School Catering
Parents and Schools Management
Research 2009

Lancashire County Commercial Services

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1 Executive Summary

This research was carried out to measure the performance of the school catering service and to help develop the service, with the ultimate aim of increasing take-up of school meals.

The first piece of research went out to parents of children at primary schools that had the lowest uptake of school meals across the county. Two sets of paper questionnaires were sent out to 44 schools, one for the parents of children who take school lunches, and one for the parents of children who do not. Eleven thousand questionnaires were sent out and 1590 were returned, a response rate of 14%. The second piece of research was an online survey of school management, and 70 questionnaires were completed.

1.1 Key findings

1.1.1 Parents survey

- The majority of parents of children who take school lunches are satisfied with the service (86%), and two in five think that the lunch service has got better over the last year (39%).

- The quality and healthiness of the food are considered the most important factors for school lunches for both school meals users (79% and 75% respectively) and non-users (69% and 65% respectively). Four in ten parents whose children do not take school lunches say that the price of meals is an important factor (42%).

- School meals users are generally most satisfied with the healthiness of the food (83% satisfied) and the service from catering staff (76% satisfied). There is lower satisfaction with the choice available and the information they receive on the service.

- School meals users are generally satisfied with the school lunch menu (81%), though only 27% describe themselves as very satisfied.

- The people who have the main influence over whether a child has a school lunch are parents and the child themselves. The parent's preference holds more weight among users of the service, and the child's has more weight among non-users. Seven in ten service users would recommend the lunch service to other parents (72%).

- Two-thirds of children who currently don't have lunches, have had them in the past (on average around 10 months ago). The top reasons for not taking a school lunch were because the child prefers a packed lunch (44%) and for parents to know what they are eating (41%). A third of parents also say that they are too expensive (36%).

- The strongest encouragement for parents to use the school lunch service was to make them more affordable by lowering prices (47%) or offering a price reduction if more than one child in a family has a meal (25%).

- Both sets of parents put their children's preferences for a protein meal in the same order, with white meat (eg chicken) the most preferred, followed by cheese (eg pizza).

- Pasta dishes (eg lasagne) are the preferred carbohydrate dishes for both sets of children, followed by potato dishes (eg shepherds pie).

- Half of parents whose children have school lunches say that their lunch is never their main meal of the day, though two in five BME children have their school lunch as the main meal on most weekdays.

- Among children who have school lunches, five in six parents rated their child's lunch as at least fairly healthy (84%). The vast majority of parents think their children's overall diet is healthy (87% users, 88% non-users very or fairly healthy).

1.1.2 School management survey

- Five in six respondents are satisfied with the schools catering service overall (58), and the majority of respondents are at least fairly satisfied with each aspect of the service. Though they were least satisfied with the size of portions.

- Respondents generally agreed that school lunches were healthier than packed lunches, and most thought that the food on offer had got better over the last year.

- On the whole respondents felt that LCCS keeps them informed about what it's doing (52 agree) and that it delivers quality services (49 agree). There is less agreement that LCCS provides value for money, as almost a third disagree (22).

- Respondents were satisfied with the overall standard of service (59 satisfied). Satisfaction with the friendliness of staff towards the school and towards the children is rated very high (64 and 58 satisfied respectively).

- Schools are most satisfied with their relationship with catering staff (63 satisfied), but are less satisfied with their support from LCCS (15 very satisfied) and the ease of contacting LCCS (17 very satisfied). The most preferred interval for the school catering manager to review the school lunch service at schools was at least once a term (31).

1.2 Recommendations

1.2.1 Parents survey

- Look at ways of reducing the cost of lunches for parents, particularly for the ethnic and fresher plus menus, to increase take-up of school meals. And trial the scheme for a price reduction when more than one child in a family has a lunch to see if this has an impact on take-up.

- Improve the frequency and content of communications about school lunches sent to parents who have school lunches – highlighting the quality, healthiness and value of the food.

- Consider allowing more children to choose their meals in advance to improve perceptions of the choice available among service users, and to encourage non-users back by allowing parents to know what their child is eating.

- Work with schools to look at ways they can encourage children to use the school lunch service. For example, provide them with materials or schemes they can use to promote the service, and to utilise the recommendations of other parents at the school in the promotion.

- Investigate further into the reasons why parents were less satisfied with many aspects of the school lunch service when their child attended a larger school, or the school had a conventional kitchen.

- Consider the schools' menus to ensure they are varied, healthy and reflect the children's preferred meals outlined in the report. Looking at the content of menus is especially important where schools have a high proportion of BME pupils (and therefore meals need to meet their special dietary needs and be balanced enough to be the main meal of the day) or, have conventional kitchens. This could mean re-assessing with schools the type of menus they use (eg ethnic menu) to ensure they have the most appropriate menu for their school.

1.2.2 School management survey

- Consider how to communicate better with schools (eg promoting if meals are produced locally), how to make it easier to contact LCCS, and how better support for schools can be provided.

- Consider introducing the following schemes in schools: discounted meals, a sandwich option for summer menus, and a crockery service. Although careful consideration needs to be given to how schemes will be administered because schools need it to be simple and effective.

- Look at ways of reducing the cost of meals, making staff hours more consistent, increasing portion sizes, and allowing catering staff more flexibility with the menus so they can fully utilise their local knowledge and skills.

2 Background

Lancashire County Commercial Group (LCCG) employs over 3,500 frontline personnel who undertake catering, cleaning and school crossing services to customers across Lancashire.

Every day they serve over 50,000 meals, clean 400 buildings and cross thousands of children safely on their way to school. The service relies on goodwill, public confidence and maintaining good relationships with all its customers to create long-term partnerships. It believes the key to success rests with its front-line employees, who are the best ambassadors to promote services.

LCCS provides services to schools, training centres, staff catering facilities, county councillors and the public in one of the largest authorities in the country. As such it is able to run a very cost-effective service, which, it believes, provides excellent value for money, quality food, a choice to suit all tastes and a service that strives to achieve 100% customer satisfaction. All catering contracts are managed directly for the school and this means that LCCS is able to provide a service tailored to the needs of individual schools.

Knowing how children's tastes change as they move from primary to secondary school is a key consideration for LCCS. In primary schools the menu is based around serving a balanced lunch containing all the key nutrients - lunches that children want to eat and parents want to pay for. With students in high schools becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their tastes, the accent is on choice with a wide range of meal options being available from different outlets.

3 Introduction

LCCS is looking to assess its current performance on delivering school meals and to gain an understanding of the service improvements required. This research covers both the views of parents of primary school pupils and also primary and secondary school management.

The research is being carried out to help develop the service, with the ultimate aim of increasing take-up of school meals.

4 Research objectives

The research objectives were to:

- measure satisfaction levels of parents whose children use the service;
- examine barriers to take-up of the service; and
- assess development opportunities for the service from the parents of children who have and don't have school meals.
- measure the satisfaction of school management with the service; and
- capture potential service improvements to the school catering service from school management.

5 Methodology

A sample of 44 primary schools were selected from the 100 primary schools in Lancashire with the lowest uptake of school meals. They were selected using a stratified method to ensure a proportionate spread from different sized schools and type of kitchen.

The sampled schools were sent two sets of paper questionnaires, one for the parents of children who take school lunches, and one for the parents of children who do not. The numbers sent to each school depended on the proportion of pupils taking a school lunch. Each school was sent enough questionnaires to cover all pupils. The questionnaires were distributed to children via the schools, and parents returned then through a freepost address directly to the county council's research department. Eleven thousand questionnaires were sent out and 1590 were returned, a response rate of 14%.

For the management survey, an online questionnaire was sent to members of school management in all Lancashire primary and secondary schools that use the school lunch service on 4 March 2009. A total of 70 questionnaires were completed.

6 Limitations

The low response rate is a limitation of both surveys. The fact that some schools gave a very low or zero response means there could have been a problem with the distribution of questionnaires to the schools. The reliance of children to take the questionnaires home to their parents will also have contributed to the lower response rate, since many are likely to have got lost on the way home.

The parents' survey is also not comparable to the 2006 survey because the methodology has changed. The previous survey went to a sample of all schools, while current survey was undertaken in schools with the lowest take-up of school meals.

7 Main Research Findings – Parents Survey

7.1 Satisfaction with the school lunch service

The first question on the questionnaire asked both the parents of children who both use and do not use the schools meal service how satisfied they are with it.

The majority of parents of children who have school lunches are satisfied with the service (86%), with only 6% dissatisfied. As might be expected a large proportion of those whose children do not have a school lunch do not express an opinion on the school lunch service (40% saying it doesn't apply/don't know).

Chart 1 -   How satisfied are you with the school lunch service overall?

