

PUBLIC DINERS

THE IDEA

WHOSE TIME HAS COME

public diner /'pʌb.lɪk daɪ.nər/

1. state supported, affordable restaurant serving healthy, tasty meals to general public

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**“No force on
earth can stop
an idea whose
time has come”**

Victor Hugo

What is a public diner?

Public diners are a place to grab a meal after a 10-hour shift. A place to eat when you've run out of ideas for what to cook tonight. A place to go for a meal between classes. They're guilt-free. The price doesn't make you think twice.

They're not somewhere you go out to as a treat. But they're not charity either. They're everyday eating places. State-supported, alongside buses, libraries, parks and museums, they are part of public infrastructure.

Public diners are a way for the state to discharge its responsibility to make good food available to everyone. They are a way of making it easy for people to eat the food that keeps them nourished. They are a way for strengthening our social fabric and connection to place. They are an investment in an intervention that can help deliver the social, environmental and health outcomes we seek.

Public diners are capturing imagination domestically and internationally.

The best time to roll them out was 20 years ago. The next best time is now.

Public diners are an idea whose time has come.

When would you use a public diner?

When I haven't eaten any veg for a while and I want something nutritious + delicious but can't be bothered to cook!!! 🍷

Last week after a demanding day Facilitating training over in Glasgow + train was delayed.

when I had 3 young kids + a job - little time to cook + feeling alone with it

As an alternative to mid week take away.

During the week after work with my daughter - when you have no idea what to cook + haven't had time to shop!

Maybe an afternoon @ the weekend too :)

Last night when I felt a bit too weary to cook anything decent.

When I was home alone and cooking for one.

I RECENTLY HAVE BEEN MADE REDUNDANT! KNOWING PUBLIC DINERS ARE NEAR WOULD GIVE ME SO MUCH PEACE OF MIND. I'D USE 'EM ALL THE TIME.

Public diners are public infrastructure. **Public infrastructure is...**

...what makes our societies liveable

From roads and bridges, through the NHS and education, to public parks and museums we have a plethora of institutions that are here to ensure that our country runs smoothly – thrives, even. The choices we make about the kind of social infrastructure we chose to support tell us a lot about what we value. Through those investments we tell ourselves the story of who we are as a nation.

...here for everyone

Public transport isn't just for those who can't afford a car. Hospitals and GP surgeries are here for all of us – not just 'the very sickest'. Libraries aim to inspire the joy of reading in everyone – they're not here for people who need support with literacy. Social infrastructure is built on the foundation of equal rights and social solidarity.

...the state's responsibility

There are aspects of societal life which are too important to leave to the markets. That's when the state steps in. State backing makes social infrastructure powerful and lasting, allowing it to withstand short-term economic shocks. Some public infrastructure is subcontracted to commercial or not-for-profit providers, but the state specifies standards and expectations for the delivery of the service. State's involvement keeps this under democratic oversight.

