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School meal spending: aces and dunces

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- [Felicity Lawrence](#), consumer affairs correspondent
- [Article history](#), Thursday March 24 2005

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This article appeared in [the Guardian](#) on Thursday March 24 2005 . It was last updated at 09:14 on March 24 2005.

Six-year-old Ben was struggling manfully with the circle of dried-out roast meat on his tray at Hawkedon primary school near Wokingham yesterday. He tried to cut it with his knife, but failed. Then he decided to pick it up whole and bite into it, but his small teeth made little impression and a couple of minutes later it dropped back on to the plastic tray before skidding on to the floor. He looked relieved and concentrated happily on his boiled carrots, ketchup and biscuit instead.

Kimberley, aged eight, was enjoying her meat more, but hesitated when asked what kind it was. "Umm, non-vegetarian meat, I think." Esme, who had already declared herself exceptional by liking her soggy cabbage, was clear though: "It's chicken."

"It's lamb", the dinner lady whispered to an intermediary, since she had been told not to talk to the press by her catering company, Initial Rentokil. On closer examination the meat appeared to be a mixture of chewy bits compacted with spongy bits that had spent some time in a factory mould.

But it wasn't all bad. There were plates of fresh fruit as well as the boiled vegetables, and the bread and butter pudding looked real, even if the gravy didn't. You could choose water instead of the flavoured, coloured squash drink - but none of the children did.

Hawkedon is a successful and energetic primary school served by Wokingham local education authority and its contracted caterer, Initial. When asked on March 16 by the Soil Association how much was spent on the ingredients of its school meals, Wokingham's education contracts department said just 27p, putting the authority at the bottom of a new league table of English primary schools drawn up to highlight the state of school meals. The number of children taking school meals in Wokingham schools, at just 33%, also puts the LEA near the bottom of the Soil Association league.

Both Initial and Wokingham now dispute the figure for the cost of food and say it is higher, somewhere between 40p and 50p, though they refused to tell the Guardian exactly how much. They would not tell the headteacher at Hawkedon, Alan Youd, either.

"I'm not sure what they spend," Mr Youd shrugged. "I thought it was about 32p. Initial says it's a lot more, but won't tell me how much, and Wokingham said, 'We can't tell you, we don't know; it's all in the contract'."

According to Mr Youd, the catering contract came up for renewal this year and was put out to tender, but no other companies were really interested. "It's been extended for a year. We're not really happy with it."

A spokesman for Initial said the company had been flooded with inquiries about its food since Jamie Oliver's television series. Asked what was in the lamb, the company said it was a well-known national brand purchased from supermarkets across the country.

Mr Youd has looked at opting out of the LEA contract altogether, but feels that he lacks the expertise to run the kitchen as well as the school. He also says the problems go much deeper than the standard of catering. He estimates that about a third of his pupils never eat at a table at home, and some children of all ages still struggle with knives and forks at school.

But the Jamie Oliver effect is already being felt. "They are changing the menus," Mr Youd said. He has been told that the new ones will contain more homemade food, though a look at what will be on offer reveals pork sausage plaits and chicken hot dogs.

At the other end of the spending league are London's affluent boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea and Wandsworth. Wandsworth told the Soil Association it allocated 70p to ingredients for school meals. (The Isles of Scilly spend 90p per head, but exceptional transport costs distort that figure.)

Wandsworth has used Harrison Catering for its meals since last year, having ended a contract with the catering giant Scolarest 18 months early. "We decided by mutual agreement that it was not working, either on standards or service, a spokesman for Wandsworth LEA said. "There was too much processed food and too high a staff turnover."

Harrison Catering also provides school meals for Lambeth,

Southwark and Ealing, though the amount allocated to ingredients is lower, at 54p in Lambeth for example. The amount charged to pupils differs widely too.

In Wandsworth they pay £1.85 for a meal in which the food has cost 70p; in Lambeth they pay £1.35 for a meal worth 54p.

Harrison's managing director, Geoffrey Harrison, said: "There may be small local differences, but we don't make a lot more money out of one borough or another. Our overall menu is light on processed foods and the vast majority is cooked on site." Just over 50% of pupils in Wandsworth take the school meals on offer.

The cost per head of school meals per local education authority

Primary school meal league table

The cost per head of ingredients, the price charged and the average percentage of children eating school meals

LEA	Cost per head (p)	Price charged	average % eating
Rotherham	37	£1.50	43
Redcarr & Cleveland	38	£1.45	55
Greenwich	38	£1.40	54
Birmingham	39	£1.50	50
Stockton-on-Tees	39	£1.35	69
Hertfordshire	40	£1.46	47
Bath & NE Somerset	40	£1.50	42
Blackpool	40	£1.40	52
Rochdale	40	£1.45	55
City of London	40	£1.60	80
Wakefield	40	£1.20	C
Wokingham	41A	£1.32	33
Wolverhampton	41	£1.35	44
Shropshire	41	£1.55	45
Kirklees	41	£1.40	53
Luton	41	£1.35	62
Hampshire	42	£1.50	37
Trafford	42	£1.45	39
Coventry	42	£1.45	39
Lancashire	42	£1.50	45
Hounslow	42	£1.50	49

