

Promoting healthy eating choices in community cafés

Key points learnt from a Glasgow Community Café Development Intervention

This paper highlights the work of an intervention instigated by Greater Glasgow NHS Board, the Scottish Community Diet Project, and the Scottish Healthy Choices Award Scheme. The intervention aimed to increase healthy eating choices in thirteen community cafés in Glasgow. The pilot project lasted just over one year and finished in early 2004. Healthier choices were defined in this intervention as meals that were low in sugar, salt and fat and high in fruit, vegetables and complex carbohydrates such as pasta, potatoes, rice and bread.

The national concern for the high levels of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other diet-related conditions that continue to be prevalent in Scotland were highlighted in the Scottish Diet Action Plan (1996). This concern was further highlighted in the Food and Health Action Framework for Glasgow (2001), where a multi-agency approach was recommended. Community cafés provide an ideal setting for the promotion of healthy eating in the community by being accessible and affordable to a wide range of people. They are places where consumers can be given the opportunity to make small but significant changes to their diet.

The intervention aimed to tackle four main areas, identified in the Glasgow Food and Health Action Framework as maximising **access to** and **affordability, availability, and awareness of** safe and nutritious food in community cafés. The findings from the evaluation showed that a fifth area – **acceptability of** healthy foods is an additional area to consider when encouraging healthy eating. These five 'A's were tackled through the implementation of a comprehensive programme comprising of five key elements:

1. **Health promotion** - cafés received support and encouragement from a Health Promotion Officer as well as a grant of £300 for the purchasing and promotion of fruit and vegetables.
2. **Scottish Healthy Choices Award Scheme** - cafés received support and advice from the Award's National Co-ordinator to make changes to their menus as well as recipes and encouragement to aim for the Scottish Healthy Choices Award (see criteria on page 7).
3. **Food hygiene and food safety** - the cafés in this intervention received training in food hazard analysis from Glasgow City Council Environmental Protection Services, tailored to this target group as well as onsite visits.
4. **Mobile chef** - the programme provided the cafés with access to a mobile chef to impart skills and share knowledge on healthier cooking methods and presentation.
5. **General training and support materials** - staff and volunteers had access to a six-week training course based on the Health Scotland's 'Just for Starters' Toolkit.



What worked?

The combination of the five elements resulted in a successful recipe, which tackled the four A's of **access to** and **affordability, availability**, and **awareness of** safe and nutritious food in community cafés. It further highlighted the importance of the 5th A: **acceptance** of healthy food choices.

Here is a flavour of how it can be done



AN ESSENTIAL STARTER

Ensuring that food hygiene and food safety standards are met

Meeting the food hygiene and food safety standards is a **legal requirement** for any organisation that sells food to the public on a regular basis. Cafés need to be aware of which person in the café or community centre is legally responsible for maintaining these standards. In the intervention, many of the cafés were based in and managed by community centres, thus the community centres' management committees were legally responsible for ensuring that the food hygiene and food safety standards were met in the cafés. The majority of the management committees were not aware of this.

A commitment to ensure that new and existing staff receive adequate training in food hygiene and food safety is essential from all those involved in running the café. It is equally important to ensure that they have the skills to implement and maintain food safety procedures. Even after training, some cafés admitted that they still had difficulty maintaining procedures such as taking temperatures due to lack of time. Again, management committees must ensure that the cafés have adequate staffing levels to follow food hazards analysis procedures.

The Key People

- **The chef and other café staff** - their willingness and commitment to promote healthy eating is essential
- **Adequate staffing levels** - staff shortages make it difficult to implement changes and for staff to take part in training courses
- **Customers** - their willingness or otherwise to try new foods will dictate the approach to healthy eating
- **Steering group or management committee** - the support from this group is vital if the café is to promote healthier choices and safe eating in the café
- **Access to an experienced chef** - who can provide training in healthier cooking methods/dishes and who can help staff build their confidence
- **Access to training** - or support in maintaining legally required food hygiene and food safety standards
- **Funding bodies** - small amounts of funding are essential for ensuring that community cafés can experiment with creating healthier dishes and promoting healthier foods
- **A person or group who will take responsibility for co-ordinating the changes**
- **Scottish Healthy Choices Award Scheme** - can provide practical advice on increasing healthy choices in the café (see back page for contact details)

access ..

“The logistics aren’t easy. On Tuesday and Thursday we use the buses that bring the elderly in for lunch to do the shopping” (staff)

“Special needs customers are accommodated and integrated, it’s more open and accepted - which is good for young children to see and learn from” (customer)



THE MAIN MENU

Increasing **access** to healthy foods

How accessible is the café?

Whether trying to achieve healthy eating or not - it is a legal requirement that people with disabilities can access facilities in the café.

Ensure the café has access to customers - several of the cafés in the intervention study were based in community centres and received much of their custom from people attending or working in these centres. In these situations the cafés need to be aware of any changes in centre activities that might affect the café’s access to customers.

