



Public Diners

By the public





***“Oh wow, stepping
up for the right to
food, like stepping
up for education”***

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN SKYE



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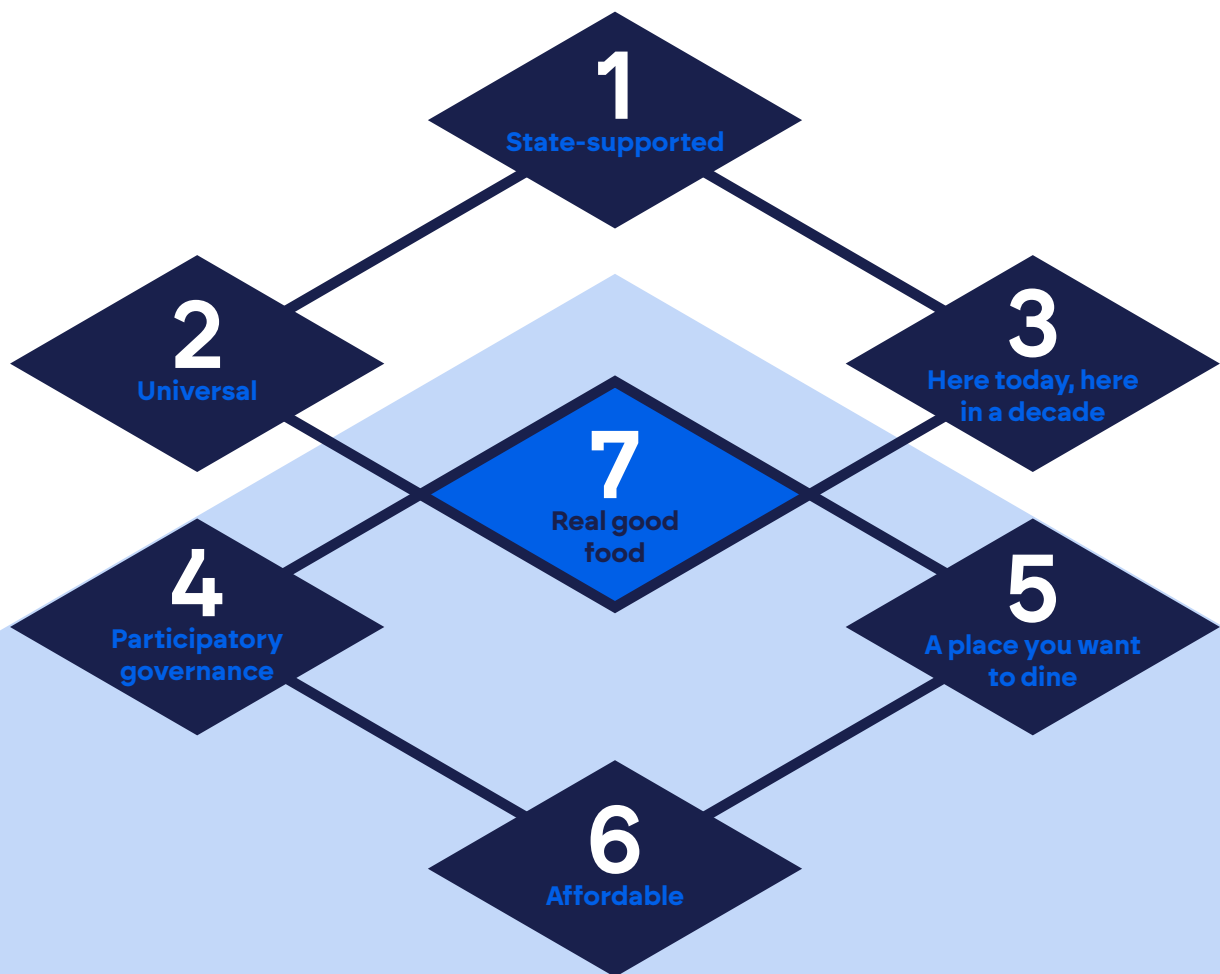


Introduction: the co-design of public diners

Public diners are state-supported, affordable restaurants serving healthy, tasty meals to the general public. Alongside public transport, libraries, leisure centres and public parks, they form part of public infrastructure that makes life easier for everyone.

