Wasting less food from banquets, meetings and events

WRAP's vision is a world in which resources are used sustainably.

Our mission is to accelerate the move to a sustainable resource-efficient economy through re-inventing how we design, produce and sell products; re-thinking how we use and consume products; and re-defining what is possible through re-use and recycling.

Find out more at www.wrap.org.uk

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Summary

This guidance is targeted at Hospitality and Food Service (HaFS) sector businesses and provides guidance to help you to accelerate progress toward your targets on food waste prevention under the Hospitality and Food Service Agreement (HaFSA).

Food Waste prevention guidance

1.0   Introduction – food waste in hospitality operations

Food waste in UK catering is an issue from a commercial and environmental perspective. The staff catering, e.g. employee restaurants and cafés aspect alone, (excluding catering for client customers and hotel catering for events such as weddings) has been estimated at approximately 21,000 tonnes of food waste, costing in the region of £44 million per annum[1] and is expected to be far more across all aspects of event hospitality.

There are various reasons for food waste in hospitality operations, not least because the caterer is acting as a third party, often trying to meet the expectations of the client and the client's customers. Poor estimation of attendee numbers by hospitality co-ordinators and event managers in the client companies can be a major cause of food waste, as can last minute 'drop-outs' by expected attendees. In some cases, inflexible contractual obligations, to always provide a full offer, can also result in over-production.

Combating these things can be difficult and will vary from client to client in terms of what is feasible. This short guide suggests ways to reduce food waste across the board; from the contractual and client engagement aspects, through food ordering and production, to service and food reuse, e.g. within staff restaurants and redistribution, outside of the business.

The guide covers:
- the benefits of food waste prevention and includes an example case study;
- a range of tips for you to consider implementing in your business;
- links to further useful sources of information.

2.0   The benefits of food waste prevention

Food waste costs in contract catering for staff restaurants are generally less than 5% of sales revenue, however food waste can be in excess of 10% of sales and over 30% of food purchase costs[2] where food is being provided for meetings, events and banqueting.

The cost of this food waste in catering is significant and has been valued at £2,200 per tonne, or around £2.20 per kg, including food purchase costs, labour, utilities and waste disposal[1]. Therefore, for a business that generates 1,000 tonnes of food waste per year, the cost to the business is estimated to be £2.2 million per year. In addition it's a waste of natural resources since food is energy and carbon-intensive to grow, process, transport and cook.

The following case study shows one example of the benefits achieved in practice by a leading caterer in the hospitality setting.

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[1]WRAP, Staff Catering: Taking Action on Waste - http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Staff%20catering.pdf
[2]Based on food waste trials undertaken with HaFSA signatories

Restaurant Associates – driving down meeting room food waste

Restaurant Associates (**www.**restaurantassociates**.co.uk/**), part of Compass Group UK & Ireland, prides itself on delivering exceptional food and service to its clients. Waste reduction has been a priority for the business for some time and as part of its on-going sustainability drive, Restaurant Associates was keen to look at ways it could enhance its waste reduction processes, increasing efficiency and bringing benefits for the client and the environment alike.

By improving the tracking of the amount and value of waste from its hospitality operations at one of its larger sites, Restaurant Associates was able to better target food waste by reviewing and tightening up the production and service controls.

Following this, some more specific actions have been taken:

- The requested amount of food continues to be prepared to meet the full booking request. However, a proportion is now held back for larger lunches and only served if more food is required. This allows any excess food to be diverted to employee dining for sale, rather than allowing it to go to waste as it had done previously.
- Take-away boxes are now offered for all internal events, with suitable signage explaining that it's preferable to take food away to be eaten by colleagues than have it go to waste.
- The biscuit offer has been changed so that at least half the biscuits are wrapped and therefore can be used again in subsequent meetings if not eaten. Similarly the continental breakfast offer now includes wrapped breakfast muffins, which can also be used again if not eaten.

Figure 1 below show the reduction in food waste achieved in the meeting rooms, which are used for both internal meetings and client meetings.

