Improving the dining experience in schools

school food top marks

Contents

Introduction

Benefits of improving pupils' dining experience

This guidance booklet brings together ideas and suggestions for your school to help improve the experience pupils have at lunch time.

With the exception of voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools, school meal provision and accommodation is the responsibility of the education and library boards (ELBs).

If you are considering implementing any of the ideas or solutions within this booklet, please contact the catering service at your ELB, which will be happy to help. If your school is planning a new build or a renovation, consider the common issues within this booklet and try to address them at the planning stage.

Improving pupils' dining experience will have a positive impact on the uptake of school meals and the wider school day.

The main benefit your school can expect from improving the dining experience for pupils is a happier and calmer population of children and young people. Improving the dining experience at lunch time will also:

• encourage positive behaviour among pupils;

• support increased uptake of free school meals;

• make a significant contribution to your health and wellbeing inspection.

What is a good school dining experience?

Good use of colour, images, messages, information, well-planned seating and music can have an enormous effect on the sense of 'space' in a dining area.

Pupils' surroundings can have an impact on their sense of wellbeing, and in terms of changing the culture, ethos and understanding of healthy eating messages, schools have found that focusing on their dining rooms is invaluable.

But there is no simple solution and no 'one size fits all'. One school's noisy atmosphere is another's happening buzz. Round tables may work in one school, while tall stools may be the solution in another. However, no amount of good seating and attractive menus and displays at any school will tempt the pupils to eat healthier food if they are frustrated by having to spend too much time queuing during their lunch break.

Like everyone else, children and young people will appreciate and be motivated by the right atmosphere and organisation in their dining space. To develop healthier eating habits pupils must respect and enjoy the environment they sit in.

A successful dining space is all about good design. Just as important is the need for clear leadership and a shared vision of what will work. A lot of valuable adjustments can be made with only modest changes and a small amount of funds.

Step by step plan

1. Getting started

Any changes to improve the overall school dining experience needs to have everyone's support. A great way to ensure this happens is to adopt a whole school approach, where you can develop an ethos that supports and promotes health and wellbeing and the participation of everyone within the school community.

Assess the need

Before implementing any changes to the school dining experience, assess what needs to be done. Use surveys and discussions to identify what the problems are and any clear solutions. This could be achieved at an assembly, parents' evening or via the school newsletter. Make a point of observing the dining room experience. Make notes and take pictures to record the areas for improvements. The results will help provide information on whether pupils and parents want changes to the dining experience. For inspiration, visit other dining spaces, cafés and restaurants. Take in the views of the whole school community, including pupils, teachers, caterers and dining room supervisors.

Form an action group

An enthusiastic action group made up from members of the school community will be essential to follow through with any changes. Senior management support and involvement will ensure the success of any changes you make.

Many schools decide to organise dining experience improvements through their school council or by forming a school nutrition action group (SNAG). The group should involve:

- a senior member or adviser from the catering service;
- a representative from the senior school management team;
- pupils from the school council or the SNAG, if in place;
- a parent representative;
- a representative from the board of governors;
- a teacher who has responsibility for health and wellbeing.

Also consider support from the wider community, for example local businesses and health professionals such as community dietitians and school nurses.

Step by step plan

Make proposals

All the information your group gathers needs to be made into key action points that your school would like to take forward and present to senior management. There is a need to be realistic. Changes take time and commitment and can require additional funding. Ensure that your outcomes are achievable.

If additional funding is required, speak to the catering manager at your ELB or senior management team member. Other areas for funding may include your parent teachers association.

Implement and review actions

You will need to focus on the budget you have available to make the changes and meet regularly to monitor the progress of your action plan. You will need to evaluate the changes made and any impact they have had on pupils and the school.

2. Providing a good dining space

Children and young people are more likely to eat a healthy meal at school if they have a seat and a table. A good dining space is an excellent opportunity to give them an experience of a dining situation, which they may or may not get at home. It also promotes social skills and a time to sit and eat with friends, providing time away from the pressures of the classroom.

