**Better Hospital Food survey findings report**

**Introduction**

The health and well-being of NHS staff has become a key issue since the NHS published its five year vision in 2014. NHS England has committed £5m to initiatives aimed at health workers such as promoting sports classes and offering healthier food in restaurants and vending machines. Yet progress is slow.

Many health workers including porters, admin workers and nurses are based in hospitals. Kitchen closures and the outsourcing of catering services has lowered standards, which in turn has affected staff. Food was once prepared with fresh ingredients in on-site kitchens. But these are rapidly disappearing and being replaced with meals made elsewhere that just need heating up. The result is food that’s less appealing to staff, visitors and patients, and means kitchen workers are being made redundant.

In 2013, UNISON and the Campaign for Better Hospital Food (CBHF) published the [*Keep Hospitals Cooking* report](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CSophieG%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CTemporary%20Internet%20Files%5CContent.Outlook%5CY0QY0DC6%5CUseful%20documents%5CKeep%20Hospitals%20Cooking%20report.pdf). This found that only half (54%) of caterers said the hospital where they worked had a healthy eating policy.

UNISON believes that both staff and patients should have access to good healthy food. Nutritious hospital food is vital to improving patients’ health, and is essential for busy staff.

This March, UNISON and the CBHF circulated a joint survey to all UNISON health staff which received 3,650 responses. The aim was to assess views on catering facilities and obtain accurate information about the availability of healthy food for staff working both day and night shifts. The survey findings are based on staff experiences, as well as on their perception of what patients experience.

**Staff access to healthy food**

Access to good quality healthy food in hospitals is extremely limited for staff working nights. The UNISON/CBHF survey shows that nearly half (49%) of staff restaurants close at 8pm or earlier, and only a tiny minority (2%) of staff said their canteens were open after midnight on weekdays and weekends. UNISON believes this is unacceptable given that the vast majority of night shifts begin at 7pm. More than a quarter (29%) of NHS staff often work night shifts, and closed restaurants limit their access to healthy food and impacts on their well-being.

Food that is available during night shifts is usually unhealthy. Many staff (74%) stated that vending machines are available, but these are often empty and sometimes contain expired goods. Others reported that no food was available at all. More than half (57%) said meal preparation facilities were poor with only a minority (9%) describing them as good. Given that hospital food is costly, it is crucial that staff have access to microwaves so they can heat up food brought from home.

Workers on overnight shifts often turn to takeaways because there is no alternative, according to staff who responded to the survey. They work hard to look after patients yet are being let down by the lack of facilities on offer. It is crucial staff have access to fresh meals that do not leave them turning to high fat, sugar and salt content foods.

**Patient access to healthy food**

This report highlights how patient food is a major issue. Nearly three quarters (72%) confirmed they had received negative feedback from patients, with just under half saying these comments related to meals not tasting very good. Other issues included food that looked unappealing or that was unhealthy. More than half (55%) said they would not be happy to eat food that was served to patients. This suggests that standards of hospital food across the UK are at levels that many consider unacceptable. Malnourished patients are more likely to experience complications and stay in hospital for longer. It is crucial that patient food is both nutritious and appealing.

**Food preparation**

Staff were asked about food preparation. More than two in five (41%) stated they would not be happy to eat food served to patients that had been prepared in an onsite kitchen. The figure was even higher - more than seven in ten (71%) - for food that had been prepared off-site by a private contractor. Nearly nine in ten (86%) staff reported receiving negative feedback about patient food prepared outside hospital premises. This highlights the huge differences between the quality of food cooked on site and that of meals brought in by private contractors.

**What staff say:**

*“Since the food started to be delivered by an external contractor the quality has been terrible. I’ve had many negative comments from patients and many refuse to eat it, thus affecting their recovery.”*

*“There is a poor choice for food on night shifts for all staff and it’s hard relatives to get anything, even a drink.”*

*“They need to think about the night shift and relatives who stay overnight. Simply having vending machines is not enough, with only crisps and fizzy pop that is too expensive.”*

*“Not enough fresh fruit available in the cafes and restaurant every day.”*

**Conclusion**

Both UNISON and CBHF are campaigning to improve hospital food standards. Proposals to reduce the amount of unhealthy products across NHS premises are welcome but change needs to happen more quickly. The CBHF has presented ten recommendations to NHS England which include addressing the lack of healthy choices available to staff working overnight, and urging hospitals to provide nutritious food.

**What we are asking for:**

* Healthy nutritious food available 24-hours a day for staff, visitors and patients.
* Clear standards on hospital food which are enforceable so hospitals that breach them can be held to account.