In February 2024, Nourish Scotland worked with members of the public from across Scotland to discuss the idea of 'public diners'. The event gave us a ringing endorsement for the concept

and a set of defining criteria. The result of this work was published in the report 'Public Diners: The idea whose time has come', which also sets out 7 core principles of public diners:



The conference gave us a mandate to continue exploring this topic, and a broad vision. Over the next two years we set out to speak with as many people as we could to elaborate on and interpret the core principles.

We used complementary approaches to co-design: a travelling exhibition which visited 10 public spaces across Scotland between March and October 2025; a co-design panel of 12 members recruited through open advertisement; 12 pop-up suppers with over 500 participants where we gathered feedback on tablecloths and in conversation; a series of information stalls where we spoke to over 1,000 people; a meeting with chefs to sense-check menus and costings; and a national poll of 2,326 adults conducted by the Diffley Partnership.



Consensus points

These are points which people agreed were important for the rollout of public diners. The co-design sessions used a formal negotiation process to reach consensus points. We then used a matching process to select points which reflected feedback from all other modes of consultation.





Public Diners: By the Public

This process of co-design was pragmatic; we needed to understand how people with different life experiences, routines, food preferences, household set-ups and food budgets wanted the diners to work for them, how they imagined them operating on their neighbourhood.

It was also a matter of principle. 'Democratic' is one of the seven defining criteria for a public diner, and this had to be embedded in the process from the start.

This report summarises what we learned from these co-design processes, which allowed us to 'colour in' our original diagram with a set of consensus points.

"I've contributed to many public consultations over many years, and I feel this has more potential to change ordinary lives than anything else I've worked on. I'd really love to see this become a reality."





The famous *bar mleczny* "Prasowy" in Warsaw, 2025

The 7 core principles

State-supported

Public diners operate with public funding or other forms of public support (for example rent controls, tax breaks). This makes them different from private restaurants and charitable food provision.

The notion of state support was central to the idea of public diners. One of the participants in our co-design session described it as "so completely radical, and yet so common sense".

Our consultation work led us to uncover a number of existing public restaurants around the world. First, we discovered *bary mleczne* – or milk bars – in Poland. There, central government subsidises the cost of ingredients, so the bars can serve hearty meals at affordable prices. We also learnt about *halk lokantasi* – public restaurants run by municipal governments in Turkey that serve 4-course meals for the price of a cup of coffee. We also found public canteens in India, hawker centres in Singapore, *comedores comunitarios* in Mexico and *restaurantes populares* in Brazil.



What could state support look like for public diners in Scotland?

Our consultation work highlighted the need not just for funding, but also other forms of state support. Many people could see a role for local authorities providing logistical support and enabling economies of scale. There was also a sense that legislation could provide the much-needed longevity.

We also spoke to people who remembered using UK's own British and Civic Restaurants between 1940s-60s. While our interviewees were children at the time, they still recalled the meals they ate, and gave us important context for the time in which these restaurants operated:

"The food was filling. Obviously nutritious. Although what did I care about nutrition as an 8-year-old? I was hungry and I'd have eaten anything, I guess. I simply have the memory of my father being very pleased that his favourite dessert – of course we called it pudding – Roly Poly [was there]... one of his favourites with jam."

"Women going out to work during the war, taking the place of the men. There was this need for nurseries and civic restaurants to keep the home fires burning, as it were, and civic restaurants were a great idea."

"Did your husband have a sort of positive memory of them generally, or did he speak fondly of them?"

No, it was just a fact of life."

Some of our speakers saw the restaurants as an emergency measure, but others were keen to see them return:

"I congratulate Scotland on having this. New – not new idea – but reinvigorating an old idea"

Consensus points

- ◆ State support happens at both national and local levels.
 - National backing, funding and standards are necessary.
 - Local governments are responsible for the delivery of diners in their area.
- ◆ State support subsidises the operation costs of the diners
 - including rent, overheads, equipment and staffing.
- ◆ Public diners are underpinned by legislation that sets out the duty of the state in relation to this public infrastructure

I imagine public diners as being a valued cornerstone & essential service of every community in Scotland. Like libraries, schools, even having access to public toilets & now more often public water fountains, why would we take it away once established, appreciated & valued by our communities?

