



# Executive summary

## Survey shows hospital food is still letting patients down

In a major indictment of the state of hospital food in this country a new survey for the Soil Association has revealed that nearly two thirds (63%) of people have bought in food from outside hospitals because the meals they were served were unappetising. Over a third (35%) say they think hospital food is unacceptable and over half (53%) would not be happy serving the meals they were given to a child.

This backs up the findings of an independent research report for the Soil Association which has found that hospital food's rotten reputation is, in most cases, richly deserved. We all too frequently have food that would be more appropriate to a disease service than a health service.

This is not the first survey to reveal the poor state of hospital food. In fact every independent survey of hospital food since 1963 has concluded that NHS food is neither appetising nor nutritious.

However, what is new is that the research for the Soil Association also uncovered a completely different picture in some hospitals. We have found a significant number of examples of strikingly good practice: well-run hospitals, where those in charge,

and their skilled and committed catering staff, understand the importance of good quality, nutritious and satisfying food. In these hospitals, the food makes a positive contribution to patients' well being and staff morale.

## Good food is possible on a tight budget

Those running hospital trusts with unhealthy food say they cannot afford better quality, but the hospitals that are doing a brilliant job are not necessarily those spending the most on their food service. One hospital saved £6 million a year by cooking with fresh, local ingredients; another sources yoghurt from a local supplier for two thirds of the price of the nationally approved supplier.

A recent national review by Deloitte found that local and seasonal food did not generally cost more, and can cost less, and in 2002, the Audit Commission noted that higher cost hospital food did not necessarily equate with better food – hospitals spending half as much as the highest were often able to provide better quality food than those spending more.

Buying locally delivers huge dividends to local economies – in Cornwall, hospital spending of over £1 million with Cornwall suppliers generated an additional £900,000 for the local economy.

Hospitals may resist changing their food because they claim it is all too complicated, as they are being asked to make food healthier, source it locally and reduce their climate impact all at once. In fact, these priorities can go hand in hand. Moving to healthier

diets means moving to more environmentally friendly food.

The best hospitals' food is good for patients, good for NHS staff, good for British farmers and food businesses – good for Britain. But the majority of hospitals are delivering hospital food that is bad for patients, bad for staff and bad for Britain.

## Getting it right from the bottom up: the Food for Life Catering Mark

There has been a catalogue of failed attempts by Governments to put things right. In 2010, Sustain found that failed hospital food initiatives had wasted over £50 million in the last ten years. Now new Government Buying Standards on health and sustainability are being applied to the food on offer in Government departments, but not in our hospitals.

So who will put an end to this sorry tale of failure, and give patients the quality of food they deserve in a health service?

Hospital trusts can and must now take the initiative. The successful hospitals in this report are doing what any decent health service should do – leading by example. Their experience shows that giving hospital food the priority it deserves need not cost more, it benefits patients, improves health outcomes, benefits the local communities the hospitals serve, and provides vital support for British farming.

The Soil Association's Food for Life Catering Mark is a voluntary award scheme that offers a pragmatic step-by-step framework for transforming food



**"Hospital food – one word – yuck!"**

# Executive summary

provision and achieving these goals. The scheme was developed and piloted in hospitals with support from the Department of Health. The Food for Life Catering Mark has already been awarded to caterers serving over 250,000 meals a day in schools, hospitals, care homes, nurseries, sports venues, and restaurants in the UK.

A key benefit for hospitals adopting the Food for Life Catering Mark is the transparency and trust that an independently audited award provides for hospital staff and patients. What the hospital is achieving is clear, and any claims the hospital makes about its food are independently verified.

## Recommendations

### Hospital trusts should

- ▶ Improve transparency and patient accountability by publishing information about the quality of food provided in their hospitals. This information should include measures of patient satisfaction, the food budget per patient per day and any independent verification of standards, for example by the Food for Life Catering Mark. In addition, hospitals could benchmark their food provision

against the forthcoming Government Buying Standards for Food (which will be mandatory for central Government from March 2011).

