

**THE 2004 CAROLINE WALKER LECTURE
ROYAL SOCIETY, LONDON**

3 November 2004

**SCHOOL MEALS AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD CHAINS
THE ROLE OF CREATIVE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT**

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School Meals: Beyond the Cultural Stereotype

In cultural terms the British school meal has been portrayed in film and literature as something to be endured rather than enjoyed, a character forming experience for the future elite in public schools and grammar schools alike, and consequently not something to be taken too seriously. Indeed, a legacy of smutty jokes about 'spotted dick' further trivialised the issue, condemning the school meal to comic status. Yet a BBC poll last year found that school dinners continued to 'haunt' people long into their adult life, shaping their eating habits for the rest of their lives (BBC, 2003).

Far from being a trivial or comical matter, however, the school meal is at the forefront of cutting edge debates about health and well being – so much so that the humble school meal has become a litmus test of our commitment to sustainable development.

Our work at Cardiff University has sought to show that, through creative public procurement, school meals could deliver a multiple dividend:

- first, more nutritious school food could help to reduce diet-related health problems like obesity, cancer, heart disease and diabetes, diseases which are estimated to cost the NHS some £4 billion annually
- second, more locally produced school meals could create new local markets for local farmers and producers, affording a lifeline to hard pressed rural areas
- third, a more localised agri-food chain could yield environmental benefits through lower food miles (Morgan and Morley, 2002)

Recent years have given the lie to the stereotype that the British don't care about the quality of their food. Over the past decade there has been a revolution in the quality of British food, with the re-discovery of local and regional products and a new emphasis on fresh ingredients. But there are winners and losers in every revolution and the beneficiaries of this quality revolution tend to be middle class food aficionados and the finer restaurants. The customers of public sector catering – schools, hospitals, care homes and the like – have yet to enjoy the benefits of this quality food revolution, unlike their counterparts in other EU countries (Peckham and Petts, 2003).

But there is now a growing awareness of, and receptivity to the quality of food in what we might call prosaic settings, especially in schools for example. It is not difficult to see why this is happening. In fact the most important reasons can be summed up in two words – health and safety. Perennial food scares have forced consumers to think more carefully about the quality of their food and the conditions under which it is produced. This is a new and encouraging departure because the food chain - that production, processing and logistical nexus that brings our food from farm to fork - is a vast terra incognita to the majority of consumers in Britain.

However, if food chains at the top end of the market are becoming slightly more transparent with regard to provenance of ingredients and methods of production, we remain almost totally ignorant about the food chains which feed the most vulnerable consumers of all – namely pupils and patients.

While schools and hospitals ought to be the epitome of healthy eating environments, getting nutritious food as a matter of course, the reality leaves much to be desired. Such are the cost pressures on public sector caterers that schools and hospitals are forced to operate in low cost food chains, the very chains which have been most prone to food scares. Two examples serve to illustrate the point:

- *the BSE crisis*: this shed new light on corners of the food chain which had hitherto been invisible to consumers. As part of the general problem of lax regulation consumers ate millions of burgers and other frozen meat products carrying potentially infected material from cattle with BSE according to the Food Standards Agency. The infected material also ended up in the cheapest minced beef and this 'probably went to schools and hospitals' (Meikle, 2002)
- *the Panorama inquiry*: last year a Panorama team working in conjunction with the Guardian newspaper exposed a shocking scandal of food adulteration. Food processors were found to be targeting Britain with chicken products that had been bulked up with water, beef and pig waste and these products were destined for low cost food chains, like schools.

The most worrying feature of the Panorama story is that many of the adulteration practices were deemed to be legal by the Food Standards Agency: indeed the FSA considered it a labelling rather than a public safety issue. In other words it was a legal practice so long as it was correctly labelled. But this ruling did nothing to allay fears about restaurants or schools, where there are no labels to warn the unsuspecting consumer (Lawrence, 2003).

The primary responsibility for re-balancing the social environment of food choice rests squarely with the government because no other body has the mandate or the capacity to undertake such a demanding task – a task that falls within the government's formal commitment to sustainable development, which aims to promote social, economic and environmental well-being.

