

Expression of Interest – Restaurant/Café Operator

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

DISHED seeks experienced hospitality businesses and organisations to express interest in running a pilot ‘public restaurant’.

About public restaurants

Public restaurants, also referred to as public diners, are state-supported eating places offering healthy meals at low prices to the general public. They operate in numerous countries around the world (including Brazil, Poland, Mexico, China and Turkey), and used to operate in the UK under the banner of British and Civic Restaurants.

Public restaurants – much like public libraries, leisure centres or public transport – form a part of public infrastructure and public services. This means that by design they need to be open to all, inclusive, delivering a high standard of service and responsive to customer feedback. The prices in the restaurant are kept low thanks to state support, typically a subsidy.

About DISHED

DISHED, co-Designing innovative Infrastructure for Sustainable, Healthy and Equitable Diets, is a 3-year project funded by UK Research and Innovation.

This academic research project seeks to understand the potentials of ‘public restaurants’ to promote healthier, more sustainable food systems and support local economies. As part of this, DISHED set out to trial pilot public restaurants in Dundee and Nottingham and evaluate their impact. The project will mimic the state support by offering a £240,000 subsidy to support the running of the restaurant for a period of 14 months.

DISHED is a collaborative project between the Institute of Development Studies, Nourish Scotland, the University of Nottingham and the University of Sussex. In Dundee our partners include Dundee Healthy Weight Partnership (led by the NHS Tayside and Dundee City Council), Faith in Community Dundee, Maxwell Community Centre and Garden.

About this Prior Information Notice

This is an early information-gathering exercise. We want to understand the capabilities and partnerships that could deliver a pilot public restaurant in Dundee. The parameters set out in operational requirements below should not be taken as final requirements and are open to negotiation interested tenderers. At this stage, we are keen to hear from interest parties who want to take part in the tendering process. We welcome:

- Consortia or partnerships submissions (e.g., venue + operator, operator + meal provider).
- Partial capability submissions (e.g., front-of-house only, catering only, venue only). DISHED may connect complementary respondents where appropriate.

About Dundee

Dundee is Scotland's fourth-largest city, with a population of approximately 150,000 and a wider travel-to-work area of over 200,000. The city centre serves as a regional retail, leisure and cultural hub, with sustained weekday and weekend footfall driven by retail, offices, cultural venues and events, and seasonal peaks during festivals and the summer tourism period. The city is home to c.1,600 registered food businesses, including cafés, restaurants and pubs.

Dundee has a large and stable student population of around 35,000 across two universities, contributing significantly to demand for affordable, high-quality food throughout the academic year, with reduced demand during summer months. The city's compact centre and strong public transport links support high accessibility for a pilot public restaurant.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Operators interested in running a pilot must align with the following principles:

- **Collaboration**

DISHED is a collaborative effort, and we expect the operator to enter the project in that spirit. Unavoidably, the restaurant will need to navigate many at times competing demands, and the other challenges known to the hospitality industry. We expect the operator to be responsive to emerging circumstances, and work with us to determine priorities where required. We commit to working constructively and positively with the successful tenderer to make the restaurant a success, and expect the same approach from the operator.

- **Universal appeal and inclusion**

The restaurant must feel welcoming to all demographics. It should not resemble a charitable or means-tested service. We ask the operator to consider how they will create an inclusive, accessible environment, service and menu that feels inviting and appropriate for the full diversity of the local community.

- **Co-design with local residents**

DISHED is conducting co-design sessions with residents in Dundee and Nottingham to understand local needs and preferences (menu, pricing, layout, opening hours). We also plan to embed different feedback mechanisms during the restaurant operations. Any insights gathered will be shared with the successful tenderer, so they can be reflected in design decisions before and during operation.

OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

- **Duration**

The contract consists of two phases: 2-month start-up period starting in spring/summer 2026 (testing menu, service and co-design feedback, setting up premises) followed by 12-month regular operation.

- **Opening hours**

We expect the restaurant to be open at minimum 5 days a week for lunch and dinner. Longer opening hours are preferred, as is 7-day-a-week provision.

- **Estimated volume and service**

We expect that at its peak, the restaurant will offer up to 300 adult meals per day and 150 child meals per day. We accept such volumes may not be achievable in the early months of the contract.

We are open as to the preferred service style (canteen / buffet / table service). We will require the operator to provide accessible service for disabled customers and those with small children (e.g. offering to carry plates and drinks to the table).

- **Venue**

Potential venues have been identified in the city centre. These include two former restaurant venues with shopfront, and a food court inside a shopping centre. All venues have rudimentary cooking infrastructure (walk-in fridges, commercial socket outlets, ventilation) which would require reconditioning. Alternative venues can be put forward by the tenderer.

The contracted operator would be expected to enter into a commercial agreement with the chosen venue. They will also be responsible for providing an appealing dining environment.

