

To order?

Making a decision on whether to outsource food provision can be a complex business. *Ruth Stokes* looks at what nurseries should consider

The choice about whether to employ an external caterer or provide food in-house is an important one. While nutritional content is key, any catering arrangement also has to make good business sense. And, of course, what works for one nursery may not work for another.

In the right circumstances, bringing in an outside caterer has the potential to take a lot of hassle out of providing food. Dawn Phelps, who runs Healthy Roots catering in Kent, explains. 'If you have an in-house cook, somebody has to write the menu, somebody has to source the supplies and somebody has to buy the supplies, then you have to manage wastage, holiday and sickness absence,' she says. 'When you outsource, you don't have to think about anything.'

Healthy Roots offers a lunch and an afternoon tea, which are designed to complement each other from a nutritional point of view. 'If you're working with a reputable organisation that is working with a nutritionist or nutrition software, you know you're getting a well-balanced meal every day,' says Ms Phelps.

But quality is not necessarily a given. As with any type of business, standards vary from caterer to caterer – something Glenis Keenan, owner of Woodland House Private Day Nursery in Beoley, Worcestershire, discovered: 'We've previously used five external caterers, all of which started off really effectively – amazing menus, meeting dietary requirements, reliable service, good pricing – but which all gradually deteriorated. We would switch to another one, then switch to another one.'

One of the biggest problems was timings. 'I got incredibly frustrated with one caterer,' she remembers. 'It put its prices up and then all of a sudden the transport started to become unreliable. Sometimes the meals would be very early, sometimes the meals would be late. When you're feeding

children, particularly younger children, you can't afford to have the food coming late because next thing you know the little ones are falling asleep. That's the way the day goes: they're fed at lunchtime and fall asleep straight after.'

CONTROL

Four years ago, Ms Keenan decided to take matters into her own hands. The result was Cupcakes Catering. Setting up this new company meant that her nursery could still use an external caterer – and so avoid having to deal with the logistics of employing an in-house chef – but at a standard that met the nursery group's needs.

Ms Keenan leaves the day-to-day running of the catering business to her business partner and Cupcakes' chef. But all the caterer's clients, including Woodland House, are consulted on seasonal menu changes, and Ms Keenan says the group is flexible to the needs of different nurseries. Cupcakes now caters for 19 settings alongside Woodland's three nurseries, and has just taken on two new contracts with local schools.

Other nurseries have found a combination of external catering and in-house cooking works best for them. Cowgate Under 5s Centre in Edinburgh gets its food from the local authority from Monday to Thursday, but cooks its own meals on Fridays. The arrangement is chiefly a practical one, rather than a preference for outsourcing, since the nursery doesn't have the facilities to make its own food for the whole week.

'On Friday, the staff take it in turns to make meals in full consultation with the children,' says the setting's June Graham. 'That's what it should be about – nice, fresh, healthy food that is not batch bought, processed, pre-cooked or frozen. The children help to shop and cook, too.'

Having opportunities like this for learning is one of the key benefits of settings bringing catering in-house,

As with any type of business, standards vary from caterer to caterer



When looking at catering options, settings should think about providing balanced nutrition and learning opportunities

according to Jo Stover, area manager at Tootsies Private Day Nursery in Surrey. The Farnham group's in-house catering, which meets the Children's Food Trust's nutritional guidelines and has twice won the Nursery World Food Award, has become one of its core selling points in recent years.

'We get children involved in the planning and preparing of the food,' explains Ms Stover. 'We also have workshops for parents to learn some tricks of the trade and develop nutritional understanding. It's really important to us that families can repeat what we're doing at nursery, so we make it accessible.'

Most caterers are now able to meet different dietary requirements, for children who are vegetarian or have an intolerance for example, but an in-house chef can sometimes give nurseries an extra level of responsiveness.

'We're lucky that our chef, Tris, is so good – any dietary requirements that come to us are not usually

an issue. He can adjust menus and change things very easily,' Ms Stover says. 'If you don't have that control it can be difficult to offer the right supply of food.'

AFFORDABILITY

She admits, however, that the cost of producing food in-house can be prohibitively high for some settings. 'If employing a proper qualified chef with an understanding of food, their salary will usually be higher than you would perhaps pay your nursery staff. And if you're a small setting or a seasonal group with shared facilities, I think the costs can be too great.'

But what makes the most sense from an affordability point of view very much depends on an individual nursery's situation, according to Ms Phelps. 'Looking at costs is an exercise that I've seen nurseries work with in the past,' she says.

'I've worked with some nurseries who have decided to get rid of their in-house cooks and work with us,

but we've gone to visit other nurseries and they've done the maths and decided they could save money doing it themselves. I spoke to a woman at one nursery whose brother ran a food wholesale distribution company, for example, so she could save herself £30 a week.'

MEETING STANDARDS

There are currently only voluntary, rather than statutory, guidelines for caterers providing food for the early years. These include the Caroline Walker Trust's *Eating Well for Under 5s in Childcare* and the Children's Food Trust's (CFT) *Voluntary Food and Drink Guidelines for Early Years Settings*.

In July this year, CFT launched a new menu

MORE INFORMATION

- Caroline Walker Trust, www.cwt.org.uk
- Children's Food Trust, www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk
- Cupcakes Catering, <http://cupcakescatering.co.uk>
- Healthy Roots, www.healthyroots.co.uk
- Menu checking service, www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/pre-school/resources/ebsb-practical-tools
- Slice of Pie, www.sliceofpie.org.uk

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE

When cost and convenience make outsourcing an attractive option, how can settings judge if a caterer is right for them? Ms Stover, whose nursery Tootsies has recently launched a sister company called Slice of Pie to provide catering services to other nurseries, offers some pointers.

'Look at the quality of the food, and how it's presented,' she says. 'It's important to think about how the food is arriving to you, what it's going to look like, and what you're offering to the children. It might be great nutritionally, but if it's just one big mound of food the children aren't learning anything from that and they're not getting the right experience with food. Also look at how far away your supplier is, and how far the food is going to have to travel to get to you.'

Credentials should also be considered (see box). 'Look at their food hygiene credentials, whether their chefs are qualified or experienced, and their references,' she adds.

Ms Keenan recommends finding out how good the caterer is likely to be from a communication perspective – that is, whether the head cook is accessible for discussions, input and feedback.

And crucially, she says, nurseries should request a taster session. 'Have the caterer bring in some sample menus for children, parents and staff to taste,' she advises. 'If you've got staff who are thinking "these meals are fab", that's the message that'll be passed to the children. In our nurseries, our staff sit with the children and have a small portion of whatever they are eating. It's really important to make the food tasty, and to appeal to adults as well. Get your parents and staff on board.' ■

checking service, for caterers providing food to early years settings.

The check, which caterers choose to submit to, ascertains if an organisation is meeting the trust's nutritional standards. Caterers that meet the criteria receive a CFT 'Menu Checked' logo, valid for 12 months from the check.

Dawn Phelps's Healthy Roots catering organisation

is currently piloting the checklist with the trust, working towards achieving the mark. The areas the checklist looks at include:

- different types of meal – such as breakfast, lunch, tea and snacks
- portion sizes for different food groups
- drinks
- reducing saturated fats, and
- foods to avoid.