



## From policy to plate: Barriers to implementing healthy eating policies in primary schools in Wales

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Food preferences  
Food services  
Nutrition policy  
Primary schools  
Child development

### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** School meal improvement is a major component of UK government policy to improve children's diets. This study investigated the pragmatic influences on local education authority (LEA) and primary school policies affecting the food available during school mealtimes, together with the professional practices of catering staff that further influence the food served.

**Methods:** A qualitative case study methodology involving interviews with primary school headteachers, catering managers and staff in a Welsh LEA.

**Results:** Whilst reflecting the primary objective of national policy with respect to the nutritional content of the school meal, LEA and school policies were also influenced by multiple, competing interests including parental views, pupil's food preferences or organisational objectives, such as protecting school meal uptake. Tensions existed between food availability and choice such that menus incorporating choices based on children's preferences were viewed as facilitating service viability and prioritised over promoting healthy eating.

**Conclusions:** Higher level policy interventions may be limited in their effectiveness if they are undermined by a lack of attention to lower level factors that may compromise their successful implementation. The critical role of school meal providers and school cooks needs to be recognised and strategic partnerships developed to minimise tensions between improved nutritional standards and school meal uptake.

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### 1. Introduction

The reduction of obesity and improvement of diet and nutrition is one of the principle objectives of health promotion programmes in the UK [1–3]. Due to its association with health in adulthood, the programmes view childhood nutrition as a priority and nutrition in schools as critical. The impetus in transforming school meal provision began with Scotland's 'Hungry for Suc-

cess' initiative [4] followed by the 'Turning the Tables' [5] and 'Appetite for Life' [6] programmes in England and Wales, respectively. The revision of nutritional standards for school meals was central to each one, whilst 'Turning the Tables' introduced the concept of 'choice control' whereby healthy options are promoted and unhealthy ones are restricted by manipulating food availability [5].

The delivery of nutritional programmes in the UK falls within the remit of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) where school meals are subject to compulsory, competitive tendering [7]. In Wales, 97% of primary schools are catered by the LEA in-house provider and in Scotland the figure is 95% [8]. However, in England, the figure is lower (68%) since outsourced providers (17%) or schools themselves (10%) may provide the catering [9]. This multi-layering of organ-

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isational involvement is a common feature of programmes that originate at national level [10], which potentially subjects the original programme to additional priorities at each decision making level. For example, competitive tendering is associated with a reduced focus on diet and health and an increased focus on cost control and income generation [8]. Since the commercial viability of school meal provision depends, in part, upon the extent to which food availability matches pupil demands [11,12], unpopular, but possibly healthier, foods may be removed from sale [8].

This uncoupling of programme design from programme delivery means that tensions can exist between management groups and individuals regarding the details of the resultant working practices [13]. These multi-layered processes whereby individual experiences and beliefs influence local policies and/or practices have been referred to as 'ecologies of practice' [14]. Ecologies of practice also involve a commitment to ideologies or formulations of best practice which can lead to a preferred style of working or judgements of how best to engage with particular individuals or contexts. This suggests that the behaviour of individuals engaged in policy implementation may be critical to its success. This is particularly pertinent for nutritional policies since the social context in which eating is embedded is known to contribute to the development of food associations [15]. For example, mild levels of coercion can lead to reduced consumption of the food concerned [16] whereas food presented in a supportive context can increase liking for that food [17].

It has been recognised that the effectiveness of health education and behaviour change interventions targeted at individuals is often limited due to the salience of higher level social, contextual, environmental, community or policy factors [18]. As manipulation of the food available at school mealtimes is a prominent feature of the UK health promotion agenda [19], the aim of the current study was to investigate the effects of ecologies of practice on the transformation of national policy on food availability at school mealtimes into practice. The research aims were: (a) to explore the pragmatic influences on formal or informal LEA and primary school policies that affect the food available during school mealtimes; and, (b) to explore the professional practices of school catering staff that influence the food made available and served at lunch time.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Design

A qualitative methodology was undertaken due to the exploratory nature of the study. This consisted of a case study of an LEA in Wales to ensure uniformity of national and local policy context. The national policy was the Appetite for Life (A4L) programme [6,20] whose key points relating to food availability (as opposed to other objectives such as sustainable procurement) are outlined in Box 1. The LEA school food policy relevant to the study period (June 2007–April 2008) was published on the author-

#### Box 1: Key points from the Appetite for Life Plan.

The Appetite for Life programme defines the strategic direction and actions required to improve the nutritional standards of food and drink provided in schools in Wales. It uses as its basis the UN convention on the rights of the child and was devised following a consultation exercise that included children's views. Its key points relating to food availability during school meals are:

- Revised and stringent minimum nutrient standards for school meals.
- Improved uptake, particularly of free school meals.
- Monitoring of the effect of revised nutrient standards on uptake.
- To provide caterers with the skills to prepare and promote healthy food choices.
- To ensure consumption of the healthier meals offered by working with children.
- To encourage schools to draw up school food policies.

Source: Welsh Assembly Government (2007).

#### Box 2: Key points from the Appetite for Life Plan.

- To follow the national guidelines for nutritional standards.
- To provide a piece of extra fruit, salad and bread daily.
- To provide a cold meal option.

Sample from the published daily hot meal menu:

Chicken wrap	Vegetable choice	Iced ginger cake
Pasta Napolitan (vegetarian)		Fresh fruit
Oven baked herby potatoes		Low fat yoghurt

Sample cold meal menu:

Filled rolls	Crisps	Fruit
Sandwiches	Juice drink carton	Dessert
Baguettes	Bottled flavoured water	
Salad bowls		

Source: Local Authority web pages during July 2007–April 2008.

ity's web pages, as were the Primary School menus (see Box 2). Ethical approval was obtained from Cardiff University School of Social Sciences ethical committee and informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

### 2.2. Study sample

At LEA level, six interviews were conducted with senior catering managers, together with representatives from the LEA's multi-agency A4L working group. Schools were recruited by stratifying the LEA's 83 primary schools into socio-economic quartiles based on Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement [21]. Recruitment order within each quartile was determined using a random number generator. The final sample included 11 schools, its size being defined by theoretical sampling [22]. The headteacher ( $n=11$ )

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