While government is the biggest and most important single player here, effective sustainable development policy needs to be understood as a collective social endeavour. To be effective, in other words, the sustainable development process needs to become a deliberative process of self-management in which people are doing it for themselves, because they value it, rather than having it done *for* them or *to* them from above.

But what does this mean in practical terms? In the context of school meals it means that schools (that is parents, teachers, governors, caterers and of course the children themselves) recognise the health and educational benefits of school food and integrate the latter into a whole school approach in which pupils have

ample opportunity to learn about food and nutrition in the curriculum in ways that are consistent and self-reinforcing (Harvey, 2000).

But it also means parents playing a much more vigilant role in monitoring the school meals service and asking searching questions of the local authority as to the provenance of the food. There is no better example than the Parents Group at Ysgol Betws Gwerful Goch in Denbighshire. Concerned about the quality of the school menu – in particular the lack of fruit and vegetables, the policy of sourcing cheap and anonymous meat from afar and the intensive use of processed foods high in fat, sugar and salt – the parents launched a campaign in 2002 called *Better Food for our Children* and they protested in no uncertain terms to the leader of their local council in Denbighshire.

Such local campaigns are necessary but not sufficient to raise the nutritional quality of school meals. What is also required is more concerted action on the part of central government to improve the *social environment* of food choice – that is to render healthy food options more readily available by encouraging the supply of locally-produced nutritious food and by stimulating the demand for these products through more creative public procurement policies for example. If these signals are not forthcoming from the public realm - that is from government and the wide array of other public sector organisations - the momentum for change will be lost. Without a more robust strategy the public realm could atrophy, leaving the social environment of food choice to be shaped almost entirely by private commercial interests. This is precisely what has happened in the US, where the public realm has been colonised by the fast food industry, the worst expression of which is the spectacle of 'pouring rights' contracts – where the more liquid sugar the students drink, the greater the financial returns to the company and the school (Nestle, 2002).

But these practices have triggered a growing wave of opposition in the US and the repercussions will be felt here in the UK. Notwithstanding its global reach, and its strong resonance with young consumers, the US fast food industry seems set to face a tougher regulatory regime than at any time in its history. Why? Because it is being blamed for transforming the US into 'the fattest nation on earth', with over 60% of Americans classified as overweight, including a quarter of people under 19, double the number 30 years ago. Aside from the human suffering, the healthcare costs of obesity-related illnesses reached an astronomical £117 billion last year, forcing the US surgeon-general to issue a 'call to arms' to tackle the obesity epidemic (Buckley, 2003).

Although the British school environment is not as commercialised as it is in the US, some disturbing trends are nevertheless taking root, like the spread of goods-for-tokens schemes for example. In one of the most contentious of these schemes, the *Cadbury Get Active* campaign, children were encouraged to eat £40 worth of chocolate, containing some 20,000 calories, to earn just one netball. Not surprisingly the Consumers' Association described the Cadbury scheme as 'an irresponsible ploy to encourage unhealthy eating among

kids'. This is the context in which we have to understand the social significance of school meals, which is one of the key influences on the eating habits of young people. At the 2003 conference of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, delegates were told that:

- children are 'eating themselves sick' with poor diets and unhealthy lifestyles
- post-war rationing was better for children than the 21st century fast food snack culture
- youngsters today were experiencing the nutritional equivalent of the Victorian age when rickets and scurvy were commonplace

According to Marion Nestle, a leading US nutritionist, only three things are needed for a healthy school meals service:

- a committed food service director
- a supportive principal
- interested parents (Nestle, 2002)

No doubt a lot can be achieved through a triple alliance of this kind; in actual fact this is the 'secret' behind the islands of good practice in the UK at the moment. But a healthy school meals service which is *sustainable* (ie one which uses local and organic food) and *systemic* (ie one which exists throughout the country) will require more concerted action if healthy eating and sustainable food chains are ever to become mainstream activities in the UK. Indeed, nothing short of the concerted actions summarised in the *Healthy Eating Action Plan* will create a genuinely healthy eating environment.

