

Tea for twos

Many nurseries taking some of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds in the country are providing free meals to ensure good nutrition, but often out of their own pocket. *Gabriella Jozwiak* reports

What children eat has been a hot topic for many years. The Government's decision to double the number of disadvantaged two-year-olds eligible for free places last September means nursery managers across the country are facing tough choices. Are they able to subsidise the cost of what might be the only healthy food these children receive? How far will their funds go to provide what should be an enriching experience?

The irrefutable evidence on the importance of early years nutrition, coupled with shocking statistics about one in ten children being obese when they reach primary school, means many good nurseries choose to provide meals for free.

Widespread tales of underfunding – as demonstrated by Pre-school Learning Alliance research showing a 15 per cent average shortfall in costs for each funded two-year-old – means many providers are not finding it easy to take the ethical approach. June O'Sullivan, chief executive of London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), says it is 'quite tricky' to provide meals and snacks for the 414 funded two-year-olds the

organisation currently accommodates. Of these, 277 attend at a meal or snack times, as some use a three-hour block in a morning or afternoon. But those present for up to ten hours a session must also be fed. 'Nutrition is a big issue for two-year-olds,' says Ms O'Sullivan. 'Some of our children come in hungry so we're going to feed them. But we're funding the lunches we provide out of our income.'

SACRIFICING INCOME

Sue Christie, early years teacher at 32-place Brook House Nursery, Twickenham, already provides free cooked lunches for all her three- and four-year-old funded children costing £2 a time, plus tea for the ones who use the full ten hours in one block. 'We're trying to provide the best food, such as 97 per cent pork sausages,' she says. 'Although this means that our hourly rate is even less, we feel we had to make this sacrifice so that all the children sit down and eat the same freshly cooked food together.'

She plans to take at least two funded two-year-olds later this year, but adds, 'It costs around £8 an hour to provide nursery care for a child, including paying salaries. When you think that the three- and four-year-old funding

we get from local authorities is about £3.50 per hour, and you have to take the cost of food off that as well, we're already really stretched.'

Department for Education (DfE) guidelines state local authorities must provide lunches to eligible disadvantaged two-year-olds registered at maintained early years settings. This is because they meet criteria for free school meals. However, twos at private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings are entitled to free meals only if the local authority decides to provide extra investment. In addition, providers who wish to charge for additional services, such as meals, may only do so if this is not a condition of a child accessing a place. The Government says councils should 'consider' funding lunches for the poorest children, but it is not a requirement. Meanwhile, councils' spending power has reduced by almost a quarter since 2010, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Ms O'Sullivan says some nurseries may avoid extra costs by asking parents to provide packed lunches. But she says this undermines the objective of delivering good quality care to disadvantaged children. 'We're meant to be giving them a healthy start,' she says. 'If the parents give them poor food, and we're not educating the parents around food, dentistry and other things, what's the point?'

Pre-school Learning Alliance caters for 1,570 funded two-year-olds. Its policy and standards manager, Melanie Pilcher, says the majority of settings provide cooked, hot meals during the day, which the organisation supplements. Ms Pilcher says that since 2011, Alliance staff have followed the Infant & Toddler Forum's Ten Steps for Healthy Toddlers approach to nutrition. This dictates children should have three meals and two to three snacks a day. As such, it is against the organisation's ethos not to provide equally for all children. 'Snack time doesn't ➤



The LEYF says some children arrive at settings hungry, and it funds their lunches out of its income

have to be expensive, but it still has to be budgeted for,' Ms Pilcher says.

Alliance settings tend to be in areas of deprivation, a fact Ms Pilcher says makes staff more aware of feeding requirements. 'If children come in hungry, that impacts their time with us,' she says. 'If that means providing snacks, that's what we do. Some things you can't compromise on.'

Research published in LEYF's 2014 'Twoness of Twos' report showed good child nutrition could 'help protect against the development of chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease in adulthood'. Eating the right food from birth aids brain development, and instilling healthy-eating habits early is vital to combating childhood obesity. NHS statistics from 2010 show about 11 per cent of English two-year-olds are obese, and up to 13 per cent overweight.

These benefits of nursery dining are backed by Infant & Toddler Forum senior allergy dietician Carina Venter. She says toddlers learn by copying other children and adults, so eating in a social group at nursery is an important part of learning to like new foods.

High House Day Nursery director Vanessa Callan says she previously had a funded two-year-old whom 'the parents were obviously struggling financially to even clothe'. 'In that instance I decided to give him a free tea. But that's not something we could do for every child.'

Ms Callan's local authority has suggested asking parents to provide packed lunches to overcome the costs. But she says this is unfeasible when she employs two full-time cooks. 'You'd end up having one term or year with 20 children pro-

viding a packed lunch, and the next term they're not. You can't be sacking staff and employing them again,' she explains.

In addition, Ms Callan suggests mixing packed and prepared lunches would be disruptive. 'When you only have a small dining room, one child will want what the other is eating. It doesn't promote cohesive social lunchtimes. When we are in the dining room, the children are encouraged to pour their own drinks and use a knife and fork correctly. If they have a packed lunch every day, and we don't know what's happening at home, we don't know if they'll get that.'

A DfE spokesman said: 'Our guidance makes clear that councils should consider funding lunches for children who are eligible for free school meals and choose to take a place at a private provider.' ■

CASE STUDY: COIN STREET NURSERY, LONDON

Jenny Deeks, head of centre at the nursery based at Coin Street Neighbourhood Centre, says, 'We run an 84-place nursery for children aged from three months to five years. We offer funded places for two-, three and four-year-olds, and currently have seven children taking up the two-year-old offer. Across the centre, which includes services such as stay and play, 73 per cent of the families who come here are workless.'

'We provide meals for the two-year-olds because it's more important that they have

breakfast and a good, hot meal in their tummies than worrying about the cost of providing that. But we do have to fund this ourselves. Our approach is a bit Robin Hood – any surplus we make goes towards the children from workless households.'

'All our funded places make a small loss. But providing food is not a big dent in our finances because we have a critical mass of children.'

'I have been shocked when I have been to local PVI

meetings and heard some providers being really cross about having to pay for food. We look at our suppliers all the time to get the best quality and prices.'

'Our two-year-olds are with us slightly longer than their funded hours because meal times, particularly lunches, are an important social aspect of nursery life. A lot of them don't have dining or kitchen tables at home so here they learn to sit at a table to eat.'

'I've heard that some nurseries are considering restricting hours for two-year-olds so they won't be there at meal times. I totally disagree with that. These children need a varied diet. That will be happening in areas where there are fewer disadvantaged children.'

'The feeding aspect of the funding would not put me off taking on more two-year-olds. I would consider that to be unethical.'



The nursery makes a loss on all funded places, but says providing food is a relatively small financial outlay and not providing free meals is 'unethical'