



**SCHOOL
FOOD
MATTERS**

FARM
GATE TO
SCHOOL
PLATE





KEY FINDINGS

- School meals have been completely transformed since 2007
- Campaign goals have been delivered
- School Food Matters has an effective campaign track record

About School Food Matters

School Food Matters (SFM) is a registered charity with the mission to ensure that every child enjoys fresh sustainable food at school and understands where their food comes from. SFM campaigns to improve the quality of school meals and to ensure that children get the opportunity to cook and grow food whilst at school, and designs, develops and manages food education projects for schools.

About our evaluation team

Food Matters (FM) is a not-for-profit food policy and advocacy organisation working on sustainable food policy issues and community food initiatives with the aim of creating sustainable and fair food systems. FM is working for and with a variety of organisations on a range of diverse issues through consultancy, research, evaluation, training, project management and delivery at both a local and national level.

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CAMPAIGN IN NUMBERS

- **65%** head teachers supported the campaign goals
- **500** parents signed the online petition
- Over **650** responses to the parent survey
- take up rose from **26%** to **52%**
- meal price came down by up to **38p**

Introduction

The evaluation focuses specifically on the School Food Matters (SFM) school meals improvement campaign that ran between 2007 and 2011. The purpose of the campaign was to improve primary school meals in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames provided under the Council contract. The evaluation is a retrospective appraisal and as such is dependent on the availability of and access to historical data and the personal perspectives of key stakeholders.

The key questions addressed by the evaluation are:

- Was the campaign effective or would the improvements have happened anyway?
- Did the campaign deliver its goals or were the goals achieved as a result of other stakeholders' efforts?
- Could the campaign be replicated elsewhere or was it a one-off?

Methodology

The evaluation methodology incorporated both quantitative and qualitative appraisal of evidence and included: data analysis and historical comparison; documentary research; interviews with key stakeholders; questionnaire surveys; and workshops with groups of primary school pupils. The workshops were particularly valuable offering a way to hear the perspective of pupils who had experienced the changes to school meals from the beginning of the campaign to the present.

Context

The evaluation acknowledges the importance of the timing of the campaign and its location as an influence on the success of the campaign. Renewed media focus and high profile national campaigns, including Jamie Oliver's 'Feed me Better' campaign, contributed to raised awareness of the issues and a push for change nationally. This in turn resulted in the establishment of advisory bodies (Food for Life Partnership, School Food Trust), the setting of new school food standards and central government funding to improve school meals. The 'Richmond effect', reflecting the relative affluence of the Borough and consequent motivation of many primary school parents, also played a significant part in the campaign's success.



SFM were very important – they took Jamie Oliver's message to a local level. SFM knew what parents wanted and the benefits to children's learning that could be achieved. Without SFM it would have fallen flat on its face.

Richmond Head Teacher





In 2007 meals were produced in Wales, transported frozen to Twickenham and sent to schools around Richmond to be reheated. Today meals are freshly cooked from good quality, sustainably sourced ingredients in school kitchens. By the end of the SFM campaign in 2011 meals served in Richmond's council-provided primary schools met the Silver Food for Life Catering Mark standard. Today they meet Gold standard. The meals are now not only appealing to look at, they are also nutritious, sustainably sourced with high animal welfare standards and are cooked using seasonally available ingredients.

Head Teachers who were surveyed rated today's meals as either good (72%) or excellent (28%).

They saw the most important changes as: how healthy the food is, the cooking of meals from fresh ingredients and the use of ingredients that are of a high quality.

Pupils who participated in the workshops recognised the important shift from re-heated frozen meals to food that was freshly cooked in the school. Pupils also discussed the variety and range of meals now offered and the opportunity this provides to try out different food. The atmosphere and hygiene of the dining area was regarded as very important, in particular being able to sit with friends who have packed lunches, as was the children's relationship with the kitchen staff, a key aspect of their enjoyment of school meals.

School meals uptake was considered as a useful indicator for changes in the quality of school meals (although it must be acknowledged that other factors could influence increased uptake). Since the 1970s the uptake of primary school meals in the UK had been gradually decreasing reaching a low of 41% in 2007. The decrease was even more marked in Richmond reaching a low of 22% in 2005. Richmond's uptake then mirrored national trends towards increased uptake resulting from national campaigns, increased government funding and the establishment of new food quality standards. However, whilst UK uptake increased slowly in 2011 Richmond's uptake increased massively to 52% in response to the introduction of Richmond Council's new primary school meals contract.



