

Prison Catering



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Executive summary

Introduction

1 This report examines the quality and cost of catering in prisons in England and Wales based on visits to 12 of the 133 prisons and information collected from questionnaires to all prison governors and prison caterers. Catering consultants from Deloitte and Touche Consulting Group were commissioned to undertake the examination.

2 Prison caterers prepare over 60 million meals a year at a total estimated cost including staffing of around £60 million, or about £3 per prisoner per day. The process of providing food for prisoners resembles that of any other catering operation, but with important differences reflecting aspects of prison regimes and the need to maintain a secure environment. Poor food can increase the potential for mealtimes to become a flash point.

Findings: the quality of prison catering

3 In the early 1990s the level of complaints from prisoners about the quality of prison food was high. The Prison Service has since introduced a number of changes aimed at improving the quality of catering, including increased flexibility for caterers to provide food suited to the needs of prisoners, and greater choice and reduced waste, for example through the use of pre-select menus.

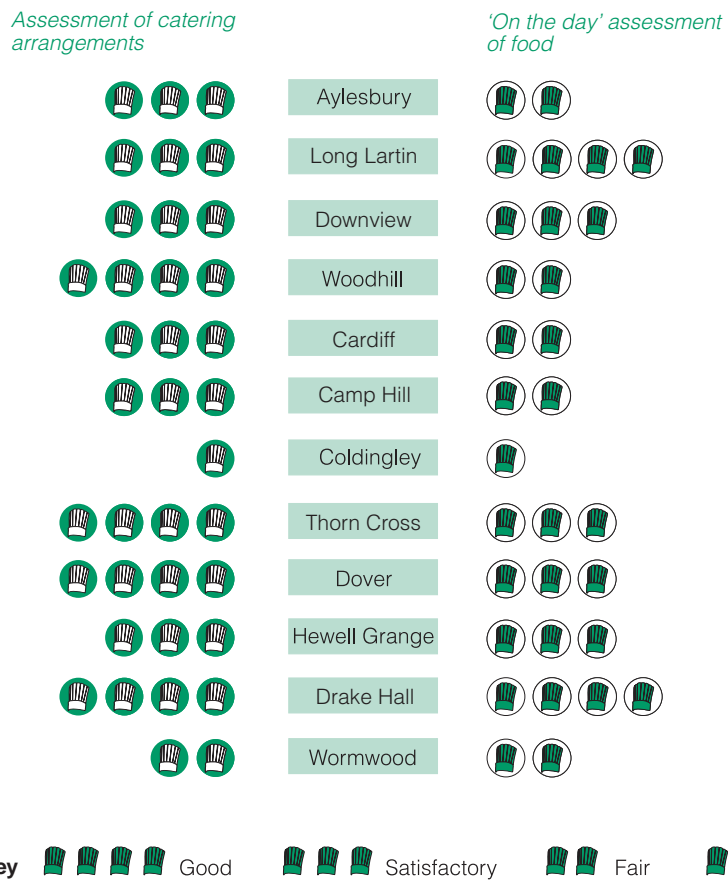
4 The quality of catering in most of the 12 prisons visited by the catering consultants commissioned to undertake this examination was acceptable; only one prison's performance was poor, and the causes were being addressed at the time; four were achieving a good standard of catering arrangements (Figure 1). The main problems which reduced ratings below a good standard were the adequacy of storage arrangements; production methods, generally resulting in food being cooked too far in advance; delivery times, with only half of the prisons delivering food within one hour of preparation; the lack in all but one prison of wastage monitoring to measure food quality; and the limited information generally available to measure quality. The prisons have been working to address these weaknesses since the time of the visits.

5 Figure 1 shows that ‘on the day’ assessments of the meals served at the 12 prisons gave broadly acceptable results.

Quality of catering arrangements and ‘on the day’ assessment of food

Figure 1

These assessments showed variations in both the quality of catering arrangements and the quality of food served on the day at the prisons visited. Good catering arrangements tended to result in better food.



