



Food for Thought: Catering in Extra Care Housing

In this viewpoint, I outline the importance of good quality food to the health and well being of older people, and how the housing and care industry needs to embrace the opportunity of expecting more from the catering than simply providing “fuel”. The focus at mealtimes should be about creating an experience for guests and delicious quality food. A fresh look and innovation are needed to raise standards in line with an increasingly savvy and demanding customer.

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Helen Bailey**, Director of Aviatix, an independent consultancy specialising in diet, nutrition and food hospitality

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Introduction

Dining out over the last 20 years has exploded in the UK, with people eating out on average six times a month (YouGov, June 2012). Despite the recession, the frequency of eating out has remained robust as it now appears to be an established part of British people's lifestyle.

The 44–54 age group are the biggest spenders, with the over 55's having the third highest spend per head after the 25–44 age group. The over 55's are identified in the Mintel pub catering 2012 report as a target group for future growth in the industry as they have the highest propensity for eating.

The expansion of the casual dining market which includes well known brands such as Pizza Express, Cafe Rouge, Zizzi's, Nando's and La Tasca has had a tremendous impact on eating out frequency, as more and more people have been able to afford to eat out.

Wetherspoon pubs are now the 2nd largest UK "restaurant" chain after McDonalds. This is a result of the continued investment that they have made in their food business where all demographics can afford their value for money menu.

The other food movement that has changed the landscape over the last decade is the coffee revolution that has swept every high street, petrol station, train station and airport.

It is now the case that every cuisine is catered for from Moroccan to Italian, and different types of coffee from caramel mochas to skinny lattes. If you look through the windows of coffee shops and restaurants you will see a mix of genders, income and age groups eating and drinking.

Added to this surge in culinary dining-out is a glut of celebrity chefs and cookery books. There is a keen interest in cooking and preparing better quality food and the standard of cooking in this country has never been better, even in our own homes.

This is echoed by the YouGov 2012 report that 78% of diners choose where to eat out based on the quality of food.

So what does all this have to do with the specialist housing with care industry?

Catering to meet older people's tastes

Whilst the outside catering world has developed, re-invented and launched new exciting concepts and food offerings, the catering inside the specialist housing with care industry appears not to have advanced.

This may seem a little unfair and it might also sound misguided, as some claim "our residents only want the traditional style meals, they won't eat all that new fangled stuff." The fact is that the latest Mintel Report on pub eating out trends highlights that the food with the most appeal is home cooked food (45%), with Traditional British Food coming second (40%).

The real challenge to the housing and care industry is not necessarily the menu repertoire, but more about the quality of what is being produced, the presentation of the food and the environment. These are the areas where the real innovation is needed!

Food has a significant role to play in the health and well being of all human beings. It is our source of nourishment to maintain life and grow. It is a moment in the day where you ideally take a break and sit down. It is an occasion that you can socialise and enjoy the company

of others and talk. Everybody has to eat, so food brings people together. Essentially food is inclusive and not exclusive, and it is, and should be, the social hub of any “home”.

According to the Mental Health Foundation, the body of evidence linking diet and mental health is growing at a rapid pace. As well as its impact on short and long-term mental health, the evidence indicates that food plays an important contributing role in the development, management and prevention of specific mental health problems including depression and dementia.

Those who eat fresh fruit, fresh vegetables and salad everyday are found not to have daily mental health problems.

A balanced mood and feelings of wellbeing can be protected by ensuring that our diet provides adequate amounts of complex carbohydrates, essential fats, amino acids, vitamins and minerals and water.

Drinking enough fluid every day is vital for good health. Dehydration or poor fluid intake can contribute to confusion and affect mood and increase irritability.

The Francis report is helpful in proposing some basic principles that should be considered to improve hydration, one of which is to ensure that drinks are readily available. This forms an essential part of any meal occasion.

There is a firm focus in the specialist housing with care industry on caring for people and doing this within the context of health and safety regulations and parameters. This can be confusing and challenging for kitchen staff to ensure all dietary requirements are taken care of – the use of salt, restrictions around a diabetic or coeliac, considerations for dental constraints and packing nutrition into fewer calories. From my experience, the application and interpretation of the guidelines varies considerably from one kitchen to another.

The reality is that using fresh ingredients to make a meal - to a tried and tested recipe, seasoned to taste and prepared in a clean environment by the hands of a clean and caring cook – that guests can eat and enjoy is the most important element of the catering offer.

Provenance of food is particularly important to the over 55's, as is the availability of regional dishes as reported in the Mintel Provenance in Food & Drink Report 2012.

The focus in the industry appears to be on the food preparation and back of house production of ‘fuel’, and less on the ‘meal experience’ with little front of house attention on guests. This practice misses out on gaining insight into how diners enjoyed the experience, how things could be improved and what else the residents would like. It also does not address what is commonly described in the restaurant industry as creating “the theatre of eating out” – referring to the increased effort that is put in to the whole dining experience. There are so many more customer touch points than there are in a retail shop for example. Each customer touch point offers an opportunity for entertaining the guest so they have a memorable experience that they want to repeat.