"Oh wow, stepping up for the right to food, like stepping up for education"

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN SKYE

I would love to see this in Edinburgh & across the country. as ~~the~~ food should be as public and accessible as transport, health & housing in theory.



A popular halk lokantasi in Eskişehir, 2025

Universal

Public diners are open to everyone. They are not targeted at, or exclusive to, any particular group.

From the outset, we understood public diners had to be universal, just like schools, libraries or public parks. Repeatedly, public transport was used as a comparison.

"I see public diners set up like other universal public infrastructure: for example, public transport – nobody feels like that's not for them. It was created for everyone, to make everyone's lives more liveable – not just for those that couldn't afford a car."

ATTENDEE AT SUPPER EVENT IN GLENROTHES

Consensus points

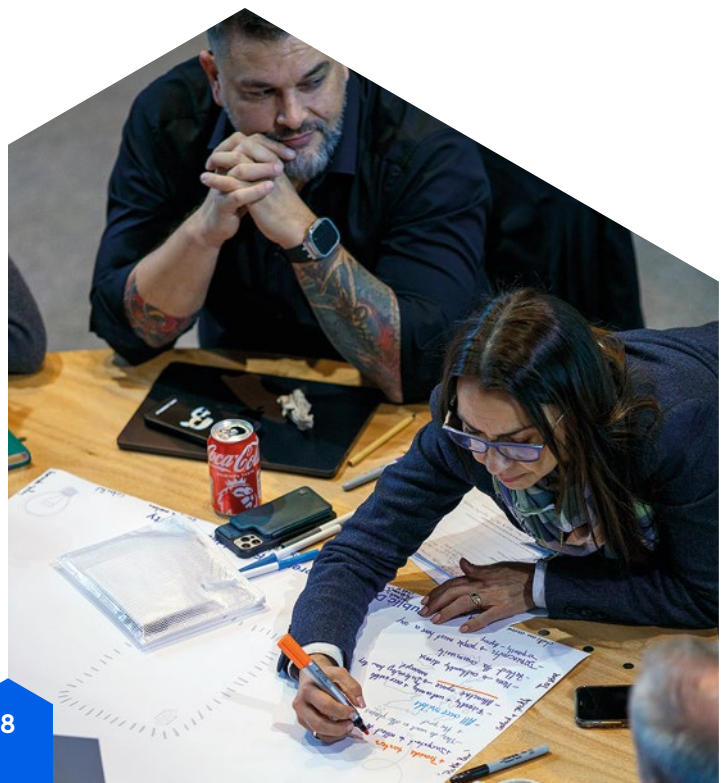
- ◆ All public diners are in central, well-lit, convenient locations
- ◆ There are no wraparound services permanently co-located with public diners
- ◆ All public diners are connected by public transport
- ◆ All public diners are open at least 4 days a week, with some weekend provision

Location of public diners was seen as key to making them universal. A flagship diner was to be in a central location with high footfall. Participants in our co-design session ruled out locating public diner with welfare rights or debt advice services – this would be sending a wrong message.

Across all supper events and exhibition engagement, convenience was the word used most often when people were describing what would attract them to visit a public diner. One comment sums up the link between convenience and public diners being 'for everyone':

"Convenience is something everyone relates to, regardless of income – if these can make good meals convenient then they are going to be appreciated by everyone – just like post boxes are."

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN GLASGOW



When would you go to a public diner?

Across all forms of consultation, we asked people:

"When would you go to a public diner?"

We wanted to reinforce the idea that public diners are for all of us, not for 'them'. The answers show the universal appeal of public diners.

LUNCH WITH
WORK COLLEAGUES
TEA WITH FAMILY
+ FRIENDS

Useful when travelling around Scotland to have a public diner for a healthy affordable meal.

At the end of a busy day

I can't be bothered cooking.

When I reach for a ready meal for speed and convenience which doesn't make me feel good.

A few times a week, definitely after a long work day, maybe before a night out as well?

after school

On a bus route

I would hope to find one in each town/city

I'm hopeful they can be a regular part of local areas - and also perhaps places folk can go when visiting another location so some way of having a list of them which is kept up to date

On a week night when I have run around all afternoon taking kids to activities at which I have worked until 5/6 pm and have no time to cook. I would arrange to meet friends there some days for a quick catch-up.