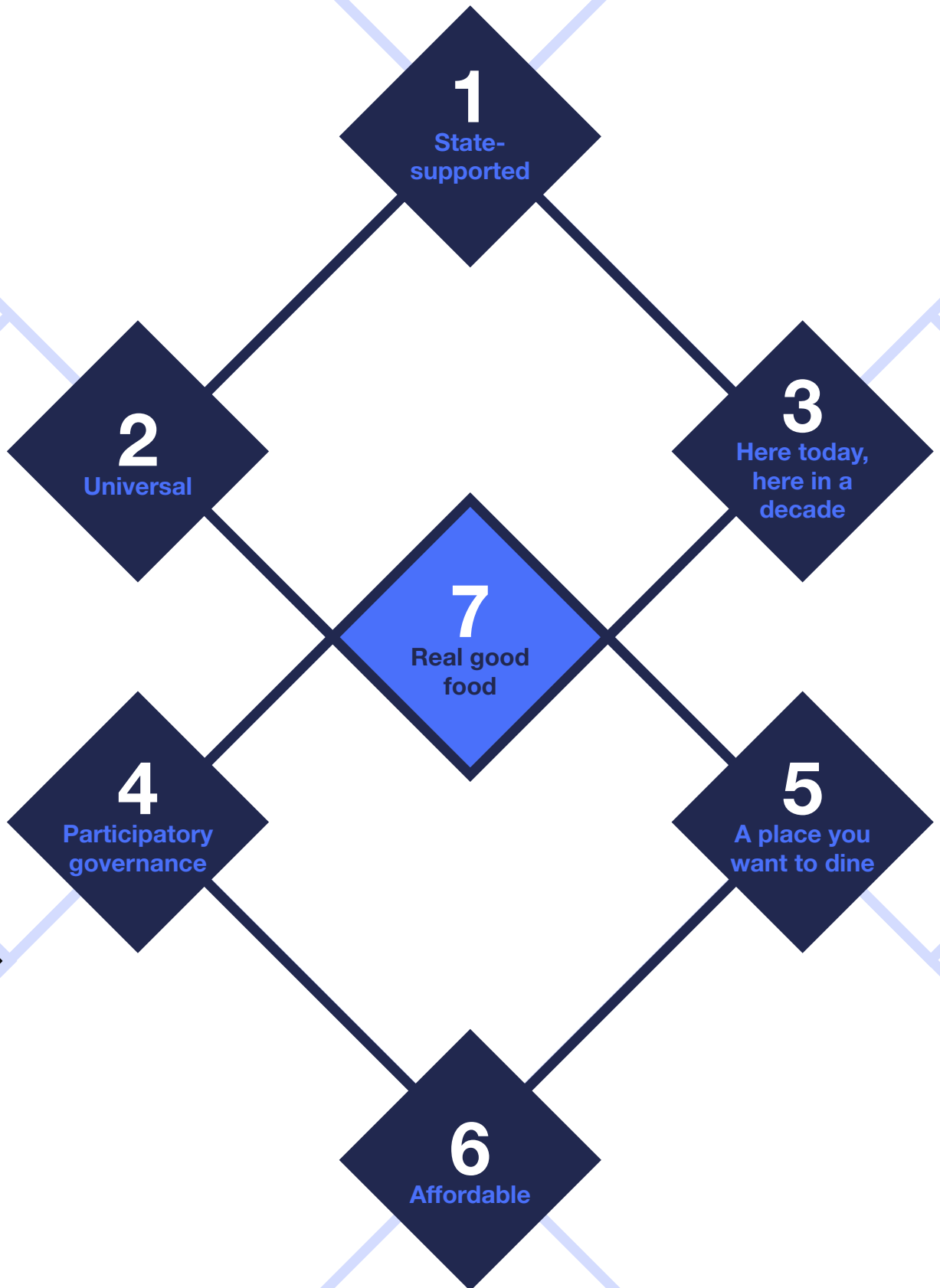
... an investment

It's undoubtable that public infrastructure costs money, but it would be a mistake to think of that as sunken costs. Money spend on public infrastructure is an investment in the wellbeing and prosperity of a society.

Public diner: core principles

What distinguishes public diners from other eating places is a set of seven core principles:





What distinguishes public diners from other eating places is a set of seven core principles:

1

State-supported

Public diners are underwritten by state support. This can take a variety of forms: from capital and start-up grants, to regular subsidies, to support with amenities and supply chains. This makes them economically viable. While delivery models vary from full scale service provision to subcontracting delivery to external providers, there is a formal and ongoing relationship with the state.

Public diners are underpinned by law – an act of parliament or a byelaw – which spells out the state’s responsibilities towards them and the financial structure. Their recognition in law is what makes them part of public infrastructure. It also provides them with stability and improves standards over time.

2

Universal

Universalism says “we’re building this for all of us”. It’s the opposite of targeting a policy or institution at a particular group. Instead, universalism focuses on creating institutions and services that benefit each of us and society as a whole.

This principle underpins our approach to public infrastructure for a reason: in order to justify the investments we make from our taxes we need to ensure that the institutions we create are popular and seen as valuable. For services that operate a mixed economic model, like buses or leisure centres, that popularity leads to more income and reduction in the need for state subsidy. It’s a virtuous circle.

3

Here today, here in a decade

Public diners as social institutions are here for the long haul. Much like libraries, leisure centres or public parks they become part of the social landscape. Thanks to state-subsidy they do not rely on short-term annual grant cycles and stay resilient to the pressures of the free market. In turn, people can grow to rely on them: either as everyday places to eat, or places to rely on during times when cooking at home is difficult – such as falling ill or having small children.

This reliability is critical to ensuring public diners can function as third spaces, which enhance neighbourhoods and build social capital.

4 Participatory governance

Public diners are public institutions – therefore subject to public scrutiny and participation. Workers, customers and citizens are clear how they can influence the running of a public diner – directly or via the local authority. They are places where people are not food consumers – they are food citizens.

They also open up possibilities for public engagement – in the same way as museums, galleries or libraries do. They have the potential to be vibrant spaces which grow the enjoyment of good food in the community and in wider culture through events and pop-ups. They can also help to incubate start-up and micro businesses.