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	It does not apply/don't know
Non-user	9%	23%	18%	7%	4%	40%
User	33%	53%	8%	4%		2%
Total	18%	34%	14%	6%	3%	25%

- ■ Very satisfied
- □ Fairly satisfied
- □ Neither
- □ Fairly dissatisfied
- ■ Very dissatisfied
- ■ It does not apply/don't know
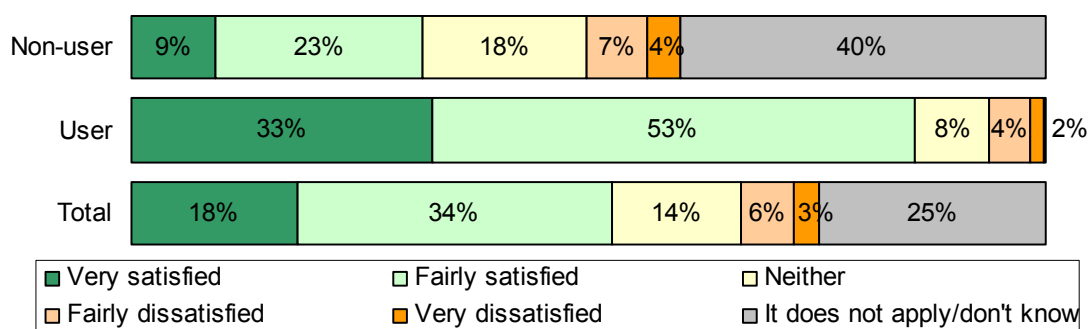
Base: All respondents (non-user 947, user 588, total 1535)

Looking at the satisfaction rate by different factors influencing the service there are only differences in perceptions among service users. The smallest schools (less than 250 pupils) received significantly higher satisfaction scores than in larger schools (37% versus 28% very satisfied). It is parents of older children (8 years and over) who are less likely to be satisfied with the overall service (29% very satisfied) compared to those with younger children (37% very satisfied). There are also differences by kitchen type. Lower satisfaction exists in schools with conventional kitchens (20% very satisfied) than those with modular kitchens or cook servery (39% and 36% very satisfied respectively).

Users of the school lunch service were asked how satisfied they were with different aspects of the service. Parents are most satisfied with the healthiness of the food (83% satisfied), the service from the catering staff (76% satisfied, 45% very satisfied), and the quality of the food (76% satisfied). Parents were less satisfied with the choice available (68% satisfied) and the information on the service they receive (63% satisfied).

Chart 2 - How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of the school lunch service?

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Doesn't apply/don't know
The healthiness of the food	33%	50%	11%	4%		
The service from the catering staff	45%	31%	10%			10%
The quality of food	30%	46%	12%	6%		5%
The price of meals	25%	48%	12%	6%		8%
The choice available	29%	39%	15%	9%	6%	
The information you receive on the service	27%	36%	21%	9%	4%	
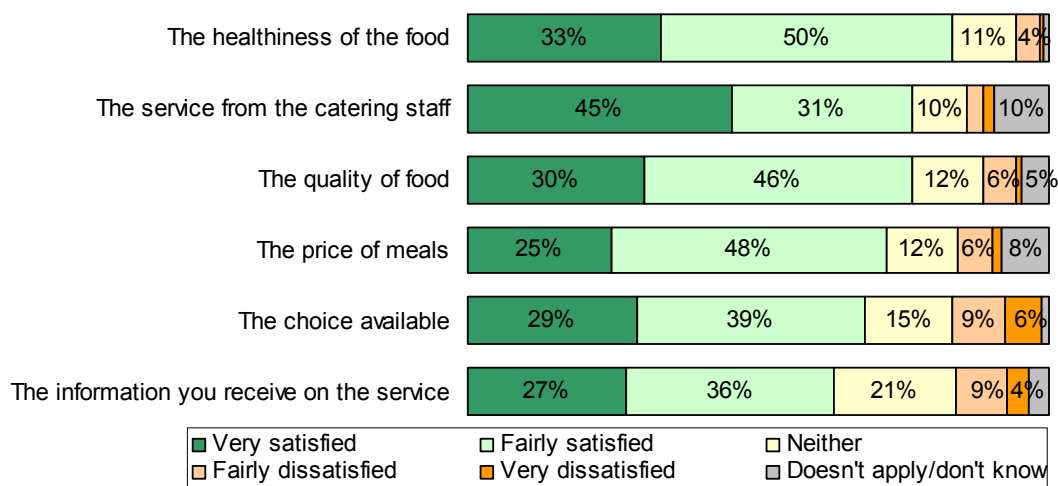
Base: All respondents using the service (581)

There are differences in parents' perceptions of the elements of the school lunch service. The most consistent differences are between the different types of kitchen at the school and in the size of the school.

Children attending larger schools (with more than 250 pupils) also tended to be less satisfied with many of the service aspects (55% satisfied with information they receive on the service, 69% satisfied with quality of food, 74% satisfied with service from the catering staff, 78% satisfied with healthiness of food).

Schools with conventional kitchens are more likely to have lower levels of satisfaction with the majority of service aspects (24% dissatisfied with the choice available, 21% dissatisfied with the information on the service, 13% dissatisfied with quality of food, and 10% dissatisfied with the service from the catering staff).

Parents of older children are more likely to be dissatisfied with the food, both in terms of choice and quality (20% and 10% dissatisfied respectively). And parents of children from a BME background are also more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of food (15% dissatisfied) and the price of school meals (16% dissatisfied).

Parents whose children have a school lunch generally think that the school lunch service has got better over the last year (39%) or stayed the same (38%), few think it has got worse (6%). Parents whose children have packed lunches are more likely to not give an opinion on the school lunch service (50%), though three times as many feel it has got better as got worse.

Chart 3 - Overall do you think the school lunch service has got better or worse over the last 12 months?

	Got better	Stayed the same	Got worse	Don't know
Non-user	18%	26%	6%	50%
User	39%	38%	6%	17%
Total	26%	31%	6%	37%

Legend: ■ Got better □ Stayed the same ■ Got worse □ Don't know
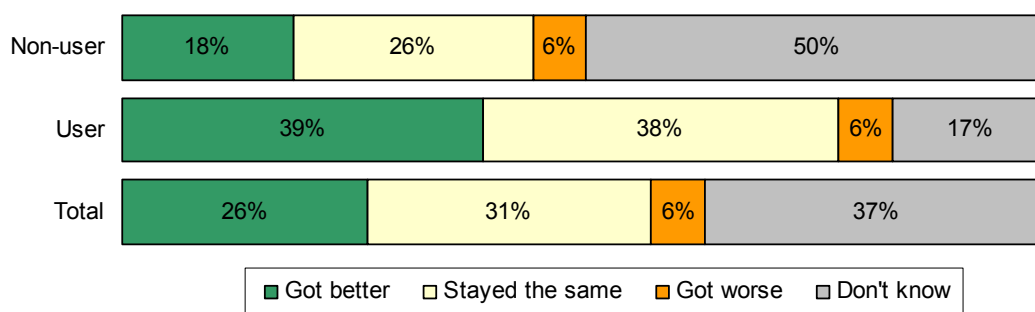
Base: All respondents (non-user 942, user 595, total 1537)

The only difference that is consistent among all parents is that larger schools are less likely to have improved the school lunch service in the last year (14% got better among non-users, 32% got better among users). Parents whose children use the service also think the service is less likely to have improved when the school's kitchen is conventional (26% got better).

Both questionnaires asked parents what they thought were the most important aspects of the school lunch service. The quality and healthiness of the food are considered the most important factors for school lunches for both school meals users (79% and 75% respectively) and non users (69% and 65% respectively). The choice available each day is also important for both (50% users, 47% non-users). The price of meals is the only factor that is more important for parents of children with packed lunches (42% against 23%), and is more important for non-users than it was in 2006 (31%). Highlighting the value of school meals to parents of children who don't use the service should be important.

Chart 4 - **Which of the following do you consider to be most important for the school lunch service?**
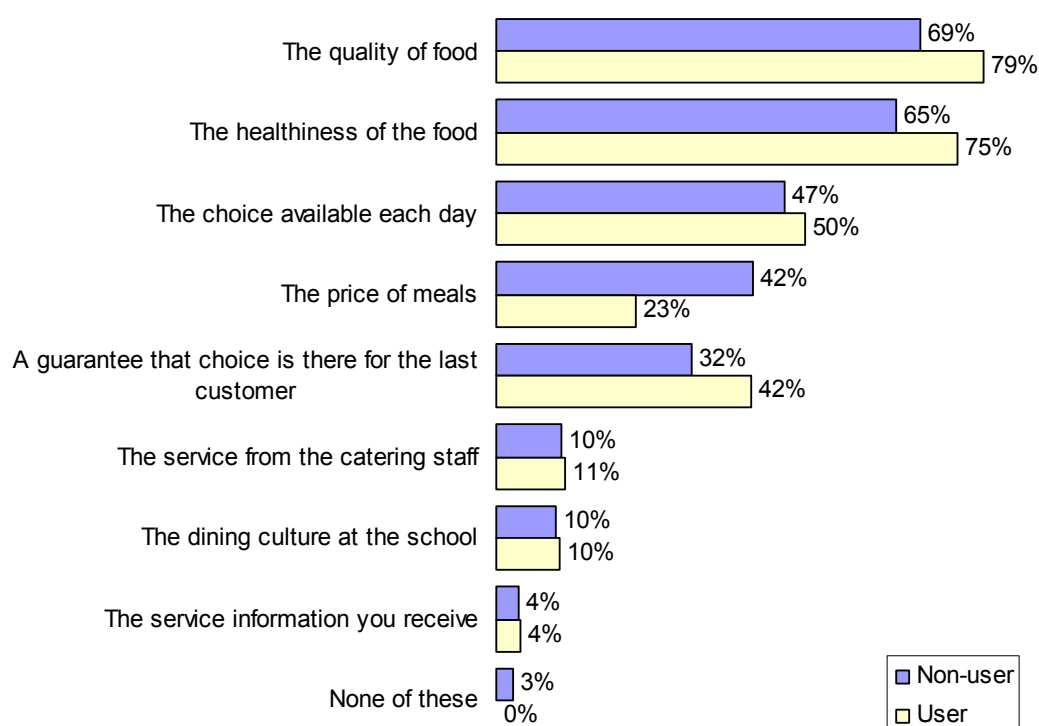
Base: All respondents (non-user 944, user 598)

Parents' priorities were similar among service users, the only difference occurring was that a guarantee that choice is there for the last customer is more important among older children (52%).