Maximising space

If the dining area is used as a multi-purpose area, consider purchasing new furniture. There are options available for foldable and 'stationary chairs'. Contact the catering manager at your ELB, or the appropriate member of staff within grant maintained integrated and voluntary grammar schools with responsibility for the dining room and its furniture. A discussion with this person may help you to maximise the number of seats available while still having sufficient room for pupils to move freely about the dining room.

Extra indoor space

Is there room to have extra indoor dining space elsewhere? This needn't be next door to the kitchen. You may want an extra dining space as an option for older age groups. There are ways that you can make space that is used for other purposes feel like a dining space during lunch break. Speak to your catering manager, as food hygiene and health and safety issues need careful consideration when exploring this option and may impact on the provision of meals.

Outside space

If not already in place, is there some outside space which could be used? You could look at areas of the playground which are underused, consider setting up an awning to add shade on sunny days, or to protect when it's raining.

Mobile food server

Discuss with the catering service the possibility of providing additional food service areas. These can be soup urns on trolleys, or 'grab and go' options for healthy sandwiches, salad bars and baked potatoes. Ensure there are seats and tables available.

Case studies

- In a new, large post-primary school the kitchen has been designed in such a way that the dedicated sixth form area can be serviced throughout the day by the same kitchen from a separate service point. The pupils have been consulted about the furniture, which will include a range of more modern cafeteria style options.

- An integrated post-primary school has extended their dining room to include space outside. The school has provided wooden tables and benches for pupils to eat their lunch outside. This outside area is used throughout the year despite our weather!

Step by step plan

Making the dining space feel inviting

Place of relaxation

Set your action group an aim to understand, from the customer's point of view, what will make the dining room a place of relaxation and comfort.

Name the dining space

Have a competition to give the dining space a name, like a café or restaurant. It promotes references to meeting and eating there. Create an art project to decorate the dining space, in keeping with the new name.

Display pupils' artwork

Consider putting up pupils' artwork or other display work and changing it regularly based on themes or projects in your school. You may wish to choose local artwork to represent the theme of the dining area. Introduce a themed table, giving each class a turn over the year to be responsible for this.

Soft music

Depending on the acoustics in the dining space, music can either add or detract from the noise levels. If the acoustics are right, soft music has been found to relax children and young people, and can encourage them to reduce the noise levels so that the music can be heard. The music selections need to be sensible, but can be a useful incentive for pupils if they are allowed to choose what is played.

Temperature

Review the temperature: is it too hot or too cold, does this change with the seasons? Speak to those who are responsible for the space and look at practical solutions such as heaters, coolers or covering bright windows in summer with adjustable blinds.

Colour of the walls

If your dining room is to be painted, consider what colour to use. The colour of the paint can help to cool or warm the room or affect the feeling of space. A new bright colour on just one wall or a section could help.

Defined zones

A good way to make a large space feel more comfortable and interesting is to have different zones or spaces defined. This is particularly useful if you have different age groups to cater for, or pupils with differing needs. This can be done with different colours, furniture and furnishings. Post-primary schools might consider using long walls or room dividers to create spaces where bars with high stools provide a different type of space to eat in. However, be careful this does not cut out space or light.

Younger pupils

In both primary and secondary schools it is important to think about the youngest members of the school. Look at ways to introduce them into the busy dining area gently. Have a dedicated seating area which is away from the hustle and bustle of the queues and servery. Some schools have set up 'buddy' systems where older pupils provide extra support to younger pupils.

Case study

A large primary school has been running a successful breakfast club. Over 70 children attend. It wanted to look at making the breakfast club more inviting to all children. Through help from their Parent Teachers Association, the school invested in a large plasma TV and CD player. There are separate areas where children can finish off their homework, read, play games or just chat.

Step by step plan

Making a room used for other purposes feel like a dining area

Stackable tables

These are commonly found in schools where the dining room is used as a multi-purpose area. Find tables which can be easily stacked or stored away, so they can be put in the corner or in a storeroom. Some tables come with wheels to make it easy to transport them, though these will need a larger storage area.

Tablecloths and settings

Use tablecloths on service and display areas as a quick and easy way to change the atmosphere of a room. Pictures of brightly coloured fruit and vegetables on vinyl tablecloths will reinforce the healthy eating message, and they can also be wiped clean. Why not have a competition to design the school tablecloth or placemats?

