

IMPROVING SCHOOL MEALS AT TOWERBANK

UPDATE MEETING

JUNE 2018

BACKGROUND

Early work

Our work at Towerbank started in early 2016 when senior management at the school asked us to partner them in reviewing the school lunch offering. They were concerned that the food cooked at Portobello High and delivered in to Towerbank was consistently not eaten by the children; that children were left hungry and unsatisfied by the catering and that a large proportion of the meals supplied were ending up in the bin.

At the time, there was no dedicated serving area or space to store kitchen equipment. Meals were served in all three halls at school, with temporary equipment wheeled out from cupboards at each mealtime. Washing up and any minor processing of food took place in a tiny room tucked into a corridor, with dining staff changing and storing their belongings in the same cramped space.

Parent-led research ended with a report presented to CEC in May 2016. Findings were significant: the standard of the food at the point of being served was, quite simply, unacceptable. The main issues identified were as follows:

1. **Many of the meals did not travel well so quality suffered**

The biggest challenge in serving meals at Towerbank was (and remains) that they were made elsewhere and brought to school. The menu for Edinburgh schools supplied by Edinburgh Catering is the same regardless of whether the meals are cooked on site or transported from another kitchen. In 2016 no allowances had been made for the transport process which meant that pasta and vegetables were overcooked, the meat in casseroles tended to have disintegrated, changing the texture of the meal, and dishes that came with a sauce or a gravy tended to be watery. Potatoes and chips that may have started out crispy were soggy. On more than one occasion the temperature of the food was below the level at which it should have been served.

2. **Presentation was poor, making food unappealing and unappetising**

In general, the food did not look appealing. The processing that took place on site did not take account of the expectations or preferences of primary school aged children. The focus appeared to be on moving food in quantity, rather than preparing meals for eating. For example, fruit was cut up in chunks, with the skin, core and pips left intact, mixed together and allowed to go brown.

3. **Food was not kept at an appropriate temperature**

Although there were heated serveries on site, one was not working properly. There was no soup cauldron to keep soup or other dishes like custard at an appropriate temperature. There

were no chilled facilities at all, meaning items like ice-cream, jelly, yoghurt and milk were served at room temperature. 'Hot' meals were often lukewarm or cold.

4. **Portion sizes did not account for age or appetite**

Everyone was served the same amount, regardless of their age or appetite. Serving staff believed it was council policy to serve a full menu of the same portion size and adhered to this despite school advice to listen to the children and serve accordingly.

5. **The take up of fruit, vegetables and salads was low.**

Poor presentation and selection of fruit and vegetables put the children off. The fruit was mixed, brown, and all tasted of banana. The vegetables seemed to be a box-ticking exercise, providing any vegetable with a dish regardless of appropriateness. Mixed vegetables (broad beans, peas and carrots) were often served but universally disliked by the children. Other vegetables were overcooked, particularly the broccoli which had often disintegrated by the time it was served.

6. **Children ate dessert or bread instead of their main meal.**

The lack of appetising and appealing main meals resulted in the children filling up on dry bread and / or the dessert of the day. This was clearly not a nutritious meal and meant that the children became very hungry before the end of the school day.

7. **Milk and water were supplied but not drunk.**

The water was provided in plastic glasses and kept on a raised window ledge: it was lukewarm. The children who opted for milk usually only took a few mouthfuls and left the rest. Several litres of milk were poured away from partially consumed cartons every day.

8. **A significant amount of food waste was generated every day (5-6 large bags).**

In 2016 most of the pupils in the lower primary were not eating a significant portion of their meal and this, along with the over production of food resulted in an average of 6 bags of food waste per day which we estimated at over £2,000 of wasted food every month. This food was thrown into the general waste.

9. **Serving staff spent more time processing than preparing**

The serving staff worked hard but their efforts were not directed at producing appealing meals for the children to eat: instead they concentrated on the processing and cleaning of the insulating trays and the transfer of food to serveries. With this focus on turn-around times and on cleaning, there was no time to spend on greater consideration of the presentation of food or engaging fully with the children.