Source: Study consultants' separate assessments of the quality of catering arrangements and quality of food served at the prisons visited

6 In keeping with the Prison Service’s intention to devolve operational responsibility as far as possible, catering managers have considerable flexibility to manage food production. Area catering advisers report on prisons’ performance, and a service level agreement sets out the kind of support they are meant to provide to caterers, comprising a 24-hour emergency advice line and a minimum of five visits annually to examine matters such as hygiene, catering standards and staffing of the kitchen. Although all 12 of the prisons visited as part of this study had received the full programme of visits envisaged, only one had received all the formal visit reports required under the agreement.

7 The Prison Service has developed standards and specifications for catering, and is continuing to produce new guidance to support the quality of catering in prisons, but further guidance is required. For example, there are few specifications designed to enable caterers to check the quality of produce on delivery, whether purchased through centrally negotiated contracts, from local suppliers, or from the Prison Service's internal supplier, Prison Farms and Gardens. There is no central requirement for spot checks on deliveries. Not all premises of suppliers have been visited. Variations in the quality of produce ranged from two prisons which had consistently high quality produce to one with produce of consistently low quality.

8 Prisoners are generally given a choice of food, but this can be limited by the methods used to distribute the meals, which may be outside the caterer's control. Since July 1995 the Prison Service has recommended a pre-select menu system which improves choice, reduces the risk of confrontation at the serving point, and can bring economies and efficiencies in the management of catering. At the time of the survey which was undertaken as part of this study, 44 per cent of prisons had adopted the system. Since then, more prisons have taken it up, bringing the number of prisons using it to around half, including nine of the 12 prisons visited. Others have confirmed plans to introduce pre-select menus.

9 Menu content, such as protein levels, varied widely, as did the provision of diet meals. The numbers of different diet meals were relatively high in some prisons and this would be likely to increase costs.

10 None of the prisons visited fully met the Prison Service's standard on the timing of meals resulting, for example, in most prisoners receiving their last meal of the day at around 4.30pm.

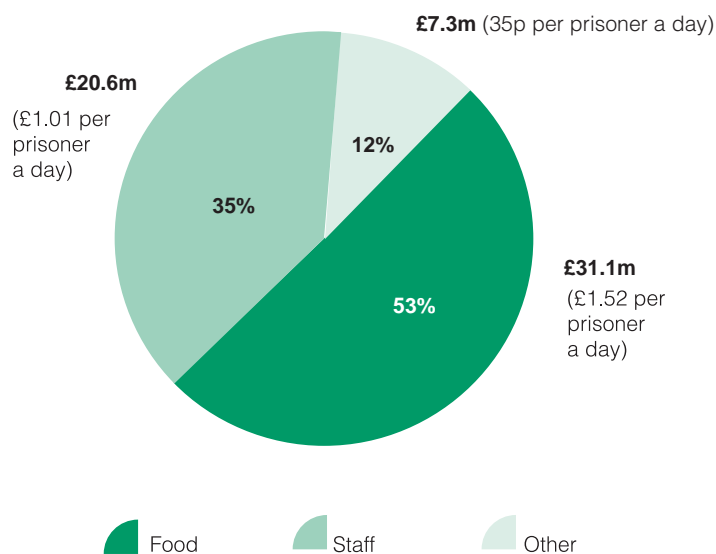
Findings: the cost of prison catering

11 The Prison Service does not have comprehensive financial information on the cost of catering. Most individual prisons only monitor the cost of food. Staffing and other costs such as utilities are not separated from the overall prison budget for those items, although area catering advisers do provide information about the staff costs associated with catering. Of the total £60 million cost, estimated as part of this study, around half is spent on food (Figure 2). There was considerable variation in food costs at the 12 prisons visited, indicating potential efficiencies and good practices for wider dissemination.

Estimated cost of prison catering

Figure 2

Food and staff represent the main costs of prison catering



Source: Study consultant's analysis

12 The Prison Service completed the introduction of a system of cash budgeting for catering in 1996. The system (known as “cash catering”) aims to support caterers in controlling food costs and drawing comparisons between prisons. It requires a significantly different approach to the management of catering resources and processes, and the study consultants found that prison caterers and managers needed to improve their understanding of the system in order to make best use of it, for example to set and monitor budgets and to link food orders and stocks to planned menus. The Prison Service has launched refresher training for caterers in the operation of the system.