5 A place you want to dine

Public diners are attractive, informal, welcoming without being overbearing. They are places where regulars are recognised, and newcomers are welcome. The staff understand their role is to make sure diners feel comfortable and provide an experience you want to enjoy again and again. They operate at scale, serving upwards of 100 meals a day. Public diners keep drawing you back with their food and their atmosphere.

6 Affordable

To ensure their popularity and universality, public diners are always affordable. The price point doesn't make you think twice and rivals the cost of a supermarket ready meal. Public diners don't operate pay-as-you-feel solidarity schemes. Instead they offer subsidy mechanisms similar to bus passes, Best Start grants or Young Scot entitlement cards for groups that would particularly benefit from using them.

7 Real good food

Public diner is an institution which models the right to food and good food culture. Food here is delicious and reflects the tastes of the local community. The menu, and experience of dining, is nourishing and supports people's wellbeing. It's a place where 'healthy' and 'tasty' are not in competition. It's a place which makes it easy for people to eat the food they enjoy and which keeps them healthy and well.

The food on the menu also serves a social purpose. The sourcing, at least in part, supports local and agroecological producers. The scale of the enterprise also means it can help to cope with and utilise food surpluses (such as agricultural gluts) that meet high quality standards. Public diners try to model and support the food supply chain transformation we need.

Why public diners?

Why now?

Food system transformation has been identified as one of the 6 levers for achieving Sustainable Development Goals. While much attention has been given to agricultural transition and what happens on the farms, we are lacking ideas for how to support changes on our plates.

Currently we suffer from 3 wicked problems when it comes to the food we eat: poor diets lead to and exacerbate bad health outcomes, levels of food insecurity issues persist, and our food choices contribute to climate crisis. Our failure to make any progress on these issues is partly due to the yawning gap in state infrastructure which could support citizens to eat well.

Public diners are a bold policy intervention which has the potential to transform our food system – and one which has been tested in the UK and internationally.

Health

Contrary to popular belief, food education is not the solution to improving our diets. The general public have both sufficient knowledge and confidence to cook at home¹. The barriers to eating well are structural: lack of time or energy to prepare meals, lack of good cooking facilities, tight budgets and a food environment flooded with cheap ultra-processed food.

Public diners are a structural intervention. They remove the need to plan for, shop for, cook and wash-up after a meal. They are an alternative to ready meals and takeaways for a whole range of demographics: families, people who work shifts, single person households, people with short- and long-term health issues... the list goes on.

Public diners are a classic public health intervention, focusing on environmental factors that lead to poor health outcomes and trying to address those.

Crucially, they offer a perfect training environment for the future generation of cooks and chefs, embedding the idea that nutritional quality and wellbeing need to go hand in hand with taste.

Right to food

Under the UN Declaration of Human Rights² we all have a right to be free from food insecurity and malnutrition. While much of the current debate focuses on the financial causes of food insecurity, there are many circumstances which can compromise a person's right to food, including illness, lack of cooking facilities and disability.

Public diners are not an alternative to cash-first approaches. They are a complementary infrastructural solution, and a missing part of the social safety net. They offer the state an opportunity to further support groups who may face additional barriers to eating well. This includes disabled people, new and single parents and anyone who at any point finds themselves on a tight budget.

Climate

Public diners can help to address three key food-related contributors to climate change: unsustainable farming practices, meat-heavy diets and food waste.

By sourcing, at least in part, from organic and agroecological farms public diners can help to stimulate the supply of climate-friendly produce. They model new diets which do not depend on meat alone to be tasty or appealing. They demonstrate that climate-friendly menus can be appealing and delicious. They also contribute to solving the persistently high food waste levels. 70% of our food waste is generated at home, often because it is not used in time.

Public diners take care of the meal planning, shopping, cooking and cleaning, and in doing so, making the food we eat more climate friendly at every stage – not just sourcing better but also wasting less.

CASE STUDY: British Restaurants Infrastructure like public diners has worked here in the UK before.

The idea of public diners is not new, not even in Britain. The UK government used to subsidise a chain of more than 2,000 restaurants serving price capped, nutritious meals to almost every demographic across the country. These restaurants may have started as a wartime effort to get stronger bodies, but they lasted into the 70s because they made neighbourhoods stronger on all fronts. Their success provides a legacy for public diners to build on.

How did they work?

