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# CATERING COMPANIES – FEEDING THE ANTIBIOTIC CRISIS?

POLICIES FOR ANTIBIOTICS IN FOOD SERVED BY CATERING COMPANIES,  
INCLUDING IN SCHOOL AND HEALTHCARE SETTINGS



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the first-ever comprehensive assessment of the antibiotic policies of the UK's leading catering companies. All ten of these companies supply healthcare institutions or educational establishments in or outside of the UK, with eight out of ten supplying both.

It might be expected that in light of the growing threat from antibiotic resistance such suppliers would have exemplary policies in this area, but our assessment finds that most catering companies are failing to take their responsibility to minimise antibiotic use in their supply chain sufficiently seriously.

Antibiotic resistance is a global health crisis, responsible for about 1.27 million deaths a year (more than HIV or malaria).<sup>1</sup> This includes 7,600 deaths per year in the UK and is estimated to cost the NHS £95 million per year.<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) describes antibiotic resistance as "one of the biggest threats to global health, food security, and development today".<sup>3</sup>

The WHO further states that "Antibiotic resistance occurs naturally, but misuse of antibiotics in humans and animals is accelerating the process."<sup>3</sup> The spread of resistance from farm animals to humans through the food chain is known to be a contributing factor to antibiotic resistance,

so it is essential that antibiotic use in farming be kept to a minimum.

In the UK, around 30% of antibiotics are used on farmed animals.<sup>4</sup> Although this is better than the global average of approximately 66%<sup>5</sup>, this still equates to 212 tonnes of antibiotic active ingredient sold in the UK for use on farmed animals.<sup>6</sup> With global levels of resistance increasing there is no place for apathy or complacency in addressing this issue.

The UK contract catering industry is big business, with a market value of £4.4 billion.<sup>7</sup> The companies surveyed supply food to NHS hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, and to Government departments and the military. They also cater for large-scale events at Twickenham, Wimbledon, the Royal Opera House, and Royal Botanic Gardens (Kew Gardens), and at venues like Olympia London, QEII centre, the O2 arena, London Zoo, and Edinburgh Castle. Some also supply staff canteens or high-street brands like Costa, Subway and M&S.

They are involved in serving some of the most vulnerable people in society, including young people.

Every year, 140 million inpatient meals are served in NHS hospitals<sup>8</sup>, where staff are already dealing directly with difficult to treat infections, deaths and financial pressures caused by antibiotic resistance and over 600 million meals are served to children in UK schools.

Three of the companies assessed served thousands of meals to military personnel as part of the recent coronation of King Charles III. Two of the companies served up almost 100,000 meals to the military between them.

In most cases, food produced by catering companies is served unbranded, and their policies are less frequently scrutinised than those of supermarkets. It is therefore important that pressure is applied to these food suppliers to ensure they play their part in creating a safer future.

In this report The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics looked at the publicly available antibiotic policies of ten leading contract-catering companies. We wrote to all the companies several times over the past 18 months to inform them of our plans and to offer support on how to develop an antibiotic policy. Unfortunately, only two companies, CH&CO and Compass Group actively engaged with us and took advantage of our offer of free support.

In April, May and August 2023, we searched for policies on responsible antibiotic use on the consumer-facing websites of the ten companies.

Unfortunately, our research shows that:

- 5 out of 10 catering companies surveyed have no antibiotics policy.
- None of the companies currently prohibit their suppliers from using antibiotics for routine disease prevention.
- None of the companies collect any data on their antibiotic use.

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## KEY FINDINGS

We assessed: apetito (apetito Limited), Aramark (Aramark Ltd), CH&CO (CH&CO Group), Compass Group (UK & Ireland), Elior (UK), ISS, Newrest (Group), OCS (OCS Group UK Limited), Sodexo (Sodexo United Kingdom) and WSH (WSH Investments Ltd). We searched for antibiotic policies relating to the UK. Some of the policies that we found were on local websites, others on global websites.

All ten of the companies that we assessed mention supplying either healthcare establishments (including hospitals and care homes) or educational premises on their websites. Nine out of ten supply healthcare establishments (eight in the UK), nine supply educational establishments (eight in the UK), eight of the organisations supply both healthcare and educational locations. Eight companies mention supplying events or working with high-street brands (all eight in the UK) or workplaces (seven mention the UK).

- Only five companies (Aramark, CH&CO, Compass, Elior and Sodexo) have a published antibiotic policy. Five companies have no antibiotic policy (apetito, ISS, Newrest, OCS, and WSH).
- None of the ten companies currently have a policy banning routine preventative antibiotic use in their supply chain.
- None of the ten companies collect any data on antibiotic use in their supply chain.
- Only Aramark, CH&CO, Compass and Sodexo have a strategy aimed reducing the antibiotics in their supply chain.
- Only Elior has any restrictions on the use of antibiotics classified as highest-priority critically important in human medicine.
- None of the companies have a ban on the use of the antibiotic colistin which is used as a last resort in human medicine for treating life threatening infections. Only CH&CO has made a commitment to ban colistin by 2024
- One of the companies, ISS, recently secured a catering contract with Defra (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), despite having NO antibiotic policy.<sup>9</sup>

## ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

The following criteria were used for assessing the publicly available antibiotic policies of the catering companies.

1. Does the company have a publicly available policy on farm antibiotic use on its website?
2. Does the policy ban the routine preventative use of antibiotics in the company's supply chain?
3. Does the company collect data on antibiotic use in your supply chain?
4. Does the policy include an antibiotic-use reduction strategy?
5. Does the policy include antibiotic-use reduction targets?
6. Is the policy clear about the coverage?
  - 6a. Does the policy cover all UK-produced freshly cooked/prepared meat, fish, dairy, and eggs served?
  - 6b. Does the policy cover all UK-produced food, including frozen, pre-packaged and branded items?
  - 6c. Does the policy cover all food sold/ served in outlets, including all imported produce?
7. Does the policy restrict the use of the 'highest-priority critically important antibiotics' across the supply chain?
8. Does the policy completely ban the use of the antibiotic colistin in the supply chain?
9. Does the company publish antibiotic-usage data in the supply chain at regular intervals e.g. annually?
10. Does the company publish antibiotic-usage data by farming system?

## SUMMARY TABLE

Red indicates an area that is lacking, green a positive and amber where there is some information or a future commitment

	 APETITO	 ARAMARK	 CH&CO	 COMPASS	 ELIOR	 ISS	 NEWREST	 OCS	 SODEXO	 WSH
1. Policy publicly available	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
2. Bans routine prevention	✗	—	—	—	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
3. Collects usage data	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
4. Reduction strategy in place	✗	✓	✓	—	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
5. Reduction targets are set	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
6. Clear about coverage	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
6a. Includes all UK-fresh produce	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
6b. Includes all UK-produce	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
6c. Includes all produce	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
7. Restricts HPClAs	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
8. Bans colistin	✗	✗	—	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
9. Publishes usage data	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
10. Collects usage by farm system	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

These are very disappointing results. Going forward, the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics calls for catering companies to engage with us and avail themselves of our free support to discuss how they can develop policies and align them with our recommendations. More importantly, we hope that they will improve their policies significantly.



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The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is an alliance of health, medical, environmental and animal welfare groups working to stop the over-use of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded by the Soil Association, Compassion in World Farming International and Sustain in 2009. The Alliance vision is for a world in which human and animal health and well-being are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely on routine antibiotic use.



[saveourantibiotics.org](https://saveourantibiotics.org)

