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## **CONSULTATION ON THE NHS Lothian Catering Strategy 2014 - 2024**

### **Background**

1. Nourish Scotland is a not-for-profit organisation campaigning for a fairer food system in Scotland. Nourish facilitates this change through engaging with organisations, community initiatives, politicians and officials. We work to influence policies from local to EU level and provide a platform for networking and sharing best practice. We make sure that food is brought to the fore in public debates of various kinds, making the link between a localised food system and its positive outcomes for economic development, community cohesion, job creation, skills development, public health, environmental stewardship and justice.

### **The Importance of Hospital Food**

2. Nourish Scotland is pleased to be able to respond to the consultation on the NHS Lothian Catering Strategy 2014-2024. Nourish believes that hospital food is an important issue, and as the paper sets out, the issue has strong linkages with other aspects of government policy.
3. Firstly, the procurement of hospital food has potential to contribute to a number of government aims. The adoption of a sustainable food procurement model can help boost the contribution that the NHS makes to sustainable economic growth in Scotland. It can also ensure that the food consumed by patients and NHS staff is responsibly produced, in ways that promote employee safety, animal welfare and environmental protection.
4. Rather than simply continuing to operate in a vertical NHS led procurement structure, we also recommend that the NHS gives thought to horizontal procurement approaches, which would see groupings of public sector bodies, such as universities, NHS and local authorities work together to procure food on a local basis, ensuring freshness, reducing carbon and giving maximum benefit to developing local food economies across Scotland, thus helping to develop resilience in our supply chains. A locally led approach may also maximise opportunities to achieve value for money. There must be an emphasis not just on traceability but also on transparency and quality in our supply chains and cost should not be the overriding factor when purchasing food.

5. Secondly, the food consumed by NHS staff and patients is important to their health and wellbeing. Nourish welcomes the fact that units will be compliant with the Healthy Living Plus Award for staff and visitor services. This, combined with the sustainable procurement strategy, should have potential to ensure that healthier, more sustainable choices are available to staff and visitors.
6. It is, of course, of critical importance that patient food reaches and maintains a high standard. The availability of healthy, fresh, nutritionally balanced food plays a key role in achieving clinical outcomes and ensuring patient health. It is important that the food choices available meet the needs of different genders, age groups, and ethnic groups as well as being appropriate for the needs of the individual receiving treatment. Nourish is especially concerned that levels of malnutrition are continuing to rise amongst elderly people receiving hospital treatment. Food and fluids need to be available at appropriate times for these patients, and they may also require significant help to ensure sufficient food can be consumed to meet their nutritional requirements.
7. Thirdly, the provision of catering services has a key role in managing food waste out of the system. NHS Lothian must ensure that food ordering closely matches projected demand, that food is attractively presented, served at the right temperature (and able to be kept warm for those who need time to eat) and is palatable, as well as nutritious. This will help reduce food waste and in turn contribute to lower greenhouse gas emissions and reduce the costs associated with processing food waste.
8. Fourthly, any catering strategy should be closely linked to the national performance framework and associated outcomes and indicators as well as to national policies such as *Good Food Nation*. The provision of hospital food can help to educate staff, patients and visitors about the importance of food and dietary issues and can also support healthier choices by patients, visitors and staff. This awareness raising role should be part of any strategy aiming to reduce diet related illness and mortality in the longer term.
9. For all these reasons, Nourish believes that it is important to get our NHS Catering Strategies right. Any successful catering strategy must be able to show that it is aware of, and taking action on, the issues outlined above. NHS Lothian must provide the freshest, most nutritious and most sustainably produced produce possible, within the financial and operations constraints of its budget.

### **Operating Context**

10. At the same time as addressing the issues above, it is apparent that NHS Lothian will have to operate under significant resource pressures. In particular, the consultation paper outlines a continuing need to:
  - Keep patient food costs to an appropriate level and to meet efficiency targets (of £1M over five years);

- Ensure that operational catering strategies can meet changing clinical needs (eg, adapting to seasonal variations, the needs of changing demographics and different patterns of care);
  - Continue to improve the safety, quality and consistency of hospital food and to meet revised standards such as the Food, Fluid and Nutritional Care Guidelines; and
  - Have appropriate workforce planning, staff training and development and employment policies in place to meet these needs.
11. The consultation paper essentially suggests that achieving cost-effective, reliable, consistent quality hospital food, which meets externally audited standards is likely to be achieved by closer integration of services and the centralisation of catering facilities. The paper suggests that this will reduce on-going maintenance burdens and manage risks associated with food safety, workforce morale and service provision in poorly designed, out of date facilities.
  12. The implication of this is that a reduced, more flexible, labour force will be required. Nourish would encourage early consultation with staff and union representatives in order to ensure that any workforce restructuring does not have a significant adverse impact on either staff morale or service provision.
  13. There is also a danger that a physically and organisationally more remote catering service becomes less flexible and less able to accommodate individual patient needs, especially in clinical areas such as paediatrics, oncology and care of older people where nutrition plays such an important part in care.
  14. Nourish would argue that savings generated by streamlining the catering operation should be reinvested in staff development and strengthening the food culture within the NHS: and in improving the quality, sustainability and animal welfare credentials of the ingredients used in line with the Procurement Reform Act and associated guidance. In particular, while technological improvements may play a part in streamlining food production, Nourish would argue for an increase in the amount of food that is freshly prepared on site and an increase in staff development to support this.
  15. Investment in staff development is important for catering and procurement staff: the House of Food example in Copenhagen provides a useful example of supporting cultural change towards providing better (organic, seasonal, low meat) food within the same budget through knowledge intensification. Strengthening food culture is also important for the clinical team who do not always collectively see food as a central element of patient care.
  16. Given the significant level of unhealthy weight among staff, including food studies in continuing professional development could have benefits for workplace health as well as patient health.

## Summary

17. In many ways it is difficult to argue with the proposed strategic objectives set out in the paper. In particular, Nourish agrees that providing the highest quality, most nutritious meals for all patients, visitors and staff must remain the most important aim. Nourish agrees that the catering strategy must also align with other government, national and local strategies and policies. We would argue that for a strategy to meet these aims it must:

- Link effectively with *Good Food Nation* and any guidance on the implementation of the Sustainable Procurement Duty;
- Ensure that the food provided also confers other public goods wherever possible, whether this be local economic benefits, higher animal welfare standards or environmental protection;
- Build transparency and resilience into the supply chain for hospital food by developing shorter supply chains;
- Encourage the effective management and reduction of food waste;
- Support healthier choices by patients, staff and visitors with a view to reducing diet-related ill health across the population;
- Support the development of a stronger food culture within the NHS, in particular, by supporting the provision of freshly cooked, sustainable, seasonal food by skilled staff; and
- Be capable of responding to the nutritional and cultural needs of individual patients and vulnerable groups as well as simply meeting operational and financial criteria.