- ▶ Visit one of the successful hospitals set out in the case studies in this report – there is no substitute to learning by seeing what those in the same position have achieved.
- ▶ Agree to improve the food they serve to patients, staff and visitors by concentrating on sourcing good quality, seasonal, local and where possible organic food, providing well cooked simple meals with an emphasis on ensuring that the meals arrive with patients in good condition.
- ▶ Ensure that all of the catering in the hospital serves the NHS's mission to improve the health of the nation, by serving healthy, good quality and freshly prepared food for patients, staff and visitors alike.
- ▶ Sign up to the voluntary Food For Life Catering Mark, which will allow a hospital to make progress in improving their food, using practical, step-by-step standards based on the experience of many other hospitals, and organisations providing food in nurseries, schools, care homes, football clubs, restaurants and pubs.

### The Government should

- ▶ Take steps to promote patient choice and accountability by making measures of food quality in every hospital publicly available on the NHS Choices website and encouraging all hospital trusts to publish this information on their own websites. This is in line with recommendations

about transparency from the Government's Food Procurement Task Force, which was chaired by Zac Goldsmith MP.

- ▶ The information should include measures of patient satisfaction and the food budget per patient per day and any independent verification of food standards, for example by the Food for Life Catering Mark. The name of the food provider should also be available along with the length of the food contract.

### Patients should

- ▶ Act on any negative experiences of hospital food by contacting Hospital Trusts via their website to make a formal complaint. This will help to raise the issue as a priority for action and investment.
- ▶ Equally, where the food has been of notable quality, contact Trusts to commend them on their food provision.
- ▶ In both cases, draw the Trust's attention to the Food for Life Catering Mark as a step-by-step framework of standards to help them improve food and gain recognition for their achievements.



**"Hospital does not provide a cooked evening meal. Their soup is so salty – not suitable for kidney patients."**

# First aid for hospital food

## Introduction

A detailed research report on hospital food, carried out in 2010 by Liz Alford for the Soil Association ('Hospital Food Review: Sourcing more local and sustainable food'), comes to strikingly similar conclusions to a number of other studies carried out in recent years, but with one major exception. Hospital food has a rotten reputation. The findings of the report suggest that in most cases, that reputation is richly deserved. The report also catalogues the serial failures of previous attempts to put things right. The Soil Association's conclusions in this document are based on Liz Alford's research. Our view is that as far as hospital food is concerned, we all too frequently have food that would be more appropriate to a disease service than a health service.

To most people it will seem self-evident that food in hospitals should help people get better rather than make them sick. But for many of those running hospital trusts, this thought does not seem to have crossed their minds. They seem to give the same priority to the contract for feeding their patients and staff as they do to getting the windows cleaned or the lawns mowed.

However, what is new is that the research for the Soil Association also uncovered a completely different picture in some hospitals. We have found a significant number of examples of strikingly good practice. These are well-run hospitals, where those in charge, and their skilled and committed catering staff, understand the importance of good quality, nutritious and satisfying food. In these hospitals,

the food makes a positive contribution to patients' well being and staff morale.

The tragedy of just how badly some hospitals are doing is thrown into stark relief by the wonderful service other hospitals are providing, usually without spending any more money on their food service.

What the best hospitals are doing is good for patients, good for NHS staff, good for British farmers and food businesses – good for Britain. But the majority of hospitals are delivering hospital food that is bad for patients, bad for staff and bad for Britain.

## A catalogue of official failure

Every independent survey of hospital food, and every survey of hospital patients, has concluded that the National Health Service's food is neither tasty nor nutritious. In 1963, the Nuffield Trust published a survey of 152 hospitals, which found that hospital food was overcooked, poor quality, and cold, with poor nutritional content. Food wastage levels were over 50%.

In 1995, the government launched nutrition guidelines for hospital food, but these were largely ignored. In 2000, an official report said that NHS food is 'variable in quality', does not respond to patients needs, and that too much of it was wasted as a result. The Better Hospital Food initiative was launched in May 2001, and five years later at least 25% of NHS trusts had failed to introduce a single new dish resulting from this initiative.