Menu boards

Menu boards can allow pupils to see quickly what's on offer. After lunch try displaying tomorrow's menu outside the dining room. Menu boards can be colourful and fun. Speak to your catering service if you would like to consider this option.

Decoration

If the hall is used for other activities, such as physical education or drama, consider decorating the hall with a joint theme. Why not have a sports café theme, or a theme from a play or a Shakespeare or Harry Potter production?

Planning

If practical, avoid planning activities for your hall immediately before or after lunch time. This will reduce pressure on catering staff for clearing away tables, and lessen the possibility of children and young people rushing their meals.

3. Managing lunch times

Staggered lunch times

If you have to provide lunch to a large group of pupils, you may want to introduce a staggered system. Here are a number of different ways a staggered system can help:

- Have one lunch time period when everyone is on a break, but stagger the times when pupils arrive into the dining room.
- Have a set amount of time allocated to lunch for each year group, but stagger the start times of these lunch time periods.
- Some schools have had success with planning a timetable where the start times of lunch are staggered around the last morning lesson, so that pupils start their lunch before, during or after their last morning lesson, depending on which day of the week it is. So, on some days pupils will have a lunch that starts halfway through their lesson, and they would come back to finish the lesson after lunch. This allows you to mix year groups easily and ensure that there is an even spread of earlier and later lunch times for everyone throughout the week.

When looking at staggering, ensure that the system you set up is flexible enough to allow children and young people to relax and enjoy their food.

Review length of lunch break

It may be that your lunch break could be extended. Review the reasons for the timing of your current lunch break. Has it just always been that way, or has it been changed to manage behaviour? If it has been to manage behaviour consider other ways to approach the issue.

Increasingly schools are shortening lunch breaks. This can be counterproductive, leading to stressed pupils who have had little time to digest their food, relax and recover to concentrate in afternoon lessons.

Introduce a cashless system

A cashless system can speed up the buying process and is particularly useful in larger post-primary dining rooms. This can be done using biometric or swipecard systems. If your school meal service is provided by the ELB, specific funding needs to be discussed and agreed.

Step by step plan

Multiple points

Speak to your catering service about providing multiple points at which young people can choose and collect their food as well as multiple points at which to pay. Have a separate queue to pay and a separate queue for choosing. Staffing costs and space will need to be considered.

Label food

This enhances presentation and when pupils get to the food counter it will reduce time and repetitive questions asked of the canteen staff. This will also be an opportunity to show whether particular meals meet special requirements such as nut allergies.

Meal deals

Consider introducing meal deals, where a whole meal (perhaps consisting of a hot dish, a piece of fruit and a drink) are set at one slightly reduced price. This reduces choice time and can encourage young people to take healthier meals, particularly if favourably priced.

Circulate the menu

Circulate the menu to everyone before they get to the dining hall. This will reduce the time taken to choose what to have. Post a large sign advertising the meals that day, or that week, outside the dining hall. Some schools send menus round at lesson times and many schools send menus home. This is a good way to inform parents about how their money is being spent. Where available, plasma screens can be used for displaying and promoting the catering service.

Grab and go

To speed up the process of getting a meal, look at providing 'grab and go' menu items, which can be quickly picked up and taken to the till. This can work for healthy food options. Provide a variation of grab and go items day to day to ensure nutritional balance throughout the week. Speak to your catering service regarding this.

Pre-ordering system

Speak to your catering service regarding this system. It is particularly useful for those who have extra-curricular activities during their lunch times. The catering service may need to consider a separate collection and pay point, or to introduce a separate service for those doing special activities such as school council meetings. Primary schools might consider letting the pupils choose their meals during registration and giving them coloured stickers to show their choice when they go up for their lunch.

4. Encouraging healthy eating

Involve the pupils

Involve pupils in the process of planning their lunch times and the food available. They will appreciate the importance of lunch time and have a greater feeling of ownership. As they are the customers, lunch time should feel like their service.

Design the menu

Have a competition, or classes could take turns on designing and displaying the weekly menu. This will attract attention to the food and the dining space.

Taster session

Have taster sessions for parents and pupils regularly, and encourage pupils to try a little of something new whenever possible. With patience, their palates can change and they will be less likely to say no to new things in the future.