March 2009 school meal at a Richmond primary school provided by the council contract caterer



September 2011 school meal at a Richmond primary school provided by the council contract caterer

Conclusions

- School meals in Richmond's council-provided primary schools have been transformed since 2007
- The uptake of school meals in Richmond has increased dramatically coinciding with but greatly exceeding the national increase in uptake.

KEY FACTOR – GETTING THE CONTRACT RIGHT



The SFM campaign increasingly focused on engagement with and influence over decisions regarding the creation of an improved school meals contract. Establishing an improved contract, one with precise food specifications and less 'wriggle room', directly contributed to delivery of SFM's key campaign goals. In particular, Richmond Council's commitment to provide freshly cooked meals in primary schools required investment in kitchen facilities and dining areas and the appointment of a contractor that would commit to invest in staff training and conditions.

School Food Matters set **five** goals:

1. stringent contract specifications committing to fresh produce from sustainable sources
2. investment in school kitchens to enable fresh food to be cooked on site
3. investment in catering staff with training and enough paid hours to enable them to cook fresh on site
4. investment in dining areas so that schools can serve lunch in a pleasant, fully equipped environment
5. links with local farms and support for cooking and growing programmes in schools.

1. Getting the contract right

The 2007 contract specifications for school meals provision in Richmond consisted of 29 pages of which 1½ focused on menus, meal content and food quality. The contract encouraged providers to adopt a 'best value' approach and significantly contained no specification on how or where the meals were prepared. The contract was very aspirational but very loosely worded and open to interpretation.

In contrast the 2011 contract consisted of 35 pages of which 9 set out precise specifications on food quality, nutritional value and the sourcing of ingredients. The contract wording was much more precise and specific allowing much less room for interpretation. A key inclusion was the requirement that meals be freshly prepared from sustainably sourced ingredients in the school kitchens. The contract also strongly encouraged an approach that supported greater integration of school meals and kitchen staff into the school community and a focus on staff conditions and training.

The development of the new contract specifications were the result of a combined effort, however, SFM played a lead role in initiating and encouraging the working group on school meals set up by Richmond Council in the run up to the re-tendering of the contract in 2011. SFM acknowledges the contribution made by both Sustain and the Food for Life Partnership in developing and wording the new contract.

Conclusions

- The school meals contract has been transformed
- The 2011 contract is thorough, precise and specific leaving little room for interpretation by contractors
- The scope of the specifications has been greatly expanded to encompass not only food quality but also a range of requirements aimed at encouraging sustainable sourcing and preparation, an integrated whole school food ethos and an increased uptake of school meals.





2. School kitchens

In 2011 the new contractor, ISS Education, was able to freshly prepare food from raw ingredients in school kitchens. The commitment to do this, instilled in the new contract, required funding to upgrade and in some cases replace existing kitchen facilities.

The way in which investment was secured is extremely difficult to unpick. The Council's procurement officer at the time, Matthew Paul, played a key role in securing funding from Council budgets. Funding was achieved through a complex combination of sources; central Government; Richmond Borough Council; the new meals contractor; school fund-raising; and the existing rolling programme of school expansion and upgrade to meet the needs of Richmond's expanding population. Improvements varied from redecoration and the installation of key new equipment, to complete new kitchen building projects. Schools have some control on how budgets for expansion projects are spent and a focus on kitchen facilities depends on each individual school's food ethos.

Conclusions

- Significant investment has been made into kitchen facilities at the schools allowing all of them to prepare meals on site from fresh ingredients
- The investment varies from school to school and is determined by their specific requirements and concurrent expansion programmes
- SFM was not directly responsible for securing the funding and delivering this goal, however, the campaign was extremely influential in encouraging the development of stringent specifications within the school meals contract only possible through investment.

“ *It is important that the cooks feel as if they are part of the school team.* ”
Richmond Head Teacher

3. Supporting the catering staff

The shift from a 'reheat from frozen' service to the 'cook from fresh on site' as stipulated in the contract required contractors to make significant investment in training staff. The 2011 contract specifications also ensured that the catering staff preparing the food are not only motivated through training and conditions of employment but also valued and respected as an integral part of the school community.

