).

### **Concluding Remarks : Sustainability initiatives and the wider community**

It may be interesting at this point to compare Food for Life in the UK with sustainable food initiatives in Italy and Finland. Sonnino (2012) praises the achievements of enlightened city politicians and officers in achieving a school food revolution in Rome but notes that the election of a right wing administration in 2008 led to abrupt policy change – with abolition of ethnic menus and “defensive localism” and asks “how can we ensure that the gains of school food reform survive the vicissitudes of electoral cycles” Her conclusion is that we need to involve “all civil society and food chain actors to ensure their support and calibrate demand for, and supply of, sustainable food products”.

The success of the Food for Life Partnership over the last five years arguably reflects the way in which it has embedded itself in the wider community of the English schools, cities and towns where it has been operating. Risku-Norja & Mikkola (2010) comment on sustainable food initiatives in Finnish schools: “Both among the catering personnel and in schools the means to influence the decisions regarding food are experienced as meager or non-existent: ; the decisions are made beyond the reach of catering and school personnel...[by] the municipal authorities” The Food for Life approach by contrast does try to involve catering and school personnel as well as children and parents in choices regarding school food. In Finland little attention is “paid to the aesthetic questions such as interior of the canteens, service layout and visual quality of food or the eating occasion itself”. The attention given to these is another feature of successful school catering operations in the UK.

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