Among parents who don't use the service there were more significant differences in priorities. The guarantee that choice is available for the last customer was more important when parents have children in small schools (36%) and when their children are white (34%). The quality of food is more important for parents of white children (70%). However the need for food to meet special dietary requirements (eg Halal) was more important among BME respondents (5%)[1].

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[1] Please note this was not listed as an option in the question, but were written comments from parents. Had it been an option in the list the proportion of respondents saying it may have been higher.

7.2   Service usage

Both users and non-users of the school lunch service were asked who the main influences were over the decision of whether to have school lunches. The main influences were the parent themselves (71% and 59% respectively) and their child (60% and 64% respectively). For users of the service it is the parents' decision that holds more weight, and for non-users it is the child's. The child's friends also have influence over the decision of having school meals (19% user, 21% non-user).

Chart 5 -   Who would you say are the main influences in your child/ren using the school lunch service?
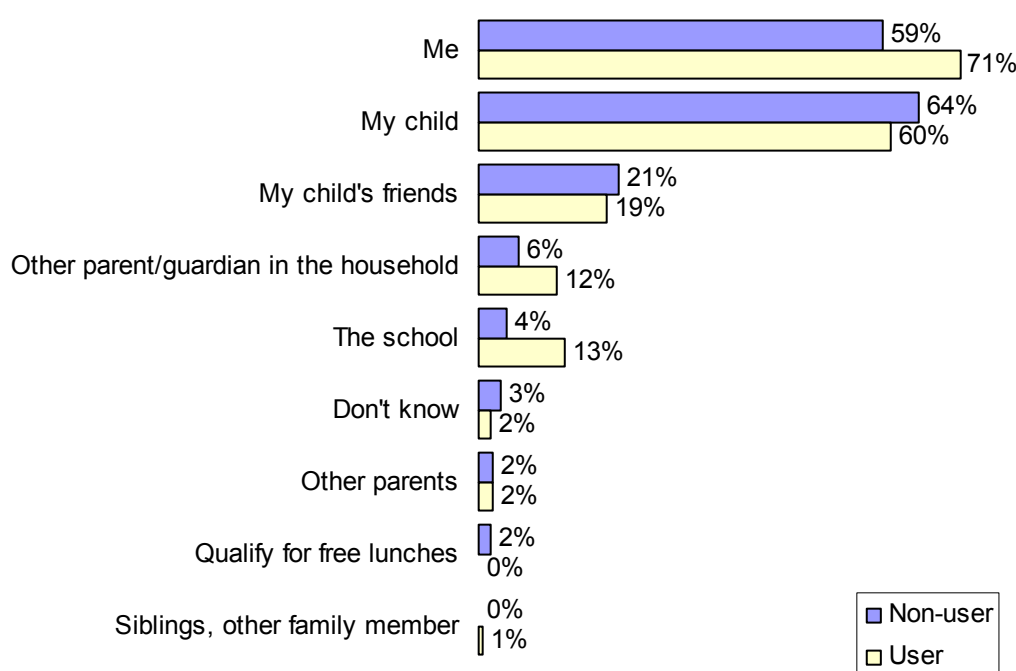
Base: All respondents (non-users 964, users 599)

For all parents the choice over if their child has a school lunch changes as the child gets older, when they are younger the decision is more likely to rest with the parent and as they get older the child has more influence. Specifically among non-users of the service, there are differences in the main influences by ethnicity. It is white children who are more likely to have an influence themselves (66%), and among BME respondents it is their child's friends who are more likely to have an influence (28%). Also among non-users the child had more influence when the school has a cook servery kitchen (73%).

7.2.1 Service usage among current users

Children who currently use the school lunch service have a school meal regularly. The mean number of days each week children use the school lunch service is 4.8 days of the week. There are no differences between different groups of users and the number of days they have school lunches.

These parents were then asked if they would recommend the school lunch service to other parents. Most would recommend the service to other parents (72%), although one in five didn't know (19%). Few people wouldn't recommend the service (8%).

Chart 6 -   If someone asked you, would you recommend the school lunch service to other parents?

Yes	72%
No	8%
Don't know	19%
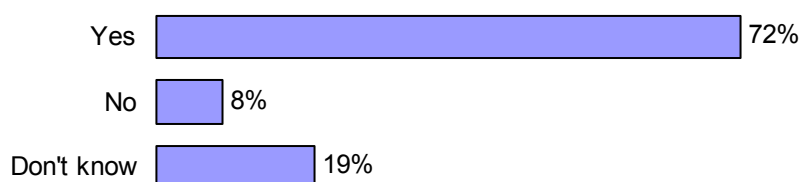
Base: All respondents using the school lunch service (595)

The number of parents willing to recommend the school lunch service to other parents' increases in relation to service satisfaction. More parents will also recommend the service when their child attends a smaller school (80%), when their child is younger (76%), when their child is white (75%) or has no disability (73%). The likeliness of recommending the service is lower amongst schools with conventional kitchens (61%).

7.2.2 Service usage among current non-users

Parents whose children currently don't have a school lunch were asked if their child has ever used the school lunch service. Most respondents said that their child has had a school lunch in the past (64%), only 36% saying they hadn't. It is smaller schools that are more likely to have had children having a school lunch in the past (71%). It is also older children (68%) and those who are white (65%) who are also more likely to have had a school meal in the past.

The mean number of months, among children who have previously used the lunch service, since their child last had a school lunch was 10 months. The time since a child had a school meal is greater for children attending larger schools and those who are over 8 (11.75 and 11.2 months respectively).

The most commonly mentioned reasons parents gave for their children not using the school lunch service were that their child prefers a packed lunch (44%), that parents know what their child is eating if they provide it (41%), that they get a hot meal in the evening (36%), and that school meals are too expensive (36%).

Chart 7 - What are the main reasons why your child/ren doesn't use the school lunch service?

Reason	%
They prefer a packed lunch	44%
I know that they are eating it if I provide it	41%
They get a hot meal in the evening	36%
Too expensive	36%
Their friends take a packed lunch	27%
Not enough variety of food	13%
Quality of food is not good enough	12%
Would not eat school lunch, poor menu	9%
Portions too small	7%
Full menu available for all sittings	5%
None of these	3%
Food to meet special dietary needs	2%
Service is not fast enough	2%
School doesn't encourage school lunches	2%
Due to the time of year	2%

Base: All respondents not using the school lunch service (948)

Schools offering an ethnic and fresher plus menu were more likely to have parents say that meals are too expensive (66%), this also happened among BME children (48%). Children from a BME background were less likely to mention that they get a hot meal in the evening as a reason for not using school lunches (17%). The need for food to meet a special dietary requirement was mentioned more among parents of children with a disability (16%).

Encouraging service use for children who currently don't have them would be best achieved by making them more affordable for parents: through lowering prices (47%) or offering a price reduction if more than one child at the school has a meal (25%). A quarter of parents also thought that healthier food (26%), more food their child likes (26%), and more variety of food (25%) would encourage use of the school lunch service.

Chart 8 - What would encourage you the most to use the school lunch service for your child/ren?

Category	Percentage
Lower prices	47%
Healthier food	26%
More food child likes (whether it's healthy or not)	26%
Price reduction (more than 1 meal bought)	25%
More variety of food	25%
Nothing would encourage me	16%
More information on menus	15%
Use more local produce	13%
Larger portion sizes	12%
Reducing notice period (for switching)	11%
Less queueing	10%
More information available on nutritional content	7%
Fewer things on the menu	2%

Base: All respondents not using the school lunch service (886)

The factors that are more likely to encourage take-up of school lunches among BME children are lower prices (56%), healthier food (44%), and more variety of food (34%). Parents who have younger children are more likely to mention having a price reduction if more than one child at the school has a lunch (36%).

7.3 School lunch menu

School meals users are generally satisfied with the school lunch menu (81%), though only 27% describe themselves as very satisfied. About one in eight parents of children who do not use the service are dissatisfied with the menu (12%).

Chart 9 -   How satisfied are you with what is on the school lunch menu overall?

