

Procurement of catering as a tool for broader social policies in East Ayrshire (Scotland)

The county of East Ayrshire has been working on improving the sustainability of its school meals since 2004, making it perhaps the earliest sustainable school food service in the United Kingdom. The area has lower levels of employment, qualifications and average earnings than the Scottish average. This difficult outlook is coupled with lower life expectancy than the national average and rising levels of obesity in school children.



The local council views these problems as interlinked and is using a joined-up approach to overcome them. School catering was identified as a cross-cutting area where the council could intervene to create positive change.¹ East Ayrshire is responsible for 44 primary and nine secondary schools, providing approximately 1.3 million school meals each year.

The Council's Chief Executive Officer explained, "School Meals is about improving the environment and improving opportunities. We have a problem with population loss [...] so anything you can do in terms of contributing to the sustainability of the economy has a positive effect on our community and in terms of local produce that's also a contribution to the environment...we see school meals as being very cross-cutting."

Think big, start small

An initial pilot sourcing fresh, organic food for one primary school was carried out in 2004. Feedback was positive, so the pilot was extended to a further 10 primary schools. When the value of food required reached 12 schools the full EU procurement process was followed and this has been repeated on 3 occasions since. The reform was extended to 42 schools in 2008, following a successful trial period and a positive response from all stakeholders. The most recent food contracts were awarded in 2012 for 3 years with an option to extend for one year.

The Council engaged with the market through a series of open meetings explaining the broader policy aims and providing support and guidance on fulfilling the tender requirements. These meetings were a key step to encouraging small and medium-sized businesses to

¹Escaping the Local Trap: Insights on Re-localization from School Food Reform, Roberta Sonnino, Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning, Volume 12, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 23-40



apply, by demonstrating that they would be able to compete against larger suppliers as the criteria being used were much broader than price.

Breaking it down

In order to encourage smaller suppliers, the contract was broken down into a number of individual lots. These covered red meat, poultry, fish, fruit, vegetables, milk, cheese, eggs, and dry, bottled and canned foodstuffs.

Award criteria were divided equally between cost and quality considerations, which were further divided into four main criteria. Suppliers were rewarded for their ability to minimise the timescale between harvest and delivery, ensuring that freshness was encouraged. A criterion addressing quality and range of foodstuffs covered fair trade and seasonality of products as well as special dietary requirements. Social issues such as training opportunities for staff, membership of food associations and issues of equality were addressed in the third criterion, which looked at quality and range of foodstuffs. Finally, an analysis of use of resources rewarded proposals for broader reductions in environmental impacts through minimising waste and packaging, increasing recycling and composting, and higher than average animal welfare standards.

An impressive impact

Independent studies carried out by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency showed an impressive reduction in carbon emissions, with CO₂ savings from just one school measured at 37.7 tonnes per annum. The effect on the local economy was equally impressive, with an estimated social return of £6 (approximately €9) for every £1 spent in the form of employment, environmental, health and social benefits. Furthermore, the use of smaller product lists per individual supplier delivered higher quality, consistency and reliability. The East Ayrshire model has had a significant long-term impact, even influencing food policy at the national level in Scotland.

