



ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



Parliamentary Food

5.30pm, Tuesday 27 June 2006

Committee Room 13, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

Present: Lord Rea, *FHF Chairman*
Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen
Ian Gibson MP
Baroness Masham of Ilton
Kerry McCarthy MP
Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer

Patricia Constant, Secretariat
Rob Hailey, Secretariat
Mathew Castle, Sustain

Apologies: 3 members sent their apologies, which have been recorded.

Speakers: **Sue Harrison, Head of Catering Services, House of Commons**

Tim Lamming, Head of Catering Services, House of Lords

Please note that powerpoint slides provided by Tim Lamming are being circulated with these minutes and provide illustrations of the new refreshment facilities that will be available in the House of Lords from October 2006.

Introduction

Lord Rea welcomed members to the meeting and thanked Sue Harrison and Tim Lamming for coming to speak to members about the refreshment facilities available in Parliament and the food policies being followed in the Commons and the Lords. Both Sue Harrison and Tim Lamming have degrees in Hotel and Catering Management from the University of Surrey, which they attended at the same time, graduating in 1979. Sue Harrison has been Director of Catering Services at the House of Commons for more than 14 years. Tim joined the House of Lords in 2003 after a varied career in the hospitality industry.

Sue Harrison

Sue Harrison (SH) emphasised that both she and Tim Lamming are professional catering managers, not nutritionists or dietitians. Their business is managing their staff and their customers' expectations.

Sue believes that the increasing interest in healthy eating is one of the biggest challenges facing all caterers. Customers are becoming much more aware of lifestyle issues and there has been a distinct trend towards asking for lighter, healthier meals at a time convenient to themselves, rather than during the traditional meal times. Sue believes that more people are concerned about their

Chairman: Lord Rea
Vice-Chairmen: Dr Ian Gibson MP
& Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer
Secretary: The Earl Baldwin of Bewdley
Treasurer: Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen

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health and diet, but some see this as a “chore”. Many people have a negative attitude towards healthy eating – they don’t expect to enjoy healthy meals – and there is a lot of confusion about healthy eating.

Sue noted that there have been several dietary fads, such as the Atkins Diet, which caterers have to be aware of. She does not believe it is the fundamental duty of caterers to educate customers about healthy food options, but she does believe caterers should respond to demand for healthy options and offer their customers a broad choice of food, including healthy options.

Sue has witnessed an increasing demand for better quality, fresh, seasonal and organic food, but said that her customers are reluctant to pay more for it: pricing such food realistically to reflect its higher cost results in the negative view that healthy food is more expensive.

Caterers face a similar problem in responding to requests for more information about the meals which they present. In order to achieve accurate labelling of meals’ nutritional value, a nutritionist would need to be employed, raising costs, chefs’ innovation would have to be discouraged and staff would have to serve standard portions. For these reasons, Sue Harrison has resisted putting nutritional information about the meals served in the Commons on the menu. Instead, the Commons Refreshment Department includes generic “healthier options” on its menus and from time to time mounts special promotions, working with the Occupational Health and Safety team and external advisers to promote healthy food choices for a week.

Sue emphasised that the catering services in the Commons have to meet a range of needs. For example, low calorie meals would not be suitable for the many manual workers employed on the Parliamentary estate, so a wide range of food is required. Sue acknowledged, however, that many consumers want food with a reduced salt, reduced sugar and low fat content. Sue has encouraged her chefs to use less salt gradually and low fat food options are available, but it is not always possible to reduce sugar in recipes. For example, many pudding recipes would fail without relatively high sugar levels.

Sue regards educating catering staff about healthy food as a real challenge. For example, many chefs smoke, which makes their palate less sensitive to salt. The staff themselves do not necessarily eat healthily – resorting to snacks and high carbohydrate meals after tiring shifts. She would also like staff to encourage customers to try healthy options, but giving customers more opportunities to serve themselves has had mixed results in terms of healthy food consumption. Some customers take more vegetables and others take less.

Baroness Gibson, noting the differing age range of customers in the Commons and Lords, asked whether there was any significant difference in the demand for healthy food options. Sue Harrison and Tim Lamming believe an important factor affecting demand is the difference in the refreshment facilities in each place. In the Lords there are only three self-service areas and most food is served by staff. In the Commons many refreshment areas are self-service. Sue acknowledged that the market for catering services in Portcullis House had a younger age profile than in other areas. Consequently, demand for healthier options is high in Portcullis House.

Baroness Gibson asked whether the infrequent appearance of curry on the Lords menus reflected low demand for it and Tim Lamming said it did.

Baroness Miller asked whether there was much movement of catering staff between the Commons and the Lords. Sue Harrison and Tim Lamming agreed this was rare. Tim noted that staff turnover in the Lords at 6% is much lower than the industry average of some 40-50%.

Sue Harrison said it was difficult for the Commons catering service to meet the demand for low cost, fresh, seasonal food, not least because it was difficult to find reliable suppliers in London who were prepared to supply the amounts required. Small suppliers also tend to use couriers to deliver food and they are notoriously unreliable about delivery times.

Sue finished by drawing attention to the scale of the catering operation in the House of Commons. The Refreshment Department now employs almost 300 staff, including a complement of around 90 chefs, providing food and drink to over 8,000 customers a day. The Department operates over 25 trading venues in Westminster, offering a wide range of catering services for MPs and staff of both Houses, visitors, contractors and others working within the Parliamentary Estate. There are some 14,000 passholders who are entitled to use their facilities. Sue noted that in less than fifteen years, the number of meals they serve has doubled, although they are now operating with fewer staff. Against this background, she welcomed the fact that they receive very few complaints.