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Non-user	11%	36%	41%	10%	3%
User	27%	54%	13%	5%	1%
Total	17%	43%	30%	8%	2%
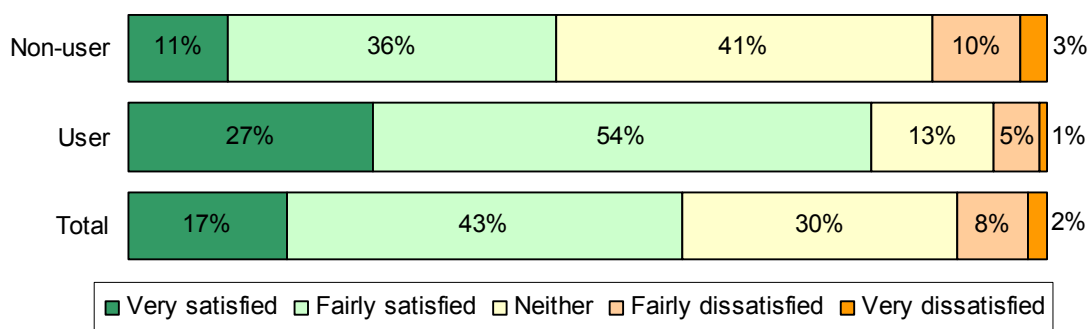
Base: All respondents (non-user 873, user 591, total 1464)

Perceptions of the lunch menu differ significantly depending on the school size with respondents from larger schools being less satisfied with the menu (16% dissatisfied for non-users, 21% very satisfied for users).

Specifically among service users, it is parents of children attending schools with conventional kitchens who are less satisfied with the school lunch menu (12% dissatisfied). The other groups who are less satisfied with the menu have children who are BME (15% dissatisfied), have a disability (13% dissatisfied), or 8 years or older (22% very satisfied).

7.3.1 Favourite foods

Parents were asked to select their children's favourite meals from a list. The first were sources of protein and the second were sources of carbohydrate, each with an example of the type of dish from the menu. For the five types they were asked to rank the preference from one to five (where one is the most favourite and five the least favourite). The mean responses are shown in the charts below.

Both users and non-users of the service ranked the protein sources in the same order - the most preferred sources being white meat, cheese fish, and red meat dishes. The least preferred were vegetarian options. Since both sets of parents agree on the preferences of their children, it is important to know whether the menus reflect these preferences.

Chart 10 - Generally speaking, what type of meal does your child enjoy eating the most?
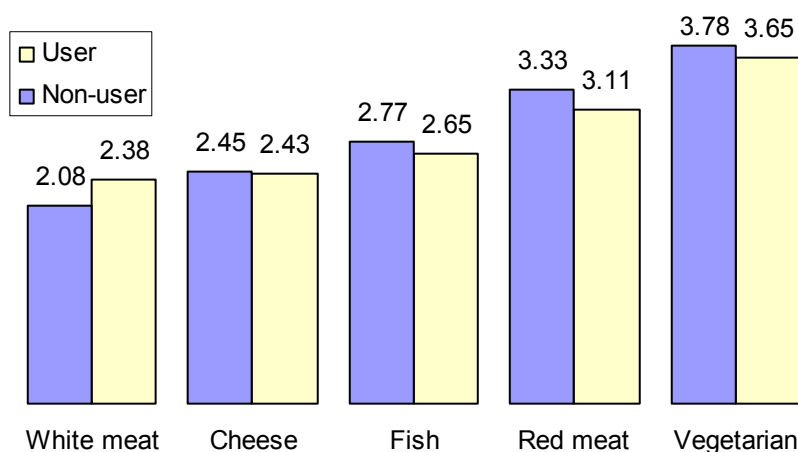
Base: All respondents (non-user , user)

The only differences in preferences centred around the ethnicity of the children for both users and non-users (the figures given below are combined for both sets of parents). Children from a BME background were less likely to prefer red meat (3.9) and white meat (2.6); whereas they are more likely to prefer cheese (2.0), fish (2.1) and vegetarian (3.3) dishes.

Pasta and potato dishes are the preferred carbohydrate dish for both sets of children. The least preferred dishes for children who have school lunches are rice dishes, whereas for those who have packed lunches surprisingly the least preferred are bread dishes. Again the preferred dish types need to be reflected in the school menu.

Chart 11 - And, generally speaking, what type of dish does your child most enjoy eating?
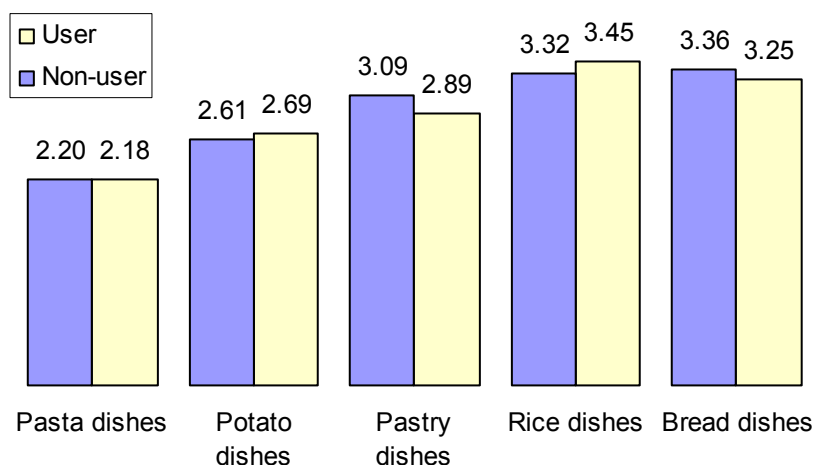
Base: All respondents (non-user , user)

There were no differences in children's preferences for the different types of carbohydrate dishes.

Half of parents whose children have school lunches say that their lunch is never their main meal of the day (50%). Similar proportions of parents say that the school lunch is their child's main meal on most weekdays (18%), two or three times a week (17%) or once a week (16%).

Chart 12 - How often, if at all, is the lunch your child/ren has the main meal of the day?
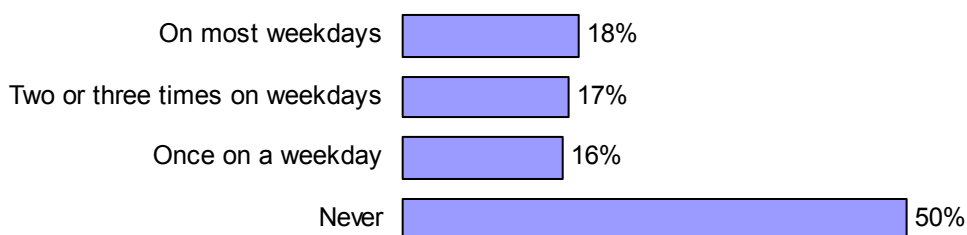
Base: All respondents using the school lunch service (592)

Children from a BME background are more likely to have their school lunch as their main meal of the day (40% on most weekdays).

The chart below shows the proportions rating school lunches as healthy or unhealthy. One in five parents of children who have packed lunches don't know how healthy school lunches are (20%). Few parents think that school meals are unhealthy, this view is similar among parents whose children have and don't have school lunches (2% and 5% very and fairly unhealthy respectively). Among children who have school lunches five in six parents think their lunch is healthy (84% very and fairly healthy).

Chart 13 -   a) And how healthy do you think school lunches are? (non-users) b) And how healthy do you think your child/ren's school lunch is? (users)

Non-user	9%	53%	14%	4%	20%
User	14%	71%	12%	2%	2%

Very healthy ■ Fairly healthy □ Neither □ Fairly unhealthy ■ Very unhealthy □ Don't know

Base: All respondents (non-users 950, users 589)
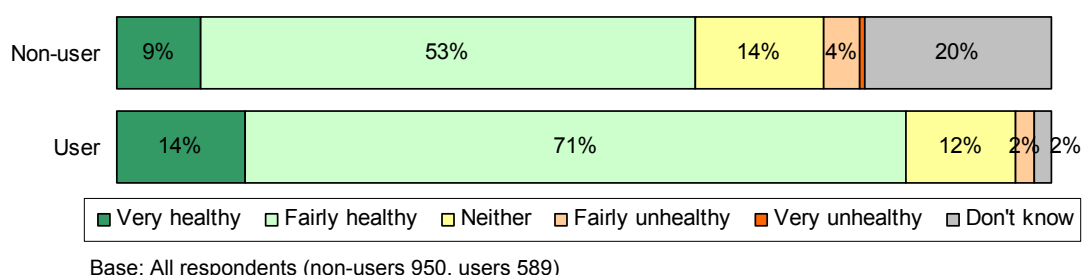
There are no differences in perceptions of the healthiness of school lunches among non-users. However, among users of the lunch service parents are more likely to be satisfied with the healthiness of the food when their children attend small schools (88% healthy) or the school has a modular kitchen (19% very healthy).

Regardless of whether a child has a school lunch, parents feel that their diet overall is healthy (87% user, 88% non-user), though most saying it's fairly healthy. There are no differences between different groups of children.

Chart 14 -   And how healthy do you think your child/ren's diet overall is?

Non-user	19%	70%	8%	2%
User	25%	62%	9%	3%

■ Very healthy □ Fairly healthy □ Neither □ Fairly unhealthy ■ Very unhealthy □ Don't know

Base: All respondents (non-user 945, user 582)
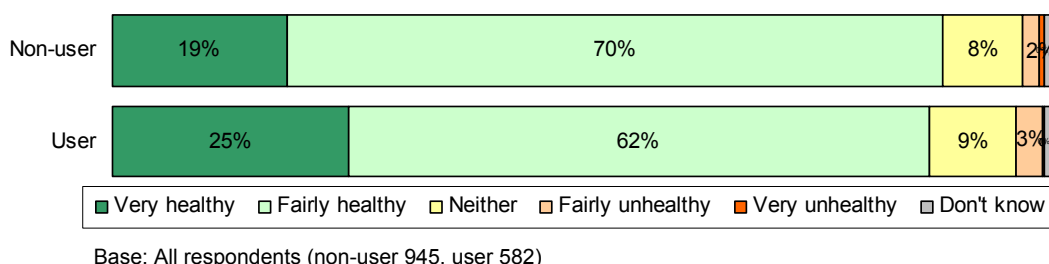
Both sets of respondents were asked if they had any other comments about the school lunch service. The most mentioned comment differed significantly between users and non-users of the school lunch service. For non-users, the most frequently made comment was that school lunches were too expensive (22%), whereas for users of the service it was that choice and quantity of food was needed for all sittings (32%). A number of both types of respondent also felt that the menu needed improvement in terms of the options, how frequently they occur and making it child friendly (15% non-user, 10% user). It is also worth noting that more than one in ten parents said they were happy with school lunches in terms of the quality, cost, choice or staff (13% for users).