Can the café purchase healthier foods from its usual suppliers?

Most cafés in this intervention used a combination of local cash and carry, catering suppliers and local retailers such as supermarkets. Some of the cafés had difficulties accessing a reliable and convenient source of supplies, healthy or otherwise. The management or management committee needs to be supportive so that staff can have time out of kitchens to consider better sourcing of supplies.

Things to consider when looking for suppliers:

- **Deliveries** - beware of weekly-only deliveries. Running out of some foods before the end of the week can have an impact on the menu, especially healthier items that have a short shelf life such as salad. However, deliveries are a convenient option for cafés with transport problems.
- **Local supermarkets and retailers** - healthy foods, such as fresh fruit, vegetables and lower-fat products might be more expensive than from wholesale suppliers or cash and carry.
- **Cash and carry** - may be cheaper than using local retailers but may not be an ideal option if a visit to a distant cash and carry store causes staff shortages in the kitchen.
- **Collective purchasing** - consider sharing the burden with other cafés or food outlets. Develop a network to bulk-buy foods. A network is also useful as a forum to share ideas around providing and promoting healthier eating.

affordable ..

available ..

“ .. he helped me on presentation and made it look nice so people wanted to try it” (staff)



How to make healthier foods **affordable** (for the café and the customer)

Have an affordable healthy food policy – make sure that healthier meals are the same price or cheaper than the less healthy meals. Most cafés found this possible. A few cafés had to absorb the cost of some healthy foods within their general budget to ensure that the price was the same for the customer. (NB: Healthy meals priced at the same or less than other meals is one of the criteria for receiving the Scottish Healthy Choices Award)

Obtain funding (or find some money in the budget) for promoting healthy options

- Offer free tasters of healthy options - the cafés had free taster sessions followed by half price offers; successful meals were then sold at full price for a trial period until kept or rejected for the regular menu.

How to make more healthy foods **available**

Decide what methods you are going to use to improve the nutritional value of the café meals

- **Healthier cooking and preparation methods** - customers do not always need to know that preparation methods have changed - in the intervention customers were rarely aware that they were given low-fat spread on their rolls or that the tuna mayonnaise salad contained more yoghurt than mayonnaise. Changing over to healthier preparation and cooking methods proved to be successful for all cafés – including those with customers most resistant to change – this is therefore a realistic goal for any café.
- **New healthier meals** - healthier meals such as ratatouille or tuna pasta were offered to the customers, although some required ongoing encouragement to try new foods. Café staff should try to remain enthusiastic when customers initially reject new healthier meals.

Provide training and help for staff and volunteers

The cafés had access to the Scottish Healthy Choices Award Scheme Co-ordinator who provided tips on creating healthier and affordable meals and a chef who provided training on preparation, healthier cooking methods, presentation skills and introduced new healthier dishes.

- **Take note** - mentoring for cooks and volunteers needs to be long term and new staff will also need access to training. Valuable skills can be lost when main members of staff or volunteers leave.
- **Provide training for management committees** - so that they are aware of their legal responsibilities regarding food safety.

awareness ...

“I’ve changed my cooking methods at home. Now I bake chops, and I’ve chucked out the deep fat fryer” (customer)

“I loved the chicken pasta; I took the recipe and made it at home” (customer)



How to increase awareness of healthy eating

Make sure staff and volunteers are aware of what constitutes a balanced diet and how this can be achieved in the café - training in nutrition, as well as healthier preparation and cooking methods are essential for increasing the confidence of staff and volunteers to provide and promote tasty and acceptable healthy foods.

Make sure that customers are aware of the café’s commitment to healthy eating, why this commitment is important and how it can benefit them.

Actively promote healthy meals to customers - point out the healthy options, say why they are healthy and why it is a good idea for them to choose to eat healthier meals.

Highlight the healthy eating options on the menu - make it easy for customers to see what the healthy dishes are.

Get colourful promotional materials such as posters and cards to promote healthy eating messages and put them where customers can see them.

Increasing awareness of healthy eating messages and recipes may encourage customers to change eating habits elsewhere - by using healthier cooking methods at home and healthy recipes.

Celebrate the café’s healthy eating achievements! Let everyone know! Not just the regular customers; but also local people, agencies and the press.

How to make sure that customers find healthy foods acceptable

Many customers understood the importance of eating a healthy diet, although knowledge varied on what this actually meant. Customers often felt that they already consumed a healthy diet or associated healthy eating solely with weight loss diets. Many customers did not want to change their behaviour, particularly if they viewed healthier foods as ‘less tasty’. However, a number of customers did actively choose healthy foods in the café and as a result some changed their cooking methods at home.

Despite some customer resistance to choosing healthier foods, many of the cafés were successful in increasing the acceptability of healthy foods by using the following methods:

Making sure that healthy foods taste good, look good, smell good and have a good texture are the first steps in ensuring that affordable meals are accepted. Again, access to training or mentoring is crucial in improving the confidence of cooks to produce acceptable healthy meals, especially if the cooks are not used to cooking or eating healthy foods themselves.

acceptable ..