West Berkshire	43	£1.50	35
Portsmouth	43	£1.35	43
Waltham Forest	43	£1.40	61
York	44	£1.52	35
North Yorkshire	44	£1.42	43
East Riding of Yorkshire	44	£1.45	47
Telford & Wekin	44	£1.50	48
Barking and Dagenham	44	£1.40	60
Newcastle upon Tyne	44	£1.45	61
South Gloucestershire	44	£1.35	48
Bromley	45	£1.35	38
Southampton	45	£1.45	40
Sheffield	45	£1.45	41
City of Plymouth	45	£1.45	43
Bolton	45	£1.50	50
Tameside	45	£1.40	54
City of Nottingham	45	£1.40	58
South Tyneside	45	£1.55	60
Halton	45	£1.60	60
Westminster	45	£1.45	63
Camden	45	£1.45	C
Bradford	46	£1.15	56
Salford	46	£1.45	62
Middlesborough	46	£1.50	66
Richmond upon Thames	47	£1.65	30
Windsor & Maidenhead	47	£1.38	36
Medway	47	£1.40	36
Sandwell	47	£1.30	42
Stockport	47	£1.35	45
Lewisham	47	£1.10	48
Northumberland	47	£1.55	63
Islington	47	£1.30	60
Cornwall	47	£1.55	D
Bedfordshire	47	D	D
Brighton & Hove	47	£1.35	38
Slough	48	£1.40	34
Croydon	48	£1.45	39
Havering	48	£1.60	48

Solihull	48	£1.55	49
Wigan	48	£1.55	50
City of Derby	48	£1.35	51
Kingston upon Hull	48	free	60
Hartlepool	48	£1.40	66
Newham	48	£1.40	67
Oxfordshire	50	£1.55	26
Leicester City	50	£1.46	45
Bury	50	£1.50	53
Nottinghamshire	51	£1.65	45
Walsall	51	£1.50	50
Norfolk	52	£1.75	38
Dudley	52	£1.45	42
Cheshire	53	£1.60	55
Ealing	54	£1.65	40
Lambeth	54	£1.35	66
Gloucestershire	55	£1.65	36
Thurrock	55	£1.35	45
Staffordshire	58	£1.55	45
Leeds	59	£1.45	42
Isle of Wight	60	£1.55	39
Durham	45	£1.35	C
Kensington and Chelsea	65	£1.85	79
Wandsworth	70	£1.85	51
Isles of Scilly	90	£1.75	78
Enfield	D	£1.60	D
Sefton Met Borough Council	D	£1.30	D
Oldham	D	£1.40	D
Cambridgeshire	D	£1.55	D
Leicestershire	B	£1.60	31
Bexley	B	£1.60	31
Merton	B	£1.40	32
Surrey	B	£1.45	32
Sutton	B	£1.60	45
Sunderland	B	£1.30	50
Reading	B	£1.30	50

Barnet	B	£1.70	50
Derbyshire	B	£1.40	51
Calderdale	B	C	52
Cumbria	B	C	52
North Lincolnshire	B	£1.50	53
Stoke-on-Trent	B	£1.60	55
North Somerset	B	1.34	58
Doncaster	B	£1.40	B
St Helen's	B	£1.60	B
Manchester	B	B	B
Barnsley	B	£1.30	C
Liverpool City Council	B	£1.50	C
Warrington	B	£1.65	C
North Tyneside	B	£1.50	60
Suffolk	D	D	D
Hammersmith and Fulham	D	D	D
Haringey	D	D	D
Tower Hamlets	D	D	D
Gateshead	D	D	D
Wirral Met Bor Council	D	D	D
Kent	D	D	D
City of Bristol	D	D	D
Wiltshire	D	D	D
Warwickshire	D	D	D
Devon	D	£1.35	D
Bracknell Forest	C	£1.30	30
Rutland	C	£1.45	39
Knowsley Council	C	£1.35	60
Redbridge	C	£1.40	77
Blackburn with Darwen	C	£1.60	C
Darlington	C	C	C
Food for Life Primary Schools			
All Saints, Ilkely	70p	£1.60	79
Chacellor Park, Essex	55p	£1.70	55

Lethbridge, Wiltshire	70p	£2.00	75
Mornington, Notts	85p	£1.59	65
Southdown Infants, Bath	75P	£1.50	80
St Peters School, Notts	70p	£1.75	83
Thomas Fair Child, Hackney	67p	£1.60	90

LEAs with no area wide organised hot meal provision in Primary Schools

City of Peterborough, Southwark, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Essex, Southend-on-Sea, Brent, Hackney, Harrow, Hillingdon, Kingston upon Thames, Buckinghamshire, East Sussex, Milton Keynes, Dorset, Poole & Bournemouth, Somerset, Swindon, Worcestershire, Herefordshire, North East Lincolnshire, West Sussex

NOTES

- A** This figure is disputed. The Soil Association was given a figure of 27p by Wokingham Council who now say this is wrong and it is over 40p. The Council has declined to give an exact amount.
B LEA knew the figures but refused to share the information.
C LEA was unable to supply a figure.
D LEA did not respond.

Figures collected by the Soil Association who contacted 143 LEAs between March 7 and March 22. In some cases LEAs found it hard to provide figures, particularly on food costs. Some said the information was commercially confidential and declined to give it. In some cases schools within the LEA thought the figures given too generous. In others changes were already being made to respond to public concern. The Soil Association would be happy to hear from cooks, catering managers and teachers who think these figures aren't right email schoolmeals@soilassociation.org

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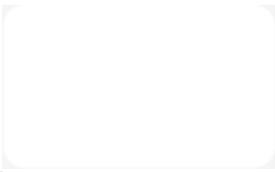
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