13 A new computerised information system has also been developed which has the potential to provide better recording and management information on food costs, if operated correctly. However, prisons’ take-up of the system has been slow, generally because of higher priorities in other areas of prisons’ operations. It is possible that not all prisons will opt to purchase the system, thereby forgoing the opportunity of having more readily accessible information on costs and reliable cost comparisons across the Prison Service. The Prison Service is reviewing the take-up of the system, and is considering whether to include catering in its information systems project “Quantum” which is planned to extend across major parts of the Prison Service’s operations.

14 The Prison Service was obtaining food at competitive prices from central contract suppliers. Prisons make some use of the flexibility they have to purchase produce locally, with 10 per cent by value purchased locally at the prisons visited.

15 The Prison Service and individual prisons lacked some of the basic information required to assess the costs and benefits of different purchase options. Indirect costs are also not routinely taken into account in purchase decisions, for example the security costs of separate deliveries to the prison. None of the 12 prisons visited were operating standard catering procedures for economic ordering and stock control. An assessment of stockholding in 50 prisons showed large variations between prisons, with many holding very high levels of stock. To address these issues, the Prison Service is about to begin a project examining all aspects of managing supplies to prisons, including catering supplies.

16 Prisons are required to “purchase” 26 per cent of the guideline daily food allowance from the Prison Service’s internal supplier, Prison Farms and Gardens. They are not charged for this produce, and can purchase above the minimum requirement without cost to their budget. Some prisons therefore perceive the produce as “free”. Prison Farms and Gardens are subsidising prison food in order to make full use of internal produce, but the extent of the subsidy is currently unknown. From April 1997, the Prison Service has introduced shadow charging and regular recording of each prison’s consumption of Prison Farms and Gardens’ produce, which will enable consumption to be monitored.

17 The cost of staffing prison kitchens is some £21 million (Figure 2). There are a range of staffing levels and mixes in catering, with widely varying costs. For example, the staff cost per inmate per year ranged from £320 to £986 for prisons with a population of between 200 and 299 prisoners. While some of the variations can be explained by the size and regime of individual prisons, there is no clear pattern. Given these differences in cost, it is likely that some prisons could make savings by changing their staffing of catering over time. The Prison Service is now encouraging prison managers to give greater priority to implementing area catering advisers’ recommendations on staffing arrangements at individual prisons.

18 Other costs associated with catering, for example, utilities, maintenance and cleaning materials, were available as total costs but not separately in relation to catering. The catering element was roughly estimated at £7.3 million a year across the Prison Service.