Chart 15 - Have you any comments about the school lunch service?
(Answers given by 10+ people)

Comment	Non-user	User
Too expensive	22%	3%
Need choice and quantity for all sittings, rotate sittings	16%	32%
Poor menu eg repetitive, limited options, not child friendly	15%	10%
Poor quality food and cooking standards	11%	7%
Poor cooking facilities at school, more staff/time to eat	8%	5%
Happy with school meals eg choice, cost, quality, staff	8%	13%
Need to cater for special diets eg Halal, allergies	7%	4%
Portions too small, need second helpings	6%	7%
Need healthier food on menu	6%	6%
Unfriendly staff	6%	1%
Food should be delivered to order	5%	7%
Need more information on service and menus	5%	5%
More flexibility in system eg takeup, notice period	5%	1%
Assist children in food choices/encourage to try new things	4%	8%
Sandwiches on menu, child prefers packed lunches	4%	1%
Taster days for children/parents	4%	3%

Base: All respondents giving a comment about the service (non-user 283, user 246)

The comments parents made reflected the results found earlier in the questionnaire. Both users and non-users of the lunch service reiterated that it was important to cater for special dietary requirements (eg need to provide Halal food) when their child was from a BME background (22% users, 21% non-users). And non-users of the service who have children with a disability also wanted special diets to be catered for (34%).

Choice and quantity for all sittings was more important for users of the service when their child is over 8 years old (41%), or attend a school with a conventional kitchen (48%). Whereas in non-users choice and quantity for all sittings was more important in small schools (22%).

7.4 Demographic information

The last questions on the survey asked for the demographic details of the parents' children of primary school age.

The first demographic question asked for the gender of respondents children at primary school. The proportions are similar between girls and boys.

Chart 16 - Gender of respondents children
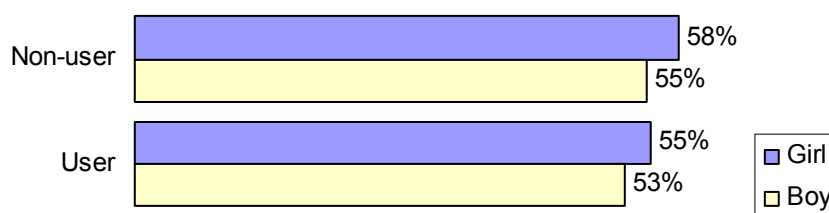
Base: All respondents (non-user 981, user 595)

There is a wide spread of ages among respondents, with a mean age of 7.6 years.

Chart 17 - Age makeup of respondents children
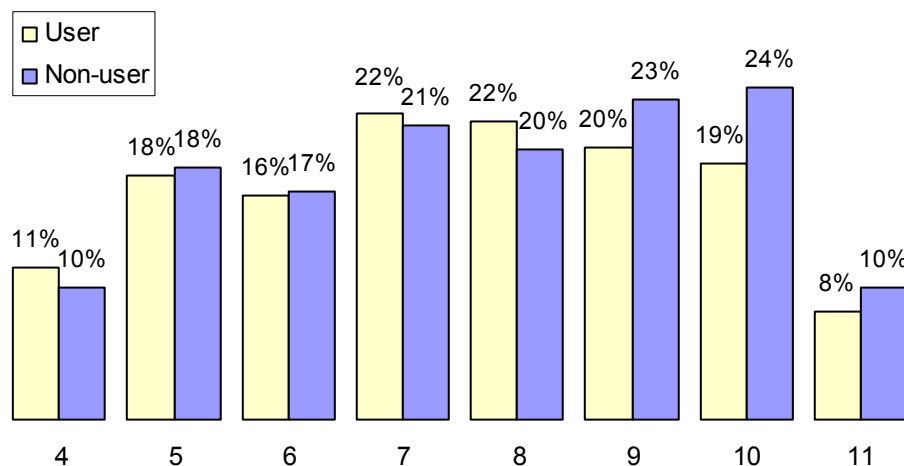
Base: All respondents (non-user 981, user 596)

About one in twelve of the children are considered to have a long-standing illness by their parents (8%).

Chart 18 - Do any of these children have a long-standing illness or disability?
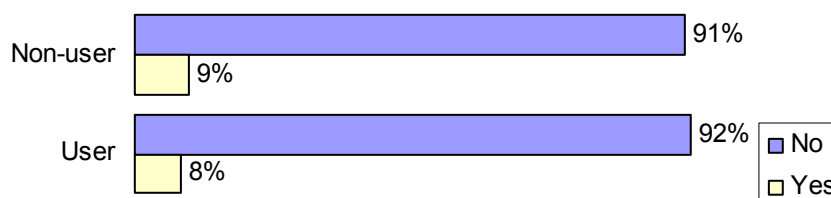
Base: All respondents non-user 962, user 586)

Overall, the majority of children are of white ethnic origin, though about one in ten is of Asian heritage.

Chart 19 - To which of these groups do you consider your child/ren belong?
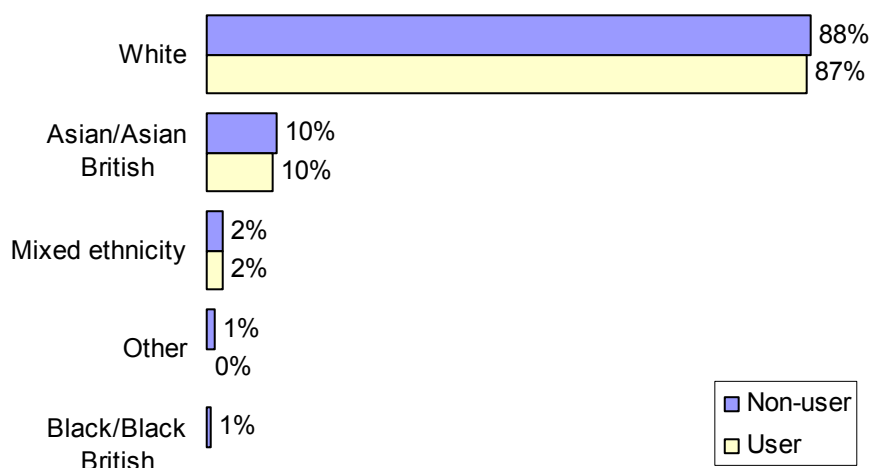
Base: All respondents (non-user 976, user 584)

8 Main Research Findings – School Management Survey

The second part of the research surveyed the opinions of members of school management. The majority of responses coming from head teachers, though almost a third were completed by school administrative staff.

8.1 Overall perceptions of the school meal service

The first section of this survey dealt with the catering service overall and the standard of food. Five in six respondents are satisfied with the schools catering service overall (58), with a third very satisfied (23). One respondent said "compared to the meals produced in the last authority I worked in the meals service is really good".

Chart 20 - **How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the school catering service overall?**

Base: All respondents (69)
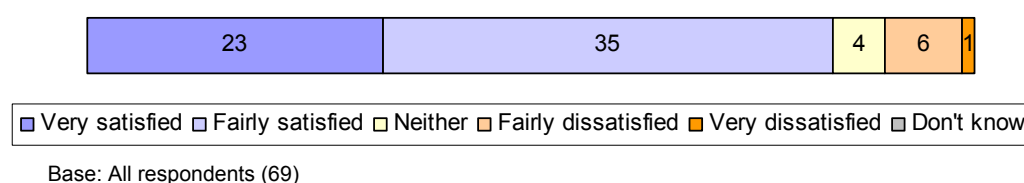
The majority of respondents are at least fairly satisfied with all aspects of the service, though this varied from about six in seven satisfied with the healthiness of food (59) to only around three in five satisfied with the size of portions (42). It was the size of portions that respondents were least satisfied with in the 2006 survey.