- open at dinner time
- less than 30 mins for me to get ~~there~~ to (cycle or public transport)



Affordable

Public diners serve meals at low prices. They can also offer concessionary schemes to ensure everyone can dine there.

Affordability emerged as a key aspect of public diners very early on, and vital for making them work. We wanted to understand what different people saw as 'affordable' and how the diners could be genuinely accessible for all.

Consensus points

- ◆ The price of a main meal at public diners is typically less than £5. No dining experience is above £10 per person.
- ◆ Public diners have formal concessionary mechanisms to subsidise access for particular groups: kids, students, 65+, those going through financial hardship.

Our consultation on the price points consistently highlights £5 as an affordable price. However, this price is not uncontested. Some of the people we spoke to were concerned that £5 was too much, especially if you were a family of five going out to eat more than once a week. Others were concerned that £5 would not reflect the true value of the meal.

To address these concerns, participants suggested concessionary mechanisms could be applied to reduce or make free the cost of eating at a public diner. For example, those used for public transport: kids for a quid, students, over 65, those experiencing financial hardship. There was also a need for clear communications that the diners are subsidised, keeping the prices low for the benefit of everyone.

"It would be good to meet friends for a reasonably priced evening meal. Not possible now!"

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN SKYE

"I'd love to eat out with friends more – we could chat over food but wouldn't have to pay tens of pounds to eat out"

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN GLASGOW

"Public diners card could be used as a mechanism for paying – the card looks the same for everyone but can have different concessions applied – like a bus pass."

CO-DESIGN PARTICIPANT



How much would you pay for a meal at a public diner?



it's a rule you can beat a 'meal deal' on price then you're on a winner.

probably if I was in town + hungry + not wanting to give money to a chain/franchise (i.e. £10 to pret)

Something cheap, tasty, and social.
Dining out is sooo expensive, my partner and I can't afford to go out a lot. Would love something local + tasty + healthy!

[illegible]

Long-term

Public diners are fixed parts of neighbourhoods and the social safety net.

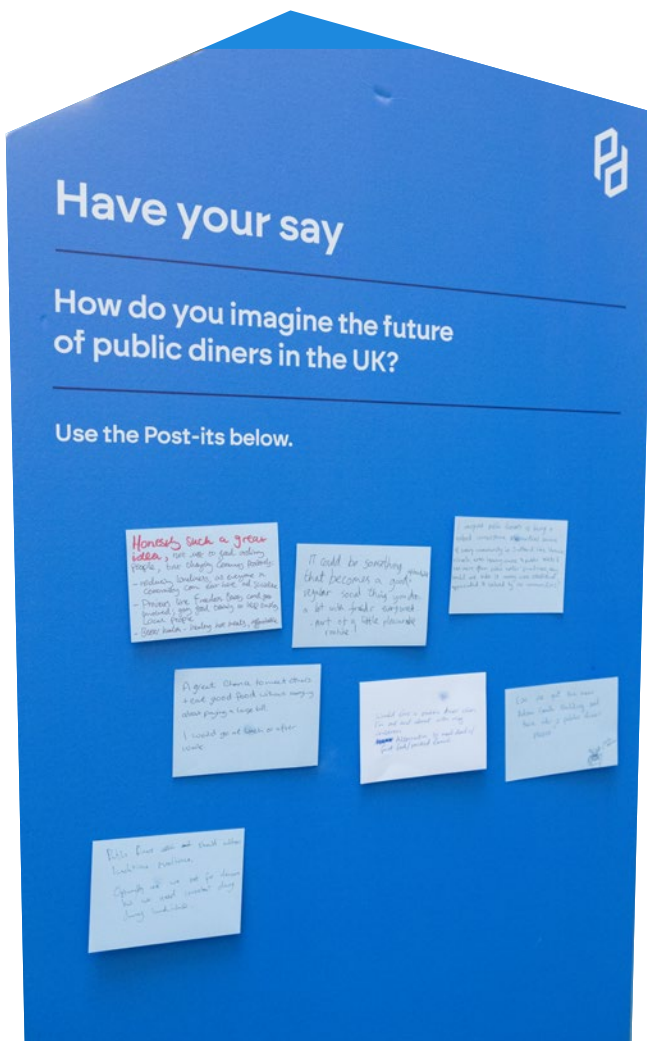
Part of public diners becoming a new piece of public infrastructure means thinking about how they can be here, and be effective, for the long term. In all modes of consultation, people shared a desire for public diners to be ushered in as preventative, reliable infrastructure as opposed to another sticking plaster solution.