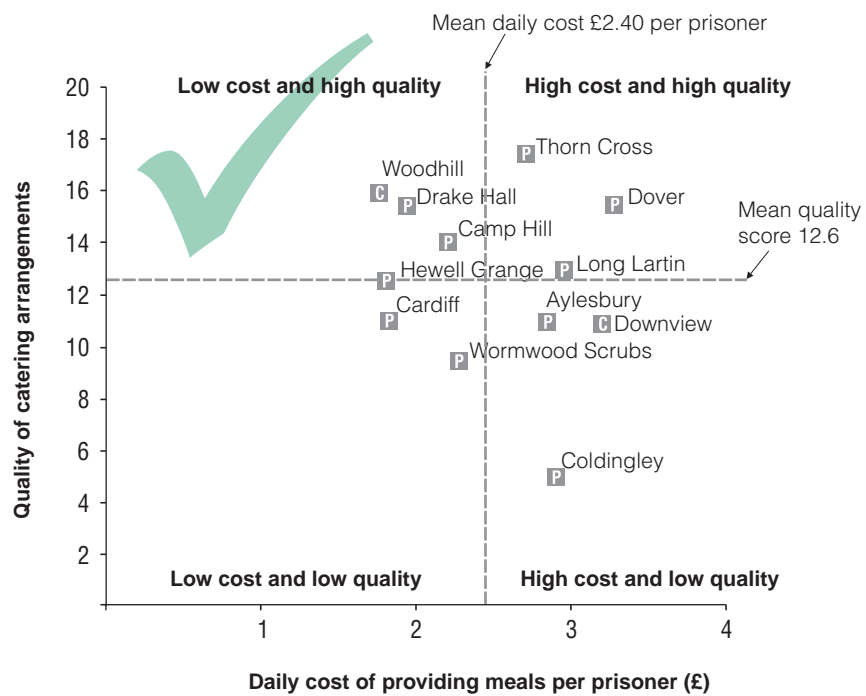
Recommendations

19 The three prisons with high quality assessments and low costs (Figure 3) suggest scope for reducing costs in some prisons with little or no reduction in quality, if prison governors and caterers seek to learn from practices in the best performing prisons. We identified key areas for management action, outlined below. The Prison Service’s intended review of the management of supplies (paragraph 15) will provide an opportunity for taking forward many of these recommendations.

Quality and cost of catering arrangements at prisons visited

Figure 3

Considerable variations exist in the quality of arrangements and cost of catering at the 12 prisons visited



Key **C** Contract Caterer
P In-house Caterer

Source: Study consultants' assessments of quality and cost

Costs are for staff and food only

1 Standards, specifications and guidance

The Prison Service should review, and where necessary develop, more comprehensive standards, specifications and other practical guidance for catering managers to use, reflecting appropriate catering best practice. Priority areas include specifications to assist caterers in checking the quality of goods delivered, standards setting out the requirements for such checks, and methods for providing routine feedback about suppliers' performance.

Where operating standards exist, for example on the timing of meals, it should be for individual prisons to provide a clear justification where they do not yet comply. Similarly, where the Prison Service has strongly recommended systems such as pre-select menus, prisons should be expected to explain their reasons for continuing to use other methods. In deciding the content of menus and the level of choice to be available to prisoners, prison governors and caterers should aim as far as possible to keep the need for diet meals down to a manageable level.

2 Monitoring the quality of catering

Records of the monitoring of supplies, operations in the kitchen, and the delivery of meals to prisoners, should be improved in order to generate routine quality information to enable an assessment of the quality of catering. Governors need better guidance on what information they should ask for in order to check the quality of catering in their prison, and should agree with caterers the information to be collected and its frequency. All prisons should have arrangements in place to check the quality of food as served to prisoners. For example, the time taken to serve sample meals should reflect the typical delay in actual service to prisoners.

Support provided by area catering advisers should be strengthened to reflect commitments in the service level agreement, and caterers' and governors' views sought on the usefulness of the support. As monitoring systems are developed, groups of similar prisons should aim to draw the same kinds of quality comparisons as those used in this report.

3 Monitoring the cost of catering

Prison governors should set a food budget which they consider meets the needs of their prison, to provide an agreed level against which expenditure can be monitored.

Prison caterers and finance staff in prisons should be assisted in operating the cash catering system more consistently. Once the data produced on the system is more robust, it should be operated as far as possible to provide governors and caterers with information on the costs of food in their prison and comparisons with other similar establishments.

The Prison Service should review the reasons for the low uptake of the new computerised information system and consider ways of promoting it, for example by working with two or three prisons to trial the system fully, and to make reports of the trials widely available across the Prison Service.

4 Reviewing the options for catering supplies

The Prison Service's proposed review of catering supplies should generate cost information which is not currently routinely available, including information on the indirect costs of different supply options. In view of the high security costs of deliveries to prisons, the costs and benefits of co-ordinating supplies through a single delivery point should form part of the review. Prisons which purchase produce locally should be provided with guidance on assessing purchase options.

5 Prison Farms and Gardens

The Prison Service should examine the relationship between prisons and Prison Farms and Gardens as a supplier, including the extent of any subsidy, and ensure that the new arrangements for shadow charging demonstrate the true cost of produce.

6 Managing food stockholdings

The very high levels of stockholdings at many prisons are unlikely to be operationally justifiable and should be reduced. In determining the optimum level of stockholdings in prisons, the Prison Service's review of supplies will need to weigh the benefits of reduced stockholdings against the costs of more frequent ordering and deliveries.