British Restaurants could have also been called a national restaurant service. The state ran this service, not the restaurants themselves. They provided subsidies to start up and scale up the restaurants. This support system meant the restaurants could keep prices low and, importantly, continue serving good food in bad times. The subsidies did not cover the running of the restaurant – this was a local operation.

- ◆ **Proprietor/s had to break even** and they could do this by using their economies of scale: serving over 100 meals a day meant the cost per meal decreased.
- ◆ **Decisions were local.** The state did not dictate the location, décor, opening hours, or even that the name had to be ‘British Restaurant.’
- ◆ **Decisions were open to democratic scrutiny.** As publicly funded infrastructure, these restaurants were owned by the people and this created a mandate for community participation.

THE BRITISH RESTAURANT.
From the numbers which have attended the British Restaurant in Bay Street it would seem that the people have just been waiting for such a place.

I have heard nothing but praise of the restaurant, and it seems that such places have come to stay.

Who did they benefit?

At their peak, there were more British Restaurants than there are McDonalds today.³ They were ubiquitous, used by every demographic in the neighbourhood and, by most accounts, loved across the UK. They were not ‘communal feeding centres’ as originally branded – but ‘British Restaurants’ which did exactly as Churchill intended: associated them with a proper good meal.

By serving these meals at affordable prices, they kept people and communities well in a way that felt long overdue. As one reporter writes:

“A place such as that was, he thought, more than an immediate war necessity. He believed that when they saw these restaurants springing up throughout the country they could see a beginning of what might be a branch of their future social organisation.”⁴

The restaurants certainly meant that less people went hungry in the short term – but their broader appeal was making eating well easier for everyone. Taking care of the meal planning, shopping, cooking, washing up and providing a space to eat together felt almost revolutionary and was, for many, well worth fighting for when the restaurants began to close down.

He hoped that when the war was over, and when they had to get through that very awkward transition period, they would be able to look back with pride on the work these places had done.



Public diners in detail

So, how do public diners work?

There is a lot to learn about what public diners will look like in the UK today. There is even more that still needs to be designed: most of this will be a local process, all of it will be ongoing.

What we can't say yet is whether every public diner will be table service or buffet. What we can say is that there are four wheels that will make them run: governance, money, people, food.



GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Public diners are a way for the state to deliver on the right to food and support the wellbeing of its citizens.

State involvement is a way of ensuring a degree of democratic control which is missing from both commercial and charitable models. This varies from an individual's right to complaint, similar to complaints procedures which already exist within the NHS or schools; to exerting collective pressure to adapt to local needs or raise standards through involving MSPs and councillors.

Currently we lack democratic mechanisms to shape our food system, especially at the local level. Public diners open up possibilities for: citizenship participation panels, worker representation on management committee, and local councillors acting as non-executive directors.

To be successful, diners must operate at a local level. What's needed on Grimsay is different from what's needed in Glasgow. Dictating menus, décor or opening hours from London or Edinburgh simply would not be acceptable. From types of cuisines to accessibility, the needs and preferences will vary and need to be decided locally.

It's important to understand public diners as a way of introducing a mixed economic model in the arena of food. This aspect of social life is too important to leave to the markets. State involvement would improve universal access, in the same way it does with water and healthcare. It's important that public investment is protected. Public diners should run on a not-for-profit basis. Where capital investments are made, asset locks would prevent those from being commercialised.

While some countries experiment with using commercial providers to deliver good, affordable meals, this approach stops short of creating a true public institution. In the same way that funding for a dance performance is not the same as funding a dance theatre, merely providing subsidy to commercial providers does not allow us to fully realise the potential of this new social institution.

“Citizens must have a stake in their lunch.”

Conference participant, 1 February 2024

CASE STUDY: Hawker Centres

The affordable, quick, honest food served by street vendors, otherwise known as hawkers, has always been important in Singapore. After the Second World War, it became essential. Unemployment levels increased the number of people wanting affordable food at the same time as it increased the number of people taking up hawking as work. This expansion was necessary, but it created problems:

- ◆ for the hawkers – it made access to good water, street space and ingredients more difficult,
- ◆ for the citizens – public health and hygiene became difficult to maintain,
- ◆ and for the surrounding infrastructure – street cleaning, smooth traffic and any kind of building was almost impossible.

After gaining independence in 1965, Singapore began its infamous urban redevelopment – building up new neighbourhoods with new infrastructure: housing, transport, parks and, importantly hawker centres. It built centres where the hawkers could operate under a shared roof and residents could easily access a variety of affordable food.