One strong theme that came across was a desire for public diners to become 'fixed' parts of neighbourhoods, towns, cities, and countrysides. People were clear that the diners need to be permanent, stable places that can be factored into their weeks, years and lives.

Consensus points

- ◆ The location of each public diner is permanent – there are long-term rental contracts to secure that.
- ◆ Public diners must be underpinned by legislation that sets out the duty of the state in relation to this public infrastructure.

There was general excitement that public diners could be something that would be there for generations.



This would be very exciting if it was put in place + supported as a 'permanent' service rather than short term funding that comes + goes.

I'D LIKE TO IMAGINE THEM AS A NETWORK OF TOWN CENTRE + NEIGHBOURHOOD SPACES, PROVIDING QUALITY AFFORDABLE FOOD THAT APPEALS TO A BROAD MIX OF PEOPLE (NOT LIKE A COMMUNITY CENTRE)

It would be good to imagine them as ubiquitous - just part of the landscape - and for it to become part of the culture to go out to eat nice, healthy food - A bit like the mosque kitchen but with different cuisines

Replacing every McDonalds would be the dream!

"places that might overtake McDonalds in use and recognition"

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN METHIL

I'd love to imagine that Public diners would be as universally recognised and omnipresent as Macdonalds. Would be great if they were synonymous with great food, and community hub for everyone and that people would choose them first, over Macdonalds to feed their families and themselves

It would be great to have a recognisable 'chain' that signifies a warm welcome, good food and affordable choices.

Open every day in dedicated space, so diners know they are going to be open



Democratic

Public diners are public institutions. They have formal mechanisms for public scrutiny and participation.

Participatory governance emerged as a key finding from our 2024 Public Diners conference. From workers sitting on management committees to citizen panels, contributors identified public participation as a key opportunity for people to be citizens, not merely consumers. There was palpable excitement at the idea of democratic intervention into our food environment.

This exploration of public diners as publicly shaped places was especially helpful when thinking about how these diners would be delivered in different local contexts across the country. Naturally, many people expressed concern that state-supported restaurants might be too “top down.”

At the co-design sessions, we explored this concern by thinking about how public diners could best be shaped by the people and places they operate in. Participants were keen on formal and informal mechanisms of allowing everyone to have a say.

Consensus points

- ◆ Public diners are regularly reviewed by citizen panels – inclusive of diners, workers, local government officials, and national government representatives.
- ◆ Public diners perform open book reporting for multiple aspects of operation such as finances and supply chain contracts.
- ◆ Public diners operate with multiple points of public control and feedback: decision-making control over certain aspects of operation, taster menus, themed nights decided by people.

“Local places would put their own stamp on it (unlike McDonalds which are all the same everywhere).”

COMMUNITY RESEARCHER FOR CIVIC RESTAURANTS

“Different communities would have different specs/needs for their public diner, depending on the local population i.e. demographics, culture”

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN GLASGOW

- Public support (State supported, but open to e.g. municipal run)
- Democratically run
- Clear articles of association / legal basis to prevent privatisation
- Community embedded



sense of shared ownership

'consumers must have a stake in it'

publicly-funded; locally-run.



Appealing

Public diners are regular restaurants. They are places which are convenient and appealing for everyone to eat in.

Consensus points

- ◆ Public diners are mainstream and popular.
- ◆ Public diners set high standards for food safety and hygiene.
- ◆ Public diners typically operate a canteen-style service.
- ◆ There are no wraparound services permanently co-located with public diners.

Our conversations across the consultation reflected on the challenge of 'design for everyone' – and offered suggestions of places that already aspire to do this. Some people used Wetherspoons as an example of places with mass appeal. These pubs have a habit of being in grand, historic buildings like former banks, theatres and cinemas, often with tall ceilings and architectural charm. At the same time, they are places that feel the easiest to pop into off the high street, even if it's just to use the toilet.