Figure 1: Food waste as a percentage of cost
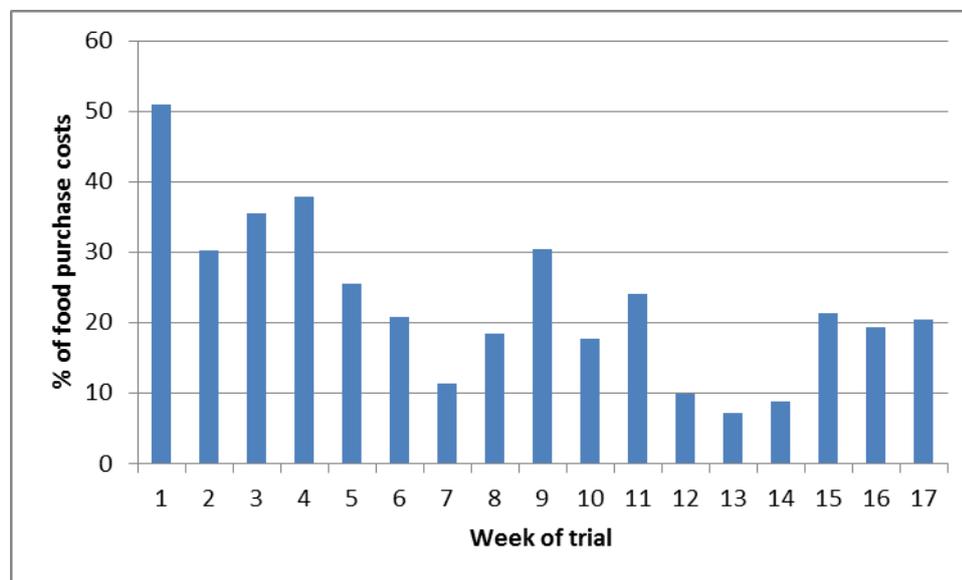
The graph shows that, over the first 17 weeks of the trial, food waste (as a % of food purchase costs), went down significantly; from an average of 39% for the first four weeks, down to an average of less than 18% in the last four weeks.

More importantly, this equates to over 20 tonnes a year of prevented food waste.

3.0 Suggested measures - top tips to reduce food waste

3.1 Contracts – aiming for flexibility

Once contracts have been agreed and signed, the on-site staff may not have the flexibility to be able to reduce some food waste. Working flexibility into the specification of contracts is the key.

- Define menu options and portion sizes carefully as part of the contract offer. It could for example be a range of portion sizes that are offered.
- Consider contract terms that allow flexibility according to need on the day, e.g.:
  - flexibility in the number of servings for each occasion, rather than a fixed amount e.g. up to a maximum of 100 lunches every Thursday, rather than 100 lunches every Thursday;
  - flexibility in the components of each serving, rather than a fixed requirement e.g. up to 20 meat portions or equivalent every day;
  - flexibility in the special diets component of each serving, rather than a fixed requirement e.g. up to 20 special diet options every day, where pre-ordered; and
  - flexibility in the period over which the full service offer needs to be provided e.g. cold food or sandwiches only after 2pm.

3.2 Engaging the client - sharing best practice

It's important to engage with the client on the subject of food waste and explain good practice and what you are trying to achieve for mutual benefit. This can raise awareness and change behaviour so that you can work together to deliver solutions.

- Remember that some clients may be engaged through emphasis of the cost benefit, whilst others may be more engaged by the environmental and/or waste reduction benefit with a strong link to Corporate Social Responsibility objectives.
- Try to work closely with PAs and client hospitality and events co-ordinators so as to gain a trusting relationship. If they know you will deliver accurately to order then they are less likely to over-order. If they know you are monitoring and reporting food waste levels that may also help them be more aware of what they can do to help.
- Share reports with your client on the amount of food being wasted to raise their awareness.
- Discuss with the client any issues that are creating food waste, for example around the hours during which 100% presentation is required or the proportion of bookings that actually attend, again sharing the evidence from monitoring the amount of food being wasted.
- Consider offering a prize, e.g. gift vouchers, to the client PA or hospitality co-ordinator who provides the most accurate booking requirement each month.
- Consider offering job shadowing for PAs and hospitality co-ordinators, allowing them to gain first-hand experience of the issues caused by imprecise bookings and over-ordering. This can really help raise awareness and help to motivate a more considered approach.

Highlighting the impact of over-ordering

Restaurant Associates is trialling a way of highlighting the quantities of food ordered by the hospitality co-ordinators/bookers. This involves taking photos of just how much food is served for different types of lunch order; for example a sandwich lunch for 4, 8 and 10 people, showing everything laid out on a table.

