

What do Concept Catering & Conference Centre and the Radisson SAS have in common? They are two of only four venues in Birmingham to have scored top marks in the city council's prestigious 'H' for Hygiene awards. **Mark Ellerby of Concept talks to SE.**

The Concept Catering & Conference Centre was set up in 2006 by RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind) Mark joined the team as Project Manager in 2007. Concept offers sustainable employment vocational training and work experience to blind and partially sighted people, working alongside sighted colleagues.

While there may be a temptation to think that social enterprises – in particular social firms which set out to employ people with a wide range of mental and physical disadvantages – offer a 'good try' in terms of products and services, but not the best, Concept Catering is proof that's not the case.

"Excellent service, good quality ingredients and food with flair have always been the driving factors behind the business," Mark explains, "in addition to the desire to break down barriers and change perceptions of what's possible."

And the recipe has clearly worked, Concept is a viable business and attracts around 8,000 delegates a year.

Concept has also started to offer a hot lunch menu to external organisations – a drop off for small gatherings or an on-site service for larger events – and Mark is keen to grow this side of the business. "By catering for events or providing an in-house café, we are offering businesses a chance to exercise Corporate Social Responsibility as well as increase the opportunities for training and employment for blind and partially sighted people. The Environment Agency has taken on trainees as a result of working with us.

"As a not-for-personal-profit organisation, we can offer very competitive prices for top quality catering and conference facilities, potentially enabling commercial companies, social enterprises or public sector bodies to go ahead with



Chop chop: Martin Pugh, Assistant Chef, and Jo Miller, Chef, get lunch on the go

events they may otherwise have had to cancel in the current economic climate. We can accommodate up to 90 people over four rooms at our Conference Centre in John Bright Street, Birmingham."

Concept serves high quality, locally-sourced, seasonal food, which is freshly prepared and uses Fairtrade and organic ingredients as far as possible. "The food and the venue are memorable parts of a conference or event," says Mark, "and can make or break it. From the outset, I wanted to ensure that we offered a warm welcome, food that's a little bit different, and an unobtrusive, efficient service – with no hidden extra costs for hiring equipment or setting up a room. That way event organisers and delegates can concentrate on what they are here for, rather than on the housekeeping."

But the real proof is in the eating, as the saying goes. Simon Lee, solicitor at Anthony Collins Solicitors says: "We have used Concept for several events now, including a lunch for the whole office, because we like to support social enterprise where we can. We have always been impressed. There is no concession on the quality of the food or the service – both are excellent."

Mark is concerned that, in general, people underestimate what blind and partially sighted people can do. "We always take the opportunity to talk to our customers and their delegates about the menu for the day and what our business is

all about," he says. "If they experience what blind and partially sighted people can do, then we hope it will encourage them to think more positively about people with a range of disabilities and be more inclusive in their own recruitment policies."

Concept currently employs four permanent staff and is about to recruit a fifth. It has three to four trainees at any one time and is aiming to increase that number to eleven in the near future. All the staff have basic food hygiene certificate qualifications and their manager, Jo Miller, has just achieved advanced certification, which is unusual within the catering industry for an organisation the size of Concept. She is now going through training to enable her to deliver food hygiene training herself. Mark explains: "We are a leader not a follower. We are rapidly becoming a Centre of Excellence for food hygiene and quality. We don't expect our customers to lower their standards because they are dealing with a social firm and we certainly won't be lowering ours." **SE**

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i RNIB has now joined forces with Action for Blind people, who will be providing support for Concept over the coming years.

Disability is no barrier to excellence



RECIPE for SUCCESS