The Hospital Food Standards Panel

The Hospital Food Standards Panel was set up by Health Minister Dr Dan Poulter and was led by Dianne Jeffrey from Age UK. The Panel was responsible for examining existing food standards and advising on how they should be applied and monitored.

The Panel’s report, published in August 2014, looks at standards relating to patient nutrition and hydration, healthier eating across hospitals and sustainable food and catering services. NHS adoption of the recommended standards has been required through the NHS Standard Contract, meaning that hospitals have a legal duty to comply with the recommendations.

Why was the Panel set up?

The panel was set up at a time when there were no national mandatory standards for hospital food in England, and a growing concern around inconsistencies in the food offer for patients, staff and visitors across hospitals, and around rising levels of diet related ill health. 62% of adults in the UK and 28% of children aged between 2 and 15 are overweight or obese, and diet related ill health also affects NHS staff. People who are malnourished, either through overweight or undernutrition, are admitted to hospital more often, stay for longer, and are more likely to develop complications or infections. Once a patient is admitted, there is a great deal that hospitals can do to support recovery by attending to nutrition and hydration needs.

Hospitals also have a social responsibility. As major purchasers and providers of food and catering services, they have the opportunity to put health-promotion and sustainability at the heart of their work and support local communities and livelihoods.

The Hospital Food Standards Panel was set up to address these challenges of inconsistency, health-promotion and sustainability. The panel examined existing food standards, advised on how they should be applied and monitored, and recommended further actions to maintain improvement in the future.

The Panel’s report

The Panel’s report was published in August 2014 and identifies a number of ‘required standards’ that should become routine practice in all hospitals, with the aim of improving food and drink across the NHS. The Panel also make more general recommendations about how food and drink might be improved. These particularly concern the importance of continued action on food and drink, with an emphasis on flavour, taste and presentation.

The Panel’s recommendations

The Panel recommends that NHS hospitals develop and maintain a food and drink strategy.

The strategy should capture how the organisation will address nutritional care for patients, deliver healthier food for the whole hospital community (particularly staff), and embed sustainability into its service. It should also pay close attention to the end-quality of food and drink served, so that everyone receives meals they can enjoy.

The Panel recommends food standards that should be required for all hospitals

Five ‘required’ standards are identified in the Panel’s report.
For patient catering:
- 10 key characteristics of good nutritional care, Nutrition Alliance
- Nutrition and Hydration Digest, The British Dietetic Association
- Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool or equivalent1 (BAPEN)

For staff and visitor catering (and applied as appropriate to patient catering):
- Healthier and More Sustainable Catering – Nutrition Principles (Public Health England)

For all catering:
- Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services, HMG standards developed by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

In addition to the required standards, there are tools and assurance schemes that can support improvement and reward excellence. ‘Recognised’ tools and schemes are not compulsory but they can promote excellence and may be useful in negotiating CQUIN agreements. ‘Recognised’ tools include Defra’s Plan for Public Procurement Balanced Scorecard and the Soil Association’s Catering Mark.

Implementation of the Panel’s recommendations

As of 1st April 2015, the Panel’s recommendations have been mandated through the NHS Standard Contract. Implementation of the required standards will be monitored via annual Patient led Assessments of the Care Environment (PLACE), with revised PLACE assessments also generating information that patients can use to help them judge the quality of the food at their local hospital.

Food for Life: Supporting NHS Trusts to develop a transformative Food and Drink Strategy

The Soil Association’s Food for Life team has been working closely with Bart’s Health NHS Trust, South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust and Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, to develop a multi-disciplinary approach and framework of criteria to underpin the development of a Food and Drink Strategy.

This work builds on the success of the evidence-based Food for Life Partnership schools work which was developed with support from the Big Lottery Fund, and is widely commissioned by public health teams and Clinical Commissioning Groups to deliver a ‘whole setting approach’ to changing food systems and behaviours.

The Soil Association was represented on the Hospital Food Standards Panel and all its expert reference groups, and the work with South Warwickshire was profiled in a case study in the Panel’s report. The Food for Life Hospital Leaders Circle is aimed at key senior multi-disciplinary staff engaged in the areas identified in the Hospital Food Standards Panel report. To find out more, email Susannah McWilliam, Workplace Health and Hospitals Project Manager, at smcwilliam@soilassociation.org.

Food for Life Catering Mark: Rewarding excellence in hospital food

The Soil Association’s Food for Life Catering Mark has been widely taken up by NHS Trusts and care settings, is cited as a benchmark in NHS England’s ‘CQUIN’ goals on Improving Hospital Food for 2015/16, and incorporates the Government Buying Standards on nutrition that are mandated in all hospitals.

For further information, please get in touch with the Catering Mark team:

- Call 0171 914 4206
- Email catering@foodforlife.org.uk
- Visit www.sacert.org/catering/hospitalscarensettings