

An organic lesson for life – transforming food culture in schools

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Author's Background

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Summary

This presentation aims to discuss a successful partnership and approach which, in the absence of a government led drive, has nonetheless succeeded in increasing organic food procurement by the public sector. This initiative is the Food for Life Partnership; an attempt to transform food culture and improve public health and wellbeing through organic food and principles.

Background

Over half of meals are eaten outside of the home, at restaurants or cafes, or at work, schools and hospitals. It is a market which in some countries is very significant, but despite this, is relatively forgotten by the organic movement. A few countries however, have realised the potential.

Publically procured food in particular, is an ideal target for organic produce as it is a way to improve public health and wellbeing, and to normalise its consumption – something that can be hard to do when targeting individual consumers with deep-rooted shopping habits. Some governments, recognising the general benefits of organic, have therefore implemented fantastic organic procurement programmes. For example, Rome in Italy can be seen to be a school-lunch pioneer, with 69% of school meals now organic, whilst Denmark's government has recently met its goal of procuring 75% organic food, and aims for 95% in 2015. This compares with the United Kingdom, where there are no government aims for procuring organic food despite the fact that average spending is around £2 billion.

Change has been led by a partnership between four food focussed NGOs who have pioneered changes to meals in schools and other public canteens. This is the Food for Life Partnership which has not only revolutionised school meals, it has transformed food culture by reconnecting children and families with food and where it comes from. Working with over 4,600 UK schools and communities it has had measurable positive effects on children's wellbeing and education as well as on local economies.

Main chapter

The 'nutrition transition' is having a number of tangible impacts on the UK population's health and food culture. Obesity and diet related disease is an increasing burden - 30% of children leave school obese or overweight. Changing diets are matched by changing eating habits, less family meals, more 'food to go', an increasingly frayed connection to how and where our food is produced.

In this context and in the midst of the recession, despite growing organic markets in other European countries, the UK's organic market has languished as consumers trade down to cheaper alternatives. The challenge of communicating the numerous benefits of organic, as people look to understand the value of their food choices, has been heightened by a complete absence of government support for the role organic food has to play in a sustainable, resilient, prosperous and healthy food system.

In the face of these challenges a new strategy was needed – in 2007 The Soil Association successfully secured £16.5million from The Big Lottery Fund to lead the Food for Life Partnership (FFLP), working with partner NGOs Garden Organic, Focus on Food and the Health Education Trust, an initiative designed to transform food culture in schools across England.

Lesson 1: Work with an open mind, start where people are

Changes in food production and culture are leaving many children deprived of the basic skills and knowledge they need to source and cook a healthy diet – we are facing a generation who grow up not knowing where milk, eggs or bacon comes from, let alone how it is produced or why their choices are important to their health and the environment. Our intervention then had to work with this growing generation, those most keenly affected by the on-going nutrition transition and who'll shape the future of our food system. The key was to start with the basics, to gradually bring about a shift in understanding and skills that eventually equips them to make good food choices in the future.

Lesson 2: A whole school approach

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The programme works directly with schools to put food at the heart of children's learning and school day by providing the schools with the training and resources they need to harness the potential of food to deliver multiple benefits.

At the foundation of the FFLP is the whole school approach, grounded in the organic principle of ecology, it recognises that real and sustainable change can only come about if all pieces of the puzzle are joined up and important players in the school and the food chain – head teachers, farmers and caterers - are involved and empowered to lead change themselves. We work with these leaders to bring about change centred on four areas of development:

- Food leadership
- Food quality and provenance
- Food education
- Food culture and community involvement

An award scheme then provides a motivational framework for continuous improvement:

At BRONZE the focus is on getting fresh food served in the canteen by a well-trained school cook. Pupils have the opportunity visit a farm and take part in cooking and growing activities.

SILVER schools serve food that is healthy, ethical, and uses local and organic ingredients. The school has a cooking club, and pupils get to cook with and eat the produce grown in the school growing area. Parents and the wider community get involved in food education.

GOLD schools are hubs of good food culture in their community, actively involving parents and community groups in cooking and growing activity. School meals use lots of local ingredients and are animal and climate friendly, using 15% organic and 5% free range ingredients.

Lesson 3: Make it count

Early on it was clear that the whole school approach was a winning formula for transforming food culture, and we could see the impact on the ground. Our experience was backed up by independent evaluation that showed it was:

Good for improving education: More than twice as many FFLP primary schools received an Ofsted rating of outstanding following their participation.

Good for children's health: It increased pupils' and families' consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Good for local enterprise and sustainability: Over £3 in social, economic and environmental value was created for every £1 spent on Food for Life menus, mostly in the form of new jobs in the local economy.

Our ability to demonstrate these multiple benefits has been key to the programme being recognised and rolled out. Public health and local authority leaders were able to see for themselves the potential of rolling out the approach in their areas – we have now achieved 10 commissioned projects across England and successfully extended the model through government funding into Scotland.

Lesson 4: Scale up

We are on the brink of the large scale change we set out to achieve some 6 years ago. The movement for change, created through partnership, and the success of our approach has been recognised in the government's commitment to support the continued improvement of school food in the recently published 'School Food Plan.' The plan recognises the importance of the 'whole school approach' pioneered by the Food for Life Partnership and goes as far as to make school Ofsted inspections include an assessment of the lunchtime experience.

In parallel, the Food for Life Catering Mark, which started out changing school meals, is now driving a revolution in the service of food around the country, rewarding the continuous improvement of meals served in hospitals, workplaces, nurseries, visitor attractions and more besides. The Catering Mark has three tiers of standards, Bronze, Silver and Gold, with over a third of meals meeting the Silver and Gold level requiring the use of 5% and 15% organic in meals. The Mark is proving a key factor in opening up opportunities for organic producers: the number of meals served under the scheme increased by 40% in 2012 to 140 million meals a year and continues to see growth in 2013 - organic catering and restaurant sales rose by 1.6% in 2012, despite a general tendency to eat out less in tough economic times.

Core messages and conclusions

The Soil Association was founded in 1946 to create a body of informed public opinion that understands the link between soil, food and health. This mission is increasingly relevant as we are forced to go 'back to basics' to support people on a journey of improving their relationship with and understanding of food. The key to the success of the Food for Life Partnership has been fourfold: starting where people are, working in partnership, transferring leadership, and most importantly taking a 'whole setting' approach. In combination our intervention has the power of transforming food culture and in the process achieving greater acceptance and understanding of, and demand for, organic food and farming.