Food ordering by prisons could be improved by better forecasting of numbers of prisoners and more comprehensive use of available systems to link food orders and stocks to planned menus.

7 Staffing and other costs of the prison kitchen

Prison caterers should work with area catering advisers to identify the costs of staffing the prison kitchen and the costs of other viable combinations of staff, so that they can determine, with governors, the optimum staffing mix for their prison against the benchmarks of similar prisons.

Other major costs of catering should be identified and monitored, so that the impact of the kitchen's use of energy, for example, is known and can be properly managed.

Potential savings

20 Given the large differences between prisons and the need to take the circumstances of individual prisons into account, the best route to savings in food costs should be through benchmarking to identify and disseminate good practice, to help all prisons to meet the standards of the best.

21 If prisons were to reduce their holdings of food stocks from 27 to 21 days, which the Prison Service has indicated should be achievable in the short term, this would yield a one-off saving of nearly £350,000. The Prison Service expects its review of catering supplies to propose further, possibly much larger, reductions, depending on the outcome of the assessment of different supply options.

22 Other potential savings arising from the matters raised in this report are more difficult to quantify. It is, however, possible to make a broad estimate of the potential savings in staff costs. In theory, if all prisons were to reduce staff costs to the current average cost, based on the median cost in a prison of comparable size, the Prison Service could save around £1 million annually.

23 One of the prisons visited which had a high quality assessment had held food costs at £1.27 per prisoner per day. Whilst the calculation can only be theoretical, if all the prisons were able to keep food costs to around this amount, savings of some £5 million could be realised.

Part 1: Introduction

Background

1.1 The primary purpose of the Prison Service is to keep in custody those committed by the courts. It has a duty to treat prisoners with humanity and to help them lead law abiding and useful lives in custody and after release. At September 1997 the Prison Service held some 62,000 prisoners, 53,500 convicted and 8,500 on remand in 133 prisons in England and Wales. Prisons range from modern high security establishments to Victorian local prisons and former military camps; each has a kitchen to prepare and provide meals for prisoners.

1.2 Prison caterers prepare over 60 million meals a year; three meals a day per prisoner, served at predetermined times on every day of the year. On the basis of a guideline daily food allowance of £1.37 to £1.405 per prisoner per day depending on the size of the establishment (Appendix 1), prisons are required to provide food which is wholesome, nutritious, well prepared and served, reasonably varied and of sufficient quantity.