Attractive food presentation

Ensure that the food looks fresh and has not been on display too long. Have an attractive servery, and dish up from serving dishes if possible. An attractive salad bar near the till will often encourage children and young people to take a little bit of salad with their meal.

Promote social interaction

Allow pupils having packed lunches and hot meals to sit together. This will promote social interaction and allow friends to socialise while eating. It will also ensure that pupils do not have to make a decision about whether to eat school dinners or packed lunch based on sitting with their friends.

Step by step plan

Promote the food

This can be done on special occasions or perhaps by introducing a regular themed day. Some schools have special events such as food festivals, to promote the work they have done on meals. The more school food is promoted outside the school, the more likely pupils will want to be involved.

Reward healthy eating

Incentives and reward schemes to promote good behaviour and healthy eating choices are operating successfully in many primary and post-primary schools. Support this by having rules or targets for healthy eating to ensure pupils are aware of what is expected from them.

Case study

A voluntary grammar school in Dungannon has introduced an incentive to promote healthy eating. The SNAG organises a healthy eating competition linked to the cashless system in the school dining room. Pupils may build up bonus points on their own personal accounts when they purchase healthier snacks or meals such as fruit, vegetables or the daily 'healthy special'. Prizes are awarded at the end of each term to those in each key stage who have gained most bonus points.

5. Meeting everyone's needs

Free school meals

In some, but not all schools, there can be a stigma around collecting free school meals. If it is an issue in your school then using cashless or ticket systems for all pupils may be solutions to consider.

Special educational needs and disability

Dining spaces should meet the needs of all pupils including those with special educational needs (SEN) and disability, whether they can access the space independently or with assistance. It is essential to consult these pupils about their needs, and also to consult their parents, teachers and support staff.

Planning considerations should cover issues such as queuing and paying systems, viewing food options at eye level, and accessing seating areas. Pupils should be encouraged to make their own lunch choices. Dining spaces may require more space or a flexible layout to allow access for independent wheelchair users and their carers, to sit and dine alongside others.

Dining together is a social experience, promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion. Review the provision for pupils with special educational needs bringing lunchboxes. Can they sit in the room with their friends, or are they separated? Can they purchase additional items at lunch time? However, some pupils may need a more sheltered environment with screened dining spaces offering some privacy and a quiet calm space with subdued colours.

Cultural issues

Work with your caterers to consider the needs of vegetarians, vegans, and cultural requirements such as halal, or kosher food. Include a needs assessment in a pupil survey to get a better understanding of your school's cultural needs. Clear labelling will help the children and young people make appropriate choices.

Food issues

There are a number of different food issues which can impact on some people's experience of eating meals. Consider how those who suffer from eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia, those with food allergies, food phobias or people who are overweight or obese experience lunch time. Balance an understanding of their needs with ensuring they do not feel alienated or set apart from other pupils.

Step by step plan

6. Gaining support from parents

Newsletters

Write to parents about any changes to the menu and update them through your newsletters. If not doing so already, send the menus home, or put them in a prominent place so they can see what their money is being spent on.

Always ask for feedback

This will allow you to know what is working and what can be improved, as well as providing an opportunity to clear up any misconceptions about the service you provide.

Invite parents for lunch

Invite parents to join lunch times with the pupils if they want to. This could be on a particular day of the week, or if you are able, any day of the week. You would need to consider the cost implication for additional meals.

Invite parents for taster sessions

Invite parents in for taster sessions during or after school, or in the evening. It is a great opportunity to involve the catering team in the event, to talk about any changes which have been introduced to the food service, and get direct feedback from the parents. To maximise attendance, hold taster sessions as part of other parent events, eg Year 1 and Year 8 induction evenings.

Involve parents

Involve parents in the process of developing the changes you plan to make. Some schools have had special events such as food festivals or theme days, to promote the work they have done on meals. This could also be an opportunity to collect funds as well as raise awareness.