An end of year report in 2009 by the Nutrition

Action Plan Delivery Board said that 239 patients had died in hospital in a year due to malnutrition. The report added that the effect of malnutrition on malnutrition makes patients more susceptible to disease, delays recovery from illness, and increases death rates. Also in 2009, a survey of 400 healthcare professionals found that nutritional care in hospitals had improved 'not at all' or 'not much'.

## How hospital food is letting down patients

Rather than treating food as an optional add-on to the service they provide, or worse, an expensive distraction, all hospitals should be aware that good quality food is the cornerstone of good health. Recent statistics show that up to 40% of adults and 15% of children admitted to hospital show signs of malnutrition. Dr Michael Stroud of the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition says that lowering the malnutrition rate by 10% could save the NHS £1.3 billion and that as many as 10,000 lives could be saved each year if every patient was screened for malnutrition on admission to hospital.

There is growing evidence that good nutrition not only helps patients recover faster, but can also relieve the symptoms of some diseases, and also improve the effectiveness of some medication. For example, there are links between diet and depression, schizophrenia and Alzheimer's.

A 2006 survey showed that over a third of patients had left a hospital meal because it looked, smelt or tasted unappetising, and this applied to over half the

# First aid for hospital food

patients in mental health and elderly care centres.

In 2006, *Which?* found that one in three patients were unhappy with the quality of hospital food and a staggering two thirds of hospital staff would be unhappy to eat the food that they were serving to patients. In 2007, the Healthcare Commission said that complaints about food and nutrition were common, despite self-assessments by hospitals painting a rosy picture.

Surveys in 2007 and 2008 found that malnutrition affected one in three adults entering hospitals and care homes, and that there was little improvement in this while people were in hospital. The 2008 report found that things had got even worse in care homes. In 2006, Age Concern found that six out of ten older people were either at risk of becoming malnourished or became more malnourished while they were in hospital. Even government data showed that in the period 2006–07 almost 140,000 patients were discharged from hospital with a diagnosis of malnutrition, nutritional anaemia or another form of nutritional deficiency. This was a huge increase from the 1997–98 total of 75,000.

All the wasted effort on programmes to improve hospital food has come at a high price, not just in increased illness and suffering for patients and poor

quality food for NHS staff. In 2010, Sustain found that all of these failed hospital food initiatives had wasted over £50 million in the last ten years. This figure pales into insignificance when compared to the cost of diet related illness to the NHS, currently estimated at £6 billion per annum and expected to rise to at least £10 billion per year by 2050. The wider costs to society and business, currently estimated at around £10 billion, are expected to reach almost £50 billion per year by 2050.

Hospitals should feed their patients so that they get healthier. Hospitals and the health service also have a crucial role in setting the standards for public health. If places where doctors and nurses work and care for sick people do not provide healthy and nutritious food, which is a pleasure to eat, the public health campaigns designed to encourage healthy eating have absolutely no chance of success. Just as doctors had to stop smoking before they could persuade their patients to do so, so the nation's health service must lead the way in providing healthy food, before public health professionals can expect to have much influence in changing the nation's diet.

## Not backing British food and farming

The official NHS purchasing body managed to source less of the food that can be produced in the UK from UK sources in 2008–09 compared to the year before – the proportion dropped from 70% to 64.5%. Much of the food that could be produced in the UK is bought from abroad. For example, the NHS Supply

Chain, that buys food for many hospitals, bought around a third of its processed potatoes from the UK, compared to the national average of two thirds. We normally buy about half of our vegetables like peas and beans from UK farmers – the NHS Supply Chain buys only 7%. For fish, the rest of us buy about half from UK fisherman, the NHS manages 5%. The Government is urging people to buy meat produced by British farmers, if not organic, at least certified to Red Tractor or Freedom Foods (animal welfare) standards – out of the nearly 150 meat contracts awarded by NHS Supply Chain in 2008–09, only two involved UK sourcing.