Eating democracy

The National Environment Agency of Singapore regulates and manages the network of 119 hawker centres across the country. This government agency also reviews and implements hawker-related policies that ‘benefit both hawkers and the public.’⁵

This public ownership of the centres mandates public participation. Each hawker centre has a hawker association comprising representatives of hawkers and citizens. The National Environment Agency maintains regular dialogue with the hawker associations to resolve problems pertaining to their centres.

Hawker centres are underwritten by state support. This support is delivered in 3 main ways: controlling the rents for all, subsidising the rent for some and controlling the price of some basic commodities (for example, rice). In combination, the centralisation of amenities – clean water, reliable electricity, tables and chairs for diners, proper ventilation, a cleaner reduces operation costs for the stallholders.

Strong neighbourhoods, strong country

Hawker centres are located within the centres of housing estates, in business and recreational districts and always near public transport. They are places where families, friends, co-workers eat on a weekly, sometimes daily basis – enjoying the variety and affordability of their breakfast, lunch or dinner. In 2020, Hawker Centres were officially inscribed on the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List. As the nomination writes: Hawker centres are an integral part of Singaporeans' way of life.⁶

There is a very strong food culture that has built up around hawker centres. Sometimes referred to as the 'belly of the nation' the centres have come to explicitly connect food to the identity of Singapore. Among other things, they have become markers of public health, social cohesion and, of course, the food heritage of Singapore.

“Bringing together well-loved local food under one roof, hawker centres are a unique aspect of Singaporean culture... they continue to be places where people from all walks of life can enjoy affordable food in a clean and hygienic environment.”

National Environment Agency, Government of Singapore



“Anything we can actually do, we can afford. We are immeasurably richer than our predecessors. Is it not evident that some sophistry, some fallacy, governs our collective action if we are forced to be so much meaner than they in the embellishments of life?”

**John Maynard
Keynes,
macroeconomist**

MONEY CAN BE FOUND

Public diners are here to deliver a service, not profit. It is clear that they will require a level of public subsidy and capital investment to help them get off the ground. This does not mean they need to be fully state funded. A financial model which includes sales would strengthen the robustness of the diners. The history of British Restaurants indicates that economies of scale are key. When serving around 250 customers per day it's possible for public diners to break even, or even generate a small profit.

Concessionary rates or free passes could ensure accessibility to all and would be in line with how existing public operators – including leisure centres or theatres – operate. Membership remains an interesting and currently unexplored model, which could build customer loyalty and could also be useful in the context of social prescribing.

The current discourse about public finances is characterised by scarcity. Still, we find approximately £160m to support our leisure centres in Scotland,⁷ and over £60m to maintain the canal network in the UK.⁸ How we distribute public funds is a matter of public priority and reflects our societal values.

While making budgetary choices is never easy, investment in public infrastructure is key to our long-term wellbeing. Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel prize winning economist, identifies the lack of that ongoing investment as a key reason for the UK's low productivity rates,⁹ undermining not just our wellbeing but also economic performance. While many of public services are funded from general taxes, introducing additional levies (similar to the sugar tax levy) would help to meet some of the costs.

CASE STUDY: Milk bars (bary mleczne)

Milk bars are government subsidised cafeterias serving affordable cooked meals across Poland.

The first milk bar was opened in 1896 by a dairy farmer. It was a mostly vegetarian canteen using milk, dairy products, eggs and flour to create simple, cheap dishes. The commercial success of this model prompted some replication across the country. When post World War I austerity hit, demand for these affordable eateries skyrocketed. Milk bars flourished under communism, co-opted and funded by the regime. At their peak there were 40,000 operating across the country. They survived the collapse of the communist regime, and continue to operate – with state subsidy – in today's market economy.

The subsidy mechanism is set out in law. The legislation specifies a list of ingredients that can be used in creating subsidised dishes: fresh fruit and veg, pulses, dairy products, eggs, cereals and spices. The business can add up to 40% mark up, and the final price of the dish is subsidised by 70%. The operator is allowed to sell non-subsidised dishes alongside the subsidised menu.

This model has many strengths. It allows the operator to be flexible with the menu, for instance to offer meat dishes – if at a higher price. Financially, it makes it possible to cover overheads and staff costs, and even turn a small profit. The profit cap ensures that public money isn't channelled to private enterprises in an uncontrolled way. And it keeps prices low for consumers: a portion of dumplings costs less than a regular cup of coffee.¹⁰

To quote Jakub Szwedowski, postal worker who is a regular at Warsaw milk bar, Prasowy:

“You won't find a better deal at Burger King...and the food is just as good as the nicest restaurant or bar.”