Kerry McCarthy asked whether the Commons has analysed the proportion of their customers who are vegetarians, but had not asked this question. Sue said that they did survey their customers once every Parliament, but it was important to guard against survey fatigue, as MPs and staff could be asked to respond to surveys by many other Departments and on a wide range of topics. There is a Refreshment Department User Group for staff, but Sue hopes to replace this with series of customer focus groups of staff and MPs to offer feedback on specific issues.

Kerry McCarthy also asked why menus in the House of Commons tend to be repetitive. Sue said this reflected the need to balance innovation with control of quality and costs. They have a duty to maintain a prudent control of costs as the food is subsidised by the taxpayer. She is aware, however, that the menu cycles sometimes are not changed frequently enough and the Department is working towards changing the menus more often with more use of seasonal dishes and ingredients.

Tim Lamming

Tim Lamming described the mission of the House of Lords catering service, which is to “provide their customers with an experience that exceeds their expectations, through quality, efficiency and an inspired workforce.”

The scale of the House of Lords catering service is significant, though not as large as in the Commons. There are ten trading outlets, which include 2 fine dining rooms, 3 self-service restaurants, 3 bars, function rooms and the gift shop. They employ over 100 permanent staff and additional casual staff. They serve over 1500 covers a day. The annual departmental turnover is in excess of £3 million. They have over 800 banqueting events per year, with an annual turnover in excess of £1.5 million, serving some 50,000 guests. The gift shop has an annual turnover of £590,000.

Over the last three years a huge refurbishment project has been carried out on the Lords refreshment facilities. There were many reasons for embarking on this work, including the need to raise health and safety standards; achieve best practice standards in food safety; improve the working environment for staff; improve staff accommodation and changing facilities; improve the quality and efficiencies of the service of food in all areas and improve the staff restaurant and bar.

The staff restaurant, which will be re-named the “River Restaurant”, will open in October. Peers will be able to use it and to take guests there. It will a 60 seat, light and airy restaurant. It will have a combination of wood and slate floors, which with the help of other special features, should help to minimise noise. The lighting will be flexible, so that it can be subdued for special events. It will be open from 7am to 9pm and light refreshments will be available all day. The plans should enable queues to be reduced and a quick service to be provided, including a fast lane at lunch. The “fast lane” will enable people who have ordered and paid for their food over the intranet to come in and collect it quickly. Healthy food options will be available.

The new Lords’ Bar, which will be in the same place, will offer a “Starbucks” style coffee service, with hot drinks and pastries from 7.30am to 10.45pm (8pm on a Friday). It will be similar to the “Dispatch Box” service in Portcullis House. It will also have a full range of bar drinks. The bar will have a much more modern, light and airy appearance. In a new departure, the bar will be available for staff functions, particularly on Fridays.

In the short time remaining, Tim outlined the House of Lords' food policies, which are: to maintain the quality of dishes served, whatever the outlet; to insist on good quality ingredients; to provide varied and comprehensive menus with seasonal variations; to cater flexibly so as to meet special dietary requests; and to offer healthy food options in all areas. Above all, they listen to their customers.

Baroness Miller complimented Tim Lamming on the success of the seasonal variation of the menus and asked if the Apple Day initiative could be revived. The last Apple Day was held before Tim joined the Lords and Sue Harrison explained that it now tended to fall during the Parliamentary recess. Tim said that for the last three years while they have been working out of temporary facilities, what they have been able to do has been limited, but he is looking forward to be able to be more innovative once the refurbishment is completed.

Tim outlined a number of the healthy food options that are available in the Lords, including salads, fruit, steamed vegetables, low fat milk, spreads instead of butter and more vegetarian dishes. He said the chefs were using less salt; using semi-skimmed half-fat cream; using unsaturated fats more often; serving sauces separately; providing more brown and wholemeal bread and rolls; and using healthy cooking methods, such as steaming, grilling, baking and roasting rather than boiling and frying.

Tim concluded by briefing members on the Catering Group Eurest Lunchtime Report (July 2004) which had found that one third of workers would like staff catering facilities to offer healthier eating options. It also found that workers choose their lunch on the basis of taste (65%), healthy options (54%), and price (44%). About one in three staff (37%) are concerned about their fat and calorie intake.

Questions

Baroness Masham and Baroness Gibson asked Tim to ensure that full-fat milk and butter are also made available and Baroness Gibson suggested that crème fraiche could also be offered, rather than natural yoghurt, as an alternative to cream.

Baroness Miller asked what fair trade food was being offered in the Commons and the Lords. Sue Harrison said that fair trade bananas are not available all year round and she has experienced significant supply problems. Some suppliers have minimum supply requirements which exceed what could be used by the Commons. There is also a problem that the stock is not always ripe when it is supplied and the Commons and the Lords do not have sufficient room to store bananas while they ripen. Moreover the Commons has found that supermarkets' buying power enables them to buy whole crops leaving nothing for other potential customers.

Mathew Castle of Sustain suggested that Parliament should buy class two products that were more easily available. Sue Harrison countered this by saying that most customers judged the quality of produce first and foremost by its appearance and would not buy goods which they regarded as sub-standard. She cited previous experience when offering old varieties of English apples and other such promotions.

Baroness Gibson asked if the Bishops' Bar would remain largely as it is and Tim said it would.

Conclusion

Lord Rea thanked both speakers for coming to discuss the catering services in Parliament with members of the group and congratulated them on the service which they provided. Tim thanked Lord Rea and noted the quality of their service reflected the commitment of their staff.

June 2006