THE DIGITAL ROAD AHEAD

Change is inevitable. Certainly, many things have changed over the past year. But how could things change going forward for the care catering sector? Nick Dutton ponders the topic of care catering and rapidly developing technology.

Most would agree that when it comes to embracing technology and digitalisation, the social care sector has been a bit of a dinosaur over previous decades. The global pandemic was certainly a spark that lit the touch paper in regard to uptake in technologies, such as electronic care planning, modernised communication methods and digital marketing.

Just like in homes around the country, care homes were quick to embrace FaceTime calls, Zoom and Skype for their residents to keep in touch with loved ones, with the help of iPads supplied through the NHS. Care homes also supplied more data digitally to monitoring bodies to help see the bigger picture of the pandemic's effect on the sector. Registered managers learnt about incredibly 'fun things', such as the Digital Security Protection Toolkit, so they could access their own NHS email

account, and then repeatedly forget the password to it because of digital security protection. Joking aside, the start of this decade really has brought a huge technological leap forward for care homes. Can care catering match the pace? What is already out there, and what is to come over the coming decades?

When looking into the crystal ball at the future of care catering, it is important to look at who we will be catering for in the years to come.

It is no secret we have an ageing population where more people will be using care services for a longer period. This will certainly lead to an increase in demand for the care catering sector, with an already overstretched workforce and no sight of an increase in funding. As of writing, the UK government has announced increases to national insurance rates to contribute to a health and social care levy and a cap on care costs, however the promised white paper is still to be seen and the promised increase in spending won't reach the care sector until 2023. And, who knows if any of it will make it through the kitchen doors.

By 2030, not only will the number of older residential care users increase by approximately

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one hundred thousand, but care homes will also well and truly be needing to adapt to meet the expectations of the baby boomer generation. This generation will certainly have different demands for care home catering teams than current service users, whose generation survived the war and were used to rationing. The baby boomer generation has set trends and had nights out on the town that would likely make today's care teams blush when the stories are retold. Therefore, à la carte menus will become commonplace in care homes, alongside active retirement lifestyles.

These are challenges care home chefs will have to adapt to, alongside an already huge skillset. The role of a care home chef isn't just to produce fantastic food, but also to have knowledge of texture modification and IDDSI, malnutrition and fortification, allergens and intolerances, menu planning for cultural differences and much more. All with recruitment struggles and cost control.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

There are many technologies currently emerging to market around the connected kitchen. Many have the aim of freeing up time for the chef by automating regular tasks, monitoring cooking, and providing an extra pair of hands without the difficulties of recruiting additional staff. Most modern combi ovens and Bratt pans can now be linked to the internet and have recipes and cooking programmes stored for automatic cooking. They are able to be left overnight without supervision, to make the most of the time when the kitchen is usually closed. Dishwashers can easily report on wash temperature cycles to make sure they are safe and disinfecting crockery properly. One main benefit that will be felt over the life cycle of these investments is the ability for engineers to dial in ahead of time and see what parts need renewing or replacing, meaning they arrive on site with the correct parts. This means less downtime and cheaper maintenance.

While remote temperature monitoring for refrigeration has been around for some time, it is now gaining popularity in kitchens with costs reducing and more importantly, better user interfaces and easier and quicker setups.

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While larger foodservice operators, and indeed some larger care homes groups, have already adopted some of these new technologies, they are now becoming more available and cost effective for smaller groups and even independent homes. Regardless of size, any time saved in the kitchen for chefs, allowing them more time to interact with residents and focus on individual needs, is a good outcome. Especially when recruiting and retaining good chefs is getting more difficult.

The rise of technology in the sector won't stop at the kitchen doors. Many advancements are taking place in the area of nutritional care and progress is happening at pace. Trials have recently taken place of Teleswallowing, where speech and language therapists can assess and identify dysphagia remotely using video calling, with support from trained care home staff. Benefits include improved response times for referrals and shorter waiting lists with no reduction in diagnostic accuracy.

There is limitless scope for where telehealth can go, especially with 5G and the Internet of Things technology about to open many more avenues. Wearable technology will likely become commonplace before the half century. With various options already on the market to help manage diabetes, wearable tech will likely expand quickly from here on out – including disposable stick-on patches that can automatically monitor hydration levels and nutritional intake and send results straight to the cloud. Orwellian fears aside, used correctly and responsibly they could indeed improve quality of life for anyone, not just those receiving care.

And finally, the supply chain. Given the current year, it would be remiss of me not to mention the possibility of self-driving vehicles delivering goods to care home kitchens!

Hands up who wants to be the first care home to serve lab-grown meat?

Whatever changes come, the main thing to remember is that the very basics of care, positivity and empathy are timeless. The ability to make a connection with another person while sharing a meal will never change, regardless of age or technological improvements. Also, chefs will always enjoy knives and fire.

This means more time for kitchen staff who no longer need to observe and manually write down fridge and freezer temperatures regularly. They simply log into the portal and download them instantly, with alerts sent to phones and linked devices if temperatures go out of set ranges. While it sounds small, even minutes a day adds up over a year.

There are many more software solutions coming to market for care home kitchen management, such as intuitive apps that can manage recipes, stock levels, ordering and allergen management. No longer do kitchen teams have to decipher scribbled handwriting in a flour-dusted folder kept on a high shelf with torn weekly diary sheets. Nor do they need to struggle at lunch with confusing orders for residents. They can now be sent instantly to the kitchen by the power of the cloud, with residents ordering for themselves or care staff on their behalf. Less confusion means less errors and safer food sent from the kitchen.

Is this how we'll receive deliveries in the future?