

From Plough to Plate – Sussex NHS Foundation Trust

'From plough to plate' is how the Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust describes its fruit and vegetable purchasing. The trust's Catering Manager, William McCartney, has found an innovative way to source fruit and vegetables – developing a market garden hub in partnership with a local farming family, less than five miles away.

This started by pure chance in 2004, when William was having difficulties in finding local vegetables. The Head Chef noticed a local market gardener delivering vegetables and asked if they delivered wholesale fruit and vegetables. The market garden did – and at a 20% lower cost than the existing supplier, although they were not always able to provide the volumes needed. But William worked with the farmers to develop their business, encouraging them to change planting methods to using smaller volumes of mixed planting in rotation, thereby extending the range of produce and the growing season to almost 12 months. The trust also found a source of organic seedlings from a local nursery for growing on. The trust has helped to improve risk assessment procedures and introduce computerised accounting and stock recording into the business, which is now allowing the family to apply for formal STS accreditation to open up public sector markets further.

The farmers are fulsome in their praise of the trust and William in particular – they describe him as having 'a growers brain', therefore able to challenge them whilst understanding the limitations of the farm by making realistic, practical and pragmatic suggestions. The market garden has now grown into a central hub, collecting produce from other smaller growers in Sussex, giving access to wider public sector markets as other hospitals and schools also take produce from the hub. Business continues to grow, with a major new contract to supply Sussex and Brighton Universities, which has generated new jobs. The farm's future is more secure, with greater financial security as a result of the consistent income stream from regular public sector customers. The family also has more time to think about the future and have been able to build a longer term strategy for the business. William has found a local supplier able to work with him to supply the majority of the trust's fruit and veg from local growers at competitive prices. The proof is in the eating – virtually all vegetables used in the Trust are grown in Sussex, with the exception of some potatoes and carrots which come from the South East and UK respectively. Even tomatoes, which many trusts import from abroad, come from South East suppliers where possible but are all from the UK. Similarly virtually all apples are grown locally within a 5 mile radius of the Central Production Unit (kitchen) and the trust uses a wide range of seasonal local fruit - plums pears strawberries, raspberry, rhubarb, red currants, blackcurrants, blackberries and gooseberries are all used in the trust recipes. The only fruit imported are the more exotic items that can't be grown in the UK, such as oranges, lemons, melons and bananas.

The trust has broken new ground by using fruit and veg that isn't otherwise acceptable to domestic markets. Chalkhill Children's Hospital uses small apples that supermarkets refuse to take and which would otherwise become consigned to compost. The small size is ideal for children and the new fruit baskets have been enthusiastically received at Chalkhill hospital. Similarly the hospital now uses local "potato snippers" for mashed potato, which were again thrown away. This is the cut waste from chip manufacture, which is cheaper than full size potatoes but much easier to mash. This is so successful that the supplier now sells most of their snippers to nursing homes and other similar

organisations.

William is now working with the hub to prepare and store more raw vegetables – leaving his team to concentrate on cooking. The farm is also considering whether the redundant mushroom growing trays could be used to grow herbs. There are also plans to switch to new soup kettles that would cook soup overnight from fresh veg – allowing the kitchen to use cheaper overnight tariffs but also replace the canned soups currently used.

Fruit and veg aren't the only products where the trust concentrates on sustainability:

- All meat is farm assured, and the trust has signed up to Eblex, giving a commitment to use English beef and lamb, and using South Downs lamb from a local abattoir wherever possible.
- All yoghurts come from Turners Dairy at Patching in West Sussex – who are able to supply at roughly one third of the cost of the original NHS accredited supplier.
- Most fish is landed locally at Newhaven and the trust uses fish from the MSC sustainable list wherever possible. The trust also uses organic salmon from Scotland.
- The trust has worked with their Newhaven based fish supplier to make a South Coast fishcake using locally caught fish, which will soon include fresh produce from the market garden, rather than tinned veg.
- The trust uses gluten free products and halal meat as far as possible to cut the number of expensive ready meals that would otherwise be bought in from an outside supplier.

All this is done on a tight budget – the total cost per patient per day (including staff costs) is between £5.50- £6.50 a day. This is possible because the kitchen uses efficient commercial principles and streamlined processes, producing 350,000 meals a year with 12 staff in one of the smallest hospital kitchens in the country. The sustainability principles aren't just confined to food sourcing:

- The kitchen switched to one hot meal a day when patients made it clear that they didn't want a full meal at lunchtime – so a light meal is now served at lunch, which includes soup and a full meal in the evening.
- The trust looks for healthy alternatives in its meals, substituting bread in sandwiches with lighter wraps and offering a variety of salads, using fresh produce from the hub.
- Proper menu planning and co-ordination with the hub has cut the number of deliveries required to three a week – saving even more food miles.
- Two new delivery vehicles will have more efficient automatic gearboxes and the Trust is currently looking at using Natural Gas as an alternative vehicle fuel.
- The CPU uses one new style oven with a graduated temperature range meaning that a wide range of food can be cooked at the same time. The ovens also cook food more slowly saving energy and electricity bills.
- Flexible silicon baking sheets cut food burning, saving cleaning time and electricity.
- All green waste from the kitchen is composted and used by the hub on the fruit and vegetable beds to improve the soil quality, ready for the next round of planting.

There is still more that the trust would like to do to increase the amount of locally produced food – the next challenge are eggs, which are currently from UK farms, but which William would like to buy from Sussex farms. Other potential product groups to

review are ice-cream, dairy and bread, all of which are currently supplied by large NHS accredited suppliers primarily from UK farms. Finally the trust is moving towards a 6 week seasonal menu, including a weekly meat-free day, to make meals healthier, use available surpluses and cut the need for costly storage. All this is happening at a time of great change – as the Trust Board has just agreed funding for a brand new unit at the hospital, including a much better kitchen.

Whilst William drives these changes in the trust, high level support is vital. The Chief Executive, Lisa Rodrigues, allowed him a couple of days a month to develop the hub and work on catering procurement.

There is no doubt that there is an enthusiastic win-win relationship between the market garden and the trust with both sides gaining hugely from the partnership. William believes that this could be replicated across the NHS with enthusiasm and commitment from catering teams and senior managers, with immense benefits for the trusts, the local economy and farming communities.