

Special delivery

From door-to-door services to day centres and lunch clubs, Meals on Wheels heroes have been nourishing communities for almost 80 years. By **Jessica Feehan**

The very first 'meals on wheels' were delivered in 1943. World War II was in full swing; winter had arrived, bringing with it an influenza epidemic; and in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, members of the local Women's Voluntary Service decided to take matters into their own hands.

Food was provided by the town's restaurants and delivered by car to the sick and elderly at a cost of 6d per meal, two days a week. The enterprise proved so popular that a year later another scheme was set up in neighbouring Letchworth.

'Meals on Wheels' was officially launched in autumn 1945. By 1956, one million meals a year were being delivered in 320 areas. By 1962, it was four million in 790 areas. It was at this point that local authorities stepped in to manage the various services, ensuring that the hot, cold and eventually frozen meals delivered to disabled and older constituents were meeting nutritional standards.

'Unfortunately, Meals on Wheels was never made statutory, so there was no legal requirement for local authorities to provide it,' explains Neel Radia from the National Association of Care Catering (NACC), which runs the annual Meals on Wheels Week (see right). Today, many services have been reduced or shut down entirely, the victims of rising costs and tightened budgets.

'It's a travesty,' says Neel. 'Good nutrition and hydration is paramount for somebody who is older or vulnerable – as is the social element of having a person deliver that meal. Meals on Wheels allows people to live independently and can greatly reduce the strain on the NHS.'

The NACC campaigns tirelessly to raise awareness about the importance of Meals on Wheels, and thankfully, as they have throughout its history, charities and businesses continue to step up.



CHOCOLATE AND CHERRY FONDANT

Meals on Wheels services cater to a variety of dietary requirements. This delicious pud is gluten-free.

Makes: 5 portions

INGREDIENTS

- 60g butter, plus extra for greasing
- 70g gluten-free dark chocolate
- 2 eggs
- 110g caster sugar
- 30g plain gluten-free flour
- 5 tsp cherry compote (bought or home-made)

METHOD

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/gas mark 4. Grease five pudding moulds that will hold 100g each.
2. Put the butter and chocolate in a heatproof bowl and set over a pan of gently simmering water to melt, stirring occasionally until smooth.

Remove the bowl from the heat and set aside to cool.

3. Whisk the eggs with the caster sugar for about five minutes until thick and fluffy, then carefully fold in the cooled chocolate mixture. Sift over the flour and fold in gently.

4. Place a dessertspoon of the mixture in each of the moulds, then place a teaspoon of the cherry compote in the centre of each one. Spoon the remaining mixture over the filling.

5. Cook for 12 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow to stand for a couple of minutes, then carefully turn out onto a plate (loosen with a knife if necessary). Serve immediately.

To make ahead: This recipe can be followed to point 4 and then refrigerated. Why not deliver a ready-made fondant to a neighbour for them to cook at home?



Meals on Wheels is more than just a meal – it's a social lifeline

In the scheme's birthplace, Hertfordshire Independent Living Service (HILS) supports around 4,000 people with meals a year. 'We work with specialist food suppliers so we can cater to each client's individual needs, making sure everyone has what they need to stay healthy and happy,' explains Elise Hoare, HILS Senior Community Nutritionist.

Covid-19 put unprecedented pressure on the charity, with demand increasing as restrictions threw up roadblocks. But the team – which also helps with nutrition, wellbeing, exercise and advocacy – rose to the challenge. 'For many older people, especially during lockdown, Meals on Wheels deliveries were the only constant in their lives, and HILS team members the only friendly faces they saw on a regular basis,' says HILS Chief Executive Sarah Wren.

Down in Brighton, meanwhile, lockdown actually served as the impetus for community-run pub The Bevy to get involved in Meals on Wheels. Prior to the pandemic, the team had been

running weekly lunch clubs, so their connections with the community helped them hit the ground running – but it was still a steep learning curve.

'The experience has been incredibly instructive for us,' says Chris Llewellyn, The Bevy's Secretary. 'We've learnt a lot about the levels of hidden food poverty in our area. This is why, even now the initial challenges of the pandemic have receded, we are still delivering meals locally.'

The feedback from those receiving The Bevy's meals certainly provides ample motivation to keep going. 'The food is absolutely lovely,' says local resident Patrick. 'It's become the highlight of the day and it also helps us keep track of the days and weeks because it's easy to get lost.'

Clearly, Meals on Wheels is more than just a meal – it's a social lifeline. And individuals can play their part in offering that too, says Neel. 'How many of us live in a neighbourhood and don't know who's around us? Can we offer any support? Can we get people to eat together and have that social relationship? We can all make a difference.'

So whether it's driving a neighbour to a day centre for a lunch club, organising a community meal or dropping an extra dinner portion to a friend, you can help keep the spirit of Meals on Wheels rolling into 2023 and beyond.

MEALS ON WHEELS WEEK – 31 OCTOBER TO 4 NOVEMBER 2022

Organised by the NACC, Meals on Wheels Week brings together charity and industry professionals to lobby local and national Government and celebrate Meals on Wheels service providers.

This year's event kicks off with a special afternoon tea at the House of Lords. On Wednesday, MPs, dignitaries and journalists are invited to visit their local Meals on Wheels service and share their experience as part of VIP Day; while Friday will see the launch of Friday Friends, a new initiative that aims to encourage lunch clubs and other social eating groups across the UK.

For further information on the event or the Friday Friends campaign, visit www.thenacc.co.uk or email info@thenacc.co.uk

