



As caterers struggle to implement the Government's new nutritional standards for school meals with the funds available, can the UK look to Finland for answers? *Tom Bill* investigates

Lure of a Finnish model

The Viikki school in the eastern suburb of Finnish capital Helsinki employs four full-time and one part-time caterer to feed 1,000 children and staff every day. This is less than half the level in an equivalent UK school. How? First, it has a highly automated kitchen. Second, there's no choice: the children, aged five to 16, must eat the free lunch at school. Packed lunches and junk food are banned.

So could the technology and the single-menu option transfer to the UK? The latter remains highly debatable. But could half of Britain's 77,000 school

The state-of-the-art Viikki kitchen cost £140,000 – about double the price of UK standard equipment, but is fitted within a 1,155sq ft space, at least half the size of an equivalent UK kitchen

caterers be made redundant – and half of the country's kitchen space saved – by upgrading to the state-of-the-art equipment fitted at the Finnish school?

In a post-Jamie Oliver UK, where average meal uptake is down by 12% and the Government's £220m pledge to fix the problem has been dismissed as inadequate, the question has added relevance.

The Viikki kitchen, installed in 2003 by Finnish manufacturer Metos, cost £140,000 – about double the price of UK standard equipment. The kit includes three computerised combi-

ovens, two computerised tilting, mixing and boiling kettles and a rack dishwasher with electric conveyor belt feed. This is all fitted within a 1,155sq ft space, including the dishwasher and storage areas, which is at least half the size of an equivalent UK kitchen. The staff, who work a seven-and-a-half-hour day, prepare menus from fresh ingredients that include lactose-free, gluten-free, pork-free and milk-free dishes on an eight-week cycle.

Gareth Newton, commercial director of BGL Rieber, the only UK supplier of Metos equipment, says the kit is financially viable at meal levels of 400 and above. "It produces higher volumes more efficiently, the kitchen footprint is smaller, it's more energy-efficient, user-friendly and is a much better use of staff and skills." Newton claims reduced labour costs would cover the extra initial outlay within 12 months.

He's backed by Richard Wedgbury, chairman of the Foodservice Consultants Society International. "By adopting the Finnish approach there's a proven way to provide the balanced meal we all want with the valuable prize of very large operational cost savings."

According to Wedgbury's calculations, the Finnish model produces 30 meals per worker hour, compared with a norm ▶



◀ of 10 in the UK. It's not only three times more cost-effective but, at a UK school of an equivalent size, would save £88,000 a year in labour costs (see pie chart, page 60).

Changing the kit could be as beneficial as changing the UK "choice" culture, according to food service consultant Philip Houldsworth.

"Choice is an overrated concept," he says. "It can lead to overproduction and waste." He also warns it will be impossible to ensure children meet the Government's new nutritional targets if they pick and choose from ever-changing menus.

Colin Garnham-Edge, group local education authority contracts director at Sodexo, agrees. "Single choice is fantastic. There can be an initial fall in uptake but if the caterer remains in close consultation with parents it will work," he says.

And limiting choice completely by banning packed lunches, as in Finland? Garnham-Edge is also in favour but warns: "It can't be done. After years of underinvestment, kitchens and dining rooms are not big enough to meet a 100%

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demand." He also doubts that head teachers would be willing to rearrange the school day to accommodate more sittings.

Simon James, managing director of Initial Catering, foresees similar problems and blames ever-shortening lunch hours for pushing more children down the snack route. "Enforced school meals would be great given the evidence on obesity and health, but the simple question is, who will fund it?" he says.

Garnham-Edge says the problem in the UK is partly down to a lack of political will from central government. He also blames cultural trends for triggering poor eating habits. "They are much more family-orientated in Finland and sit down for meals together. Here, kids are open to more American influences and eating habits have

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suffered as parents no longer have the time to cook for their kids in the evening," he adds.

In Finnish schools, children eat lunch with their teachers from an early age. It encourages discipline in the dining hall and instills the idea that lunch plays a significant role in the school day as lessons. It's the cornerstone of the Finnish "whole school approach" that is heralded as the way forward in the UK.