In 2023, Poland spent around £8.5mIn – or £0.25 per capita – subsidising milk bars across the country.¹¹

Culturally, milk bars are being detached from the communist past and held up as something which is of greater significance – not just because of their affordability but because their food is considered more honest than the fast food chains or trendy wine bars. In the words of Szwedowski: “Milk bars are ours”. When Prasowy was threatened with closure in 2011, neighbourhood residents staged a protest, serving free food and chanting anti-gentrification slogans.¹² Today, the bar continues to thrive, alongside over 100 similar diners across the country.



PEOPLE MAKE IT

Public diners are people places. They strengthen neighbourhoods, build social connections and provide good jobs.

As public institutions, public diners do not rely on volunteer labour. Instead, trained and paid staff ensure the establishment is well run, welcoming and delivers high quality, delicious food. This means professional chefs in the kitchen and front of house staff.

To help public diners live up to their full potential, staff need to understand the underlying mission of the public diner: to nourish, not merely to sell. They might also benefit from additional roles not typically found in commercial settings, for instance a community liaison officer to help build links with the neighbourhood and wider community.

As public institutions, public diners set standards for practices in the hospitality industry. This includes more collaborative culture in the kitchen, Real Living Wage, paid breaks, and a free shift meal from the menu. They also offer a perfect training ground for future chefs and hospitality staff, making them ideal settings for modern apprenticeships.

It's not just the staff that make a public diner – the people who dine there do that just as much. Regulars help to embed public diners in the local community, create informal networks and strengthen the social fabric. Public affection for public diners helps to foster a sense of belonging to the place and the community.



“Oh, you were trained in a Public Diner, work with us!”

Conference participant, 1 February 2024



FOOD IS KEY

Food in a public diner doesn't have to be perfect, but it has to be good – and keep improving over time.

Food isn't nutrition until it reaches the stomach. Taste is the key factor that keeps bringing people back to public diners, and in turn maximises the benefits that flow from them. Public diners escape the false dichotomy of taste vs health, serving delicious dishes which help people to stay nourished and well.

The public diner menu doesn't have to be expensive, but it does offer choice. It includes meat-based, fish and vegetarian dishes and a pudding. A reduced menu which changes daily means the public diner can be a daily eating place and not grow tiresome.

Public diners also offer an opportunity to try new cuisines and ways of eating. Opting for venison or using meat to flavour a dish, as opposed to as the hero ingredient, is a starting point for a conversation about sustainable menus. Salad bars or small tasters offered free of charge are all a way of building excitement around food and making new dishes accessible.

To build a good food culture public diners source at least some ingredients locally, building relationships between people who produce, cook and eat the food. They also reflect the food traditions and cultures of the neighbourhoods they're in, benefiting from the modern-day diversity.

Food in a public diners is good in more ways than one, serving as a cornerstone of new, enriched diets.

Looking back...

Creating a new piece of infrastructure is a big undertaking. When thinking about how to pursue public diners, it's useful to consider the stories of other pieces of infrastructure which we have built.

1. There are precursors.

“Of course the health service in this country did not begin in the year 1948. Many of us have associations with the between-the-wars health service; a great patchwork, a good deal of good intentions, a great deal of inadequacies.”¹³

The Rt Hon Jennie Lee MP, Minister of State, Department of Education and Science (Aneurin Bevan's widow)

The designers of the NHS did not start from a blank slate. What existed before the NHS was a patchwork of private health services and public insurance schemes. The national health insurance scheme – also known as the panel system – meant you could get access to public support for health services, but it didn't cover everything (hospital visits, ambulance service) and it was only available to those who were working (cutting out almost all women and children). Responding to this gap, voluntary hospitals started to pop up across the country. This would be the same gap that the NHS stepped in to fill. Importantly though, these community health projects were not displaced – they either became the bones of this new public service or they continued to exist alongside it, serving the community in ways that this service couldn't.

In 2023, the National Health Service (NHS) marked its 75th anniversary. In looking back at its story, there are 4 main parts that will be helpful for designing a new piece of infrastructure today.

2. It takes a whole of society movement.

The idea of a national health service came about because people realized the quick improvement it could make to their everyday lives. The consecutive conditions of a Great Depression and World War increased the demand for health services at the same time as people were unable to afford healthcare. Many people were forced to make impossible decisions: feed themselves or pay for their children to go to the doctor. These trade-offs between basic rights scarred the system – and provided the motivation for a different way of doing things.