The mantra constantly repeated by those running hospital trusts with unhealthy food is that they cannot afford better quality. This ignores the fact that poor nutrition is costing the NHS billions of pounds a year, and the wider economy tens of billions. It also ignores the fact that the hospitals that are doing a brilliant job are not necessarily those spending the most on their food service. Nottingham City Hospital estimates they save £6 million a year by cooking with fresh, local ingredients. Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust gets yoghurt from a local supplier for two thirds of the price of the nationally approved supplier.

As is well-known, buying locally delivers huge dividends to local economies. Nottingham City Hospital now buys pork from a local pig farmer, allowing him to make a profit for the first time in ten years and saving jobs on the farm. The Cornwall Hospital Food Programme showed that the hospitals' local spending of over £1 million with Cornwall



**"I had a hospital stay... food was disgusting, floppy rubber toast, lousy greasy choice for lunch."**

# First aid for hospital food

suppliers generated an additional spending of over £900,000 in the local economy.

A wider review by Deloitte found that local and seasonal food did not generally cost more, and can cost less. In 2002, the Audit Commission noted that higher costs of hospital food do not necessarily equate with better food. Hospitals spending half as much as the highest were often able to provide better quality food than those spending twice as much. Good quality food services can make a profit for hospitals. The examples from the report highlight what can be achieved, with commitment and skill, within tight budgets, without extra cost, and often generating substantial additional income.

Apart from the myth that serving patients good quality, healthy diets must cost the earth, some hospitals may try and avoid making changes because they claim it is all too complicated, and they are being asked to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and their overall environmental impact, while at the same time having to change the food they provide patients and staff. This is not a complication, because almost without exception, moving to healthier diets means moving to more environmentally friendly food.

There are clear benefits for health and sustainability associated with a shift towards more seasonal

fresh fruit and vegetables and less but better quality meat, (giving preference to grass-reared British lamb and beef which are associated with higher levels of beneficial fatty acids). Grass-fed meat has the benefit of storing carbon in soils and protecting our most valued landscapes, and is good for animal welfare. Intensively produced white meat comes from chickens that are usually fed on soya, much of it grown on recently converted rainforest or permanent grassland, with a huge carbon footprint. A shift in emphasis from white to oily fish, avoiding over-exploited species, will also pay dividends for health and sustainability.

## The Food for Life Catering Mark

The Soil Association developed and piloted the Food for Life Catering Mark in hospitals with support from the Department of Health. It is an independently audited, voluntary standard that allows caterers to make step-wise improvements up through Bronze, Silver and Gold awards. To achieve the Bronze award, caterers ensure that no hydrogenated fats or undesirable additives are present in the food, that 75% of the food is unprocessed (and where facilities permit, freshly prepared on site) and that eggs are free range and meat meets British welfare standards. Silver and Gold standards reward increasing use of sustainable fish, higher welfare meat and locally sourced and organic ingredients.

The Soil Association has been working with schools, school cooks and caterers to improve school meals

for nearly ten years, and as a result of support from the Big Lottery, the Food for Life Partnership, led by the Soil Association is now working with over 3,000 schools. Our experience shows clearly that improving the quality of food in schools leads to increased uptake of school meals, sometimes dramatic increases. Head teachers are clear that healthier meals lead to better attendance at school, better behaviour and increased readiness to learn. We have clear evidence that children will change what they eat, and that as they adopt healthier diets, they in turn change the food that many parents themselves buy.

There could be no clearer public health message – if hospitals all served healthy meals, this would have a significant impact on the nation's diet.

A key benefit for hospitals adopting the Food for Life Catering Mark is the transparency and trust that a voluntary, independently audited Mark provides for hospital staff and patients. What the hospital is achieving is clear, and any claims the hospital makes about its food are independently verified.

## Brilliant practice

### Keeping costs down

► Darlington Memorial Hospital has a budget of £2.20 per patient per day but has still been able to buy all organic milk, and source yoghurts and bread locally, and Fair Trade tea and coffee. In 2009 the catering team opened a new coffee bar which contributed £66,000 in profit in the first nine months.



