

What's Cooking - project summary

Overview

The aim of What's Cooking was to provide socially isolated older people in rural areas with access to opportunities to eat with others, while building their cooking skills and confidence and helping them to form new social connections and friendships.

What's Cooking was commissioned as part of Brightlife's 'Bright Ideas' strand and was delivered by Rural Community Services (RCS), a registered charity working with older people in rural localities across Cheshire West and Chester.

What's Cooking was initially awarded £8,425 for one year, and was subsequently awarded a further £10,323 to extend the project for another year.

Background and context

Eating is a social activity. However, for many older people, social isolation, combined with limited transport options (especially for those living in rural areas), can lead to a lack of opportunities to eat with others.

Older people who are socially isolated can lose interest and confidence in cooking for themselves, particularly if they live alone. This puts them at a greater risk of malnutrition.

What's Cooking aimed to establish community clubs in rural areas, led by volunteers with support from project staff, with a focus on cooking and eating well.

It was envisaged that the participants would cook and eat food together, discuss growing and sourcing good quality food, and share recipes from the present and past. It was hoped that as well as rekindling participants' interest in food, the clubs would enable new social connections and friendships to be formed.

Development and delivery

A part-time project officer was employed to facilitate the delivery of the project.

The project initially encountered difficulties with finding suitable venues to hold the sessions. As a result, the format of each group had to be adapted to fit the available venues. During the first

year, two groups were established in the rural communities of Helsby and Frodsham, with a third group added in Farndon during the second year. The sessions worked best with relatively small groups of 8-10 members.

Participants came via referrals from health and social care professionals and other third sector programs, and via self-referrals as a result of marketing and promotional activity (using materials designed by a marketing professional accessed through a skill share project run by the local voluntary and community sector support organisation). Questions were raised about the extent to which the branding was reflective of the nature of the activities involved in the program, and it was felt that some potential participants may have been put off by this. Once the groups were established, word of mouth proved to be the most effective method of engagement.

All groups were 'open access', available to all those aged over 50 regardless of their level of social isolation. As a result, the cohort was intergenerational and included people with a wide range of abilities, as well as several carers. This proved to be an asset to the project, as those who felt more confident and less isolated were able to welcome and support other participants and help them to connect with other local activities.

The commitment and flexibility of the volunteers involved in the project (including those under and over 50) contributed greatly to the success of the groups.

Impact and legacy

Reducing loneliness

While the data does show improvements for some participants in terms of a reduction in loneliness and isolation, higher levels of social contact and improved health and wellbeing, reluctance of many participants to complete the evaluation questionnaire means that the conclusions that can be drawn from this data are very limited.

However, there was a noticeable growth in confidence among participants in general, particularly in their willingness to participate in group discussions and project co-design, and to attend other community activities. New friendships also developed between members, with some meeting socially outside of the group sessions.

Developing skills

Delivering the What's Cooking project has resulted in RCS working with a broader age demographic, particularly in the 50-70 years range, and a wider range of partners.

Sustainability

All three *What's Cooking* groups will continue to be supported by RCS, with further funding already secured for at least two of the groups.

Key learning

- The design of a community project must allow for flexibility as a result of co-design. When working in multiple communities, the model must be adapted to fit the available facilities and participant needs.
- Having an 'open access' policy, without the need for a formal referral or qualifying criteria, creates a group with mixed levels of confidence and social connectedness. This can create a more vibrant group, where those with higher levels of confidence and connectedness are able to welcome and support others.
- Creating an open, welcoming and inclusive group dynamic is important when seeking to engage socially isolated/lonely people.
- Reduced mobility and fewer transport options can contribute to social isolation and loneliness in rural areas.
- When marketing a scheme designed to bring people together, careful consideration needs to be given to the messages being conveyed.

Key numbers

Participants recruited = 14 (Target = 31)

Volunteers recruited = 5 (Target = 12)

CMF Entry Questionnaires completed = 63% (Target = 60%)

Once engaged with the project, the majority of participants remained engaged for at least 12 months

The sessions worked best with relatively small groups of 8-10 members.