In 1942, Beveridge's report calling for free healthcare sold 600,000 copies and was instrumental in building a whole of society movement. This was followed by a mass public relations campaign that 'sold' how the NHS worked, including the 1948 public information cartoon 'Your Very Good Health':

“In the past we've had many health services – some could afford them others could not, some places were well off for hospitals, others were unlucky. This new health service will be organized on a national scale as a public responsibility. The cost of the service will be met from rates, taxes and national insurance and so everyone will pay for it and everyone will benefit.”¹⁴

3. It delivers benefits quickly.

People use it straight away, people benefit straight away. On the first day of the NHS you see people lining up outside hospitals and clinics to receive their free healthcare. In the first year, the service delivered 4.5 million pairs of glasses, 27,000 hearing aids, 6.8 million dental treatments.¹⁵ For something of this scale, the NHS was brought in quickly – the 75-year plan was certainly not there on opening day. What was there was the need for this service and the existing DNA to make it happen. There have been numerous reformulations of how the NHS works but the fact remained that from the very first day it came to be, it made sense because it made peoples' lives easier.

4. It needs to be properly embedded in neighbourhoods.

The NHS is part of community identity in Britain. Despite the benefits it delivered from day one, it wasn't always the case that people 'loved' the NHS the way they would come to today. Working with existing healthcare providers, delivering clear benefits, and maximizing participation with the community, usually in the form of providing employment, meant that over time the NHS became fundamentally embedded in peoples lives. So much so that whenever a politician might hint at taking it away, mass opposition quickly followed. This embeddedness supported the 'love' of something called the NHS. In the late 1990s, it gets a logo and with it, something that people can embrace – something that people could wear on badges, that could be displayed in a performance at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, even a profile picture for its Instagram account.

...moving forward

1. There are precursors.

For public diners, there is an existing DNA of food service today: restaurants, cafes, school meals and in particular, community meals.

Community meals are an incredibly useful prototype for public diners. They offer a plethora of valuable lessons on everything including what to put on the menu, how to cater to diverse communities, how to create spaces which make people feel at ease. They do what public institutions can't do easily: they experiment and innovate. They show us what works, and as importantly – what doesn't work.

We know from the spread of these community meals that there is a gap in the market. People want places where we can reliably afford and enjoy good food, where we can casually get to know our neighbour. We also know that it's difficult for these meals to robustly fill this gap.

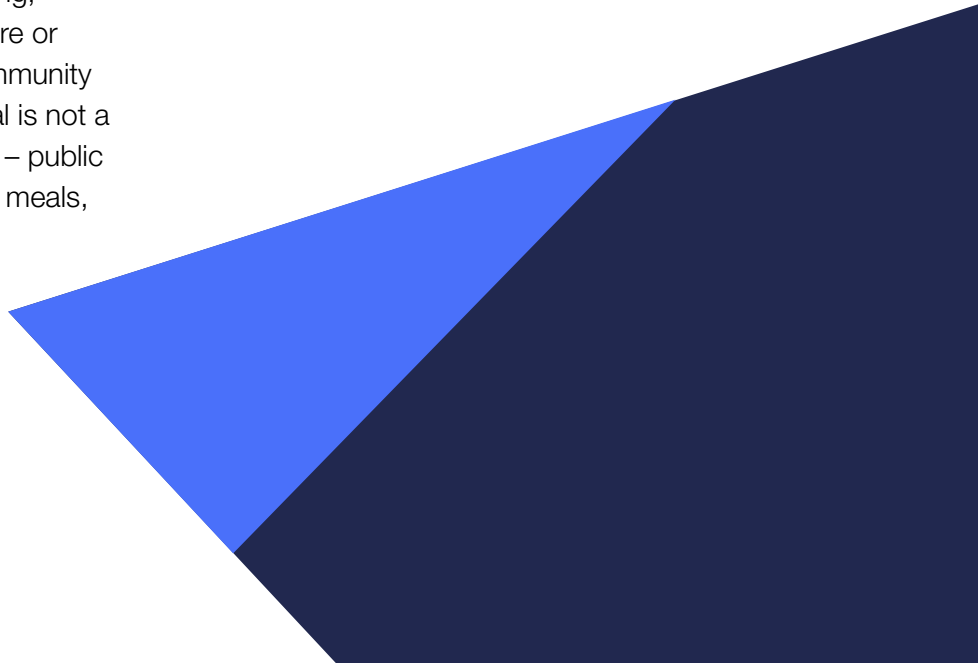
Public diners will either offer a route for community meals to evolve into lasting, universal neighbourhood infrastructure or complement the function of that community meal. In the same way that a hospital is not a threat to a community health project – public diners do not undermine community meals, they enhance them.