Parental concern

Let parents know when you are addressing special issues. There may be fears that you can easily alleviate, eg by letting parents know what you are doing to ensure meals are allergy friendly.
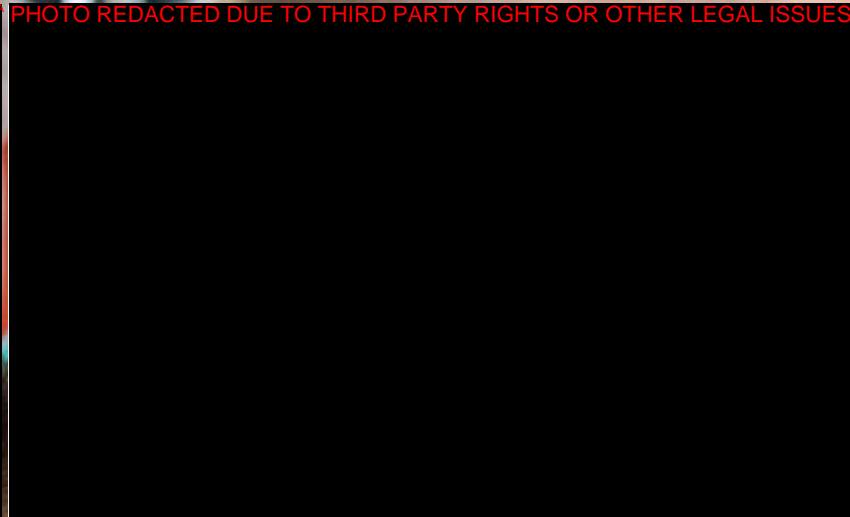
7. Providing the time to eat

Length of lunch break

As discussed on page 11 the length of your lunch break can impact on pupils in a number of ways.

Working lunches

Lunch times are often used for extracurricular activities, such as sports, clubs or groups. Consider providing working lunches for clubs and groups, such as the school council meeting. This will aid social interactions within these groups, increase their time to eat meals, and reduce queues for the rest of the school.

Eating and social times

Allocate specific eating times and social times. This is particularly successful in primary schools as it ensures that children do not rush their food for play, and learn to relax and enjoy social time in the dining room.

Case study

Several primary schools in the Western Education and Library Board area ran a scheme where they invited parents and grandparents to lunch. They were invited in on different days depending on the year group their child was in. The parents and grandparents were happy to pay for the school meal and sat with their child. The experience was enjoyed by all and it provided an opportunity for parents to see what the school's catering service provided. Many parents were unaware of the choices available. Schools that took part in the scheme noticed an increase in pupils taking lunches following the event.
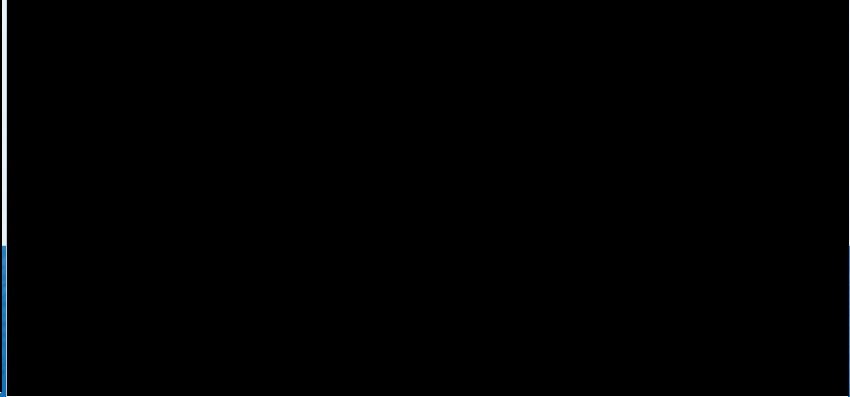
Step by step plan

8. Promoting good behaviour

Sense of ownership

This will be reinforced even further if young people have a sense of ownership over their dining room. Look at ways to ensure that pupils are involved in the process of designing any new features and future updates in the dining room.

Remove tension

Look at ways to remove tension from the dining experience. For example, children and young people can feel rushed if, while they are still eating lunch, supervisors come and clear away tables. Queues can also be tense.

Promote social skills

In both primary and post-primary schools it is important to think about the youngest members of the school. If you are able to promote social skills, such as table manners, and familiarise them with the process of the school meal in an open and non-threatening way, they will be able to carry this into their future years at school.