Conclusions

- Specifications in the school meals contract require a commitment from the contractor to invest in kitchen staff
- The commitment includes training, terms and conditions and an assurance that kitchen staff are motivated, valued and have opportunities for career progression.



4. The dining experience

The school meals contract highlights the importance of the dining environment and its influence on the quality of the school meals service and to some extent on school meals uptake. The contract is less clear on how the Council's commitment to this aspect of the school meals service should be put into practice. A strong school food ethos and an awareness and commitment on the part of the Head Teacher and other decision makers at the school of the importance of the dining environment will influence the amount of investment in dining areas. Investment and improvement projects are mainly achieved through the programme of School Expansion, however, additional funding was made available through school fund-raising and in some cases through a budget raised by schools charging an extra 3p on the price of a meal.

Conclusions

- Specifications in the school meals contract identify the quality of the dining environment as an important aspect of the school meals service
- Investment in dining areas is determined by the Council's rolling programme of school expansion and improvement
- The commitment and interest of individual schools to an integrated school food ethos influences investment in the school dining environment.

“ *It's easier to eat when you're in a happy place.* ”
Richmond Year 6 student

5. Food education

The delivery of this campaign goal, though reflected in the improved contract, became a much higher priority for SFM following the evaluation period. Its inclusion in the contract specifications was significant in that it laid the groundwork for the work of SFM following 2011 and once the new contractor, ISS, had been appointed.

Conclusions

- During the evaluation period SFM focused more on delivering the goals most relevant to improvement of the school meals
- The campaign involved the establishment of strong relationships with Richmond's primary schools and with particular individuals within those schools.



SFM HAS AN EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN TRACK RECORD

The strategy that developed between 2007 and 2011 was very effective. It was powered by the strong personal conviction of SFM Founder/Director Stephanie Wood and her energy, commitment and ability to 'bend ears'.

The strategy evolved in response to changes in SFM's impact, developing credibility and focus. SFM's approach evolved from agitation and activism to collaborative engagement and participation in decision-making.

SFM's activism built a strong argument for change based on research and evidence including: surveys (650 responses), a petition (over 500 signatures), support (65% Head Teachers), an audit of schools and kitchen facilities. This provided a strong mandate for SFM's participation and earned a place at the table. SFM was then able to exert influence through collaborative engagement and in particular through the initiation of the school meals working party in which it took a strong leading role. SFM also encouraged a focus on best practice elsewhere and then facilitated the expert input of influential organisations working on school meals campaigns nationally. In particular SFM brought the Food for Life Partnership into the discussions and established their set of standards as the basis for the new contract specifications.

Whilst the Council was committed to improving the school meals service the relevant officers had little time or energy to take on the necessary work. The existence of an energetic and well-informed external campaign organisation, representing the voice of local parents and Head Teachers, was seen as an extremely important asset in the process.

“ SFM were a very valuable part of the working group.
Matthew Paul, Chair, School Meals Working Party, LBRuT ”

Conclusions

- SFM has proved itself to be a highly effective campaign organisation
- As an 'activist' campaign organisation SFM exerted influence on decision-makers in LBRuT through thorough information gathering, consultation and clear and consistent communication of its vision and goals
- As a 'collaborative' campaign organisation SFM was accepted as an equal partner in deliberations over the new school meals contract specification
- SFM strongly represented the voice of parents in discussions and was instrumental in establishing links to the Food for Life Catering Mark award scheme.

“ SFM suggested incorporation of the Food for Life Standards. No-one else on the working group would have been as determined to include the Food for Life standards if SFM hadn't strongly pushed for them.
Vic Laws, AVL Consultancy ”



LESSONS LEARNED

A number of factors contributed to the success of the SFM campaign:

Good timing

The SFM campaign benefitted from raised national awareness of the issues – the zeitgeist, the impact of Jamie Oliver's campaign (Feed me Better), Government support for improved school meals.

Clear focus

The campaign had a clear focus on bringing the national debate to a local level in Richmond.

Strong communication

The campaign developed good communications with a 2-way focus on awareness raising and information gathering.

