



National Audit Office

**HM PRISON SERVICE**  
**Serving Time: Prisoner Diet and Exercise**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**1** ‘Food’, commented one prison governor, ‘is one of the four things you must get right if you like having a roof on your prison’<sup>1</sup>. Food in prison is a key issue in control, improves prisoners’ health and can help in resettlement through training and work opportunities. Although the Home Office does not have a specific Public Service Agreement target relating to prisoner diet and exercise, the Prison Service aims to ensure that prisoners live in safe and decent conditions and that prisons are well-ordered and controlled. We examined improvements made by the Prison Service to prisoners’ diet and exercise since we last reported on prison catering in 1997.<sup>2</sup>

## Main Findings

The Prison Service has made financial savings from catering but scope for more savings exists

**2** In 2004-05, the Prison Service spent £94 million on catering, the largest components of which were food (£43 million) and catering staff (£32 million). Significant improvements have been made to the Prison Service’s catering arrangements resulting in financial savings and improved quality of service. Since 2003-04, savings have been made from expenditure on food (up to £2.5 million each year or about six per cent of expenditure on food) and on catering staff (£1.7 million a year or about five per cent of expenditure on staff) – mainly through the civilianisation of catering staff posts. Savings have also arisen from more efficient procurement (up to £1.2 million a year) and reduced stockholdings of food (a one-off saving of some £2 million).

**3** Expenditure on food is determined by each prison governor who sets the budget in terms of a daily food allowance per prisoner. The average daily food allowance for prisoners is £1.87, but there are wide variations ranging from £1.20 at an open prison to £3.41 at a young offenders’ institution. Variations between different types of prison can be partly explained. Young offenders’ institutions, for example, have some of the highest daily food allowances because growing juveniles tend to eat more than adults and they receive extra money for food from the Youth Justice Board. Open prisons tend to have lower daily food allowances because some prisoners eat some meals outside the prisons. Variations between the same types of prisons are due to a number of factors including some governors choosing to give food a higher priority than others or differences in the quality and range of foods purchased. Compared with the cost of other public sector organisations, the Prison Service lies in the middle of the range. The Scottish Prison Service, for example, spends £1.57 on its daily food allowance but hospitals spend up to an average of £2.50 per consumer.

**4** Our analysis of catering costs shows scope for further savings; for example, by benchmarking prisons’ expenditure on food across the service and with other organisations. There is potential for financial savings if prisons with particularly high daily food allowances (“outliers”) were to reduce their daily food allowance and conform closer to the average. As an illustration, if ten prisons with some of the highest daily food allowances were to reduce their allowance by £0.10 there would be savings of £133,000 a year. Other savings could arise from adopting joint purchasing arrangements with other public sector organisations.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with a governor at an English prison. The other three factors important to maintaining good order include mail, hot water and visits.

<sup>2</sup> *HM Prison Service: Prison Catering* (HC 277, 1997-98).

## The quality of catering has improved, although some standards are not being met

5 Overall, the Prison Service has improved the quality, range and choice of meals over the last seven years. Prison caterers provide a professional service and prisoners' complaints about food have fallen. Prisoners are asked for their views about food likes and dislikes and they are responded to where affordable and practicable. Following the Committee of Public Accounts report in 1998<sup>3</sup>, the Service introduced key catering standards setting out the legal and practical requirements to deliver good catering practice, food safety and to provide advice on menu management. The last check on performance by the Standards Audit Unit of the Prison Service showed that over 80 per cent of prisons met 80 per cent of the standards.

6 However, there is still more progress to be made. Some prisons are not meeting recommended levels of service. In particular:

- Food is often not served within 45 minutes of its preparation which means that it risks losing some of its palatability and nutritional content. There are, however, practical difficulties in meeting this target, such as the long distances between kitchens and the points where prisoners are served their meals; kitchens having to cope with larger populations than they were designed for; and prisoners having to queue for up to 45 minutes.
- Main meals are sometimes served very early. At Channings Wood Prison lunch was served at 11:15 am and the evening meal at 4 pm at weekends. There are also long intervals between meals – half of the prisons we visited did not meet a 14 hour interval standard between meals overnight.
- Overall standards for the preparation, cooking and serving of religious and ethnic food are being met, but the equipment for the production of Muslim food is not always separately labelled. There is also an issue about prisoner perception. Caterers may well be meeting all of the required standards for religious and ethnic food but some caterers found it difficult to convince prisoners that this was the case.
- The Standards Audit Unit found that in 2004-05 prisons were fully compliant with 66 per cent of standards, partially compliant with 32 per cent of standards and non-compliant with two per cent.

