

Darlington Memorial Hospital – NHS caterers winning contracts in open tender competitions

Producing high quality food using local produce has been a driver for Stuart Wray, the head of catering at Darlington Memorial Hospital for the past 5 or 6 years. In 2005 the hospital became the first in the country to switch its entire order for whole, skimmed and semi-skimmed milk to organic. The milk comes from Acorn Dairy - only two miles from the hospital, which was able to compete on overall price due to lower haulage costs. The initial decision to switch suppliers was driven by the desire to use more local suppliers to deliver its strategy on sustainable development. Patients noticed the difference in taste, preferring organic milk in the initial trial so the contract was awarded in 2005 and the dairy has supplied the hospital's milk ever since. Not only has this given the farmer access to the public sector but also giving a general boost to the business as a result of the extensive press coverage and publicity, allowing them to expand and take on three extra staff.

Since then, the hospital has gone on to source more produce from local producers with yoghurts coming from Embleton Hall Farm in County Durham and bread and morning products from Taylors Bread in Darlington. The hospital also acts as a hub for the local Primary Care Trust by receiving dairy and bread deliveries, moving items via vehicles being used other deliveries – saving even more food miles for the NHS. The hospital also uses sustainable sources for its frozen fish, farm assured meat, and fair trade tea and coffee for both patients and in the hospital restaurant. Insufficient supply can be a problem for some items - although the local fruit and vegetable supplier tries to use local produce, some food still has to come from overseas. Another problem for smaller suppliers is providing appropriate assurance, so the catering team had to invest time to help the bakery gain NHS accreditation and work with the trust's procurement team to put the contract in place. This allowed the bakery to compete for other NHS contracts, and they now supply bread to Tees Valley and the local mental health trust.

The hospital cooks all food on site using a cook chill system, using appropriate ingredients for patients requiring halal or special diets, cutting the use of expensive ready meals. The hospital also introduced ward housekeepers to serve food and deal directly with any patient requests or problems, giving the catering team complete control over the food in the hospital. The hospital also concentrates on the efficiency of its kitchen and meal ordering, using electronic scanning to collate the patients' food requests and generate the correct ingredient quantities.

High level support and clear accountability and responsibility support the moves to more local food, but keeping costs low is still a major barrier to increasing local and sustainable food with a budget of £2.20 per patient per day – therefore the catering team has to take a more commercial approach to its operations. As well as looking at measures to cut the number of cooked meals and generate more income from the large restaurant, the hospital opened a new coffee bar in June 2009 which has already made a significant contribution of £66,000 to trust income in just 9 months - an increase of more than 13%. The hospital is hoping to repeat this success – providing it can find the necessary space. Another major move is to use the excess capacity in the hospital's kitchen to tender to provide food to other NHS hospital. The catering team recently won a competition against external commercial suppliers to supply cook chill meals to Bishop Auckland General hospital. The team plans to mount similar bids for other local hospitals when contracts come up for tender.

The hospital catering team have received national recognition for their work, winning the Catering Service of the Year category at the 2009 Health Business Awards, with Stuart being awarded the 'Caterer of the Year' title by the Hospital Caterers Association in 2009.