Dining room rules

Spend time in assembly making links between your school rules and dining room behaviour. Alternatively, develop a dedicated set of dining room rules. This will ensure that pupils will know what is expected from them at lunch time and rules can be referred to by staff present in the dining room to reinforce and promote good behaviour.

Teachers mixing with pupils

Look at getting teachers involved by, for example, encouraging them to sit among the pupils. Sensitivities to the needs of teachers to have their own break should be considered. Teachers in schools who have successfully done this speak of the great benefits to the children and young people, and staff-pupil relationships.

School dining experience checklist

✔ Have you identified the changes needed in the dining room?

✔ Have you involved the school council or SNAG?

✔ Have you talked to the senior management team and got their support?

✔ Have you talked to the school catering service?

✔ Are you clear about what you want to achieve?

✔ Is additional funding needed?

✔ Have you made the best use of the dining space?

✔ Have you made the dining space feel like a dining room, when it needs to be used for other purposes too?

✔ Have you made the space feel inviting?

✔ Have you made queues as short as possible?

✔ Have you ensured that pupils have enough time to sit and eat while still keeping behaviour in check?

✔ Do you encourage pupils to enjoy healthy options?

✔ Do you inform parents about menu changes and get their support?

✔ Have you ensured everyone's needs are met?

✔ Have you planned how you are going to monitor and evaluate the impact of the changes made?

Case studies

- One primary school in North Belfast has introduced a 'golden table' to reward good behaviour from children in the dining room. Every Friday the best behaved pupils sit at a special table with a tablecloth, flowers and fancy glasses!

- When a post-primary school dining room was refurbished, the pupils were involved in the choice of furniture, floor and wall colours. As a result, there was a sense of ownership of the environment and everyone still comments on how well the area looks today.

Integrating with other school food projects

There are many natural links which can be made to other school food projects, depending on your school. Links to improving dining provision could include:

- Encouraging pupils to make their own breakfast club corner or café in the dining room.

- Ensuring that water is freely available and promoted to all pupils in the dining room. You could consider incentives to encourage increased water consumption.

- Making sure that, if there is a vending machine in the dining room, it is fully stocked for the lunch-time service, helping to reduce queues and waiting times.

- Using posters or pupils' art projects to promote healthier eating messages in the dining space.

Curriculum links

The dining room environment provides a context for a wide variety of curriculum links.

Primary

The arts

Pupils could design a mural, sculpture or mosaic for the dining room wall (you may be able to engage the school community to help plan and paint the artwork). Pupils could help to develop a new area to display the menu.

Personal development and mutual understanding

Pupils could design a questionnaire to gather opinions from their peers and from staff regarding improvements needed to the dining room.

Mathematics and numeracy

When drawing up plans to improve the dining room environment, pupils will be using and applying numeracy skills and problem-solving strategies.

Language and literacy

Why not encourage pupils to write a poem, song or short story based on what they eat and drink? This can be displayed in the dining room.

Post-primary

The arts

Art and design – a wonderful opportunity for pupils to use their creativity and imagination. Colour, form, texture, pattern and different materials and processes can all be used to create an attractive and stimulating social environment.

Music – encourage pupils to compose or produce musical pieces around food and drink that could be performed or played in the dining room. Why not plan a CD of suitable music for the dining room?

Science and technology

Using a digital camera to record the dining room environment before the make-over, pupils could collect feedback from users regarding suggestions to promote accessibility, social aspects of eating or help to reduce queuing.

**Learning for life and work**

Local and global citizenship – involve pupils in a school council or SNAG providing a forum where their views and opinions will matter and count towards change.

Personal development – developing social skills by eating and drinking with friends and peers in the dining room.