10. **School staff engaged in practical tasks, but not with the children**

The school staff played a key role every lunchtime with at least five members of staff undertaking roles like refilling the water jugs and handing out the water, checking that cutlery, trays and glasses were clean, wiping down the tables in between sittings and helping to clear away uneaten food and drink and stacking dirty trays.

11. **Staff were disengaged and lacked direction**

The school lunch service at Towerbank, necessitated by the volume of children to serve and the limited space in which to do so, was process rather than experience driven. This was

exacerbated by the low quality of food and high volume of waste. The catering staff shared their frustration at not being involved in cooking the food, or in making sensible menu choices that worked well in practical terms. It was evident that they felt they fell between CEC and the school in terms of management and had no-one to offer them clear direction on how they should be working, nor anyone to feedback or offer ideas to. Because there was no engagement in the food, and no pride in what was being served (one commented she would 'not feed this to my cat'), there was no desire to make the food look nice or to encourage children to eat it.

IMPROVEMENTS

The response after our meeting in May 2016 was immediate, with many changes made promptly in the weeks following our report, and a commitment from CEC to continue to review and improve.

Practical issues such as keeping food at an appropriate temperature, gaps in essential equipment and overordering were resolved quickly. The fruit, vegetable and salad offering was widened and presentation improved. Unpopular items such as mixed vegetables and milk were removed from the menu. Portion sizes were adjusted, and bread and cake supplied in smaller amounts. Efforts were made to improve food through different cooking methods and ingredient selection, resulting in generally better meals. A dedicated team serving primary schools was established at the new site of Portobello High School, with a remit to improve the food sent over to Towerbank.

This work from CEC coincided with a complete reworking of the dining space and serving area in school. A classroom was converted into a preparation, washing and serving area and an extension to the ground floor hall meant all those eating school meals could be accommodated in one space across the lunch hour. Older children who have packed lunches are still accommodated in upper halls or in the playground.

Subsequent visits and reviews have seen a maintained improvement in most areas, but significant issues remain, as does our commitment to work until we have the very best food possible for the pupils of Towerbank school.

BEST PRACTICE

During our research, we visited two other primary schools in Edinburgh catered for by Edinburgh Catering Services. Currie Primary School and Flora Stevenson both have a kitchen on site. Flora Stevenson, which we visited most recently, has many similar challenges to Towerbank: it has a comparable school role and uptake of school lunches and is housed in a Victorian building on a restricted site.

The differences between the schools with on-site kitchens and Towerbank were remarkable, not only in terms of the food quality achieved because of cooking on site, but in terms of the atmosphere, the enjoyment and appetite of the children, the (lesser amount of) waste generated and the commitment and engagement of the catering staff. Key points of note are:

Healthy, appetising food

The food was universally better at the schools with kitchens on site. Chips were crispy, hot and fluffy in the middle, pizza fresh and tasty, pasta had a proper consistency and vegetables were not overcooked. Notable at both schools was the popularity of the salad bars, stocked with a wide variety of appealing foods. Staff at both kitchens talked about the importance of trial and error and of monitoring the success or otherwise of all food, but especially the salad bar. Theirs contained pasta salads, rice and vegetables, strawberries, grapes, cheese, cucumber, sliced peppers, raisins and croutons. They were monitored throughout the service and replenished regularly. Children had no hesitation in asking staff for food if something had run out.

A sense of ownership and pride

The catering staff were keen to tell us about the way they worked and happy to show us around their kitchens: they also had a happy relationship with the children, who found them approachable and helpful. This is in marked contrast to some of the catering staff at Towerbank, who can appear unwelcoming towards visiting parents and appear impatient with the children.

The staff at Currie and Flora's had a very clear idea about what children liked and disliked and how to present food to them. They understood that simple things like cutting fruit and providing it in pots and making pizzas round and thin were important to a child. The dining hall was their area, for which they took responsibility and ownership. The teaching staff were a sociable presence in the dining space, talking to the children and offering encouragement, as the practicalities were handled by the children themselves or the catering staff.