To appreciate the scale of the challenge of creating a healthy eating environment let us elaborate on each of the components of the action plan which requires complementary actions at a number of different spatial scales, from the global to the local.

Towards a Healthy Eating Action Plan

Creating a *regulatory framework* that fosters rather than frustrates the growth of sustainable food chains is perhaps the most important reform of all because it creates a new set of incentives and sanctions for everyone in the food chain. The regulatory changes involve a combination of global action (like the reform WTO rules to make them more supportive of human health, the environment and animal welfare) and EU action (like more radical reform of the Common Agricultural Policy reform to shift the emphasis to sustainable agriculture). But the biggest regulatory barrier to more sustainable food chains, and that means more *localised* food chains, lies in the EU's formidably arcane public procurement directives, which are thought to prohibit public bodies from specifying local food in catering contracts. Public procurement managers in the UK have convinced themselves that they cannot procure local food from local producers because their hands are tied by EU

directives that forbid such practices on the grounds that they violate the free trade principles of transparency and non-discrimination.

But our research at Cardiff has been able to show that, while the EU directives do indeed outlaw explicit 'buy local' policies from public bodies, some member states are more creative than the UK in how they interpret EU directives. For example, public bodies in Italy and France will design contracts that specify certain product qualities – like fresh ingredients, seasonal produce, locally certified products (like those with Protected Geographical Indication status), organic products and so forth – which allow their cities and regions to practice local purchasing. As a result of such policies many Italian cities now have well-established organic school meal systems in place: in Ferrara, for example, 80% of all food served to the city's nursery schools is organic, while Udine was one of the first Italian cities to supply organic meals to all its schools.

The UK public procurement profession claims that cost is the other big barrier to the use of higher quality food in school meals, and there is much more substance to this charge. Although the average price of a school meal in 2002 was £1.56, most parents would be shocked to discover that as little as 35 pence is often the amount allocated per child to the actual food for a two-course primary school meal in the UK. Although this is nowhere near enough to provide a truly nutritious meal, the Local Authorities Caterers Association (LACA) are painfully aware of the need for more investment in school meals, especially as some £154 million is taken out of the service every year (LACA, 2004)

A 'cheap food' culture was systematically introduced into the school meal service in the 1980s, when local authorities were exposed to *Compulsory Competitive Tendering* (CCT), a market-driven regulatory regime that spawned a cost-cutting mindset which had adverse effects on children and caterers. So far as children were concerned CCT had negative effects on diet, health, choice and portions; while caterers suffered from reduced staff numbers, fewer in-house kitchen facilities and plummeting pay and morale (Unison, 2002). Although New Labour jettisoned some of the cruder, more debilitating features of the CCT regime when it introduced the more enabling *Best Value* regulatory regime, the 'cheap food' culture of CCT lingers on in the school meal service as we'll see from the story of Carmarthenshire in a moment.

Clearly, the regulatory barriers to healthy eating and sustainable food chains are not confined to (real or imagined) EU regulations. Procurement managers in the UK feel that local government regulations are no less ambiguous as to whether they allow local authorities to re-localise their food procurement on sustainability grounds. Apart from *Best Value* constraints there are the additional constraints of Section 17 of the *Local Government Act 1988*, which sets out a number of 'non-commercial matters' which must be excluded from the contract process. But regulations are never set in aspic. Just as EU procurement regulations are evolving in response to an internal tussle between the twin goals of competition and sustainability, so too are UK local

government regulations. In the latter case the tussle is between the competitive concerns of Section 17 of the *Local Government Act 1988* and Part 1 of the *Local Government Act 2000*, which empowers local authorities to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their communities.

The key point to make about the above regulatory ambiguities is that, in the UK at least, they foster a risk-averse culture: if procurement managers think they are entering a grey zone between legality and illegality when they try something novel and innovative, like promoting sustainable food chains, they will recoil from experimentation, preferring the comfort zone of custom and practice (Morgan and Morley, 2002). For all these reasons, a regulatory framework that offers clearer signals, that supports rather than stymies innovation, is an essential component of any action plan to promote healthy eating and sustainable food chains.