One common suggestion was that canteen style would help make the space feel appealing to everyone, whether extroverted, introverted or in between. As one supper attendee put it:

"You are in control of your whole dining experience, from walking through the doors, through to lining up – having just enough time to decide what you want, where you might sit and maybe even start a conversation with someone if you're feeling up for it that day."

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN ABERDEEN

Add to that equation a meal that tastes good, a price lower than a meal deal, warm lighting, ambient music and a clean toilet, and you have a very appealing place to stop in for dinner.

Another dominant theme of conversation was how public diners could build in more opportunities for social connection in neighbourhoods. There was discontent with the lack of places that people could 'hang out' at in their neighbourhoods. Many responses from the consultation suppers expressed excitement at the prospect that public diners could create the actual physical spaces to feel connected – whether that's from running into neighbours, being able to casually go out for dinner with a new friend, or just by being surrounded by others instead of eating alone.

I imagine they will become a reality. It could be a very good chance to meet neighbours and family, in a cost effective manner. For families with young kids - it will give the "sit down meal times". For seniors, it will give a fully balanced meal - which a lot of seniors/ single people, won't even bother cooking for themselves. Locally, it would help if local produce was used.

There are tables for one, tables for two and tables for many people, which give diners the choice in terms of ~~their willingness~~ social interactions with other diners, depending on their willingness to do so.

"You are in control of the whole dining experience, from walking through the doors, through to lining up"

SUPPER ATTENDEE
IN ABERDEEN

I like canteen style service - nice to have more of a person-person interaction rather than table service. Candlelight was really nice - elevated vibe. I would've rathered no music as cut conversation short for me! Serving time perfect for me.

I've just moved to stay and it would be a brilliant resource to help ease loneliness / help to connect with people

Pleasant surroundings - not too basic, maybe some art on display for example.



Real good food

Public diners serve meals which taste good, celebrate local flavours, care for the planet and can be enjoyed by everyone.

Real good food was a non-negotiable for public diners from the beginning. The exact meaning of “real good food” and how to deliver it through public diners has been an ongoing, complex conversation.

Consensus points

- ◆ Public diners serve ‘recognisable’ dishes*
- ◆ The majority of sourcing for each public diner is local.
- ◆ Public diners adhere to a set of agreed national standards around minimum nutritional and environmental requirements.

When asked “what would you want on the menu of a public diner?” nobody said it needed to be all fried, just like nobody said it needed to be all green. On balance, people wanted meals that tasted good, and that they could trust wouldn’t hurt their health, like many other £5 options do.

*meaning dishes need to resonate with the people the diner is serving. Some dishes might feel more recognisable than others, but nobody feels like there is nothing for them at a public diner.

“Yes, public diners would serve chips and desserts – they just wouldn’t be drowning in oil or ultra-processed.”

CODESIGN SESSION PARTICIPANT

At the same time, it was clear that people wanted the meals served to set better standards for local and sustainable food. Creating new routes to market for local, agroecological produce emerged as a priority for many people – as did the ambition that public diners could help support other necessary changes to how food is grown, produced and sold in Scotland.

“I think this model has a lot of potential to utilise and support locally grown food!”

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN GLASGOW

“I’d eat there 4-5 times a week if it was supporting the local producers”

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN ROSYTH

“Serving low mileage seasonal food”

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN EDINBURGH

It was also important that the food served was culturally valued by people eating there.

“Diverse and inclusive of all food”

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN GLASGOW

Another key aspect of ensuring real good food, is that there are real good working practices. There was a strong sense that public diners could provide more employment and raise the standards and value of jobs in the food sector – from food producers, growers, chefs, hospitality and all in between. Real good working practices are inseparable from real good food.

- good healthy locally grown food
- interesting dishes reflecting local cultures.

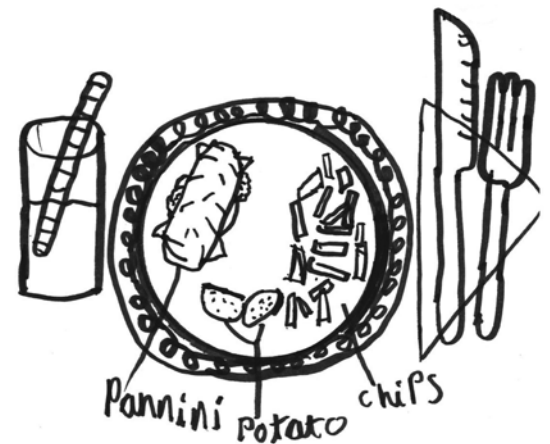
good choice of hot food
+ dessert

It'd love to see a public diner
that supported local/regional growers
and producers to create a
seasonal menu/choice...
and poss worked in partnership with
local businesses to avoid a clash.

