

Position on a Circular Economy

The European contract catering sector is doing its part to support clients who choose sustainable procurement

FoodServiceEurope represents the interests of the European contract catering sector, a sector that employs over 600,000 people. Contract catering encompasses food and ancillary services provided to people working or living in communities – private and public undertakings, schools, universities, hospitals, retirement homes, prisons – under the terms of a contract with the client communities.

Food waste prevention

FoodServiceEurope members are active across Europe in reducing food waste and sharing good practices. As a signatory of the Every Crumb Counts Declaration and a member of the European Commission's EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste, FoodServiceEurope is actively contributing to EU efforts to prevent food waste. Good practices to prevent food waste from the FoodServiceEurope members can be found on the European Commission's website¹.

Until quite recently, there has been no protocol that defines categories of food waste. Therefore, there are no comparable figures currently available on food waste in the contract catering sector. FUSIONS estimates that 11 million tonnes (12%) of food waste originated from the food service sector as a whole in 2012 in the EU-28².

In the contract catering sector, food waste consists primarily of prepared or cooked foods that did not get served to the final consumer with the exception of certain segments, such as education, where food waste arises for multiple reasons along the value chain resulting ultimately in consumer waste. Factors include the difficulty to accurately predict how many guests will purchase a meal and what type of meal will be chosen. Vegetables from the salad bar and sides, and in some cases soup, are the main food categories in which contract catering waste occurs³.

Actions that contract caterers are taking to prevent food waste include:

- Identifying, measuring and monitoring where food waste arises and taking steps to reduce its occurrence (e.g. changing food preparation techniques);
- Working with suppliers and clients to more accurately match supply to demand;
- Educational campaigns to increase awareness among consumers to reduce food waste;
- Supporting clients who wish to donate food;
- Working with partners to recover food waste to produce renewable energy.

¹ European Commission (2016) Good practices in food waste prevention and reduction.

http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food_waste/good_practices/awareness_information_education/index_en.htm

² FUSIONS (2016) Estimates of European food waste levels, 31 March.

³ Soethoudt, 2012, Reduction of food waste in the catering sector, Sodexo France trials (2013)

Packaging

While most food served in a restaurant is not packaged, the growth of the take-away market means that it is of increasing importance for contract caterers. Most importantly, packaging needs to be fit for purpose. It must keep food fresh and ensure the safety and hygiene of food served in the restaurant.

Contract caterers are taking action to contribute to sustainable packaging use. For instance, plastic crates for fruits and vegetables can be sent back to suppliers and reused when there is sufficient storage space and when it makes environmental and economic sense. In addition, when a client has arranged separate waste collection, the caterer separates the waste in the kitchen and provides information to consumers about how they should sort their waste.

Policy recommendations

1. **Raising consumer awareness is a key priority** because food that is thrown away by consumers is no longer fit for consumption and must be destroyed. For instance, through both awareness-raising and staff training, consumers may be empowered to discuss with the server how large a portion size they would like.
2. **Raising client awareness is also critical** for facilitating sustainable public procurement because the client has an important role in determining what is offered to consumers when and how the service is carried out. For instance, requiring a full buffet for three hours will create more potential for food waste than allowing for more limited options during non-peak hours. The emphasis on procuring fresh foods over processed foods is another key driver of food waste, since fresh foods have a shorter shelf-life.
3. **Preventing food waste from arising in the first place should be prioritised over donation**, which should be seen as a last resort. The most efficient and sustainable way to reduce food waste in the contract catering sector is to prevent it from occurring. The steps being taken by contract caterers to prevent food waste have been outlined above.
4. **Food donation should be incentivised on a voluntary basis**. There is generally a very limited amount of food from restaurants that is fit for donation to food banks and other charities. For instance, leftover food at self-service counters cannot be donated due to food safety and hygiene concerns and cooked food must be chilled with special equipment, packaged, refrigerated and collected the same day, and consumed within 24 hours of preparation. When food is not chilled, it must be consumed within two hours. Small and medium-sized kitchens are generally not equipped with chilling and packaging equipment. Financial incentives could help to stimulate investment in such equipment (when space allows) by clients (or as applicable contract caterers and/or the associations receiving the food), which would help extend shelf-life and would facilitate donation.
5. **EU and national food donation guidelines** are welcome in cases when the client would like to donate surplus food. For instance, such guidelines should facilitate the donation of non-perishable food that is beyond its “best-before” date as long as the hygiene and food safety obligations are fulfilled. FoodServiceEurope has been actively contributing to the European Commission’s development of food donation guidelines.
6. **Waste-to-energy must remain an efficient option** for catering waste. Initiatives by contract caterers to work with partners to recover food waste have helped to generate energy and prevent greenhouse gas emissions by diverting waste from landfill and by displacing fossil fuel use to generate the same amount of power.

7. **Rules related to packaging should be based on life-cycle thinking**, taking into account how food products may be impacted, when relevant, and the local waste streams that are available. For instance, encouraging the use of biodegradable or compostable packaging only makes sense if treatment facilities for such waste are locally available.

8. In the case of **reusable packaging and tableware in a contract catering setting, environmental trade-offs should be borne in mind**. The environmental impact of transporting returned bottles and of the cleaning process (energy, water and soap consumption and associated wastewater, and the installation of and energy efficiency of dishwashers) must be taken into account. For instance, one study finds that ceramic mugs need to be used 1000 times to be as energy efficient as a foam cup⁴. In a commercial setting, mugs are generally chipped or broken within 30 uses and need to be disposed of.

Feasibility also needs to be considered as returnable packaging systems require careful space management, more rigorous cleaning of storage areas, losses from broken bottles, and considerable investment in the management of the packaging. Health and safety is another important consideration in the case of glasses and ceramics, which can pose a danger when chipped or broken in a contract catering setting (schools, prisons).

⁴ Hocking, Martin B. "Reusable and Disposable Cups: An Energy-Based Evaluation." *Environmental Management* 18(6) pp. 889-899.