**"I'm on a dairy free/vegetarian diet... A stay in hospital for several days met with many difficulties... 'We don't have anything for you unless we remove the ham from a salad sandwich!'"**

# First aid for hospital food

- ▶ Sussex NHS Foundation Trust uses substantial volumes of local food and some organic, on a tight budget, producing 350,000 meals a year with 12 staff in one of the smallest hospital kitchens in the country.
- ▶ Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust have managed to source 30% of their food locally with no overall increasing cost – some higher prices were balanced by savings elsewhere, keeping the Trust within their current budget of £2.95 per adult patient per day.
- ▶ The North Bristol NHS Trust has achieved the Soil Association's Food for Life Bronze Catering Mark, after the Trust Chief Executive attended a seminar addressed by HRH The Prince of Wales. The Trust has found that they can make significant changes to where they buy their food, increasing local sourcing substantially, while staying within a budget – around £2.20 per day – which is below the national average.
- ▶ In Barnsley, sourcing sandwiches locally cut costs by nearly 10%.
- ▶ The Royal Brompton, with one of the best records on hospital food in the country, has a catering budget higher than the national average at £3.50 per adult patient per day, but their policy of sourcing from smaller and local suppliers did not increase costs. Although some organic foods are more expensive, overall the changes have been cost neutral.
- ▶ Nottingham University Hospitals Trust (holders of a Food for Life Bronze award) has saved money by cooking their own hams using pork from a local

pig farmer. The Trust have also found new ways of generating income for the catering service, opening 13 'Coffee City' branded coffee shops, generating a profit of £150,000 per annum.

- ▶ The Royal Marsden also generates significant income from its food retail outlets used by staff and visitors – last year the income covered almost 20% of the catering budget.
- ▶ Bedford Hospital has increased its retail income by a hundred fold from £120,000 to over £1.2 million, with the profit being invested back into hospital catering.

## Improving food for patients, staff and visitors

- ▶ At Bedford hospital outpatients fix their appointments so they can eat in the hospital restaurants – one patient said that the food is "excellent and worth visiting the hospital for even with no appointment".
- ▶ The Royal Brompton Hospital caters for 295 beds and 1,300 staff, cooking all food on the premises from fresh ingredients; the catering team include a halal option on every menu and cook fresh ingredients for patients with special diets.
- ▶ A North Carolina hospital recently reported a more than 40% improvement in patient satisfaction rates when it started to make changes in its food based on ideas from the Royal Brompton Hospital.
- ▶ Medical science suggests that about a third of all cancers could be avoided if people eat more healthily, so the specialist cancer hospital, the Royal Marsden takes particular care to provide high quality food.

- ▶ St Andrews is the UK largest mental health charity with 500 beds at three sites, serving the NHS; patients stay in hospital for an average of 18 months, compared to the NHS average of three days. After the chief executive attended a seminar with HRH the Prince of Wales, the charity started to transform their food, and now over 80% of patients rate hospital meals as good or excellent, compared to just over half three years ago.

## Benefiting UK farmers and the local economy

- ▶ Darlington Memorial Hospital was the first hospital in the country to switch its entire order for milk to organic in 2005; the milk comes from Acorn dairy which is just two miles from the hospital. The organic milk is priced competitively because of lower haulage costs.
- ▶ Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has increased the proportion of food bought from local suppliers from 18% to over 30% over the last three years. Their national supplier was able to find a local source of fishcakes using Marine Stewardship Council certified fish for the Trust, and ice-cream also comes from a local supplier.
- ▶ North Bristol NHS Trust (holders of a Food for Life Bronze award) has introduced winter and summer menus to make the best use of seasonal, local produce. The Trust buys local milk, and the ice cream from a farm near Bath is now free from artificial colours or flavours but is the same price as the ice-cream the Trust used to buy, which came to them from Belgium via Bolton.