Public diners in each major city that are
used by people from all walks of life that
serve locally produced, fresh + nutritious
food that supports local food producers
& is climate conscious & in line with national/
regional/city emissions reductions. + a just
transition (think public diners could play a
really valuable role in the climate transition
for society).

**"Paid staff
and new job
opportunities"**

SUPPER ATTENDEE IN GLASGOW



Varied menu
Consistently good

> Properly paid, securely employed
workers



In conversation with hospitality workers

Throughout the co-production process, we have engaged with chefs and hospitality workers from across the food sector. This has included people working in speciality bistros, small independent café owners, McDonald's assembly line workers, care homes, hospitals, charitable organisations, catering colleges and more. We were keen to understand what they thought of the prospect of public diners and how they saw themselves in this future. We also wanted to learn from their expertise by experience: how might public diners do menus that appealed to everyone, were healthy enough, sustainable enough and culturally valued.

Overall, public diners were seen as a positive proposal if they could be places which create more and better opportunities for chefs. We heard many hospitality workers express excitement that these places could be part of uplifting working conditions across the country: e.g. modelling better hours and better wages. Conversations with catering colleges also highlighted how these diners could provide valuable training pathways to their students.

"The students could do placements in public diners like doctors do placements in hospitals."

We had many conversations about how public diners could exist alongside other catering establishments. Some chefs noted that usually speciality restaurants aren't open 7 days a week, so public diners could be good places to go for a casual meal on a day off or a spot to pick up a nice short shift if needed.

Others testified to the fact that there are many people interested in cooking who can't break into the industry because of tough working hours, such as late-night shifts. Public diners would provide these opportunities.

The general consensus on the feasibility of menus was that it would be challenging but possible. Common suggestions included canteen style service, a limited menu (2 cooked, hot mains) that changes daily, and "micro choices" (salad bar, optional garnishes/toppings such as spices, fresh herbs, cheese, pickles, other sides).

Dishes most commonly suggested as substantial mains were stews and curries – widely recognisable and comforting dishes, whilst also being very flexible with ingredients used. Importantly, they would be good vessels for incorporating

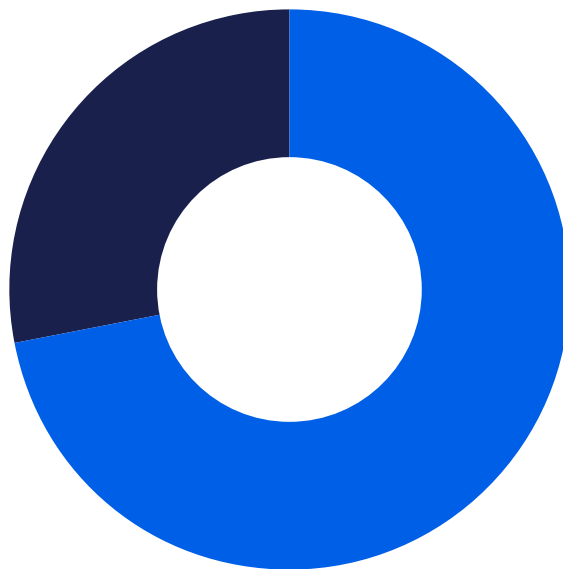
seasonal, fresh, available ingredients, as well as using legumes and pulses that could drive down the amount of meat needed in a dish.

Nonetheless, chefs made it clear that ensuring the menu was sustainable would be a challenge. It would be more expensive and take a lot more effort in terms of supply chains to procure local, sustainable produce, so public diners would need to make sure they are committed to supporting this. This point was reinforced by conversations with producers at the co-design sessions, who made it clear that public diners cannot overlook other system changes needed to make sure agroecological produce and the people that grow it are properly supported.