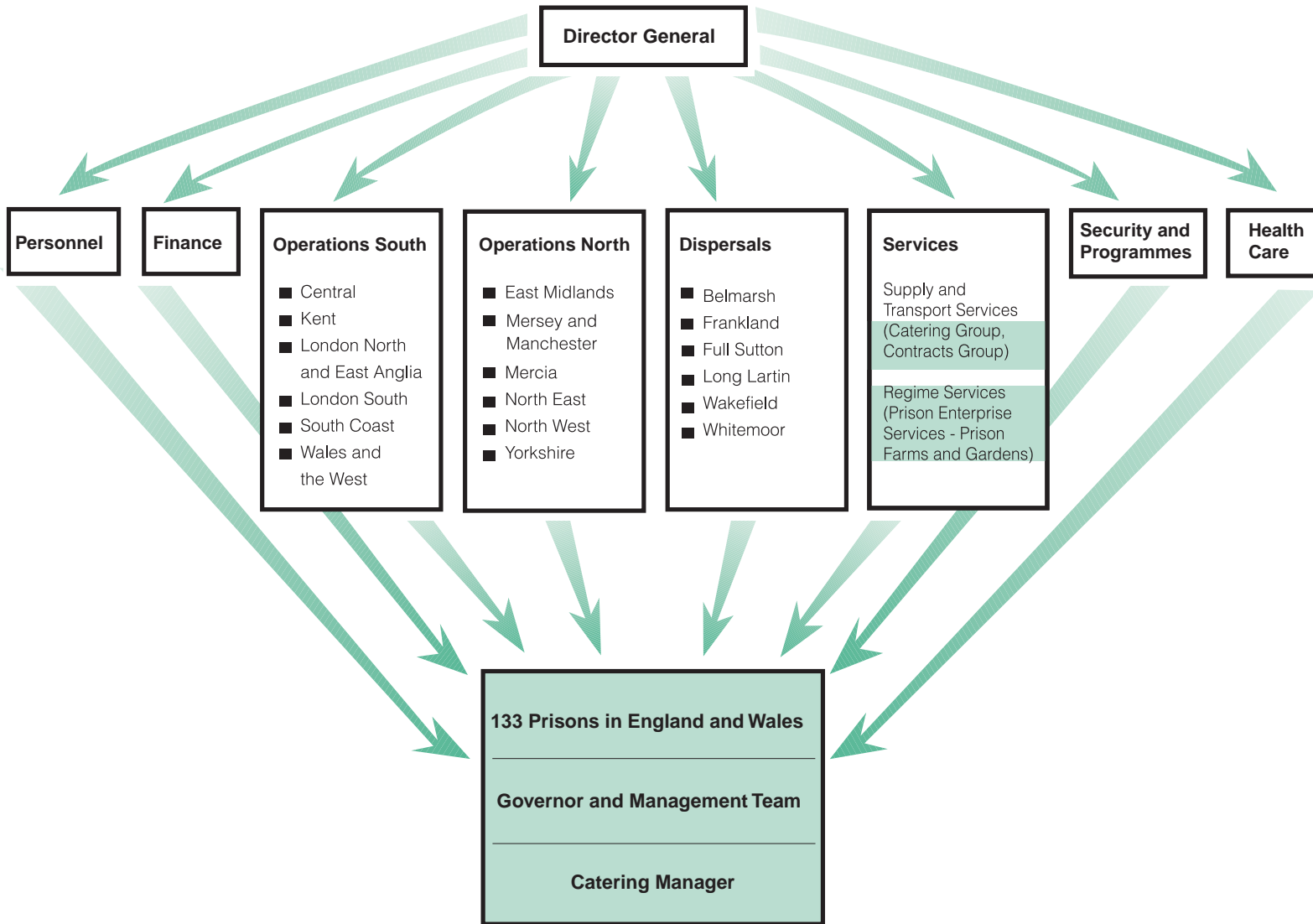
Responsibility for prison catering

1.3 The organisational structure for catering within the Prison Service is set out in Figure 4. The main responsibility for catering is at prison level, with the governor taking ultimate responsibility, including for the approval of the catering budget. Governors are required to approve food as fit for service to prisoners. In most prisons, a member of the governor's senior management team has day to day oversight of catering.

1.4 The Prison Service's Catering Group's area catering advisers provide technical advice to prison caterers under the terms of a service level agreement with prisons. The terms include a 24-hour emergency advice line and a minimum of five visits annually to each prison to examine matters such as hygiene, catering standards and staffing of the kitchen.

Figure 4

Prison Service Organisation



Source: Prison Service

Who manages the prison kitchen?

1.5 Prison officers have traditionally run prison kitchens, but civilian caterers have increasingly been appointed. Some manage the catering service, replacing the prison officers as managers; others have replaced prison officer chefs. The practice of employing prisoners in kitchens is common, raising issues of security and discipline for all staff involved.

1.6 Nationally, 11 prison catering operations are run by the private sector as a result of contracting out either the whole prison or just catering. A further two privately financed and contracted-out prisons are planned to open during 1997. The Prison Service is also considering the use of private finance for the redevelopment of prison kitchens. These developments increase the opportunities for the Prison Service to seek alternative ways of providing the catering service.

Food supplies

1.7 Prisons get their food supplies from a range of sources, both locally and on central contracts negotiated by the Contracts Group (Figure 4). Prison Farms and Gardens, which are part of Prison Enterprise Services, are one source of supply, producing vegetables, milk, pork and eggs for the Prison Service. Each prison is required to take 26 per cent of the total daily food allowance in produce from Prison Farms and Gardens.

