

Outbreak!

Is your business ready?

It's your worst nightmare. You receive a phone call from the EHO 'Hello, is that Mrs Smith at the Red Lion? It's Environmental Services at Babergh District Council. I'm calling as we've had a number of cases of suspected food poisoning reported to us over the last day or so, and there appears to be a link to your premises. Can I come over and see you in about an hour to discuss it please? Good, see you in an hour then. Bye'.

What do you do whilst you're waiting for the EHO to arrive? Panic and pace around the premises? Probably, and that's understandable under the circumstances. But is there anything more productive you could be doing? What might you be able to show the EHO to help them with the investigation and ideally demonstrate that the food prepared on your premises is not to blame? The following is a checklist of items that the EHO is probably going to want to see, and which if you have available could well help you to demonstrate that the food that you have sold was safe:

- Booking records / guest lists – particularly useful if the outbreak is thought to be linked to a particular function. But even a booking diary may be useful to check who ate at the premises during the period in question.
- Menus / product ranges – again very useful for functions. Does there appear to be a common foodstuff between those that are ill? If not, it could be that

the illness was spread person to person rather than via the food. In any case, the EHO is going to want to know what types of food you serve or sell.

- Records of staff training. Which staff were in on the day(s) in question? Have they received training in food hygiene and if so can you prove it? Written



records of on-the-job training as well as certificates are valuable to demonstrate that staff are competent to handle food safely.

- Lists of suppliers / invoices. From where do you buy the foodstuffs that you sell or use as ingredients? It could be the case that something you bought in was already contaminated. But if you can show that you bought the food in good faith from a reputable supplier, you will not be to blame.
- Recipes / cooking instructions. Do staff follow any written instructions for food preparation? Particularly for larger premises, where any one of a number of different staff may have prepared a particular foodstuff, it is useful to be able to demonstrate that they all adhere to safe methods of preparation.
- Temperature records 1. Can you show that chilled foods

were delivered and stored at safe temperatures? Records of deliveries of high risk foods and daily refrigerator and freezer logs can show that whilst the food was on your premises it was safe. Then if the food poisoning seems to be due to temperature abuse, this must have occurred either before you received the food, or after it had left your control.

- Temperature records 2. Do you check the temperatures of any foods after cooking or reheating, or whilst they are being held hot? If so, do you ever record the temperatures found? Don't try to probe and record everything – it's not practical and not necessary, but recording a sample of temperatures each week can help to show that your cooking/reheating/hot holding is adequate.
- Other records which you might have that could be relevant include pest control, cleaning schedules and maintenance records.

In short you are trying to build up a picture of how you ensure that your business sells safe food. This is known in food safety law as the defence of *due diligence*. If you can demonstrate that you did everything that could reasonably be expected of you to ensure that the food would be safe to eat, then even if something *has* gone wrong, you are unlikely to face legal action. I hope that you never have to face such a scenario as that described above, but if you do, you'll be very glad that you've got your documentation available ready to show to the EHO.