# First aid for hospital food

- ▶ The Royal Marsden buys local, good quality fruit and vegetables, and uses local organic milk, and meat from local farmers, and all their coffee and tea is Fair Trade and organic.
- ▶ St Andrew's source 40% of their food within a 50 mile radius of their sites, and 20% of the ingredients are organic. Currently all of their milk, yoghurts, poultry, bacon and cured meats come from local suppliers, and their organic milk did not cost more than the previous non-organic supplier. St Andrew's is aiming to source 40% of all the vegetables they use within a 50 mile limit, and they already estimate that they have reduced their food miles by 96,000 miles
- ▶ Sussex NHS Foundation Trust started sourcing vegetables from a local market gardener, saving 20% on their previous contract price. The Trust has worked with the market gardener and other local growers to increase volume of production, and to grow some organic crops. Now almost all of the vegetables used by the Trust are grown in Sussex, and almost all apples are grown within a five mile radius. The Trust uses a wide range of seasonal, local fruit – plums, pears, strawberries, raspberries, rhubarb, red currants, blackcurrants, blackberries and gooseberries. Most of the fish used is landed locally, and is Marine Stewardship Council certified whenever possible – the Trust also uses organic farmed salmon from Scotland.
- ▶ The Royal Brompton's fruit and vegetables come from a farm in Kent, and the farmers have worked with the hospital to develop seasonal menus to make best use of local produce, including

soups made with local organic produce. Soup consumption is now up by 40%. The Royal Brompton's mushrooms are grown under the North Circular Road, and most of their meat is sourced locally, and their bacon and sausages come from Bedfordshire. Organic meat is on the menu at least once a week, and organic milk and yoghurt come from a farm in Bedfordshire.

- ▶ Nottingham University Hospitals Trust (holders of a Food for Life Bronze award) sources all the milk for the City Hospital, 1,000 pints a day, from a local dairy 11 miles away. 95% of its meat comes from a local processor sourcing from farmers in the East Midlands. The Trust's switch to local suppliers has saved an estimated 150,000 food miles a year and £6 million per annum.

## Conclusion

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The story of the failure to provide decent, tasty, healthy food in British hospitals is a result of an indefensible failure by those in charge of hospitals to understand the basic importance of good food to good health. If there is anyone in our society who should know better, it is those in charge of our health service. The story of the inability to change what has been repeatedly recognised as indefensibly bad levels of food service is a result of lack of leadership, lack of commitment, and lack of skill. This has little or nothing to do with money. It has everything to do with determination to give reasonable priority to providing patients and staff with good food, while

recognising the crucial importance of the quality of the raw ingredients and the skill and commitment of catering staff.

In contrast, successful hospitals are doing what any decent health service should do – leading by example. No one thought people could be encouraged to stop smoking until doctors themselves stopped smoking. Why should anyone expect the nation to move to healthier, more environmentally sustainable diets until our National Health Service starts to lead the way? Pioneers like Cornwall, the Royal Brompton, North Bristol Trust and Nottingham hospitals have now been joined by others, but these leaders are still the minority. Their experience shows that giving hospital food the priority it deserves in our health service need not cost more, it benefits patients, improves health outcomes, benefits the local communities the hospitals serve, and provides vital support for British farming.

Those still lagging behind the best hospitals should be ashamed of themselves. It is to the leaders of those hospital trusts that this report is aimed. What this report shows is that the solution is in their hands.

# First aid for hospital food

## Thank you

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Barnsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust  
Bedford Hospital NHS Trust  
Darlington Memorial Hospital  
Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
North Bristol NHS Trust  
Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust  
Royal Brompton Hospital  
Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust  
Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust  
St Andrew's Healthcare  
Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

This report draws on the detailed research, recommendations and case studies in Liz Alford's report to the Soil Association, 'Hospital Food Review – Sourcing more local and sustainable food', October 2010 (available free from [www.soilassociation.org/hospitalfood.aspx](http://www.soilassociation.org/hospitalfood.aspx)).

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