A better informed and more resolute public sector procurement profession could help to boost **demand** for local food, the second component of the action plan. Far from being the Cinderella of the catering sector that it is in the UK, the public sector catering service in other EU countries has played a significant role in promoting healthy eating and sustainable food chains. Schools, colleges, hospitals, care homes, central and local government, the armed forces collectively constitute an enormous market and this could be used to induce the growth of more localised food chains throughout the UK. A very positive step in this direction was made in August 2003 when Defra launched a sustainable food procurement initiative – but these initiatives are the beginning, not the end, of the process.

Stimulating demand for local food is a long-term endeavour and, to be effective, it needs to be part of a wider process of consumer education. But this process of consumer education needs to move beyond the conventional injunctions of the health promotion industry to ‘eat less, move more’ and to ‘beware of foods high in salt, fat and sugar’, even though these remain the key messages. Here the UK has much to learn from Italy, where local food products are being used as learning materials for teachers and pupils alike in a programme called *Cultura che Nutre* - ‘culture that feeds’. Aside from learning about local produce, and how it changes through the seasons, the key aim of this educational programme is to create knowledgeable consumers, that is consumers who have an awareness of, as well as a commitment to locally-produced nutritious food. Discerning and demanding consumers are ultimately the most important factor of all in the campaign to create *and* maintain healthy eating environments (Morgan and Sonnino, 2004).

However, if more locally-produced nutritious food was demanded in school meals tomorrow it could not be delivered. Why? Simply because farmers and producers are not tooled up to produce it. Nor are the distribution networks available to deliver it. This underlines the significance of the third component, which is the urgent need to develop **a supply-side capacity** to produce local and nutritious foods. The dangers of creating a new market, by stimulating demand, and doing nothing to create a local source of supply would

provoke a flood of imports, making it that much harder for domestic firms to enter the new market. This is precisely what happened with the rapid growth of the UK organic food market, where some 75% of organic products are supplied through imports.

Local farmers and producers have found it difficult if not impossible to break into the public sector catering market, where the barriers to entry include an exacting tendering process, which is too daunting for small traders, and the caterers' preference for dealing with large national food suppliers, which offer lower transaction costs and sponsorship deals which offer the 'brands' to help hard-pressed school caterers fight-off the challenge of high street competitors. Such is the growth of commercial sponsorship in schools that an influential report on school meals policy in Scotland has recommended that education services should be encouraged to 'de-brand their service' (Scottish Executive's Expert Panel 2003).

This brings us to the final component, namely the urgent need to promote a **healthy food choice environment**, which includes some of the most controversial proposals in the action plan because they directly impinge on the interests of the junk food industry. Reforming the social environment of food choice, to ensure that healthy food is no longer the pygmy to the fast food giant, is a vital macro-level action to complement the micro-level actions in the food chain. The simple point to make about this complex area of food choice is that we do not make our choices in a vacuum. On the contrary, just 0.9% of the UK food advertising budget in 2000 was devoted to fresh fruit and vegetables; 28% was devoted to advertising cereals, cakes, biscuits, crisps and snacks; and, even more extraordinary, 99% of adverts for food during children's TV programmes was for products high in either salt, sugar or fat (Sustain, 2001). New campaigns are springing up to challenge these highly questionable practices, like the campaign being led by Debra Shipley (the Labour MP for Stourbridge) which is demanding tighter controls on marketing to children and a complete ban on advertising to the under-fives. Clearly, a combination of consumer action and citizen action will be necessary to secure a healthier food choice environment (Lang and Heasman, 2004)

Although these campaigns are encouraging, the fact remains that successive UK governments have fought shy of introducing tougher regulations on the junk food industry. As the scale of the childhood obesity epidemic becomes clearer, however, the escalating costs and the moral panic might combine to force government to introduce new curbs on foods and drinks of low nutritional value. The Commons Health Committee report on Obesity, which propelled the issues to the top of the political agenda, could be a tipping point in this respect (House of Commons, 2004).