Chart 21 - **How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following aspects of the school meals service?**

Base: All respondents (69)
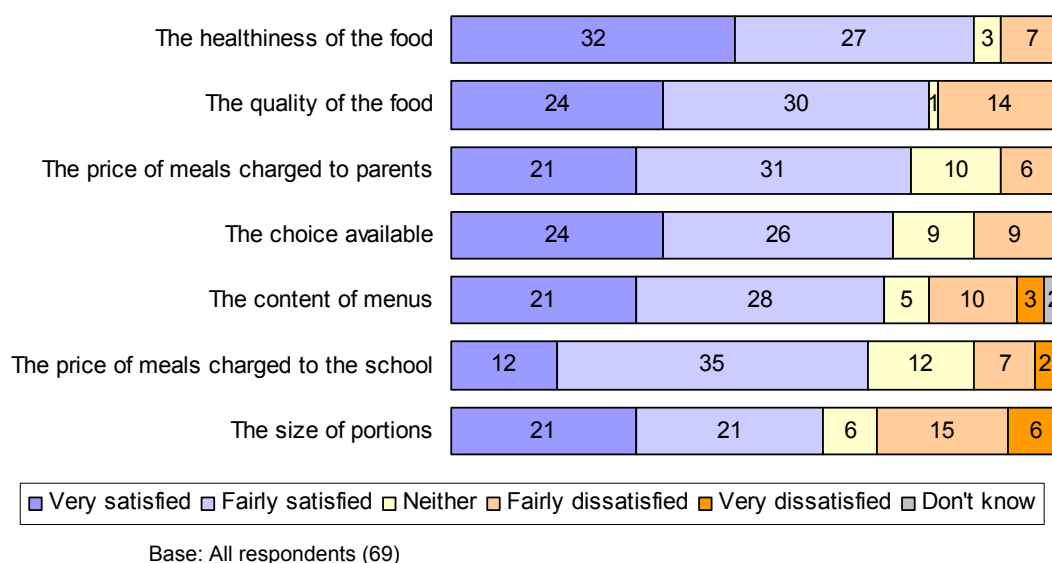
There was agreement among the majority of respondents that school lunches are generally healthier than packed lunches (52). Looking more closely at the food on offer, the majority felt that things had got better over the last year rather than got worse – particularly for the use of fresher food. Communication with schools may be an issue as almost half didn't know if food was produced locally.

Chart 22 - How much do you agree or disagree that school lunches are generally healthier than packed lunches?

Response	Value
Strongly agree	19
Tend to agree	33
Tend to disagree	13
Strongly disagree	0
Don't know	3

Base: All respondents (68)

Chart 23 - Do you think each of the following have got better or worse over the last 12 months, or stayed the same?

	Got better	Stayed the same	Got worse	Don't know
The use of fresher food	36	22	5	7
Food quality	34	23	9	4
Menu quality	29	25	12	3
The use of locally produced food	21	14	2	33
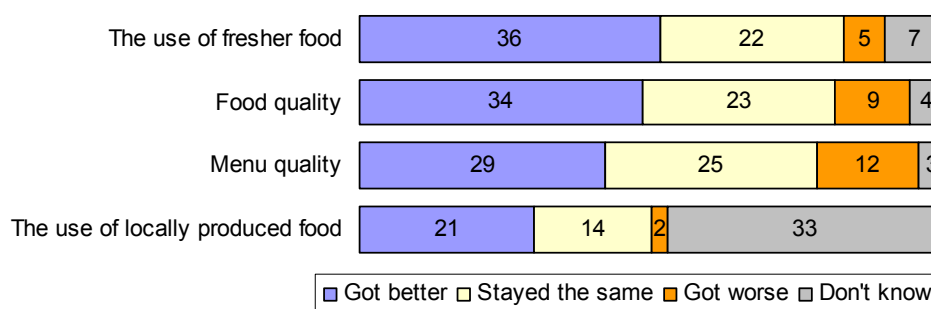
Base: All respondents (69)
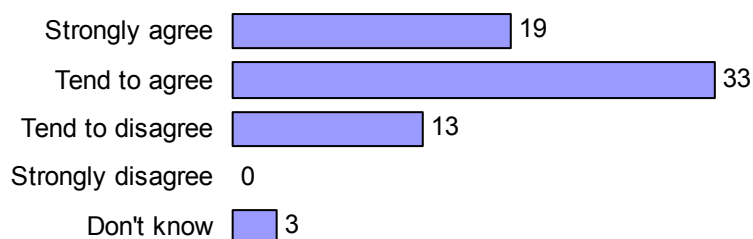
The feedback from schools in the open question provides more context for how schools feel about the school lunch service.

Schools appear to be concerned with the cost of meals for parents. They say that "the issue surrounding poor take-up of school meals at our school is the cost – a large proportion of our families are living in social deprivation" and "parents state they simply can't afford them". One respondent even went as far as suggesting "free school meals for all".

A handful of schools mentioned concerns that "portions sometimes seem to be small for the older pupils" and that there is "not enough food offered as a choice". Some schools also mentioned that the menus "sometimes [mean] little proper cooking is required and our unit catering manager is bored and her skills under-utilised". They also felt that "the catering staff within school have a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the children – their food likes and dislikes and work very hard at encouraging children to make healthy choices. The menus

don't always support this understanding and rather than being supported by LCCS they often feel straight jacketed and as though their knowledge and understanding is under valued."

The opportunity to look at "how children can get exactly what they want from the menu … [perhaps] they could book in advance" would be appreciated by some schools. Although there does appear to be some problems with the running of the system because one school has had "complaints from parents about children not getting their choices since we introduced the children choosing their own menu".

8.2 Service delivery

The next section of the survey asked about aspects of service delivery, including the support they receive from Lancashire County Commercial Services (LCCS).

On the whole respondents felt that LCCS keeps them informed about what it's doing (52 agree) and that it delivers quality services (49 agree). There is less agreement that LCCS provides value for money, as almost a third disagree (22).

Perceptions of the value for money of the service are further highlighted from respondents open comments. Schools are "concern[ed] over cost of transporting meals" saying there are "opportunities for saving money". Another school said "it is costing [the] school more money per meal than we are taking … if we put the cost of the meals up then the take up will probably go down. We cannot afford to subsidise school dinners." One school thought that "portion size and quality of our meals do not match the cost".

Chart 24 - How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Lancashire County Commercial Services (LCCS)?

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
LCCS keeps me informed about what it's doing	10	42	10	6	2
LCCS delivers quality services	11	38	15	1	5
LCCS provides value for money	7	33	21	1	8
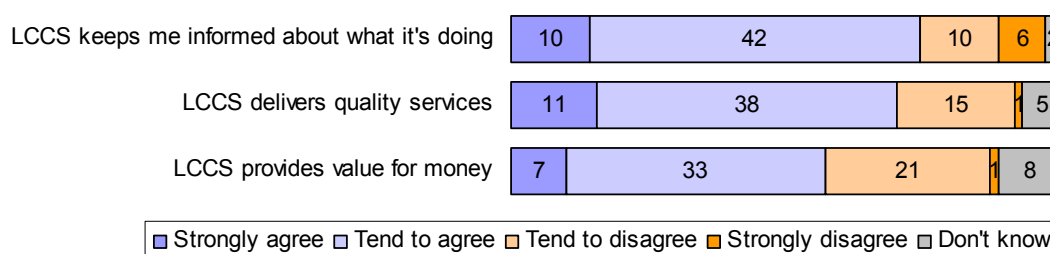
Base: All respondents (70)

Respondents were satisfied with the overall standard of service (59 satisfied). Satisfaction with each aspect of the service delivery is high with at least four in five people being satisfied with each. Satisfaction with the friendliness of staff towards the school and towards the children is rated very high (64 and 58 satisfied respectively).

Many respondents commented on the quality of their catering staff saying "I cannot recommend the catering staff at my school highly enough, their commitment and approach is excellent" and "our new staff are brilliant and have made such a difference to the school meals we can offer". One said they use "[our cook's] relationship with staff and children as a selling point when showing prospective parents around school".

However, one school suggested that the training of catering staff needs to be improved because they "have a cook who has not worked in a school setting previously ... she received very little (ineffective) training and induction and has struggled to keep the standard up of the previous cook". Another said that their school "would like to provide more fresher meals on site but catering assistants not willing to help with this".

Six schools also have concerns over the quality of their kitchen and dining facilities. They felt that "the dining hall and servery desperately need a make over and we believe this would have a more positive impact on the pupil dining experience" and "we need a better fitted kitchen so that more can be produced from fresh".

There are some problems with the cleanliness of the dining facilities "post service floor cleaning is not always as thorough as schools would like" another commenting that "kitchen staff do not have enough hours to make sure they clean them properly each day … our cook tries her best at times, but when staff hours keep being cut and her staff are sent elsewhere with no notice, she is not being treated fairly".

Chart 25 - And how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following aspects of service delivery?

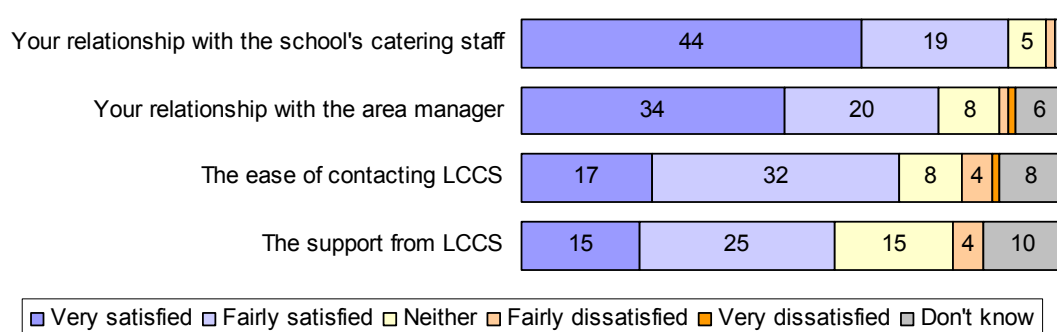|	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The friendliness of staff towards the school	49	15	2	3	
The friendliness of catering staff to the children	44	14	6	2	2
The overall standard of service	35	24	7	3	
The cleanliness of the dining area	33	25	5	4	1
The speed of service	32	24	9	3	1
The school's kitchen	30	23	5	5	3

■ Very satisfied □ Fairly satisfied □ Neither ■ Fairly dissatisfied ■ Very dissatisfied ■ Don't know

Base: All respondents (129)

Looking specifically at the school's relationship with catering and county council staff, it is their relationship with the school catering staff that schools are most satisfied with (63 satisfied), the majority being very satisfied (44). Schools are less satisfied with their support from LCCS (15 very satisfied) and the ease of contacting them (17 very satisfied). Though few people were actually dissatisfied, this suggests the service could do more to increase its visibility and become easier to contact. Some of the comments schools made about the service from LCCS are shown below.

