

Mickley First School

Mickley First School in rural Northumberland is a small primary school of 63 children with a nursery class of up to 24. The school had a catering contract with the local authority until head teacher Andy Hudson arrived 2½ years ago. An accountant and information analyst before he became a teacher, Andy wanted to get the school lunch service breaking even. That meant increasing take-up from 27 to at least 40.

The school's cook, Dot Glaister, was officially employed by the local authority. Hugely experienced and much loved, she had been cooking at Mickley First for two decades when Andy asked her to help him bring the service in-house. He put her on to the school's payroll and hired the school caretaker for an extra hour a day to be her kitchen assistant.

Dot loves having more autonomy. The local authority used to tell her what to do without discussion. They always went for the cheapest option, whether or not it was the best, and she was on a strict budget of 56p per child per meal for ingredients. Dot now has a budget of 70p per child, with the flexibility to spend more some days and less on others – as long as she balances the books over the whole year. Her overall budget is £17,000 a year: £10,000 goes on staff costs, £5,000 on ingredients, £1,000 on cooking costs such as electricity, and £120 on unpredictable extras.

By teaming up with six other schools in the area to buy in bulk, Dot has managed to get a good discount from her food supplier. She consults the children about what they would like to eat, and her long experience means that she provides the right amount of each choice so that wastage is kept to a minimum. Redecorating the dining room, getting children growing vegetables for the kitchen and giving them more say about what goes on the menu – all these measures have helped boost take-up to between 40 and 50 children a week. The service now breaks even.

A number of larger schools in the area have brought their food in-house like Mickley First, and made a success of it. What makes Mickley unusual is that it can break even despite its size. Andy Hudson says this is down to canny budgeting, high take-up and Dot's experience and popularity. "A school cook who likes children matters."