

Demanding more from existing caterers: Ashley Church of England Primary School

The food at our school, Ashley C of E Primary School in Walton-on-Thames, used to be pretty uninspiring. It was brought in pre-cooked by council caterers and dished up into plastic flight trays at a small serving hatch. Unsurprisingly, take-up had sunk to a miserable 27%.

But when our head teacher Richard Dunne told our cooks that he wanted to overhaul the lunch service, they rose to the occasion. “As heads, we should have the confidence to say to the local authority: 'this is OK, but it could be better',” says Richard. “At the end of the day, they want our business and a high take-up of school meals.”

Together, we resolved to start serving high quality, seasonal food. For six months our pupils were obliged to make do with packed lunches while a new kitchen was built so that the food could be cooked from scratch on site. Parents agreed to a rise of 10p (to £2.10) to fund fresh, seasonal fruit and vegetables and high welfare, organic meat. The children were involved in shaping every aspect of the lunchtime experience, right down to choosing the right kind of cutlery.

Take-up now stands at a fantastic 70%. Lunch is just one part of our strong, curriculum-wide approach to food, which incorporates our vegetable plot and fruit tree orchards. Everyone is involved. Our Year 1 children learn about and plant wild flowers. Year 2 keep bees, while Year 3 become experts in fruit trees and local varieties of fruit. Year 4 look after the soft fruit, Year 5 raise the salads and Year 6 are in charge of the vegetables. And because our school kitchen uses the children's produce, they are always excited about eating it.