Without the concerted actions proposed here the UK will never be able to emulate the healthy eating environments of other EU member states. Some schools will of course forge ahead with or without a national action plan, but these will remain islands of good practice, the exceptions that prove the rule. These islands of

good practice owe their success to the remarkable actions of a few highly committed public sector entrepreneurs. Some local education authorities have also won recognition for their efforts to generalise the provision of high quality school meals through the use of local food, and here we could mention Carmarthenenshire in West Wales, South Gloucestershire in the South West of England, and Aberdeenshire and the Highlands in Scotland as exemplars of good practice. But the real challenge is how to extend these success stories to the country at large.

Re-thinking Best Value: The Health Promoting School

Although local authorities have been much maligned they are nevertheless unique institutions in two ways: they are the only local institutions with a democratic mandate and they have a new duty to promote community well being. Whether these advantages are put to good effect will depend on three things in particular: the quality of local members, the calibre of local officers and the engagement of local civil society. Local authorities have recovered some ground from the 'dark days' of *Compulsory Competitive Tendering*, when they were effectively under siege, and this is most apparent in the leading role they have been allotted in preparing Community Plans for their areas.

But local authorities continue to be heavily regulated by central government financial controls and by the *Best Value* regulatory regime which places a duty on them to deliver services to clear standards of cost and quality and obliges them to review all of their services every five years.

In Wales the *Best Value* regime has been replaced by the *Welsh Programme for Improvement* because the Assembly Government felt that local authorities would perform better under a less restrictive and more enabling regulatory regime, though only time will tell which is the more effective system. Yet both regimes face the same challenge in one fundamental respect: what **metric** should be used to assess 'value for money' benefits in a local authority that is seeking to promote community well being through a sustainable development strategy?

To illustrate this conundrum it is worth mentioning the case of Carmarthenshire County Council (CCC), where a *Best Value* inspection was conducted in 2001. On a four point scale – embracing poor, fair, good and excellent – the CCC catering service was found to be 'a good level of service' because:

- Primary school pupils receive healthy and nutritionally balanced food, and individual pupils often receive particular help to change dietary habits
- Secondary schools provide a range of food that most pupils think is of good quality
- Front line staff are clear about what the service is trying to achieve and there is unmistakable customer focus, attention to quality and a common sense of purpose
- Paid meal uptake is the highest in the country and free school meal uptake is in the upper quartile for all schools
- Much of the Service's performance compares well with similar authorities (Audit Commission, 2001)

But the *Best Value* inspectors were concerned about some other aspects of the CCC service:

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- Productivity in primary school kitchens is comparatively poor and needs to be tackled
 - Pupils in primary schools pay more for their meals (£1.35 in 2000/01) than in most other Welsh authorities
 - If productivity cannot be improved, and if competitiveness cannot be demonstrated, then the Council should engage the private sector in the delivery of the service (Audit Commission, 2001)

Overall the inspectors concluded that the CCC catering service was 'a high quality, high cost service', the clear implication being that it should become 'a high quality, low cost service'. In our view however the review takes as resolved what most needs to be explained in a study of this kind: when it talks of 'high cost' and 'low productivity', for example, it assumes that these are innocuous and uncontested terms, when they are manifestly not.

Employing a metric that seems more attuned to a widget-making factory than a health-promoting school, namely 'meals produced per staff hour', the review criticised CCC for its low productivity in primary schools. But the inspectors seem to have forgotten what they said earlier in their report, when they noted the following with evident approval:

'We were impressed by the approach of kitchen staff in primary schools who were clearly focussed on the eating behaviour of the pupils. We came across examples where cooks showed flexibility with the menus to account for the preferences shown by pupils in their care. We heard of situations where pupils who came into the school with less healthy eating habits have been 'converted' to a wider and more healthy range of food'

(Audit Commission, 2001).

We simply need to juxtapose these two pictures to realise that they are not unrelated: one of the main causes of low productivity in the primary school meals service is the fact that CCC's catering staff devote time and effort to changing the eating habits of their children, which is precisely what is required if the Welsh Assembly's laudable new nutrition strategy is to work. But the *Best Value* review seems to be pushing CCC in the opposite direction, creating the absurd spectacle of higher productivity at the expense of a lower health dividend. Furthermore, CCC 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.