- **Menu**

Restaurant menus will need to strike a careful balance between desirability and dietary guidelines. We expect the menu to be shaped by the co-design work with local residents, and to take account of customer feedback throughout the restaurant operation. Some of the key elements identified thus far include:

- availability of both vegan and meat options
- use of halal meat
- popular dishes including steak pie, pasta dishes, stovies, mince and tatties
- minimal use of ultra-processed foods or ingredients (if any)
- possibility for customisation (salad bar, condiments station, etc)
- accommodation for major allergens to maximise inclusion

- **Sourcing and sustainability**

Operators are strongly encouraged to consider sustainable and ethical parameters in menu design, sourcing of food and supplies. DISHED can help connect operators with local, ecological, and ethical suppliers and may be able to support with procurement.

- **Food safety**

Operators must be able to demonstrate full compliance with HACCP requirements including allergy compliance, and appropriate food safety training meeting the required standard for all staff.

- **Fair Work First and training requirements**

The contractor must pay at minimum the Real Living Wage to all the staff involved in the restaurant. They must also provide appropriate channels for effective workers' voice.

In addition, we will prioritise contractor who offer training and development opportunities and follow good scheduling practices (e.g. avoiding split shifts). Real Living Wage accreditation is recommended.

- **Budget and financial arrangements**

We anticipate that while the menu offered may change frequently, the restaurant will follow a fixed pricing structure. We will also require the operator to consider a scheme which will incentive regular customers and simultaneously operate as a concessionary mechanism for people on low incomes. This may take a form of pre-paid meal cards (set number of meals) or membership schemes.

We expect the restaurant to serve low cost meals to all. At the moment, the price points under consideration are:

- Adult meal - £5
- Memberships or pre-paid options - £2.50 - £3
- Child's meal - £1

We also anticipate a referral scheme in which NHS and other relevant bodies can prescribe meals at low / no cost. The DISHED team will support in facilitating this.

The restaurant must not operate solidarity / pay-forward schemes, pay-as-you-feel models, or tiered pricing structures outside of pre-agreed parameters.

The project will subsidise the restaurant with:

- up to £210,000 for the 14-month pilot (start-up + regular operation)
- up to £30,000 for infrastructure upgrades, marketing, and communications
- up to £500 for staff DBS checks / disclosure checks

Operators must share financial information and KPIs at regular intervals (e.g., monthly, TBC) to support forecasting, operational adjustments, and research. In addition, the financial performance of the restaurant will be made public at the end of the project to facilitate learning amongst public sector and community food partners.

- **Marketing**

The operator can be directly responsible for promotional activity or subcontract marketing to a third party. The DISHED team is able to provide advice on messaging that has been identified as resonating with different target audiences. We reserve the right to request changes to messaging used where it does not align with the overall objectives of the project.

In addition, DISHED team has been undertaking extended engagement activity across the city to promote the project to local stakeholder organisations and residents in the city. We will also offer media and communication support at the time of the restaurant launch.

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST PROCESS

Please send expressions of interest to **tender@publicdiners.org** by **10 February**.

Any questions can be submitted to the DISHED team [tender@publicdiners.org] by Friday 30 January. Answers will be made available to interested tenderers by Tuesday 3 February.

Your expression of interest must include:

- A short description of your organisation
- Relevant experience in hospitality, community food provision, or similar operations
- A statement that demonstrates the experience your organisation has in working in line with the outlined values and principles
- Initial response to the operation requirements [max 500 words]

Following review, DISHED may undertake further soft-market testing or Early Market Engagement. The specification and operating requirements may change based on feedback. Selected respondents will be invited to discuss further and submit a full tender bid.

TENDERING TIMELINE

Our anticipated timeline for tendering the pilot public restaurants is as follows (subject to amendment):

EOI deadline – 10 February

Full specification shared with preselected parties – 17 February

Full tender deadline – 17 March

Notification of successful tender – end of March

Pilot restaurants commence – end of April TBD

MORE ABOUT THIS PIN

Participation in this Prior Information Notice (PIN) does not constitute a pre-qualification or guarantee of inclusion in any subsequent tender process. The contracting authority intends to use a restricted procedure for the formal procurement stage. Invitations to tender will be issued at the discretion of the contracting authority, based on predefined and objective criteria such as relevant experience, capability, and alignment with project objectives.

Organisations that do not respond to this PIN may still be considered for invitation to tender.

Responses to this PIN will be used solely for market engagement and to inform the contracting authority's understanding of potential suppliers. Any information provided will be used solely to inform the development of a future procurement and will not be shared in an identifiable form. Respondents should avoid including commercially sensitive information.

This PIN is not a pre-qualification or tendering exercise. Detailed proposals or submissions are not required. Any submission sent in response to this Exercise does not constitute any contractual agreement between the respondent and DISHED.