7 Area catering advisers provide advice to the Prison Service's area managers on kitchen catering. The advisers have played a key part in the introduction of improvements in prison catering over the years. Catering managers at prisons act upon their advice. Although two thirds of catering managers at prisons told us that they found area catering advisers helpful, one third did not. Of the managers who were not satisfied, their main concerns were that they added little value at well-managed kitchens.

### Prisoners have the opportunity to eat healthily but there are some concerns

8 On the whole, food offered to prisoners is in line with the government's recommendations on healthy eating.<sup>4</sup> Prisoners are offered a variety of foods, different dietary requirements are catered for and there is a variety of choice such that prisoners who wished to eat vegetarian one day, halal the next, and a standard diet the next could do so. At least one meal option labelled as healthy, is offered at lunch and in the evening.

9 Our consultants, Bournemouth University, carried out research on the nutritional content of food offered to prisoners. They found that although prisoners were offered meals that contained recommended quantities of most vitamins and minerals, there were some notable exceptions which could affect prisoners' health. Average levels of salt, for example, were far above the government's recommended levels – up to 93 per cent more in the case of the adult male standard meals, mainly due to the use of processed and pre-prepared dishes and high consumption of bread. Dietary fibre, which could be provided by fresh fruit and vegetables and wholegrain products, such as bread and cereals was low. The amount of energy (calories) provided by some meals over the day exceeded the government's recommendations and, although the recommendation for average energy consumption for women is lower than for men, most meals offered to women provided similar energy levels.

10 Prisoners are provided with meals which rely heavily on convenience foods, such as pies and burgers and tinned food and frozen vegetables with little use made of seasonal produce. The researchers also found that although prisoners were offered the opportunity to eat healthily many did not choose to do so and they considered that prisoners did not understand what constituted a healthy balanced diet. Prisoners were provided with little information about healthy eating apart from when they first entered prison. Some meals with a

3 Committee of Public Accounts 30th Report of 1997-98 (*The Prison Service: Prison Catering*, HC 419).

4 Balance of Good Health, Food Standards Agency, 2001.

high salt content and salads with a high fat content were incorrectly labelled as healthy. To improve the diet of prisoners we recognise that there would be an additional cost to the Prison Service.

### Most prisoners have the opportunity to exercise regularly but participation in organised physical education at some prisons is low

**11** Physical activity is as important as food in maintaining and improving prisoners' health. According to Prison Rules,<sup>5</sup> adult prisoners should have the opportunity to exercise for a minimum of at least one hour a week and young offenders for a minimum of two hours a week. In addition, all prisoners are given time in the open air each day, which they can use to exercise if they so choose. Prisons also offer programmes of organised physical education activities. Prisoners do not have to attend physical education activities but are encouraged to do so.

**12** We found that prisoners are given the opportunity to exercise according to Prison Rules. While 43 per cent of prisoners participate in some form of organised physical education activities, there are wide variations ranging from eleven per cent of prisoners in Bristol Prison to 87 per cent in Huntercombe Prison. Low take up rates are affected **by the range of activities and facilities available** (many older prisons have gyms with restricted capacity and no outside sports pitches); **whether prisoners are given equality of access to activities** (vulnerable prisoners, for example, do not always have the same level of access as others); **limitations on the availability of staff** (especially at evenings and weekends when prisoners who work or attend education classes during the week could exercise); and **the emphasis given to some activities at some prisons**, such as weightlifting and personal fitness, which perhaps diverts attention from activities which might attract wider participation.

### The cost of physical education instructors varies disproportionately between prisons

**13** The Prison Service spends some £29 million on physical education instructors. From the sample of prisons we examined, we found wide variations in the ratios of prisoners to physical education staff ranging from 38:1 at Aylesbury Young Offenders Institution to 165:1 at Channings Wood Prison and commensurately wide variations in cost. Young offenders (at Aylesbury for example) are entitled to and receive more hours of exercise, which is reflected in the costs. Elsewhere the

numbers of instructors did not bear a strong relationship to the number of prisoners or the type of prison. For example, the cost each year of providing physical education per prisoner, including staff, facilities and management, at Channings Wood Prison is £520 compared with £930 at Ashwell Prison. Prison governors do not have up to date guidance on standard ratios of staff to prisoners. The Prison Service told us that there are difficulties in establishing baselines for physical education provision. Very few prisons hold identical prisoner populations with similar facilities and direct comparisons may not be meaningful. In addition some prisons have deficiencies in the provision of other activities, such as education and workshops, and if they incur higher levels of expenditure on physical education they might be covering for regime deficiencies elsewhere. Reducing physical education provision in these prisons would only impoverish regimes further.

