

Will coronavirus have a long term impact on the future of Care Catering?

This is the time to change how people view Care Catering.

For the first time in a generation, there is a well of trained and experienced pool of chefs looking for work and we need to market the Care Sector as a catering career opportunity now more than ever. There are a whole host of other roles in the care sector which will suit hospitality staff too.

The benefits for anyone making the move from Hospitality to Care it starts with more sociable working hours and patterns of work and therefore improving work life balance. It is an all year round service in a possibly a less stressful working environment. We need to promote the quality of the food service by highlighting the skills and versatility of the current chefs employed, I'm thinking here of the many competitions in house by companies such as Sunrise Senior Living, plus the NACC Chef of the Year competition. The quality will surprise many who do not realise the skills set in our sector.

There may be some difficulties in transferring across to a new sector as new skills will need to be learnt; careful budgeting, how to texture modify foods and the adherence to allergens (which is something the care sector has been doing for four to five decades, not four or five years as is the hospitality sector). Cross these bridges and the scope for the care sector to further improve the quality of its catering workforce and the quality of food for its many hundreds of thousands of service users will be immense. After all food is the main "Highlight of the Day" for many in our sector.

A challenge facing many local authorities as we come out of the other side of the crisis, will be the number of older people who have had their primary source of meals changed and are now more socially isolated in their homes. If you have visited many of the supermarket cafes, local cafes, garden centres and park cafes prior to the crisis you will have noticed that the majority of the clientele at lunchtimes were older people eating out. Probably 30 years earlier many would have been in local authority day care, but to due to the changes re care in the community they have been frequenting other locally based food outlets.

I know from my own father's experience of food access, that many of the cafe staff looked out for their older clientele and knew them by name and their food preferences. Like many, the crisis leading to the closing of these cafes, has led to huge problems in accessing food outside the home as the skills to make meals has long disappeared. Simply changing the food access habits for many older people and those with early stage dementia is not easy. Finding an alternative source of food for the 500 to 1000 calories a day that was being consumed outside the home is not straightforward particularly as many of the community services are now stretched to capacity.

There is a huge opportunity for meals on wheel services to fill this void, think differently! Forget regular boundaries, definitely in the short term and possibly for the long term. It may be the time to actually showcase what a meals on wheels service can provide for those who currently don't use service.

For those services with regeneration vehicles, they can easily create a teatime run, for those using more traditional means of delivery in boxes travel time is more of a limiting factor on reach. The draw back given was often that the rush hour traffic would be problematic with deliveries, but not at the moment.

Local authorities always stop at the imaginary line drawn on a map, but what about neighbouring areas? After all the mantra is "We're in this together". Could the larger metropolitan areas with meals on wheels services reach into the neighbouring local authority areas I'm northern based so for example could Leeds's meals on wheel service provide an evening service for York, the out lying townships in between York - Selby - Goole? Parts of Kirklees are in reach off both Bradford and Leeds, you get the idea.

It is also utilising other council staff, who's roles may no longer be operating at the moment due service changes in lockdown - Leisure services, passenger transport etc all correctly vetted staff for the general publics safety.

I hear you say this could spread the virus wider but not if you train the staff and ensure the basics about preventing the spread, hand washing, social distancing and using sanitising wipes between deliveries. It's about managing the risks now **and** mitigating future risks of malnutrition in the elderly in the coming months and next winter.

There is also a discussion whether we should be providing free food, but I'll leave that to another day!