School caterers are fully alive as to what lies behind productivity differences in the school meal service. The basic rule of thumb among caterers is that the more ready-made products that are used then the higher the food costs and the lower the labour costs. Alternatively, the caterers with low food costs tend to be those engaged in prime cooking (that is, cooking from scratch with raw ingredients), which requires more hours and more skill. Another important factor in the productivity equation is the number of service points which need to be 'manned' and how many service times during the day are required (from 8am breakfast clubs to 5pm

homework clubs). The quality of kitchen equipment also has a bearing on productivity: for example a regeneration oven cooks items much quicker than the old six-burner ranges, therefore more staff hours will be needed with the older equipment because it has to be started earlier in the day. Finally, the length of lunch breaks can also make a difference – the norm is currently about 45 minutes, but some schools are pressing to reduce this to 35 minutes, a retrograde step which would have the effect of increasing the number of service points to break the pupils up into manageable queues to get them through quicker.

One needs to delve into this detail to appreciate the diverse factors that constitute the seemingly innocent notion of 'productivity' in the school meal service. But at a time when all the official mantras proclaim the need to abandon 'silo-based' thinking in favour of 'joined-up' thinking, it beggars belief that we continue to use a desiccated productivity metric which treats a school meal as though it were a widget in a supply chain, when it should be viewed and valued as a long term investment in health and well being. Indeed it is time that school caterers were recognised for what they are – namely health workers in disguise. But these workers need better access to training because, in one recent survey, 75% of head cooks had no training in healthy eating in the past 12 months (Nelson et al, 2004)

The better local authorities recognise that schools have a big contribution to make to community well being. Aside from its purely educational role, the school can become a learning and health-promoting resource for parents and children alike, especially in deprived communities where formal learning opportunities are few and far between. Primary schools are particularly important in this respect because parents visit twice a day and most parents tend to be keen to be involved in school-based activities. Local authorities could play a much more active role in brokering this relationship between schools and their local communities, especially by encouraging parents to take a more active interest in what food and drink should be provided in school. But the local community may also contain farmers and local farm visits could be an enjoyable way for children to learn how food is produced. By encouraging such links local authorities would help to reconnect consumers and producers (the two ends of the food chain that have become dangerously divorced from one another) and this in turn could help to heal the divisions between town and country.

Within schools, too, local authorities could do much more to encourage healthy eating environments – and there is no better way to start than by acknowledging the significant role of their very own school catering staff. For the most part this is a service that is both managed by and staffed by women and it tends to have a Cinderella status as a result – how many local political leaders have ever met to their school caterers? But senior officers and members in every local authority would do well to acquaint themselves with the state-of-the-art thinking on the school meal service from the Scottish Executive's Expert Panel, which succinctly revealed the 'secret' of good practice when it said:

'The key agents of success in implementing these standards are local authorities working in partnership with catering professionals, schools and the school communities – teachers, parents and pupils themselves'

(Scottish Executive's Expert Panel 2003).

What this means is that local authorities should feel less cowed by UK and EU public procurement regulations because, contrary to widespread perceptions, these do not preclude the use of social and environmental benefits as valid contract conditions so long as these are part of the core purpose of the contract (Morgan and Morley, 2002; Macfarlane and Cook, 2002).

Although the locally-sourced school meal would seem to be a simple confection, it is proving to be a real challenge for everyone involved in the food chain – regulators, producers, suppliers, caterers, procurement managers and parents among many others. Perhaps this is because it challenges some powerful conventions, like the notion that food has to be globally traded, that the provenance of food is unimportant or that cost takes precedence over quality in public sector catering. But in promoting the school as a healthy eating environment, where locally produced nutritious food is *routinely* available, and where pupils, parents and caterers appreciate its benefits, local authorities will be rising to the larger challenge of promoting community well being by weaving sustainable development principles into the warp and weft of everyday life. In other words there's more to the locally sourced school meal than meets the eye.

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