Chart 26 - And thinking about the staff, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your relationship with…?

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know
Your relationship with the school's catering staff	44	19	5			
Your relationship with the area manager	34	20	8			6
The ease of contacting LCCS	17	32	8	4		8
The support from LCCS	15	25	15	4		10

■ Very satisfied □ Fairly satisfied □ Neither ■ Fairly dissatisfied ■ Very dissatisfied ■ Don't know
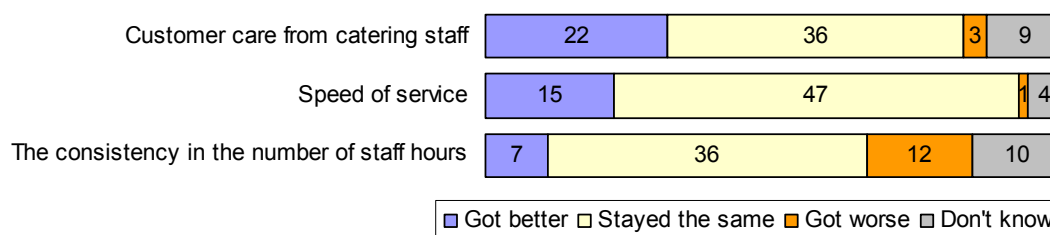
Base: All respondents (69)

One school had difficulty getting clear "information regarding ongoing review over the year [of the] budget. I have asked for this information but it does not seem to be accessible in an easy to understand format." One school also wanted "more flexibility needed and a stronger rapport with the school who are, after all, the customer!".

"I would be more than grateful if school lunches were monitored more closely generally and if you want the uptake to increase – that you do more to encourage the parents – it is not my job to promote the dinners if at times I feel there could be more options, more food and more consideration for what the pupils actually enjoy and don't waste".

Although a school said they had with "meals arriving too early … taxi driver mixing up the meals because we share a taxi with another school even though we each pay the full cost of a taxi", they were pleased with the way LCCS "deals with mistakes promptly, courteously and efficiently for us".

In terms of changes in the service delivery over the last year, more than half of respondents feel there hasn't been a change. However, the biggest changes have arisen from the improvement in customer care from catering staff (22 got better), and a fall in consistency in the number of staff hours (12 got worse).

Chart 27 - Do you think each of the following have got better or worse over the last 12 months, or stayed the same?

|	Got better	Stayed the same	Got worse	Don't know
Customer care from catering staff	22	36	3	9
Speed of service	15	47	1	4
The consistency in the number of staff hours	7	36	12	10

Base: All respondents (65)

8.3   Information needs and service development

Schools were asked how often the school catering manager reviews the school lunch service at their school. Two in five respondents didn't know how often this occurred. Where respondents did give an answer, the most frequent interval was at least once a term (31).

Chart 28 - How often does your school catering manager review the school lunch service at your school?

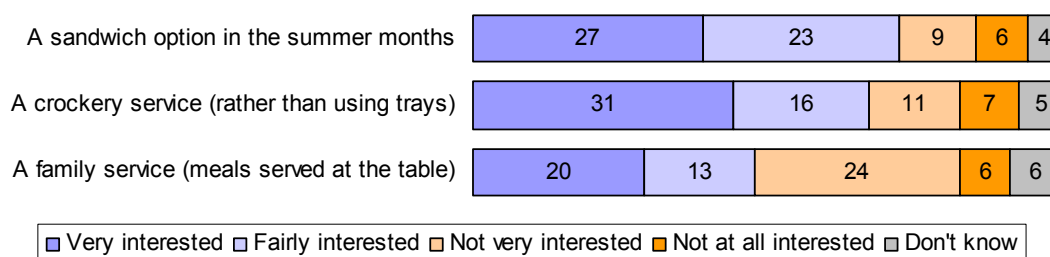| More than once a term	About once a term	About once a year	Less often	Don't know
10	21	7	3	29
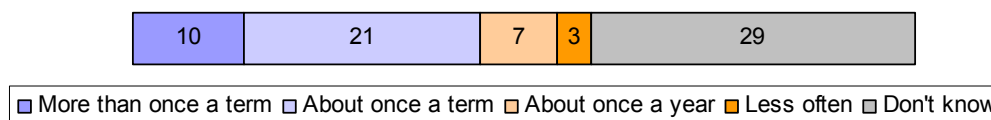
Base: All respondents (70)

School management were also asked how interested they would be in a number of different schemes. The schemes that had most interest from schools were a sandwich option in the summer months (50 interested) and a crockery service (47 interested). Opinion was more divided over

whether a family service where meals would be served at the table would be useful in their school (30 not interested).

Some schools "would like more events in school to try and increase numbers", one commented that they "would like consultation on some of the new ideas eg pasta station" and another "would appreciate earlier notice about special lunches planned by LSCS". However, two schools were "disappointed with the healthy design a lunch initiative as the spoons are a poor prize". Many schools are "always trying to raise the profile of school meals and encouraging pupils to stay but it is very time consuming and not easy" and thought "the recent food tasting sessions were very successful – the staff you provided were lovely and it makes a real difference to the whole experience for the children. We know more children would stay for lunch if it was a pleasant environment for them".

Chart 29 - How interested, if at all, would your school be in…?

	Very interested	Fairly interested	Not very interested	Not at all interested	Don't know
A sandwich option in the summer months	27	23	9	6	4
A crockery service (rather than using trays)	31	16	11	7	5
A family service (meals served at the table)	20	13	24	6	6

Base: All respondents (69)

The vast majority of schools felt that there was a need for a discounted meals scheme for parents with more than one child at their school (63). Most schools would be willing to help administer the scheme (60), though schools commented that they "find it increasingly difficult now with the administration of school dinners and this would make it much more complicated", another saying "I personally do not have enough hours in the day to devote any more time to the administration of school meals and collection of monies on behalf of an external service".

Chart 30 - Discounted meal scheme

	Yes	No
Is there a need for discounted meals scheme for parents with more than one child at your school?	63	6
Would your school be willing to help administer the scheme?	60	9
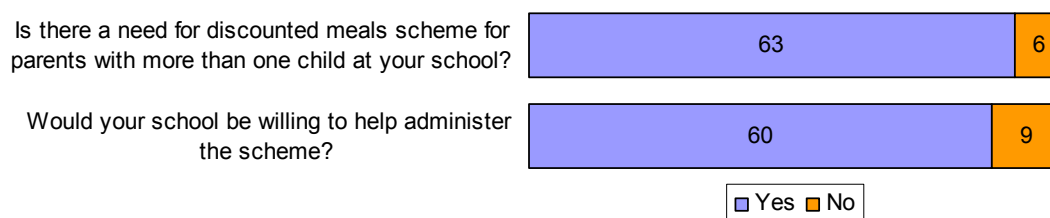
Base: All respondents (69)

The last question on the survey asked for any further comments on the service. These are displayed in full in the appendix, but have been used where relevant throughout the body of the report.

9 Appendix: school management survey verbatim quotes (grouped by theme)

Costs of school meals

"1) The above answer (administering the scheme) would be a 'Yes' if it is supported through Westfield and the relevant dinner money programme.
2) I have not seen any significant attempt to redress the balance of increased fuel costs to the school for providing meals to other schools.
3) I had to wait much too long to have the water leak fixed and once again no attempt to redress the issue financially."

"Concern over cost of transporting meals opportunities for saving money. Would like consultation on some of the new ideas e.g. pasta station"

"Free school meals for all. Offer to pilot this."

"Our main concern with our agreement with LCCS is that it is costing school more money per meal than we are taking, therefore it is costing school a lot of money to provide this service. If we put the cost of the meals up then the take up will probably go down. We cannot afford to subsidise school dinners. This is a major concern that needs to be looked at."

"The issue surrounding poor take-up of school meals at our school is the cost - a large proportion of our families are living in social deprivation (although not necessarily eligible for free school meals) and cannot actually afford to pay Â£1.75 for a school meal when a packed lunch will cost them considerably less. These families do tend to have more than 1 child, so maybe they would take advantage of discounted rates, however I personally do not have enough hours in the day to devote any more time to the administration of school meals and collection of monies on behalf of an external service. Our kitchen prepares an average of 260 meals per week and we have 32 eligible for free meals - although they do not all consistently take a daily meal. Despite sterling efforts on the part of the catering manager and links on our website etc, even promotions don't appear to have much impact on increasing take-up of meals. The dining hall and servery desperately need a make over and we believe this would have a more positive impact on the pupil dining experience."

