When the announcement was made about Universal Infant Free School meals, Haddenham St Mary’s school, at the time a small rural school in Haddenham Bucks with 90 children had no school meals provision and no kitchen. The headteacher, Karen Collett had attended an inspiring and thought provoking conference about school food at Charlton Manor Primary school, Greenwich. Myles Bremner, director of the school food plan spoke at the conference and Karen was immediately interested in the school food plan and how to make it work for her school.

Over eighty schools in Buckinghamshire had no kitchen facilities and so for these schools the implementation of UIFSM was a tall order particularly with the small budgets that they also cope with .The county council had put together a plan to build a large central hub that would deliver meals to these schools. However, Karen did not feel that this would meet the requirements of the school food plan and was not in the best interests of the children at the school.

The school had no funds at the time to build a kitchen but luckily parents were hugely supportive so Karen set up a ‘food and growing group’ to raise money to build the kitchen. The group met regularly to raise funds to build the kitchen and also dug allotments to start growing produce within the school to begin to supplement meals. Karen contacted local businesses to see if there were any funds available and luckily a local property developer, Rectory Homes in Haddenham agreed to support the project with an extremely generous donation. It must be noted that without this fundraising and donation, it would not have been possible for the kitchen to be built.

Schools in Bucks were then invited to bid for a share of government funding to implement UIFSM. After much research into how much a kitchen would cost, with the help of the children’s food trust, the school put together a bid and submitted it awaiting a decision from the county council.

The proposal was to:

Extend and equip an existing dilapidated kitchen in order to be able to provide a financially sound school meals service that provides healthy nutritional meals to all its pupils and the adjoining preschool including those eligible for the vulnerable two year old funding.

The kitchen and existing dining room would be part of a whole school approach to provide children with good food and a great social eating experience. At Haddenham St Mary’s we are committed to making a difference and believe that if children learn to eat well, they will eat well as adults. We also believe that children who eat well learn well.

By having a fully equipped school kitchen, the school aimed to create an incredible food culture through a fabulous food service, brilliant food education including growing fruit and veg and keeping animals. It would help put health, wellbeing and personalised learning at the centre of the school, inspiring children to grow, cook and taste food.

Having a school kitchen and implementing UIFSM in house would improve the school's food culture -with a strong focus on a practical curriculum, putting children at the centre of decision making and sourcing local and organic food.

We would also be enabled to involve our whole school community by giving parents and other stakeholders the opportunity to volunteer, taste food and eat with pupils.

We felt that with a fully equipped kitchen, we would be able to provide wholesome meals with a menu designed by our children. The produce would be sourced locally and supplemented with our own vegetables from our kitchen garden.

The County council came back with the decision that they would supply the funds providing that the school served two or more other local rural schools.

Schools were approached and three local schools signed up. The kitchen was built and ‘Home made at Haddenham St Mary’s was born! The schools that signed up to the project are very much part of the whole picture and they strive to work together to:

* Provide wholesome, homemade food for their children
* Encourage children to try new foods
* Help children to understand where their food comes from
* Provide a sociable dining experience
* Develop a ‘love’ of food
* Help children achieve better in the afternoons because they have good food in their tummies

Since January Homemade@ Haddenham has been supplying over 300 children with food every day. It has been a huge challenge in the tight time frame to get the hub kitchen up and running. Staff recruitment and training was an issue as well as transportation of the meals. Haddenham St Marys is extremely proud to say that it is living out it’s dream by giving all of these children the opportunity to eat wholesome, healthy meals each day that are cooked fresh using their own produce and that from local suppliers.

The school has found that implementing a ‘waiter system’ whereby pupils help distribute the meals – and clean up after – has given children responsibility and helped develop a sociable dining experience with a restaurant feel. Children have been open to trying a variety of foods and their nutritionally balanced midday meal has had a visible impact on afternoon concentration levels.

We are so pleased that our children can benefit from these meals and that we can also serve neighbouring schools. As Raymond Blanc said when we opened our kitchen ‘We have built a truly professional catering space’. We are thankful to all the sources from which we obtained funds.We managed to secure funding and grants for most of it but Rectory Homes kindly agreed to donate monies that completed the circle. For that we are most grateful.