

High Streets Task Force Case Study: Foodie Friday in Stockport

[25/09/2020]

Foodie Friday in Stockport adapts its offer to raise money for charity

Basic Facts about the high street and local area

Foodie Friday is a monthly street food event that regularly attracts thousands of people to Stockport Old Town each month. The event features 15 street food traders, alongside a number of indoor market traders who adapt their traditional offer to meet the demands of a night-time visitor profile. For example, the opticians delivers an 'optics' bar and the sweet stall delivers an 'ice shack' serving cocktails. Over the last few years, the success of Foodie Friday has helped drive the growth in bars, pubs and restaurants around the Market Place and, in 2016, the event was awarded the "Best Event" award at the Manchester Food and Drink Festival.

Key opportunities/challenges

The main challenge facing Foodie Friday was the ability to deliver the event safely in the light of new restrictions imposed by the coronavirus. Prior to the current crisis, an event like Foodie Friday was seen as an example of best practice for driving footfall in a town centre and encouraging private investment to stimulate a local economy. The event is estimated to generate £500,000 of additional income into the town centre each year.

However, following coronavirus, the hustle and bustle that the event usually generates has become something to be avoided rather than something to be achieved. As a result of this, the short-term viability of a town centre event like Foodie Friday remains very unclear, which will have long-term consequences on both the Market Place and its surrounding businesses.

The logistics of running such an event during the coronavirus is incredibly problematic. As the event takes place in a public square, with six separate access points, controlling capacity is very difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, the fixed stalls in the Market Hall make social distancing for visitors very difficult, especially when music is performed and crowds gather around to listen. With businesses around the Market Place already having to contend with restrictions on their premises, placing additional strain on their resources through running the event would be irresponsible.

Following the government's national lockdown, Foodie Friday was cancelled with no guaranteed certainty to when it would likely return. Our main concern was the impact that the event's cancellation would have on our community of street food traders, as all other large outdoor events had also cancelled. As such, we decided to launch a crowd-funding campaign to support our traders by raising money to provide free meals to NHS staff at Stepping Hill hospital in Stockport.

Goals/objectives

The main outcome is the safe delivery of Foodie Friday, however, as noted above, achieving this under the current circumstances is practically impossible. Instead, we decided to focus on the objective of supporting our community of street food traders, who are all small local businesses, as well as supporting good charitable causes during a time of great national crisis. This resulted in Foodie Friday adapting its offer to raise £21,205 to provide 3,000+ free meals to hard-working local NHS staff as well as running a socially distanced street food event at Weir Mill which raised £1,400 through ticket sales for the Greater Manchester Mayor's Homelessness Charity.

Description of the project/initiative

Following the cancellation of Foodie Friday, we contacted the Chief Executive of Stockport NHS Foundation Trust, Louise Robson, to ask if we could launch a campaign to raise money from our community to donate dishes from our street food traders to local NHS workers. We had felt the need to do this especially after seeing images of frontline NHS staff faced with empty shelves after long shifts at work fighting the coronavirus.

Ms Robson responded by stating "What a fabulous gesture and a great idea! Thanks so much of thinking of our hardworking staff at this difficult time." She then put us in touch with the Estates & Facilities team at Stepping Hill to organise the logistics. They were particularly keen to have us involved as their main hospital restaurant was undergoing renovation, which had been paused due to the coronavirus, and was thus reducing their capacity to provide hot meals to staff.

A plan was then put together to deliver the street food fresh on site, like we usually do during our Foodie Friday event, however, the staff would be required to queue up in socially distanced lines for each trader. The crowd-funding campaign was then launched on the 30th March 2020 with the aim of raising £6,000 to provide 1,000 free meals to NHS staff.

The campaign immediately received support from Stockport's MP, Navendu Mishra, as well as from the Stockport indie pop band Blossoms, who have had multiple number-1 selling albums and are regular visitors to Foodie Friday. This support managed to attract wide-spread shares for the campaign on social media and we hit our campaign target in less than a week, thanks in part to a £1,000 donation from Blossoms themselves.

The momentum of the campaign then sky-rocketed after our first visit to the hospital to provide the meals. As soon as we shared the images of NHS staff with great big smiles as they tucked into Thai food and carried pizzas back to their wards, the campaign donations came flooding in.

We soon hit double figures thanks to individual donations from members of the local community and we started getting organisations and businesses wanting to support our efforts. Donations were received from the Communications Workers Union, the Greater Manchester High Sheriff's Fund and local businesses such as Lynx Taxis, who donated £2,000.

The campaign also started attracting regional and national media attention. Our visits to the hospital featured on ITV News, BBC North West Tonight and on Channel 4's 'The Steph Show' which included a live interview from the hospital with organiser Joe Barratt.

By the end of our campaign, we had raised over £21,000 and delivered over 3,000 free hot meals to NHS staff across eight separate visits, including two to the night staff between the hours of 11pm - 2am. The night staff were particularly happy for the free hot meals considering they usually have to make do with providing their own packed 'lunch'.

Following on from our successful campaign at the hospital, we were approached by developers Capital & Centric about partnering with them on the delivery of a socially distanced street food event at their new site, Weir Mill in Stockport town centre, which they plan on redeveloping into a new urban neighbourhood over the next few years. The aim was to engage local people in the plans for the development whilst delivering a safe event under the current circumstances.