In both schools the cook came out to talk to the children at some point during service, even though it was a busy lunch. We observed effective dialogue and communication between the serving team and with the supervising teaching staff. Cooks were involved and interested in how much was eaten and what the children thought of the food.

The cook at Currie Primary School explained that when the salad bar was first introduced children tended to take a large amount, half of which ended up being thrown away. When this was noted she spent some time with the children talking with them about the appropriate amount to take. This has

evidently had an impact as all the salad was eaten. The Flora Stevenson cook spoke to a couple of children who were not happy with their food choice and immediately sorted them out an alternative.

One very clear advantage of having a kitchen on site was the opportunity for staff to be responsive and to take ownership of the food offering. Despite cooking from the same menu, each kitchen will decide how best to prepare and deliver the food so that it is well-made, attractively presented and popular.

Clean plates – lots of them – and minimal food waste

The difference in food waste between the schools with kitchens and Towerbank was stark. At Currie Primary School there were one and a half bags full at the end of service and the majority of this was the disposable plastic cups used for water. Any food that hadn't been served was either saved for the following day (fruit and the potato fillings that had been kept cool), served as staff lunches (pasta and a couple of slices of pizza) or given to the school compost team (some pasta). There were no vegetables left and because the salad bar contained only a small amount that was replenished throughout service there was very little left.

We asked Flora Stevenson about their waste and they thought there was a lot – but they later clarified this was never more than two bags after a busy service – and this is with a school roll almost identical to Towerbank's.

More leisurely dining

Although the atmosphere at Towerbank is a happy one, it was noticeably more relaxed at both comparison schools. As the system was more experience than process driven, children took longer to eat their meals and the servery remained open until the end of the lunch hour. At Flora Stevenson's more than 30 pupils queued up for extra helpings near to the end of service.

CURRENT PICTURE AND AREAS FOR IMMEDIATE ATTENTION

MEAL QUALITY

In both our original report, and in subsequent reviews, we highlighted that certain menu options do not travel well, with their appearance, texture and taste suffering as a consequence. Although there have been improvements in some dishes, these issues remain, and some dishes are still significantly affected by being cooked, kept warm and then transported; pasta bakes are overcooked, stodgy and contain vegetables indiscernible from the pasta, 'sizzling' fajitas are soggy and unappetising, bean enchiladas are tough in texture and bland to the taste, and chips and potato wedges are still not crispy.

We are now locked in to a 4-week menu cycle for a 12 month period and there are a significant number of dishes that simply do not work when cooked elsewhere and served on-site. We have highlighted the problems with these dishes on several previous occasions but no changes to the menu options or to the way the dishes are cooked and served have been made.

Q. How do we improve pasta, chips, vegetables, wedges and wrap-based meals?

Q. What is the process and opportunity to feedback on dishes that are not working, or those that are proving unpopular, so they can be adjusted to suit?

Q. What real changes can be made to the menu options that do not work in schools with no working kitchen?

SALAD, FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

We are pleased to say that these are vastly improved. The vegetable accompaniments to main meals are appropriate (although sometimes overcooked), the selection of fruit is much better and well presented, and the addition of a salad bar is a great step forward.

However, things could still be improved. The salad bar is under-used and under-promoted. It:

- is tucked in an out of the way position in the food hall;
- is not replenished regularly throughout service, meaning popular selections run out quickly (we observed cucumber running out by 12.15 on several occasions); and
- regularly contains items that are unlikely to be eaten by primary school pupils, these include chopped raw red onion, large pickled onions, large bowls of salad leaves. Inevitably these items are not eaten and are thrown away at the end of service.

The fruit selection, whilst impressive, is not made easily accessible to the children. We noted that some younger children were given pots of fruit, rather than making a choice. This meant that they sometimes received fruit they did not like, and it too ended up in the bin. We were very disappointed to see some children throw whole fruit into the bin rather than take it to the playground to eat. We are

clarifying with the school what the 'rules' of the dining hall are, an area we think the catering staff, dining hall supervisors and children should work on together.