This may seem a step too far but there are a number of ingredients that could be tried and implemented - the following are my top ten recommendations for innovating in the specialist housing with care industry.

A choice of menu

1. Compare yourself to the quality of the catering on the high street NOT other specialist housing with care industry providers. The generation that is currently dining out 6 times per month on average are your customers – their expectations are higher and they know what good food and service tastes and feels like.
2. Equally, if you can offer a dining experience that includes delicious, consistently well cooked meals, the appeal of the restaurant would increase. Residents would choose to dine more frequently and invite relatives and friends, and the wider community would take advantage of the offering. Creating a higher demand helps to cover the costs of the catering.
3. When planning a catering offer, conduct a thorough feasibility study to ensure you create what the market needs and maximise the local opportunities. It is not a one size or style fits all – the offer should vary depending on the circumstances.
4. Create an authentic dining ‘experience’ that is relevant to the target market, BUT feels special and is designed to be distinct from the “home”, which would ensure the catering operates successfully and encourages people to come back.
5. Develop a delicious and nutritious range of recipes, cost them out and make it the bible for the kitchen – SAY goodbye to inconsistency. Every professional restaurant has a manual of all their recipes, how it should look on the plate, with a detailed list of the ingredients and where you get them from, including a photograph. Even the size of a jacket potato can be specified for consistency!
6. Labour is expensive – create a schedule that eliminates waste and ensures you have staff at the right time. Inefficient or untrained staff cost more money and must be dealt with in the most appropriate manner. You do not need a chef, you need a good cook who can multi-task and be frugal!
7. Do not relinquish all responsibility to the “caterers”. Stay involved and ensure the management of the restaurant is fully integrated into the management structure and processes of running the care and accommodation.
8. Catering is the carrot that attracts people to social gatherings – it is the thing that will tip the scales in deciding if you will “go” or not - food brings people together. In a catering review undertaken by Aviatix, the attendance at a resident’s meeting in an extra care housing scheme increased from 4 or 5 faithful regular attendees to a full house when cake was on offer! Ensure that food is used as a focal point for activities and events to make the event more successful and to generate more catering income.
9. Agency staff create more problems than they solve – they do not appear to care about the quality of the food they produce, they are expensive and there are no consequences for poor performance. Having well trained back up staff and reviewing labour schedules to eliminate the need for agency staff would do wonders for consistency and the quality of the food.
10. Have a programme of continuous review and innovation in place. The continual evolution of the catering will take into account changing customer needs and adapt to the external and internal market opportunities. There are examples amongst the housing providers where they have employed hospitality staff with a hotel and restaurant background that employ this process as a matter of course – and it works!

Food rating

Sharing best practice and benchmarking throughout the industry would be a great step forward through a programme of service and quality measurement. Egon Ronay in the 50s and 60s is credited with raising the standards of food in public places by producing guidebooks and implementing a star rating rather like the Environmental Health Officers do now for all public restaurants on their standards of food hygiene.

The same could be done in the specialist housing with care industry to identify minimum standards and have independent and objective Egon Ronay style visitors to measure the performance of each restaurant/ dining room. The objective with any measurement programme is for each location being measured to try a little harder so they are not at the bottom or last. As a result, overall standards in the industry improve. The shared learning that would result from such a process would be immense.

The problem in the industry at the moment is that catering is perceived as a must have, a cost line, and an area where there is limited expertise – more of a pain than a pleasure!? The challenge is to inspire, create ambition and focus on the bigger picture of how much larger the role of catering is and how much more it could be. And who knows where that might end up? A hub for the community to enjoy home cooked, delicious, value for money meals in an aspirational, friendly setting? Could this expand to be a meal service for the local community like meals on wheels?

Having spent 25 years in the hospitality industry, it has been a great experience to work in the specialist housing with care industry over the last year and learn again the joy that food can bring to people's lives. As one 89 year old I interviewed said, "when you get to my age mealtimes are one of the few things I have to look forward to everyday – I can barely move my legs, my heart is not good and each day is roughly the same BUT food is the one joy I have left." It feels like there are so many more things that could be done to enhance the quality of the food experience and therefore the lives of the people you are caring for – they simply need to be embraced with enthusiasm.

As all relatives and friends of people that live in specialist housing with care accommodation know, the one area that you can judge a home by is the quality of the food. It is your showcase. Does your dining experience convey all the values and beliefs that the "home" represents?

I hope that you have enjoyed reading this viewpoint and would be grateful if you would be kind enough to spend 10 minutes completing the short survey on catering by going to the following link: <http://bit.ly/housinglin>. The results will be published through the Housing LIN in December as part of the refresh of the Housing LIN's Catering Factsheet and a selection of accompanying case studies.

Note

The views expressed in this case study are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

Published by:

Housing Learning & Improvement Network,
c/o EAC, 3rd Floor, 89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP
Tel: 020 7820 8077
Email: info@housinglin.org.uk
Web: www.housinglin.org.uk
Twitter: @HousingLIN