The 'Richmond Effect'

The campaign benefitted from a community of well-informed and motivated parents, ready for change, and the relative affluence of Richmond.

“ Richmond parents were well-informed and had high expectations.
Richmond Head Teacher ”

Learning from others

The campaign didn't try to re-invent the wheel – instead showing a willingness to adopt and adapt successful approaches developed by others with similar aims working elsewhere.

Leadership

The importance of SFM's strong leadership based on personal conviction and commitment should not be underestimated.

Window of opportunity

The campaign spotted and capitalised on the window of opportunity provided by the Council's tendering cycle allowing 4 years work before the contract was up for renewal.

Pushed hard for change

SFM presented a consistent vision and goals, and a coherent approach focused on challenging the prevailing argument that lack of facilities was an insurmountable obstacle to improving school meals.

Evolution

SFM was able to evolve and adapt its approach from activism to collaboration, showing flexibility and a strong strategic consciousness.

Mandate

SFM developed a strong mandate based on its campaign credibility and its coherent representation of the parent and Head Teachers' voice.





Outcomes

The main outcomes of the campaign are:

- SFM’s overarching **campaign aim was achieved**. School meals provided to primary schools under the council contract in Richmond have been transformed
- The improvement in school meals was the result of a collaborative effort based on contributions from a number of different stakeholders, however, SFM played a **key influential role** in pushing the process
- The process has produced a **model contract** which should be used as a template for other similar campaigns elsewhere, either led by SFM or by other organisations with similar aims
- SFM’s **campaign goals have been delivered**, either as part of the campaign or in the time since the campaign (in particular the food education goal)
- The campaign has left a **strong legacy** both locally and nationally through SFM now adopting a new role as a policy advisor and service provider using the campaign reputation and relationships built with schools and school staff and other national campaign and advisory organisations. This includes earning a place on the School Food Plan expert panel and appointment to the London Food Board.

Could this campaign model work somewhere else?

The SFM campaign provides an excellent model for similar campaigns elsewhere whether they are led by SFM or another organisation. The campaign illustrates the vital role played by community initiated campaign organisations in instigating, driving, supporting and in some cases leading major change.

To replicate this campaign’s achievements elsewhere, in another London Borough or elsewhere in the UK, there are four key recommendations:

Provide an independent voice

- An independent external organisation can play a vital role in getting the process started and keeping up the momentum
- To stay independent the organisation must avoid any perceptions of political or other affiliation or motivation.

Represent the school community

- It is crucial that the voice of parents of school children and of school children themselves is incorporated into the process
- Their voice is harder for other stakeholders and decision makers to hear and bring into the process
- Ensure that the campaign is rooted in the community it represents – the wider school community
- Present a coherent evidence-based argument to establish a strong mandate for participation
- It is particularly important to explore ways to include the voice of school pupils and ensure that it is incorporated into the process of improving the school meals service.

Be flexible and willing to evolve

- Be sensitive to the changing role that the campaign may need to assume
- Evolve from agitation as a ‘thorn in the side’ to become an equal collaborator and contributor to the discussion
- Support the decision-makers in ‘doing the right thing’.

Get the timing right

- Build the campaign alongside heightened awareness through national media coverage and government interest or funding
- Look for a window of opportunity in the Council tendering cycle
- There is little point in pushing for change if there’s not enough time to make the change.

“ SFM had credibility based on research and analysis of information. They could not be dismissed as ‘just a group of mums’.”

Richmond Head Teacher



Additional recommendations

The evaluation has also identified the following additional recommendations for successful replication of the SFM campaign:

- Don’t re-invent the wheel – apply experience from elsewhere to your situation
- Build a strong case based on authentic evidence: surveys, audits etc.
- Raise awareness – this may be more necessary elsewhere
- Be sensitive to entrenched attitudes of professionals and officers – they may suffer from inertia, reluctance and scepticism and may be wary of your motives
- Focus on positive opportunity and be proactive
- Remember the key to success is **getting the contract right**
- Get a place at the table, based on the credibility and reputation you have built, or build the table if it isn’t there yet.

“ SFM campaigned on behalf of Head Teachers and brought the voice of parents to the debate.”

Richmond Head Teacher





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