Initial feedback indicates that this helps the hospitality co-ordinators/bookers to visualise food quantities. Many were surprised at just how much food was actually served and stated that they would probably order more conservatively in future.

3.3 Customer booking and pre-ordering

Getting the bookings right, and where possible the actual individual preferences, can make a huge difference to the amount of food being wasted. Again this needs to involve close co-operation with the client and hospitality co-ordinators and PAs.

- Offer an online booking system -one example is the Datacraft Hospitality Suite although others are available. These systems, which are generally Windows or web-based, allow room bookings with associated food and refreshment orders being managed through drop down menus.
- Make sure that this online system allows adequate detail to be recorded for the kitchen/pantry e.g. special diets and portion size as well as numbers of people, so that the exact requirements can be met, and that this data can be easily updated as necessary by the client hospitality co-ordinators or meeting organiser.
- Consider providing lunch menus mid-morning on the day for smaller groups, e.g. meetings and training events, to allow pre-ordering of individual plated meals or to allow a more tailored buffet.
- Consider offering a discount for smaller groups, e.g. people running a training event, that are prepared to pre-order this way as it can reduce waste significantly.
- Try to keep menus simple, with a limited range of options, and offer portion choice as part of the pre-ordering, i.e. make 'light' options available.
- As required by law, ensure that special diet choices are clear by marking them on menus, e.g. vegan, gluten free, dairy free and allergens
- Make it easy for groups to mark all their requirements on an online system or paper menus as appropriate.

3.4 Checking numbers

If it's not possible to check actual individual preferences, as suggested in Section 3.3, it should still be possible to track the 'final' numbers for a meeting or event. Again, this can make a difference to the amount of food wasted as often more people are expected than actually attend.

- Regularly review block booking procedures with the client, e.g. for regular weekly meetings, as these can be based on the maximum number of attendees rather than the likely number for a particular occasion.
- Ask the client if they would agree to a text/email update request to prompt for event number changes, special diet changes etc. This could be done two or three hours before the event to allow modified food preparation, e.g. are the four vegetarians still coming?
- If doing this by email, send a link to the original booking on the online system to make it easy for the client to amend. Note that this is often made simpler by having an internet-based booking system, rather than a Windows based system, that allows the client easy access as most systems have a web-based version and apps for smart phones.

3.5   Production and serving

Production, and to a degree serving, are the areas where you have greatest control. Food preparation is an area covered in other WRAP guides as detailed in the next section, however there are additional areas that need careful consideration. As with many of the suggestions in this guide, it is advisable to discuss any planned changes with the client in the context of the drive to reduce food waste.

- Prepare small batches 'on the go' to demand where possible or, if all food has to be prepared in advance, serve in small batches to reduce excess food taken into the event or meeting room. Signage can be left in the room making it clear that more food can be delivered very quickly, should it be required.
- Offer a simpler cold 'top-up' option on request within an agreed timeframe; smoked salmon salad rather than seafood risotto for example.
- Where there is a requirement for equal availability of each type of dish, work to produce around 2/3rds rather than 100% of each. As an example, for 120 people make 80 of each item, e.g. 80 vegetarian, 80 seafood, 80 meat etc. Overall this will guarantee more than enough food, but with a risk that not everyone gets their first choice.
- Where buffet displays are used, make sure that the trays and bowls used are the right size to look full at the start of service, and create a good display of food, whilst not being too large for the numbers present. Putting a plate in the base of a serving bowl or dish, for example, can help to modify the volume (by creating a false bottom) without adversely affecting presentation.
- Discuss with the client if it would be acceptable to only offer cold-food after a certain time, e.g. after 2pm on a lunch service to deal with late comers.
- Consider providing a 'pooled' food service, e.g. a joint buffet for three or four meetings/events. This economy of scale approach typically allows a greater chance that consumption will even out, some groups eating less, some more. This may only be suitable for internal staff and non-client events, such as Graduate Recruitment.
- Use smaller plates, e.g. 8" starter plates, to avoid 'excess' first take at buffets, which can restrict availability for those that come later, allowing a higher probability that everyone will at least get some of their first choice items and should lead to a reduction in plate waste.

Big savings in buffet food waste

A trial in 2012, undertaken by GreeNudge[3] on buffet plate waste, identified that a reduction in customer plate sizes reduced food waste by 19.5%. The introduction of a sign, highlighting that people can return for more than one serving, reduced food waste by 20.5%.