"The school cook and I work together to promote meals by holding special event meals. The children really enjoy these taster days which are really popular. The main reason why the parents don't commit to additional meals in the interim is that Ribbleton is a deprivation area with high unemployment and low pay where the parents state they simply can't afford them. We are having a Governors meeting to discuss whether to up the price of the meals as many of the parents struggle to pay £1.70 per day let alone £1.85."

School lunch menu

"Portion size and quality of our meals do not match the cost."

"Portions sometimes seem to be small for the older pupils."

"A good relationship with catering services staff and would like this to continue. Do have complaints from parents about children not getting their choices since we introduced the children choosing their own menu. Would like more events in school to try and increase numbers."

"Menus sometimes repetitive e.g. pizzas twice in one week or just plain silly e.g. boiled rice as choice with main course followed by rice pudding for dessert! Sometimes, little proper cooking is required and our unit catering manager is bored and her skills under-utilised. "

"Not sufficient quantity for healthy appetites. Kitchen staff not be in such a hurry to get off."

"Only 39 pupils taking meals out of 130. Some menus seem to be spicy. Small portions. Not enough food offered as a choice. More food should be delivered for accidents i.e. dropped lunches or forgotten sandwiches. A lot of sweets seem to be ice cream, jelly, biscuits etc. more hot puddings needed."

"The catering staff within school have a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the children- their food likes and dislikes and work very hard at encouraging children to make healthy choices. The menus etc don't always support this understanding and rather than being supported by LCCS they often feel straight jacketed and as though their knowledge and understanding is under valued."

"The winter menu that we currently have is not as well liked as the previous menus selection"

Service delivery

"The only aspect I would like to look at is how children can get exactly what they want from the menu - i.e. if they are the last few children in for service they have to be given 'what's left' - is there any way they could book in advance - have you heard or run any schemes which do this (which don't cause administrative burden)"

"Cooks should have more freedom to select ingredients relevant to the likes and preferences of the schools they work in. Post service floor cleaning is not always as thorough as schools would like."

"Crockery instead of plastic trays, in my opinion, would be better. Main meal served first. Return for sweet/fruit etc. This is my own personal opinion but what is best for the Cook/Assistant is what matters"

"It is difficult to answer some questions because our meals are not cooked on the premises but ferried in."

"Meals arrive too early e.g. before 11.30 a.m. Taxi driver mixing up the meals because we share a taxi with another school even though we each pay the full cost of a taxi! [Name] deals with mistakes promptly, courteously and efficiently for us. Thank you."

School facilities

"Compared to the meals produced in the last authority I worked in the meals service is really good! Need some financial help in locating the kitchen in the coming years if possible. Would like to see children being able to have some input into the choice of meals - but this may not be workable."

"Our kitchen staff are fab! They work hard and are an asset to the school. The condition of the kitchen itself is not at all good, although the new oven is helpful. When the building was handed over the excepted buildings money was a joke- the whole kitchen is riddled with damp and has been for a long time. It needs knocking down and rebuilding."

"The school lunch furniture at my school is very shabby and could do with renewing, however I am having problems finding out whose responsibility this is."

"We have tried very hard to offer a salad bar and even supplemented some items. I have been disappointed with the healthy design a lunch initiative as the spoons are a poor prize and the kitchen couldn't cook some of the items the children had chosen as they didn't have the facilities. We need to offer children less frozen food. The children would love a well presented salad bar."

School lunch staff

"Fantastic support form the team when we had problems and our new staff are brilliant and have made such a difference to the school meals we can offer. We are totally up to date with new ideas and these are being used as good practice within the county and I am sure with your continued support we can improve further but to do this we need a better fitted kitchen so that more can be produced from fresh"

"I am very pleased with our school meals service and know from experience in other schools that the quality of provision is largely down to the quality of the school's cook. Ours is fantastic. I use the school catering facility and [Name's] relationship with staff and children as a selling point when showing prospective parents around school."

"I cannot recommend the catering staff at my school highly enough. Their commitment and approach is excellent. Very happy with the service they provide."

"I have a relatively new cook who has not worked in a school setting previously to being appointed here. She received very little (ineffective) training and induction and has struggled to keep the standard up of the previous cook. Our dinner numbers are falling as the food served is very 'hit and miss'. Some days are better than others. The menus are very narrow and often repeated e.g. pizza on a Friday then the following Monday. There appears to be a lot of convenience food e.g. sausage rolls, fish fingers etc. Many staff have also stopped having school meals because of the above and because of the small portion sizes. As the staff and parents complain to me, I am put in a difficult position. I have to either approach the cook myself (again!) which I feel is causing a rift in staff relations (more difficult with a small staff) or ring the catering service and appear to be going behind her back. The cook is a very nice person and I think with some proper training would do a good job. Because she has no previous experience of school kitchens, she is unaware, I think, of the standard expected. I have contacted the catering service several times and someone was sent out to observe/assist etc. But obviously when someone comes in, the meals are better for that day. There was a small improvement after the last visit. The tables are now cleared away on time from the hall. Previously, the hall was being cleared as late as 1.30pm. I asked if our cook could go and work in another local school kitchen for a few days as a late induction. Nobody has got back to me on this one, so I presume the answer is no."

"New catering manager is very good - last one was awful. Information re costings/ongoing review over the year re budget is not clear. I have asked for this information but it does not seem to be accessible in an easy to understand format."

"We are extremely pleased with our catering staff. The quality of food has improved considerably with our cook."

"Our cook is easy to work with and adaptable to our requests for eg. slight changes to lunchtimes to accommodate children's sports activities etc. She is enthusiastic at supporting new initiatives and special themed menus and has a good relationship with the children. We also offer parents the opportunity to come in for lunch once a week and [name] is enthusiastic in supporting this"

"Our school catering team [names] are excellent. We are a bit pressured for space and time to involve other options but we obviously have a good service as our school meals uptake is nearly 50%. I also have a good liaison with [name]."

"Poor portion sizes for adults - should a fully grown man be getting the same amount as a 5 year old!!!!! - More flexibility needed and a stronger rapport with the school who are, after all, the customer! Happy to discuss the above points further with LCCS management."

"School cook in our school is outstanding. Meals are now over 100."

"The quality of meals provided at the school has always been high. The relationship of the catering staff with school staff and pupils is excellent. The catering staff have always made an exceptional effort to meet the dietary needs of our pupils as well as taking into account the pupils' special social, emotional and educational needs. I cannot praise them highly enough for their outstanding service."

"We would like more flexibility with our own school kitchen. Would like to provide more fresher meals on site but catering assistants not willing to help with this."

Service from LCCS

"The school has had discussions with you regarding problems we face. We feel that LCCS should be more pro-active - our school is trying to lead the improvements without much support from LCCS. We would have appreciated follow up from our recent meetings with the area supervisor. We were very disappointed in the recent Healthy Heart menu competition - the wooden spoons were a disgrace! We had to supply rewards ourselves from school budget. We are always trying to raise the profile of school meals and encouraging pupils to stay but it is very time consuming and not easy with the issues our school faces that you are aware of. Our office staff do not mind if it means more children stay for lunch and enjoy it. They are very pro-active promoting the school meals service. The recent food tasting sessions were very successful - the staff you provided were lovely and it makes a real difference to the whole experience for the children. We know more children would stay for lunch if it was a pleasant environment for them."

"This survey does not take into account the different people serving meals - which influences my opinion, as they can differ considerably, both in personality and service. The answers are too limited. We have to have what is sent to us from another school. I can only go on what the pupils think, what I see & what isn't eaten!!!! Although I am more than satisfied with our area manager - I think that you should be self assessing the service, the food, the quality & quantity & the staff whilst our usually lady is absent. As a head teacher I know what my staff think about the food & what the children say. I can not comment about individual packed lunches because they differ from one family to another. I would be more than grateful if school lunches were monitored more closely generally & if you want the uptake to increase - that you do more to encourage the parents - It is not my job to promote the dinners if at times I feel there could be more options, more food & more consideration for what the pupils actually enjoy & don't waste. The above survey should not

be sent to me it should be sent to the pupils, staff & parents - if you are to get an accurate response."

"We already family service, crockery and a sandwich option in the summer. In our bid to encourage take up of school meals we have worked closely with the unit catering manager to encourage as many children as possible to stay for a school dinner."

"We work in strong partnership with our kitchen staff and adapt menus within guidelines to meet the needs/likes of our pupils. We are very fortunate to have a highly skilled cook. We do a lot of promotional lunches etc. We would appreciate earlier notice about special lunches planned by LSCS."

"Whilst I agree with healthy menus, if the children won't eat things, they won't eat them. I really hate children leaving much of their dinner and being hungry for the rest of the day. I agree with doing away with chips etc. - but our cook is not allowed salt or tomato sauce. A small amount of each would soon encourage the children to eat more. Our tables are VERY DIRTY. Kitchen staff do not have enough hours to make sure they clean them properly each day. One cleaning day every few weeks is not enough. Our cook tries her best at times, but when staff hours keep being cut and her staff are sent elsewhere with no notice, she is not being treated fairly. If I had the time and patience - I would go elsewhere for the school meals service. LCC is NOT serving us well."

"Whilst I would agree in principal to the above scheme, I think it would be much more difficult from an admin point of view to undertake. We find it increasingly difficult now with the administration of school dinners and this would make it much more complicated."

"The Governors have a meeting scheduled with our area manager for next week as you can see we are not satisfied with various aspects of our service at present. I would like results of this survey to remain confidential from the catering staff at this time."