2. It will take a whole of society movement.

Creating a new piece of public infrastructure is a big undertaking. It requires widespread, active support. Support for public diners will continue to build because we are increasingly feeling the effects of their absence.

The food system is being scarred in the same way that the health system was: not only by those impossible decisions like cooking dinner or heating the house, but by unacceptable health inequalities.

The movement is simple and powerful: we should already have public diners – they are a piece of infrastructure that is missing from our lives, infrastructure that can help deliver our right to food; that could not only help us do our food better, but do our neighbourhoods better, our health better, our climate better.



3. It will deliver benefits quickly.

Time and again we see policies fail to affect health inequalities because they do not remove the structural barriers to eating well. We can understand the benefit of public diners because they can remove these barriers quickly. They are a bold intervention: new physical places where quality food is no longer out of our reach.

From day 1 people would gain a new neighbourhood restaurant that they could afford to dine in. They could go there everyday that week and trust that the food is not going to negatively impact their health, the climate or their budget. From day 1 public diners would bring down the barriers to eating a good meal. Cost, time, proximity, company would be no obstacle to enjoying our dinner.

4. It will need to be properly embedded in neighbourhoods.

It's easier to love a restaurant than it is to love a hospital, but it will still take work.

If public diners can keep offering quality affordable meals in attractive settings, it will be hard not to love them. Still, they will have to navigate their place in the neighbourhood. They will have to become embedded everyday eating places that complement their surroundings: creating more footfall for surrounding shops, providing a different offering to specialty restaurants, leaving space for other community food gatherings.

If they properly honour their democratic nature, providing levers for us to shape them, public diners will feel distinctly 'ours.' Like the NHS, public diners will also be big employers. The creation of neighbourhood jobs – not just for cooking and service, but sourcing too, will maximise neighbourhood participation.

Love, a sense of ownership and participation is a powerful combination – one that we expect to mean a long life for public diners.

On the road to public diners, we are now at the stage where the movement is building. In other words, this is happening. Now we need to work hard to make this a whole of society movement, work for the policy change we need to make this possible and work with the existing DNA of food provision to make the delivery happen quickly. If we do these three things together, we are going to have public diners in our near future.

The People's Public Restaurant

by Kevin Mclean

If the way out lies in the imagination
of the mind and the power of an idea
Then the challenge is in taking others with you
In making your vision clear

You cannot simply lay it out before them
It cannot be a painting hung only to be
admired

A mythical place to be desired
We do not need another lesson
Another preaching demonstration
But an actual destination that all
of us can reach

So we will lay here our foundation
A stone for us to build upon
A service for the future
The people's public restaurant

Warm of temperature and of temper
A port of safety in the storm
A place of cleanliness and comfort
A light at night to guide us on

Not just a space for hungry bodies
But hungry minds and hungry souls
Where community can flourish
'cause we all deserve a place to go

A place that caters for the nation
As as diverse as its tastes

One where we encourage better choices
'cause you can trust what's on the plate
Where the only divide is in what you're picking
for your pudding when dinners done
Where there's equal space for quiet coffees
as there is for social fun

It will take all of us to build it
To make this Herculean push
To turn words into actions
And ideas into truth

But it is worth that uphill struggle
It will be stronger for the work
A place we can all belong to
A place of honest meals and of worth
Where we put people above profit
Where dignity comes first

And when we finally get there
When all is said and done

Then this vision we've all constructed
should be the painting that is hung.



This poem was written on the day of the 2024 Public Diners Conference. To hear it please visit bit.ly/ThePeoplesPublicRestaurant



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Photo credits

- P2 Attendees of 2024 Public Diners Conference
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 P10 Wishaw Press, 18 September 1942, British Newspaper Archive
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 P12 Harrison Reid, 2024 Public Diners Conference
 P15 Rebecca Toh, 'Hawkerland', 2021
 P19 Ana Paula Hiram, Nowe Miasto Milk Bar, 2009
 P20 Harrison Reid, 2024 Public Diners Conference
 P21 Harrison Reid, 2024 Public Diners Conference

“The most depressing is not the scarcities we have, not the inflation, not the neglect on the streets and means of transport, but the demoralization of the population.

The way out lies in the imagination of the mind and the power of an idea.”

Peter Behrens,
first director
of Bauhaus



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