



**SCHOOL
FOOD
MATTERS**

**FARM
GATE TO
SCHOOL
PLATE**

The Richmond Story

This is the story of School Food Matters and their quest to transform school meals in primary schools across the London Borough of Richmond. Their journey began with a frozen school meal and ended with a Gold Food for Life Catering Mark menu.

School Food Matters (SFM) was founded in 2007 by parent Stephanie Wood. Her children were about to start school and wherever she went, head teachers were embarrassed by the school meal service. School meals in Richmond primary schools were reheated from frozen and very unappealing. This was reflected in the borough's low take-up figures; at just 26% there was clearly a job to be done! SFM set out to actively engage parents and head teachers on the quality and delivery of school meals and to help develop a better model for the Local Authority.

SFM believed that Richmond primary schools could be serving fresh, more sustainable food. The charity also believed that children should have freshly prepared food, cooked on site and a more enjoyable dining experience. SFM set out to find out how many head teachers and parents felt the same and what changes they would like to make. There followed a lengthy series of surveys and telephone calls with all the schools in Richmond and 65% of heads responded in support of SFM's goals.

The official launch of the campaign took place in Richmond Theatre in May 2008 and included a list of high profile speakers. Chaired by Jonathan Dimbleby, the panel included Zac Goldsmith, Jeanette Orrey (the "dinner lady" who started the school meal revolution in Nottinghamshire), Prue Leith (then Chair of the School Food Trust) and Chris Collins (Blue Peter Gardener). With over 200 people attending the launch and over 500 signatures on an online petition, SFM had a body of support to catch the attention of the local authority. A School Meals Working Party was subsequently established with representations from schools, parents, national campaign groups and, of course, School Food Matters.

SFM recommended that parents should be consulted more widely before setting about the task of writing the specification for the new meals contract. 650 parents completed the online survey providing some interesting feedback. '*Meals cooked from fresh*' was by far the most popular change to the service requested by parents, followed by information about food quality and sourcing. '*Not being able to sit with friends having packed lunch*' was the key obstacle to improving take up of school meals. The majority of parents seemed happy with the set meal price but not satisfied with the current offer.

The survey was followed by presentations from Sustain and Food for Life Partnership and site visits to London boroughs with successful school meal services. With the fact finding mission complete and an idea of what can be achieved with a clear vision and lots of enthusiasm, the working party set about producing contract specifications that reflected the wishes of schools and parents and that would secure a school meal service that would make the council proud.

In May 2011 the new contract for Richmond was awarded. In September 2011 the winning caterers, ISS Education, began providing school food meeting the Silver Food for Life Catering Mark criteria. All meals were cooked fresh on site and the meal price **dropped** by up to 35p. In February 2014 ISS Education was awarded a Gold Catering Mark for its service to primary schools in Richmond. This means more local, more organic, higher welfare food and at no additional cost to parents. At £2.20, the meal price is still cheaper than when the campaign began in 2007.

And the children of Richmond eat school meals in ever increasing numbers. At most schools take-up has doubled. In some it is over 70%. This complicated journey was somewhat simplified by one year 4 boy. When asked why he now chose to have a school meal he answered "...it just tastes nicer".