Following a number of weeks of planning, both with the developers, the police and the local authority, we announced that we would be running a socially distanced street food event and that people would be able to book tickets for tables in advance, up to a maximum of six people, for either an early afternoon (12pm - 3pm) or late afternoon (3pm - 6pm) session. Tickets for the event completely sold out in less than three days, which worked out at 300 people over the two sessions.

We ran the event, which we called a 'Sunday Social', on Sunday 13th September. It featured the three traders we had worked with at the hospital (Artisam, Somtam Street and I Knead Pizza) alongside other businesses including The Blank Coffee Company, who were selling coffees and teas, Wonderland Cakes, who were selling cakes, Ice Cream Creations, who were selling ice cream pots and The Local Wine Company, who were running the bar.

Due to the restrictions around the coronavirus, the event was completely run by table service using the Dines App. This meant that visitors arrived at their table and were able to order all their food and drink directly to their table without having the need to get up, gather and form long queues. The use of the app was warmly received by visitors as it made them feel safe and also gave them more time to socialise with their friends and family on the table.

To animate the event, we had a number of DJs who played vinyl records throughout the day from a stage at the front. These included Duncan Wallis from The Dutch Uncles, Neil Summers from Proper Magazine and Clint Boon from The Inspiral Carpets. We also had two acoustic live performances from Liv May and Fuzzy Sun, who sold their acoustic E.P for visitors to purchase through the app.

Links / Videos:

[NHS Campaign Go Fund Me page](#)

[NHS Campaign Video](#)

[Capital & Centric Sunday Social](#)

The team involved in the project/initiative

The successful delivery of our NHS campaign wouldn't have been possible without the support of the hospital staff, from the Chief Executive, Louise Robson, to the Estates Manager, Dan Reason, and the Catering Team, Duncan and Emma. Everyone pulled together to deliver over 3,000 free meals on-site over a six month period. It also wouldn't have been possible without our street food traders, who were all local businesses in great need of support.

For the Sunday Social at Weir Mill, we managed to establish a great partnership with the Capital & Centric team which included the Development Manager, Richard Spackman, the Marketing Manager, Lauren Kaye and the Head of Digital, Joe Luk. The co-founders of the company, Tim Heatley and Adam Higgins, were also in attendance at the event and spoke about how pleased they were with both the management and engagement.

Impact or outcomes

The short term outcomes include providing our street food traders with a regular income during a national crisis, as well as fostering a strong community spirit within both the NHS and the general public who were able to contribute to the campaign. The Sunday Social at Weir Mill resulted in a safe and successful consultation / engagement activity with Capital & Centric during a difficult time which helped promote Weir Mill as an exciting destination for future animation and activity. Both activities also helped raise money for charity, with the NHS campaign raising £21,205 and the Sunday Social at Weir Mill raising £1,400 for the Greater Manchester Mayor Homelessness charity.

The long-term outcomes include the benefit of the partnerships that have been developed with both the NHS and developers Capital and Centric. Our street food traders were able to forge a good working relationship with the hospital's catering department, which has resulted in further opportunities for them to trade commercially on-site to support the hospital's food provision. One of our traders, Artisan, is also currently in discussion with the hospital about the potential of supplying their kitchen with micro greens and organic mushrooms that they have started to grow out of a mill in the town centre.

The positive and productive relationship that was forged with the management of Capital & Centric will also be of benefit in the future, as it will hopefully lead to more opportunities to collaborate with them as they aim to transform a derelict, industrial part of the town centre into a creative, urban neighbourhood which appeals to a wide range of new residents and visitors.

Advice for High Streets Task Force users

We recognised very early on that the delivery of our event would be at threat because of the impact of coronavirus and worked very quickly to establish an alternative method of engaging with our community to support both our traders and the local NHS. Whilst we were responsive, agile and flexible in our response, we didn't rush into the campaign without first thinking about how it would be delivered. Consulting with the hospital first, before launching the campaign, was key to gaining their trust and commitment as a key partner. That trust and support was then built on further when we demonstrated our ability to deliver the initiative safely and smoothly, which resulted in great press and PR for both ourselves as event deliverers and the hospital itself.

As place-practioners, we are probably too quick to think of place as being defined by the high street or a town centre but this initiative provide to us that a hospital is just as important a place as it shares many of the same qualities but is absolutely critical to the health and wellbeing of our society as a whole. Furthermore, we often think of the health and wellbeing of hospital patients but very rarely about the hospital staff. The provision of free fresh street food not only helped improve their physical wellbeing but also had a huge impact on their mental health. It showed that the local community cared about their work which proved to be a real boost to their staff morale.

The key learning that we took away from our event with Capital & Centric is how much our preparation and planning was key to ensuring the delivery of a safe event. By working closely with the police licensing team to agree a suitable event capacity and format, which included limiting all unnecessary contact and practising table service through the use of the Dines app, we were able to run a safe event for all visitors. It showed that an outdoor street food event can be run safely in these circumstances if the site can be controlled.

The event also proved that there is real demand for this type of activity at this site in the town centre, demonstrated by tickets selling out very quickly. This demand could be built on further by partnering with Capital & Centric over the next few years to deliver more activity which could foster more interest in this development and lead to investment from potential future residents.

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