Public polling on public diners

In May 2025, the Diffley Partnership conducted a national survey on attitudes towards public diners. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their support for and potential use of public diners.



72% support the rollout of public diners in Scotland

Source: Diffley Partnership, May 2025, Public Survey on Public Diners

Nearly **3 in 4 people (72%)** supported the introduction of public diners in Scotland. **1 in 3** express strong support. **70%** thought that investing in the first phase of public diners would be a good or fair use of public money. The policy was particularly popular with younger people (16-34 years old) and people living in areas classed as SIMD 1 and 2, with **78%** and **77%** support respectively.

Most people said **£5** would be the expected price of a main meal at a public diner. When asked what the most appealing part of public diners would be, the top response was their **affordable prices** – two in five respondents said affordable prices would be the top reason for going to a public diner.

The poll also showed that knowing public diners use good working practices was one of the top reasons why people would go to a public diner (**31%**).

Consensus points

Together, these points help to understand how people want public diners to work in Scotland today.

- 01** State support happens at both national and local levels:
 - a.** National backing, funding and standards are necessary.
 - b.** Local governments are responsible for the delivery of diners in their area.
- 02** State support subsidises the operational costs of the diners including rent, overheads, equipment and staffing.
- 03** Public diners are underpinned by legislation that sets out the duty of the state to support this public infrastructure.
- 04** All public diners are connected by public transport.
- 05** All public diners are in central, well-lit, convenient locations.
- 06** There are no wraparound services permanently co-located with public diners.
- 07** All public diners are open at least 4 days a week, with at least some weekend provision.
- 08** The price of a main meal at public diners is typically less than £5. No dining experience is above £10 per person.
- 09** Public diners have formal concessionary mechanisms to subsidise access for particular groups: kids, students, 65+, those going through financial hardship.
- 10** The location of each public diner is permanent – there are long-term rental contracts to secure that.
- 11** Public diners are regularly reviewed by citizen panels – inclusive of diners, workers, local government officials, and national government representatives.
- 12** Public diners perform open book reporting for multiple aspects of operation, such as finances and supply chain contracts.
- 13** Public diners operate with multiple points of public control, decision-making and feedback.
- 14** Public diners are mainstream and popular.
- 15** Public diners set high standards for food safety and hygiene.
- 16** Public diners typically operate a canteen-style service.
- 17** Public diners serve 'recognisable' dishes.
- 18** The majority of sourcing for each public diner is local.
- 19** Public diners adhere to a set of agreed national standards around minimum nutritional and environmental requirements.



Acknowledgements

This report is the result of consultation and co-production with over 1,000 people. Thank you to the following organisations who helped put on a consultation supper event and/or exhibition in their area:

- ◆ Aberdeen Central Library
- ◆ Carnegie Library
- ◆ Central West Integration Network
- ◆ Civic House, Parveens Canteen
- ◆ Corra Foundation
- ◆ EATS Rosyth
- ◆ Edinburgh Food Social
- ◆ Eskdalemuir Community Hub
- ◆ Glasgow Life, Sauchiehall Street Cultural District
- ◆ Glasgow Science Festival
- ◆ Greener Kirkcaldy
- ◆ Halleria Trust
- ◆ National Lottery Heritage Fund
- ◆ New Lanark Heritage Centre
- ◆ On Fife
- ◆ Scottish Storytelling Centre
- ◆ Self Health Truck, The Hebridean Inn
- ◆ The Rowett Institute
- ◆ U Jarka, Sikorski Polish Club

The co-design sessions were co-created with members of the Meaningful Participation Panel (MPP):

- ◆ Georgy Davis and Max McDonald

We recruited 12 participants for the co-design sessions – each with varying personal and professional experiences to feed into the design of public diners. From producers to parents, chefs, students, New Scots, public health officials, and activists:

- ◆ Alice Eaves
- ◆ Cate Bulmer
- ◆ Col Gordon
- ◆ Debra Gill
- ◆ Fiona Macdonald
- ◆ George Gray
- ◆ Jana Anderson
- ◆ Naila Akram
- ◆ Roddy Smith
- ◆ Sara MacMillan
- ◆ Sarah Head
- ◆ Shona Cameron



***“places that
might overtake
McDonalds in use
and recognition”***

SUPPER ATTENDEE
IN METHIL



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