- Obtain regular feedback on quality – what people do and don't like – and get feedback from serving staff in terms of the plate waste at the end of an event.

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[3] GreeNudge is a foundation that aims to initiate, fund and promote research into behavioural change as a climate change mitigation measure. Link to the full research paper http://www.scp-knowledge.eu/knowledge/%E2%80%98nudging%E2%80%99-hotel-guests-reduce-food-waste-win%E2%80%93win-environmental-measure

3.6 Food reuse

The main objective should be to make only as much food as is needed for the meeting or event, however it is impossible to get it right every time. Consequently it is important to plan for some reuse where necessary and with regard to compliance with food safety regulations.

- Keep food in temperature controlled containers / fridges in the event room so that any unused food can be used in the staff restaurants or be taken away after an event or be distributed to charities.
- Consider providing wrapped items where possible, such as cakes and sandwiches, that allow reuse if not eaten.
- Have a clear reuse policy and communicate that to all staff, e.g. fresh sandwiches and wraps can be reused within x hours[4].
- Select ingredients for the hospitality menus that can be adapted to suit restaurant dining and will also fit with the staff restaurant offer.
- Be careful when sharing 'spare food' from lunch events with other client staff, e.g. using an email notification or physical movement of trays to offices, staff rooms etc. This is fine on an occasional basis, but it can create an expectation amongst staff and the potential for deliberate over-ordering.
- Consider donating surplus food to charities, e.g. to organisations such as FareShare, PlanZheros or Trussell Trust. Make sure that the company liability issues are covered contractually and through appropriate disclaimers.

3.7 Monitoring waste patterns

Monitoring food waste will allow a better understanding of where and why the food waste is being created. That is good for any food service business, but it can also provide the evidence required to have a meaningful discussion with the client over food waste quantities and costs.

- Monitor waste produced in the kitchen including spoilage, preparation waste and over production;
- Monitor what comes back from hospitality service (serving containers and client plates) and where possible weigh and categorise this. Any food that is redistributed should also be weighed as part of the 'excess' production – it is still a cost to the business;
- Discuss particularly common types and areas of wastage, the costs of the wastage and the potential reasons for it, with the client. This can be a real 'eye-opener' for the client, opening the door to greater care in ordering and greater flexibility in the service offer.

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[4] *Need to ensure complies with UK food health and safety regulations*

3.8   Packaging, condiments and sauces

Packaging plays an important part in food protection and preservation, however packaging is also a source of material waste as it requires disposal after use and, in some cases can also contain food waste residues. Single use tableware and cutlery can also create waste

- Use reusable and durable crockery, cutlery and food containers where service is in-house and suitable dishwashers are available.
- Use bulk sauces, jams etc. decanted into ramekins where resources allow. This generally looks smarter from the client perspective and can reduce waste compared with pre-portioned pots and packets.
- Use concentrated syrups and dilute where this will not affect quality; for example a litre of elderflower cordial will make ten times that amount once diluted, saving ten glass bottles and the associated transport costs.
- Talk to your suppliers, directly or via your procurement team, and where possible encourage greater use of returnable/reusable packaging, such as trays for fruit, vegetables and baked goods.

4.0   Further information and support

As well as the information in this guide, there is a wide variety of other useful information on the Hospitality and Food Service pages of the WRAP website: **www.wrap.org.uk/ hospitality**

Here you can find information on the HaFSA, on taking action on food waste including information sheets for your part of the sector, menu planning, a wide variety of case studies and the 'Getting started on waste prevention' section which includes the food waste tracking sheets and simple ways to prevent food waste, including information sheets for your part of the sector.

For a list of all WRAP resources click here:
www.wrap.org.uk/hafsaresources

or by business topic here:
http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/supporting-resources-hospitality-and-food-service-sector-2

For food waste prevention click here:
http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/supporting-resources-hospitality-and-food-service-sector-3

http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/how-reduce-waste-and-save-your-hospitality-and-food-service-business-money

For guidance on zero waste events
http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/zero-waste-events

And for our YouTube Playlist of support materials and videos, click here:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLxKoZsblPUTEMNy0fdjM5C2tk0iUICOrC

For information on ISO 20121 Sustainable Event Management
http://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/iso-20121-sustainable-events-management/

www.wrap.org.uk/hospitality