

January 2024

Food Matters in Prisons

Executive Summary



food
matters

inside & out

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Executive Summary

The World Health Organisation has emphasised the importance of seeing prisons as whole food systems. In this paper, Food Matters highlights numerous opportunities for food to play a broader role in prison life.

In January 2023, Food Matters organised a roundtable workshop to discuss the issue of food in prisons, involving experts from the voluntary sector, academia, and individuals with lived prison experience. The central theme was the significant role of food in prisons and its impact on the lives of those held in them. We coupled the findings from this workshop with a review of related policy and literature in an interim paper which was shared with key stakeholders, including His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, the Care Quality Commission, the Independent Monitoring Board, Clinks and other voluntary sector organisations.

This paper explores the crucial role of food in shaping prisoners' identities and relationships and its potential to have positive impacts in prisons, including fostering relationships; promoting education, exercise and meaningful activities; enhancing cultural understanding improving physical and mental health; enhancing safety; and reducing reoffending. Food Matters has concluded that food should move from being a functional aspect of prisons to become a focal point for various activities and improvements to prison regimes.

Key findings and considerations include:

1. **Opportunities for building on existing initiatives:** Positive initiatives related to food and nutrition have been undertaken in prisons by voluntary sector organisations, supported by HMPPS and/or individual governors and more recently by HMPPS itself in promoting self-production initiatives and creating healthy recipes. However, limited resources and short-term funding have hindered the sustainability and long-term impact of these efforts. There is potential for collectively sharing best practices and building an evidence base for food and growing-related initiatives across prisons.
2. **Opportunities for greater transparency over food quality, standards and sustainability** following strengthened government commitments to adopting sustainable food procurement, the introduction of new nutritional guidance for public catering and requirements for data reporting on food procurement and waste. More broadly, there is potential for widespread adoption of mainstream public health initiatives in prisons, including accreditation schemes for caterers and food suppliers. There is also scope for enhanced independent inspection and parliamentary oversight to encourage more creative approaches to be taken, building on a thematic review that explored the role of food in connection, comfort, and mental health support in prisons.
3. **Opportunities for HMPPS to adopt a strategic approach to developing food-related initiatives, integrated within a range of policies and practices** such as rehabilitation, learning and skills development, family ties, and well-being and ensure that opportunities for self-catering, communal dining, and sustainable food production are maximised in redevelopment and new building projects.

Conclusions and recommendations

We have considered how the collective endeavours and experiences of those involved in aspects of food provision in prisons in England and Wales can shine a light on how best to promote the importance of good food and nutrition and how this could be maximised within prison life.

The literature review and roundtable discussion brings together a wealth of ideas about **how food in prisons can become a focal point rather than simply a function of prison regimes**. This report highlights the multifaceted role of food in prisons and the significant potential for the positive change that food could offer in terms of nutrition, food quality, and overall well-being of people in prison. Improvements in food standards, sustainability, nutritional education and activities related to understanding, preparing and sharing food are essential for creating healthier, more meaningful prison environments.

The report's key recommendations for prison food system change.

- An His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) cross-cutting strategy, like those for drugs and family ties, would provide an opportunity for food, nutrition, and wellbeing to be integrated more widely into existing operational and strategic policies and to develop prison food systems so that food becomes a focal point rather than solely a function.
- Future procurement contracts for catering and canteen could provide greater flexibility around procuring local and seasonal produce.
- The implementation of the updated Government Buying Standards for food and catering services (GBSF) will provide opportunities to improve the understanding of people in prison about the importance of food choices for good nutrition and sustainability.
- The proposed introduction by Defra of data reporting and monitoring on buying standards should provide additional transparency and scrutiny which will enable greater understanding of the extent to which HMPPS adheres to the standards and related nutritional standards.
- Plans for more effective use of current prison spaces, and future prison buildings should be built with food production and preparation in mind, including food sustainability projects, self-catering options and communal dining being offered as standard in newly built prisons and large-scale expansions or refurbishments.
- The provision of education and skills should include access to opportunities for people in prison to learn cooking, gardening, and other life skills, as well as work-focused skills, as part of the core curriculum and think creatively about how food related activities can provide purposeful activity.
- Publications aimed at the prison audience, in-cell technology and prison radio should be used more to promote nutritional awareness education and recipes.
- Peer supporters who can act as food champions should be introduced more widely across the prison estate.

- There should be much more research on food in prisons, the various roles it plays and how the benefits of food might be realised more broadly to develop the evidence base about the dietary health of people in prison and the impact of existing growing, culinary skills, cooking and nutritional awareness projects.
- It is important that there is robust, ongoing monitoring of food standards through the Inspectorates. There is scope for His Majesty's Inspector of Prisons (HMIP), Ofsted, and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) to review their expectations to ensure that prisons are inspected against a wider range of opportunities to promote health, wellbeing and inclusion through food, and to report in such a way that access to healthy food both via catering facilities and the canteen are consistently included in inspection findings.
- Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) are well-placed to improve to our understanding of the quality and quantity of food in prisons, perceptions of the menu, canteen and self-catering options, and the extent to which food is a focal point rather than a function.
- A cross-Committee inquiry on the role of food in prison by the Health and Social Care Committee and Justice Committee and for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs Committee would provide helpful scrutiny of both the impact on prisons of the updated Government Buying Standards at a suitable period of time once they are implemented and the extent to which opportunities to make food a focal point are being maximised to improve prison regimes.

Annex 1 - Expert Organisations participating in the Food Matters Roundtable Workshop

Butler Trust

Clinks

Do It Justice

Food Behind Bars

Food Matters

Garden Organic

Howard League

Independent Monitoring Boards

Inside Time

Royal Holloway, University of London

The Clink Charity

Think Through Nutrition

University of Plymouth

Women in Prison

Annex 2 – Glossary of key terms

This table is comprised of a list of words and acronyms which may be used within this report for reference.

BMI	Body Mass Index
CQC	Care Quality Commission
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
EFRA	Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs
GBSF	Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services
GOOP	Greener on the Outside
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point
HMIP	His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons
HMP	His Majesty's Prison
HMPPS	His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service
IMB	Independent Monitoring Board
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
NOMS	National Offender Management System
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
OHID	Office for Health Improvement and Disparities
PHE	Public Health England
PSI	Prison Service Instruction
WHO	World Health Organisation
YOI	Young Offenders Institute

Annex 3 – Reference list

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food matters

sustainable, fair food systems

Food Matters was set up in 2004 to combat the inequalities in the food system. We create opportunities to bring about changes to see healthy, sustainable, fair food become a reality for everybody, every day.

Our work focusses on food system transformation through person centred action and advocacy. We aim to create food systems that enhance health and wellbeing, nourish the environment, reduce inequalities and promote social justice.

- We ensure people and communities are at the heart of food system transformation by using participatory approaches to take action at every level to empower people and make better food policy.
- We support people to develop skills, knowledge and confidence so they feel empowered to take control over decisions that affect their lives and their food choices.
- We believe that change happens when policy interventions align with people's ability to make change happen.

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