For further advice and suggestions go to:

www.ccea.org.uk

www.nicurriculum.org.uk

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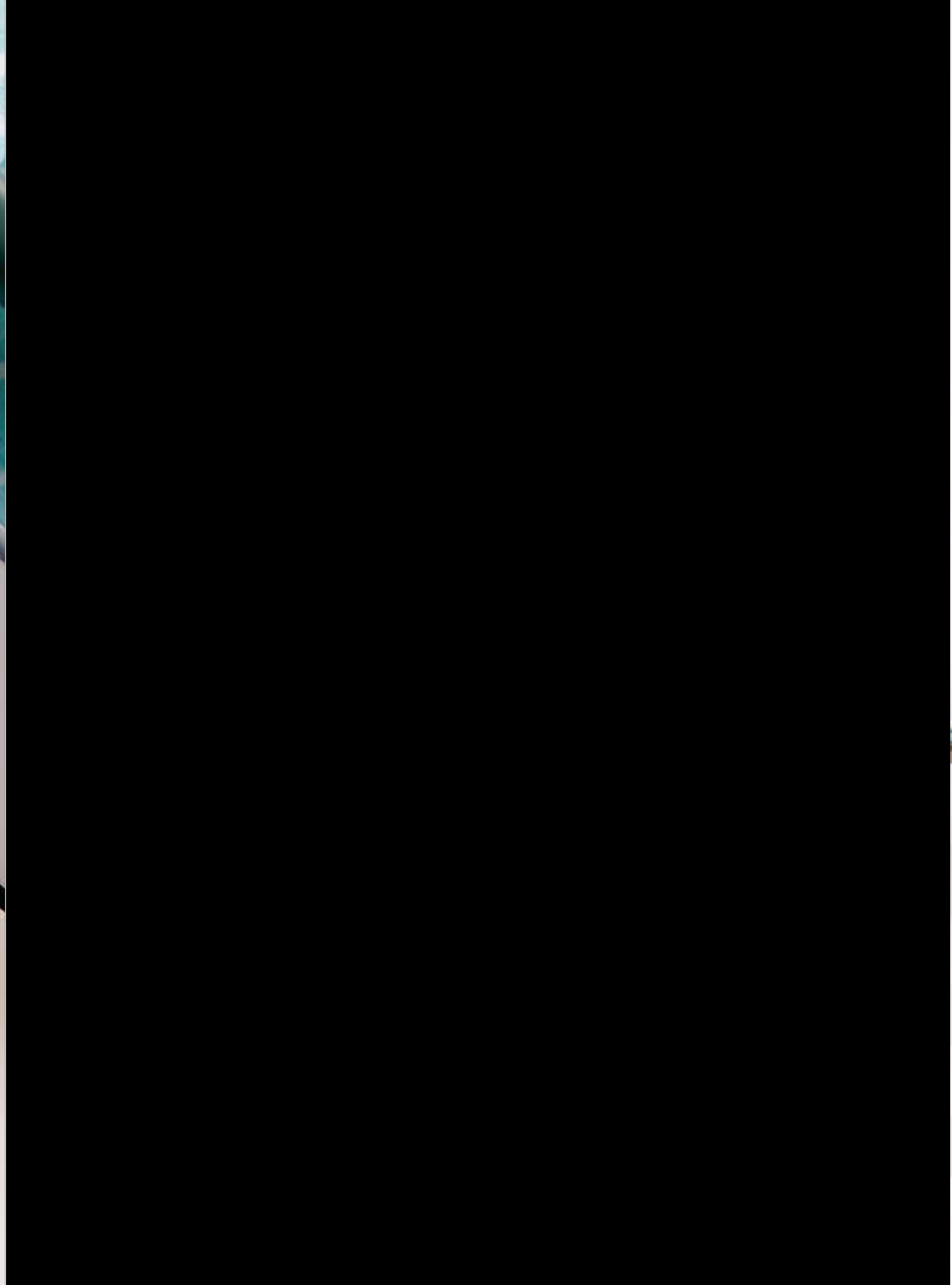
Sources of further information

The following list provides links to further resources and information that may support you in improving your dining room environment.

The Department of Education

www.deni.gov.uk

The Department of Education's website provides information on the planning and designing of school buildings.

The Design Council

www.designcouncil.org.uk

The Design Council site provides details of work done in partnership with the Department for Children, Schools and Families in England.

The Northern Ireland School Caterers Association

www.nisca.info

The Northern Ireland School Caterers Association (NISCA) was formed in January 2002. Until that date Northern Ireland was one of nine regions of the Local Authority Caterers Association (LACA), the professional body representing catering managers and suppliers who provide services to all sectors of local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland.
See: www.laca.co.uk