But Houldsworth doubts it would work here. "The National Union of Teachers would put a pretty quick stop to that," he says. Garnham-Edge says it happens in some UK schools to positive effect. "Where teachers sit with kids the service is much better and it even knocks on to uptake."

Some doubt that making school meals free would have any impact in the UK. The Local Authority Caterers Association (LACA) called for free lunches for several years but quietly shelved the idea when the debate moved on to one of funding following Jamie Oliver's TV series.

Calls have further receded after Hull council decided to scrap its free service last month after a two-year trial. The plan, which raised uptake from 36% to 64%, was abandoned after the newly-elected Liberal Democrat council said the £3m annual price tag was unaffordable. Houldsworth says: "It says a lot when they're giving the food away and can only get 64% of kids to eat it."

LACA chairman Kevin McKay believes some degree of subsidy ▶

SCHOOL MEALS: FINLAND v ENGLAND & WALES

| | Finland | England & Wales |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------------------------|
| School population aged 5-16 | 583,000 | 8 million |
| Catering staff | 2,900 | 77,000 |
| Ratio of staff to children | 201:1 | 104:1 |
| Free meal | 100% | 16% entitled (75% uptake) |
| Menu choice | No | Yes |
| Packed lunches | No | 50% |
| Uptake | 100% | 41% (9% go home/out) |

◀ is the answer and warns that meals can become devalued if they're made free too readily.

But he stops short of drawing comparisons with Finland. "It's very difficult because their whole model is built on 100% uptake. They have found a system that works for them but we've got our own issues in the UK, such as improving uptake. We're coming at the problem from a different angle."

So what about installing labour-saving kitchens as a start? Garnham-Edge says caterers are wary of making such large investments in the current climate. "Who will guarantee future uptake to us? The way things are it would be a big risk," he points out.

McKay is slightly more upbeat. "Anything that presents itself as a good business case needs to be looked at," he says. "Private finance initiative schools find plenty of money, but I question whether the political will is there to invest in hi-tech kitchens over books, computers and teachers."

Food service consultant Julian Edwards also doubts whether enough schools are willing to think sufficiently long term. "There are lots of contracts out there that are not performing very cleverly," he admits. "A good dishwasher will let staff spend more time cooking and preparing fresh food, which is

Pupils at the Viikki school, aged five to 16, have no choice of menu for their free lunches. Packed lunches and junk food are banned

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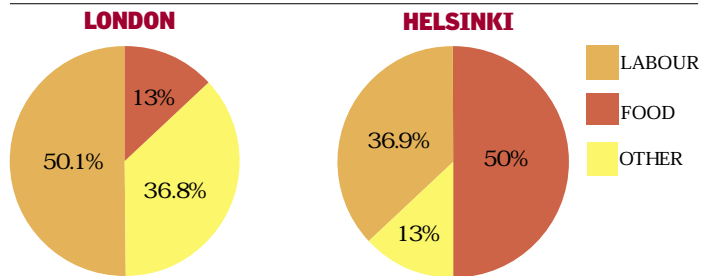
what the new nutritional guidelines emphasise."

Newton concedes there may be resistance to more automated kitchens. "There will always be a suspicion when new equipment and working methods are proposed, but we wouldn't envisage forced job losses," he says. "However, an ongoing aim to improve efficiency can lead to improvements in working environments, training and investment in people."

A spokesman for trade union Unison is predictably wary. "School caterers aren't paid a lot in the first place," he says. "What's important is that food is served to high nutritional standards and we would resist any attempt to automate the service further."

Labour costs are reduced further in Finland because, from primary school, children serve themselves and clear their own trays away. Food service consultant Tim Dunn, who visited the Viikki school in May, believes it represents a cultural difference that would be hard to replicate in the UK. He says: "The secret of the Finnish school meal success story lies largely with the pupils themselves. Willing to accept a single meal choice, able to safely serve themselves and sort their tableware for recycling, the children are the real stars of the show."

MODEL OF SCHOOL MEAL COSTS



Calculations are based on a school with 1,000 students and staff and 100% uptake. Wage and food cost differences are taken into account.

