

## FOOD HYGIENE ON CHURCH PREMISES

*Myth: It is against the law for someone to make a rhubarb crumble at home and to bring it to church to be heated up and served at the Harvest Supper.*

[1] The role of local Council environmental health departments.

Such food hygiene law as there is comes under the jurisdiction of the environmental health departments of local Councils. Environmental health officers have wide powers over both the commercial and the voluntary sector. Not only do they have the right to inspect all premises where food is served, but they have the authority to ban catering in any premises where they judge the conditions to be a danger to the public.

In practice, the approach to the voluntary sector tends to be different from the one adopted for the commercial sector. Whereas environmental health officers could be described as the “catering police” to the commercial sector, their relationship with the voluntary sector tends to be on the basis of advice and guidance. EH departments have a range of literature, and are usually willing to give advice about all catering issues.

Although their relationship with the voluntary sector has a lighter touch than the one they have with the commercial sector, EHOs do still inspect church premises, and they would expect churches to take note of any advice given. If they make a follow-up visit, they would expect the action they recommended on their previous visit to have been taken.

EHOs do also have views about rhubarb crumbles, beef hot-pots and rice salads prepared at home, and these are dealt with in the last section of this paper.

[2] Legislation

There are two main strands of food hygiene law in place which will affect churches.

[1] *Whether the church premises need to be registered*

[2] *The need for a trained person, required procedures and practices regarding the handling of food, and requirements in connection with the lay-out and equipping of the church kitchen.*

We will look at these in turn. If you want to obtain a full copy of the relevant legislation, enter the full title into a search engine, and you will be able to read the full text of the Act or Statutory Instrument on the OPSI web site, which gives access to all UK legislation passed in the last 40 years.

A cautionary note which needs sounding is that the legislation I am quoting is in all cases the piece of legislation which is the fullest source of current law on that topic. There has been a vast quantity of food hygiene legislation since the Food Hygiene Act 1990, with which the present generation of food hygiene legislation originates. There have been subsequent laws, instruments and orders which have slightly changed or added to the earlier provisions, but the fullest and most basic outline of the requirements under each topic is in the legislation to which I am referring.

[1] *Whether the church premises need to be registered*

This is covered in the Food Premises (Registration) Regulations 1991. Churches will only need to be registered if they *sell* food on more than four days in any period of five consecutive weeks. This means that if you have a lunch for seniors every week, and make a fixed charge rather than leaving a plate for voluntary contributions, the premises will need to be registered. If no charge is made, there is no requirement to register, however frequently food is served. A suggested level of donation is not a “charge,” provided that it is still open to the beneficiary to decide whether to give that amount, or any amount, or not.

Snacks still in their original wrappings – e.g. crisps, packets of biscuits, chocolate bars – and the provision of hot or cold drinks, is not regarded as “the provision of food.”

In the light of the above criteria, it is our experience that most churches are not required to register, and we would discourage churches from registering voluntarily. Where it does apply, registration is with the Environmental Health department of the local Council, and their staff will advise on the procedure involved.

*[2] The need for a trained person, required procedures and practices regarding the handling of food, and requirements in connection with the lay-out and equipping of the church kitchen.*

This is covered in The Food Safety (General Food Hygiene) Regulations 1995.

#### Trained person

At every catering event there must be a trained person on the premises. A trained person can be someone with a professional qualification in catering, but at the minimum level it means a person who has completed the six-hour food hygiene course sponsored by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health. Courses are run by local authorities and by a wide range of accredited private agencies. Costs vary, so it is worth shopping around. Most active churches arrange for a number of people to go through the course, so that there is plenty of flexibility in deciding who is available for any one event. The trained person does not need to do all the work, nor even to be in charge of all the work. But they must be present whenever food is being prepared on the church premises, and during the event itself. The trained person is responsible, and will be the person approached by the local authority in any subsequent inquiry in the unlikely event of a food-poisoning incident occurring.

#### Food handling practices

The Regulations set out a range of handling rules and practices, all of them very sensible and effective, and churches are advised to print off the list and ensure that these practices are followed. None of them are difficult to achieve. The kind of issues covered are the prohibition of wooden chopping boards and the need to ensure that raw meats never come into contact with cooked meats.

#### Lay-out and equipment in church kitchens

This is the section of legislation which prescribes that there must be a hand-wash basin which is separate from any sink used for food preparation, and which requires that no toilet must lead directly off the kitchen. There are other requirements which need to be carefully considered when a church is renewing its kitchen or its kitchen equipment.

#### *[3] Preparing food at home*

Two things are not in doubt. One is that it is easier to ensure food safety if everything consumed on church premises was prepared on church premises. The second is that environmental health officers would prefer that all food served on church premises was prepared on church premises.

However in the real world, EHOs do recognise that most major catering events in churches do depend on an arrangement under which a large number of people in churches prepare food at home as a contribution to a particular catering event. All EHOs are aware of this practice, and I am not aware of any authority which has banned it, even though it is not their preferred option.

However, in allowing it to take place, EHOs do expect the person in charge to ensure that all food prepared at home is prepared in a safe environment. If there is any doubt about the home environment, or the personal food safety related habits of a particular person, that person should not be asked to prepare food at home. It is part of the responsibility of the person in charge to ensure that food safety is maintained with appropriate rigour, and this will at times involve declining offers, and maybe, in certain cases, giving some instruction or guidance. People whose circumstances are in doubt could be asked to bring biscuits, crisps or any other manufactured items required, as their contribution.

As we mentioned earlier, the trained person is responsible, and will be the person approached by the local authority in any subsequent inquiry in the unlikely event of a food-poisoning incident occurring. No doubt, if an incident occurred, one of the questions asked would be about the sources of the food and the arrangements for its provision.