

## Social Bite: Cafes Helping People Out of Homelessness

by Lee Williams

Lee Williams spends a day at social bite, a gourmet enterprise with a menu designed by a michelin-starred chef and a tasty twist – one in four staff were formerly homeless.

Imagine the response if a homeless person walked into a café and asked for a free meal.

Now imagine the same scenario but instead of being told where to go, homeless people are met with a smile and asked politely what they'd like to eat. And then asked if they'd like a free coffee to go with it. Perhaps even asked if they'd like a job.

This isn't just an imaginary exercise, it is Social Bite a string of sandwich shops in Edinburgh and Glasgow operating a suspended payment system where customers can buy a coffee or meal to be collected by a homeless person in the future. The scheme is so successful that there are already tens of thousands of free meals in the pot. "We can now feed people for an entire year," says Social Bite co-founder, Josh Little John. "Any homeless person who comes into the shop is simply never turned away."

Social Bite is a social business – a commercial enterprise which gives all its profits to good causes. In Social Bite's case these include an eye care hospital in Bangladesh; a foundation providing small business loans to impoverished women in Africa; and the STV Appeal raising funds to combat food and fuel poverty in Scotland.

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Social Bite Co-Founder, Josh Littlejohn

Co-founder Littlejohn used to run a successful events company in Edinburgh until, in 2011, he found himself reading a book about social businesses by Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi entrepreneur and philanthropist. So inspired was he by Yunus' ideas that he and his girlfriend, Alice, travelled to Bangladesh to meet the man himself. "We spent a week there," says Littlejohn. "We met him and toured around his different social businesses and the trip inspired us so much we decided to come back to Scotland and try and start our own social business."

Back in Scotland, Josh sold the events company and his flat and ploughed all the cash into his new project. The idea for Social Bite came from his experience of lunching in central Edinburgh: "I used to go out and eat my lunch at all these places like Pret A Manger,

Starbucks and Subway,” he says. “We thought that if we could come up with something that offered a good product and service but would ultimately have a social mission behind it rather than shareholders making loads of money, then hopefully customers would come and choose us.”

The homeless connection didn’t arrive until a couple of weeks after the first shop opened in August 2012. “We got to know a young guy who sold The Big Issue outside,” says Littlejohn. “He came in and plucked up the courage to ask if we had any job vacancies.” Social Bite took him on and when it worked out successfully, they asked him if he knew anyone else from a similar background. His brother was also homeless and so they took him on too. Soon they were rapidly employing more and more homeless workers so it seemed sensible to make it part of the company policy. “We made a commitment that one in four of our workforce would come from a homeless background,” says Littlejohn. “Now we’ve got 15 people with a history of homelessness working for us.”

Employing homeless people doesn’t come without its challenges. There are the basic barriers of no fixed address, no ID and no bank account. There is also the issue of acclimatising them back into a culture of routine and punctuality.

Social Bite helps them to get bank accounts and find accommodation and also acts as a guarantor for rent. The work mindset can take longer to reintroduce though, according to Littlejohn, but once the person is settled, the benefits to the business as well as to the individual can be huge. “If you successfully rehabilitate someone, you have a very, very loyal and hardworking member of staff you can rely on,” says Littlejohn.

One possible downside is a perceived lack of quality. “There’s an almost automatic assumption that it probably won’t be that good and a charity café is not going to be as good as Pret A Manger.” It’s a perception Social Bite takes great pains to dispel. The shops are immaculately clean, the service excellent and the menu of simple but delicious sandwiches and hot meals is created by a Michelin-starred chef, Mike Mathieson, who is consultant chef to the legendary Albert Roux and Chez Roux restaurants.

Littlejohn isn’t ambiguous about his desire to compete with traditional high street lunch venues: “We want to compete with all the big boys on the same commercial terms and beat them at their own game,” he says. “We want to offer better food, really good value and better customer service.”

With four outlets in Edinburgh and Glasgow they still have a long way to go, but with two more due to open in Dundee and Aberdeen there will soon be a Social Bite in every major Scottish city. Whether that can be replicated across the whole country depends, according to Littlejohn, on first perfecting a business model which is still relatively untested. “Social businesses are still a fairly niche idea,” he says. “We want to compete and win on a business level but as a social business. I don’t think that has been done...”

He pauses and thinks for a while, before adding the all-important word: “...yet.”