

NHS Supply Chain's Kathryn Browne, a lead in the procurement team and a champion of food safety, speaks about the importance of safe practices in the supply chain and the evolving world of sandwiches.



Safety and quality in the food-to-go sector



The Food to Go market in healthcare has changed in the last six months, with four key factors having influenced some big shifts, making the market look very different now to how we were used to.

In this changing environment, we have been working closely with industry to evolve alongside it and maintain a great quality product of great value for the NHS.

Four factors for change

Labour shortages (both in distribution and other areas of food operations) have had an impact on suppliers and distributors, causing delays and/or increased costs because of the need to outsource agency workers at a higher rate. An increase in the cost of commodities, in some cases by 40 per cent, is the second factor, and this has led to pricing reviews by suppliers so that they are able to absorb the increases.

In this area, the NHS Supply Chain: Food team has been working very closely with suppliers on the Food to Go Framework to negotiate price increases, where necessary, and to keep a competitive price for the NHS. This has been a delicate balance to ensure suppliers can provide sustainable supply and was exacerbated by one large sandwich supplier withdrawing from the healthcare industry entirely at the end of 2021. Contracts with suppliers exist to protect NHS customers and when situations like this arise, we work with suppliers and trusts to find the right solution.

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Suppliers are now also limited to ordering certain volumes of packaging from the EU because of an overall shortage and changes as a result of leaving the EU. This is factor number three. Our teams have been working with suppliers to better understand and communicate alternative packing options, and with NHS Trusts to make them aware of the changes.

The final factor is related to the overall context we are facing with Covid-19. Closed retail outlets in NHS Trusts have reduced the number of retail lines purchased. Retail in other parts of the market has also not fully recovered from several lockdowns.

All of this points to a new sandwich market, one that has been impacted by many factors but one that is also moving forward and adapting to change.

Food safety – no bitesize issue

Another factor being considered in the evolution of the sandwich market is food safety. The Independent Review of NHS Hospital Food 2020 specifically mentions food safety and obligations around it. We're proud to support the recommendation to have the right controls enacted at every stage of the food supply chain.

We know we have a part to play in upholding high standards in our area of the supply chain, which is why we have a requirement for all suppliers on our frameworks to achieve 'Approved Supplier' status by passing a food safety audit. This is carried out by Support, Training & Services Ltd (STS), our appointed accreditation body. Our Food to Go framework is also classed differently and requires audits of every supplier every six months for quality and safety purposes.

We also know that within hospital Trusts, responsibility shouldn't just fall to the catering team, so we want to support Trusts to be food safety champions. We've created a new resource¹ that covers background information on Listeria, as well as temperature requirements for sandwiches and a step-by-step guide on how to carry out checks on arrival while avoiding damage to the product.

The value of a good sandwich

Despite market changes, we have been working with the industry to support an increase in sandwich quality. Sandwiches are a common staple for patients, staff and visitors so we support the move to a higher-quality product, not just from a food safety point of view, but from a health and nutrition point of view as well.

The British Sandwich Association has been working closely with the Hospital Food Review team and NHS Supply Chain to ensure that sandwiches supplied to hospitals are of the best quality, as Jim Winship, Director at the Association explains. "We are ensuring that those supplying sandwiches meet stringent food safety standards so that patients get a safe and nutritionally balanced meal, which is so important to their wellbeing. With rising ingredient and labour costs, it is inevitable that

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prices will increase, but it is critically important that we do not let safety standards slip and that those supplying the NHS continue to meet appropriate standards."

Phil Shelley, Chair of the NHS Food Review and Senior Operational and Policy Manager, NHS England and NHS Improvement, agrees with Jim. "The NHS is committed to improving food served in hospitals, whether for patients, staff, or visitors, and this includes our sandwich offering. We continue to work with our catering teams and suppliers to produce or procure high-quality, nutritious sandwiches that meet the needs of a wide range of consumers."



Sandwiches and other Food to Go items are available through the NHS Supply Chain: Food framework, which currently offers approximately 1,200 products from 10 suppliers. The team is always happy to talk to NHS trusts about the market and products available.

You can contact the team at food@supplychain.nhs.uk or you can speak to your local Food Account Manager.

¹ The resource is available at: www.supplychain.nhs.uk/categories/food