The catering operation

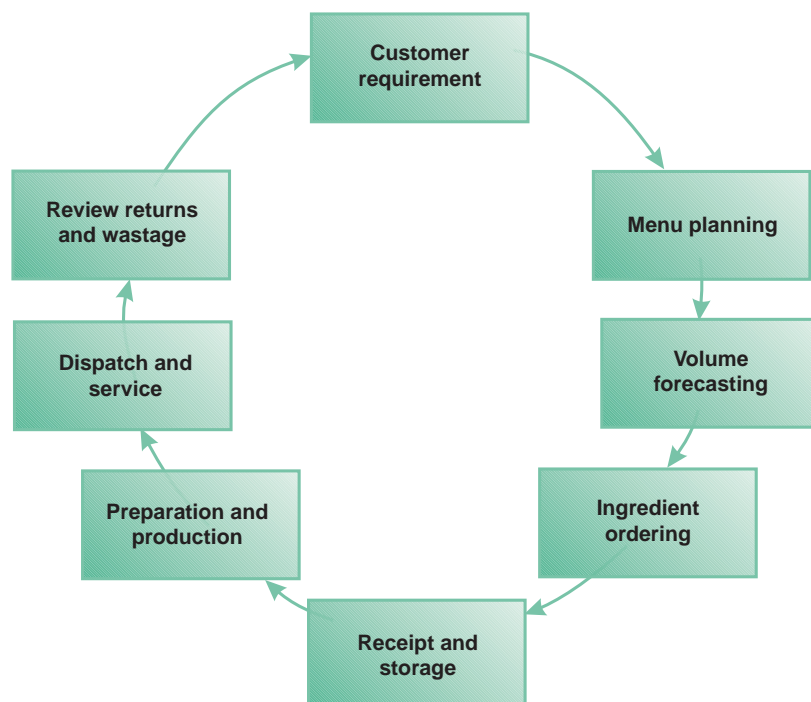
1.8 Figure 5 outlines a typical production cycle in a large scale production kitchen. The cycle is the same whether for a school, a hospital, a staff restaurant or a prison. However, there are some key factors which differentiate prison catering from typical commercial catering operations.

- Meals are provided free, at the taxpayers' expense.
- Prisons are required to provide three good quality meals for each prisoner, every day of the year.
- Prisoners might be in custody for considerable lengths of time, so they are dependent on prison food to meet their nutritional needs.

- Prisoners are often employed by the governor to prepare the meals for their prison. They are usually less experienced or qualified than caterers and this can reduce the quality of the meals prepared. The use of prisoners introduces a security requirement into the operation of the kitchen, for example to monitor the use of some equipment, such as knives.
- Meals have to be provided at specific times to fit in with the prison regime.
- Mealtimes in prisons are a potential flash point. Whilst poor quality food usually leads to customer dissatisfaction in any environment, in a prison it can result in unsocial behaviour and, in the worst case, to disturbance and violence.
- Whilst prison food must be decent, nourishing and hygienically prepared, provision reflects the fact that the meals are for prison inmates, most of whom are convicted criminals.

Catering production cycle

Figure 5



Source: Study consultants

Scope of the examination

1.9 This examination focused on:

- **the quality of catering**, including the adequacy of catering standards, specifications and procedures, and the quality, diversity and timing of meals provided (Part 2 of this report).
- **the cost of catering**, centring on the Prison Service's arrangements for ensuring that prisoners' meals are provided economically and efficiently (Part 3).

1.10 The examination concentrated on the management of prison catering operations. This report does not consider the design of prison kitchens, which was touched on in a previous National Audit Office report on the Control of Prison Building Projects (HC 595, 1993-94). More recently, we have examined prisons being built as a result of the Private Finance Initiative, with a report published on 31 October 1997.

1.11 The performance of Prison Farms and Gardens is considered only in so far as it affects the cost and quality of food used in prison kitchens.

Methodology

1.12 We commissioned catering consultants from Deloitte and Touche Consulting Group, to undertake the examination. The study consultants visited 12 prisons (Appendix 2) over the summer of 1996 to observe and assess catering practices and obtain the views of governors and catering managers; undertook two surveys, one of prison governors and one of catering managers (Appendix 3); and they commissioned an independent horticultural examiner (David Cheston Quality Assessment) to assess the quality of Prison Farms and Gardens' produce.