Q. We would like to see the salad bar moved to a more prominent position, replenished throughout service and filled with appropriate food choices. Who can make this happen? Who informs the selection of food stuff in the salad bar (the children!)? Who takes responsibility for monitoring the success or otherwise of the selections in the salad bar?

Q. Can we find other ways to encourage children to eat fruit? If there is prepared fruit left that has been on display can this be kept for the next day's service, offered at the table or offered to children in afternoon break / in their classrooms? Can fruit be offered to children at their tables as they eat?

Q. We would like to host a session with dining staff, supervisory staff and the pupil council to feedback on the dining experience and talk about some of these aspects. How can we make this happen?

STAFF DEPLOYMENT

The staff disengagement that we noted as significant in our very first report is still a noticeable issue. Although they are working in improved conditions and serving better food, the fact that they have no part in designing the menu or preparing and cooking the food means they have little investment or connection with the meals they serve. What's more, it seems that any feedback they could give through the daily diary (in which they can note any problems or feedback about the food) is not being used and so the staff do not appear to be responding to what they see and serve every day.

Service remains process driven: the focus of their energies is still on serving the food quickly and efficiently, and on getting cleared up as soon as possible. We saw the serveries close as early as 12.40 on some occasions, when lunch service is supposed to last until 1.10. One parent fed back that a couple of children had asked for more food and were told it was all gone, despite there still being some left in the serveries: the shutters were closed at 12.45. We believe this is to allow staff to complete the cleaning and loading of equipment onto waiting vehicles in the short working time they have.

Dining staff are only in the dining areas at waste stations. They are again focused on the process, seeing that children dispose of their uneaten food, trays and cutlery as quickly as possible. There is minimal interaction with the children, although we did observe the staff, on occasion, asking children to try and eat a little more food when they arrived with almost uneaten meals, but at this point the food is cold and congealed; interactions of this nature need to happen when a child is still at the table.

Water service is inconsistent. On some days it was very efficient, with pre-poured water in cups available and frequent topping up of water by school support staff at the request of children. On other days although water had been pre-prepared there was very little in each cup and support staff then had to top up all the drinks for the children. The number of support staff varied depending on their commitments each day. We observed older children helping themselves on some days and not on

others, unsure of whether this was permitted. Sometimes there was no one to replenish the jugs of water and we stepped in to fill the gap.

Q. Can there be a review of the roles of the serving staff who are out in the dining area? We would like to see the children take responsibility for their own lunches. They should be able to collect their own cutlery (currently a member of the school staff hands them their cutlery as they enter the dining room). To do so they need somewhere to rest their tray as they pick up cutlery. The cutlery trays should be stationed at the beginning or the end of the serveries themselves. This would free up a member of staff in the dining area and allow them to perform a more general supervisory role.

Q. We think the children should be clearing up after themselves when they have finished eating. This would mean they scrape any uneaten food into the bin and then put their cutlery and trays into the appropriate containers at the waste stations. The two members of the dining staff could then have a more general presence in the dining hall, helping children should they need it, but also encouraging them to eat, asking what they like and don't like, as well as replenishing the salad bar and water. This approach operates successfully in Flora Stevenson.

WASTE

Despite the improved food offering and the more efficient service in place, there is still a significant amount of waste generated every day. We observed as much as 7 plastic bags full of waste after one service.

General waste has increased with the frequent use of plastic pots. None of it is recycled. All waste goes into the same bins with no separation of food, general and recycled material. All of our parent researchers expressed surprise that a school with an 'eco' status had no facilities for sorting waste.

Q. When can we have appropriate waste sorting bins to enable us to recycle packaging and compost food waste?

Q. Can an alternative be found for the salad and dessert pots that is washable to lessen packaging waste? If we allow the younger children access to the salad bar and it is regularly replenished, this will remove the need for salad pots and reduce waste.

Q. There are not enough red plastic cups (the washable ones) to serve all pupils. The rest of the water is served in disposable plastic cups. Can we have more washable cups to cut down on this unnecessary waste?