“Some thought it (the ratatouille) was poison and others loved it” (staff)

“I really liked the red pepper soup: I'd never eaten red pepper before” (customer)



‘Health by stealth’ might be necessary – many customers were reluctant to choose meals labelled as ‘healthy’. However, cafés were able to improve the nutritional value of the less healthy meals by using healthier cooking methods. Customers were not always aware of these changes.

“We know it’s not healthy; it would be healthier if it was grilled instead of fried, but it’s fried here. They keep saying ‘have something healthy’ but we just say no” (customer - who was unaware that the café grilled rather than fried foods)

Presentation or other persuasion methods - by making the healthier foods slightly cheaper, by giving free tasters of healthy options or by stealthy presentation.

“We deliberately laid the food out with the healthier options at the beginning and the less healthy food at the end. They filled up their plates at the start and by the time they got to the chips they hardly had any room on their plates” (staff serving buffet to children)

or by encouragement:

“Target healthy eating in a positive way - don’t say what you can’t eat, but what you can eat” (staff)

Don’t change the menu overnight - i.e. the café may not want to take chips off the menu because of concern that it may lose its customers. **Take note:** café customers were asked for ideas on how to get people to eat healthy food – some suggested radical changes such as taking anything unhealthy off the menu – however they did say that they would not use the café if those changes were made! On the other hand, cafés that receive custom from schoolchildren should not undermine national and local efforts to improve nutritional standards of school meals by selling school children sweets, fizzy drinks and crisps that might not be available in their school.

Cafés need to consider their customers’ preferences in order to avoid costly wastage - those cafés whose customers were mainly elderly found it difficult to get customers to eat fresh fruit - but they did find that customers would eat tinned fruit and fruit based puddings. Some cafés did experience wastage, others used unsold fruit in puddings.

Promote tasters and introductory offers - make tasters and introductory offers a regular feature so that future customers and new recipes can be included.

Don’t be put off by initial reluctance from customers - the overwhelming response from customers in the cafés was that trying to encourage healthy eating was a good idea and would make a difference to customers’ diets and long-term health prospects.



THE CHEF'S SPECIAL CHOICE

Aim towards the Scottish Healthy Choices Award

This award is open to all catering establishments, although prior to this intervention no community cafés had received the award. As well as promoting healthy choices, the community café intervention was also undertaken to explore the potential of community cafés who may have limited resources and facilities to meet the criteria for this award.

The criteria to receive this award are:

1. **Provide a healthy eating environment** - i.e. high standards of food safety, hygiene and management, provide a non-smoking area and have a policy that supports mothers who wish to breastfeed on the premises.
2. **Provide healthy food choices** - i.e. offer healthy choices on the menu and use healthier cooking methods.
3. **Promote healthy food choices** - i.e. highlight healthy meal options on the menu and encourage customers to purchase them.

Some cafés did experience some difficulties in meeting the criteria for the award: the award requires cafés to always offer healthy options, thus cafés with a set menu are unable to receive the award unless the set menu is always 'healthy'.

AND TO FINISH ...

Cafés need a lot of support if they are to be successful at either achieving an award or improving the range and take-up of healthy options on the menu. Training on nutrition and healthy eating is essential, staff and volunteers require time to attend meetings and training, and cafés also need to be aware of what is involved and what can be gained by either working towards the award or increasing healthy eating options. Despite the difficulties that some cafés had in meeting the criteria for the award, all the cafés involved in the intervention were successful at either providing new healthy choices on their menus or/and changing to healthier preparation or cooking methods. Five of the cafés gained a Scottish Healthy Choices Award (to date four still hold the award). Access to, affordability, availability, awareness and acceptability of healthy foods was improved but also cafés generally offer a wider choice of meals, and staff and volunteers are more aware of the importance of eating a healthy diet and generally have more food preparation skills.

References

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Eating For Health: a diet action plan for Scotland, Scottish Office, 1996. www.Scotland.gov.uk/library/documents/diet-00.htm

The Food and Health Action Framework for Glasgow, 2001 www.glasgowcitycouncil.co.uk/healthycities/default_bl.html

'Just for starters' – All the ingredients you need for setting up and running a community café. Health Education Board for Scotland/ Edinburgh Community Food Initiative, (no date) (Out of print)

Useful Contacts

Scottish Healthy Choices Award, tel: 0141 226 5261, fax 0141 221 0731
Email: shca@scotconsumer.org.uk www.shcas.co.uk

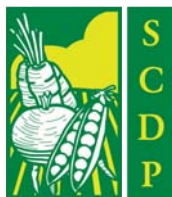
Nutrition Team, Greater Glasgow NHS Board, tel: 0141 201 4964

Scottish Community Diet Project, tel: 0141 226 5261, fax: 0141 221 0731
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The Disability Rights Commission (DRC), tel: 08457 622 633
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Scottish Community
Diet Project



Glasgow Community
Café Link-Up