

ST LUKE'S SCHOOL, SOUTHSEA

It's a business with a £3.5 million yearly budget employing around 80 – but St Luke's is not an unusual school for that reason.

It has a professional Bursar and that indicates a different approach, especially as Bursar Mark Pearce is a member of the school's senior management team.

Also marking the school out as different, is the decision to stop using a contractor to provide the school meals service.

In 2004 the contractor was pulling out of school meals and the entire contract for Portsmouth schools was up for tender.

St Luke's decided not to take part, but to run the meal service itself. Traditional school meals have returned. And St Luke's is managing the catering.

"I am neither a caterer nor a chef," says Pearce, "but together with the rest of the staff here, we knew what we wanted to deliver.

"Our previous catering contractor provided a satisfactory service that compared well with other schools in the area but we felt it did not meet the needs of the school. It focussed – like a lot of contracted services – on grazing and hand-held foods that could be eaten on the hoof.

"We felt what was needed was a reduction in the fast food element and a more traditional service – a proper meal with a knife, fork and plate, seated around a table.

"Lunchbreaks here were a constant 'high' with the teachers having to bring the pupils down to earth again once they were back in the classroom. And I needed two people just to pick up the food and packaging litter in the playground."

With the decision taken to opt out, St Luke's governors and senior managers looked for professional advice to help plan the new service and made contact with Richard Wedgbury FCSI of Alexander John Richardson & Associates.

In September 2005 the new school meal service started. Gone are the fast foods, crisps and fizzy drinks.

What came in was a traditional two-course meal service; healthier snacks such as muesli bars, seated dining and fruit-based drinks and water for beverages.

"We offer better value for money than previously," says Pearce. "The old menu was priced per item and it was easy to spend more than £1.50 on burger, chips, a yoghurt or snack and a drink. But we now charge £1.50 for two courses including a drink, using a meal ticket system which avoids the pupils needing to carry cash.

"We are feeding 100 more pupils per day than last year and I am particularly proud that we can guarantee a decent two-course meal for the 45% of children on free school meals."

Richard Wedgbury advised on the new menu format; ideas that were discussed and developed by the school's Food Technology Group, teachers and pupils.

Two extra staff were required in the kitchen to handle the extra workload involved in real cooking. A new ex-Navy chef joined the team (Pearce is also ex-Navy) bringing high-volume quality catering

THIS INNER CITY STATE SCHOOL HAS SOME SURPRISING DIFFERENCES FROM THE NORM. MIKE SAWYER INVESTIGATED HOW IT HAS CHANGED ATTITUDES.



expertise but also the training experience to upgrade the culinary skills of kitchen staff more used to fast food than fresh.

Pupils were told at school of the impending move and involved in menu selection. There was also regular liaison with the Student Council and a Customer Attitude Survey was conducted by Richard Wedgbury giving feedback on the meals service from more than 100 male and female pupils.

Parents were formally informed by letter in July 2005. A new food page has also been added to the school website.

Wedgbury took the school through the 'nuts and bolts' of the process of converting from fast to fresh food service.

Advice on purchasing included a recommendation for the school to join the Pelican buying consortium – widely used by other schools who also manage their own catering.

Wedgbury was also consulted on the issues of TUPE and staff management issues, equipment selection, health and safety and marketing the service to the pupils. He is currently retained to help with cost control.

"Richard effectively gave us the resources of a large organisation. We are a small operator," says Pearce, "and we do not have the level of contact that someone of Richard's experience has. He has just saved me a great deal of time by helping choose a crockery supplier, for example.

"If it were not for his involvement, the risks and difficulty involved would have been a lot higher."