**14** Prison governors prefer to employ officers as fully trained instructors because of their leadership skills and the assistance they can provide in controlling aggressive behaviour. However, cost effectiveness should be a consideration as to whether officers should be employed as instructors. There is scope for employing civilians in prisons where the risks to security are less, such as open prisons. If by employing a civilian instead of an officer a saving of £5,000 could be made, then the replacement of 20 officers with 20 civilians would save the Prison Service some £100,000 a year.

### Overall value for money

**15** On the whole the Prison Service provides a well managed and professional catering service. There have been cost savings from rationalisation of food contracts and civilianisation of kitchen staff. Much of the food offered to prisoners meets government healthy eating recommendations. However, there is scope for improvement: some catering standards are not being met; food contains high levels of salt; and some further financial savings could be achieved. Prisoners have access to some high quality physical education activities. Instructors are highly motivated and respected. Better value for money could, however, be achieved. Participation levels in physical education activities in some prisons are low. The Prison Service needs to establish appropriate ratios of instructors to prisoners and consider the financial savings that would arise by employing civilians instead of officers.

<sup>5</sup> The Prison Act 1952 gives the Secretary of State for the Home Department legal powers to make rules for the regulation and management of prisons. These are set out in the Prison Rules 1999 which were last amended in May 2005.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

16 We recommend that:

### On catering

- a** Prison governors and caterers should improve performance against those catering standards which have consistently not been met including keeping kitchen facilities well-maintained, serving meals at recommended times, putting temperature controls in place and training food handlers at serving points. Governors should enforce compliance with those standards, such as training, which are not wholly managed by catering departments.
- b** It is vital that prisoners, particularly those from minorities, believe that their food is stored, prepared and served in the appropriate way. Good practices we recommend include appropriate labelling of all equipment; caterers inviting local religious leaders into their kitchens; observing religious festivals by preparing special meals; and involving religious and ethnic minority prisoners in kitchen work.
- c** The Prison Service should explore the scope for further financial savings in their catering operations by:
  - comparing food costs between prisons and other organisations and reducing the costs of high spenders; and
  - improving its purchasing power by adopting joint purchasing arrangements with other public sector bodies.
- d** Risk based assessments are used to determine the number of visits to prisons by area catering advisers. Well-run prisons which comply with standards need visiting less frequently than others.

### On prisoners' diet

- e** Prison caterers should improve the diet of prisoners, especially those aspects of diet which could adversely affect health, by, for example, reducing the high energy content of some meals taking into account the different requirements of prisoners being catered for (according to age and gender); setting specifications for suppliers to offer healthier products; not offering fried foods too frequently; offering plenty of fruit and vegetables, including more wholegrain products; serving fish regularly including oily fish at least once a week; and increasing dietary fibre.
- f** The Prison Service should provide practical guidance and training to all prison caterers on healthy catering practices and nutrition, including standard healthy option recipes, and the correct labelling of healthy food.
- g** The Prison Service should raise the level of awareness of healthy eating among the prison population through educating prisoners on the importance of healthy eating, posters, and by actively promoting it on a regular basis.



### On exercise

- h** Each prison should increase participation in physical education activities to the highest proportion of prisoners as is practicable given the prison's facilities. All physical education departments should consult prisoners over which activities they would like to take part in and then offering them if suitable; promote activities which involve greater participation; and target specific groups who would otherwise be reluctant to participate such as the over 50's and foreign nationals.
- i** All prisons should provide exercise opportunities in the evenings and at weekends to increase participation of prisoners who work or attend educational classes full time during the week.
- j** Prisoners should have equality of opportunity to access physical education activities in each prison, including vulnerable prisoners, as far as is commensurate with maintaining good order and the privileges system in place in each prison.
- k** The Prison Service needs to take a strategic view of staffing for physical education instruction across the whole estate. Governors could be helped in determining how many instructors they require and their level of training if up to date guidelines on standard ratios of staff to prisoners were in place.
- l** The Prison Service should consider whether all physical education instructors in a prison need to be officers. There is scope for cost savings in some prisons by employing civilians as instructors where the risks to security and control are less, such as open prisons.