ACCESS

Currently our school food is delivered every day by two minibuses. They cross the playground to access the door nearest the kitchen. This presents serious logistical and safety issues for the school: any activities have to be planned around the arrival of school lunches to ensure that the delivery vehicle and children do not cross paths. The school is committed to increasing the amount of exercise

each pupil gets every day, and to allowing them to spend more time outside. The regular interruption brought about by the delivery of school lunches is hampering this development.

Two years ago, in discussing how best to make improvements to the lunch offering, the senior management team proposed the creation of an additional entrance to the school dedicated to using an old side entrance, that had been blocked up, for deliveries. The site of this would mean deliveries (of food or supplies) could be made with far less disruption. From further communication with Susan Brown, our contact at the time, we were led to believe that this had been investigated, funding had been found, and that it was just a matter of permissions being sought before work could start. We have since been told that this is no longer happening.

Q. How can the commitment to re-open the side entrance be met? We think it is vital to improve services all round and will prove valuable should we move to preparing food on site.

NEXT STEPS – WHAT WE ARE ASKING FOR

We believe that the challenges presented by cooking off site, and a situation where staff have no ownership or investment in the food at school, can be resolved by cooking on site, in a kitchen built for Towerbank. Food cooked on site, by a dedicated team that can become a part of the school, is our ideal, and one that we are committed to campaigning for.

Whilst we would like to see the issues outlined in the previous section addressed as soon as possible, we also want to look at what long term investment is necessary to ensure that the very best food possible is delivered at Towerbank school. We feel that we have come as far as we can with changes to the preparation and delivery of food off-site and for things to improve any more then investment in preparing food on site needs to take place.

We were much encouraged when we met with the catering team last November and they outlined that a review of the whole estate was to take place to see which schools could be equipped with their own kitchen, especially as they felt Towerbank could qualify for this. As there is a move to reduce the workload of existing production kitchens at high schools faced with more commercial food production in smaller kitchens, the development of kitchens in primary schools seems a natural progression. And as we are the largest primary school in Edinburgh, with a role equal to that of some secondary schools, we seem a fitting candidate.

The Deputy First Minister's recent *Review of Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools* reinforces the importance of and commitment to high quality school food and for this to become a reality at Towerbank, we need our own kitchen.

Q When is Towerbank due for a review to see if it qualifies for a kitchen on site? How can we be a part of this and help the process?

Additional notes

PRACTICALITIES OF A KITCHEN ON SITE

We appreciate that Towerbank is a challenging site and that the restrictions of the building and the space around it do not allow for great flexibility or expansion. However, after seeing kitchens at other schools feeding a similar number of children each day and the smaller size of modern kitchen equipment, we are confident that cooking and storage facilities can be accommodated in the school.

With this in mind, we have researched what equipment would be necessary to deliver the current menu and where it could be sited in the current space.

Figure 1: catering equipment schedule

Catering Equipment Schedule								
Item	Short Name	Description	Number Required	Dimensions	Cost	Electrical Power W	Gas Consumption	Water conn
1	Freezer	full height, 600l, gastro	2 max	600x800	1039.99	600		
2	Fridge	Gram Gastro 4 door, 668l, under-counter	1No	2163x700	3029.99	310		
3	Mixer	large table top Buffalo Planetary 20l	1no	558x600	999.99	1100		
4	Combi	Rationale 20x2/1 GN	1 (300-500mpd)	1084x996	15949.99	100A*3ph 65.5kW		3/4"
5	Hot Hold	hot hold with bainmarie top	2No	1420x600	1449.99	3000		
6	Sink	cleaning/prep	as existing					
7	Plonge	as existing	as existing					
8	Range	6 burner w oven Falcon Dominator	1	900x770			5.3kWx6 7.1kW Oven	
9	Fryer	twin tank 14lx2	1	394x762	1981.99		32kWx2	
Total					24451.94			

We will also share our thoughts on how the space can be best used at our meeting on Tuesday 19th.