

Food Cultures: Growing, Cooking, Eating project reveals new appetite for behavioural change

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At a time when 25% of the adult population is considered to be obese and the annual cost of the national obesity epidemic is estimated at £5 billion, a Plymouth-based research project that introduced young men and older people to sustainable and healthy food activities points to innovative partnership solutions. The research showed how participants underwent a range of social and behavioural improvements around food and diet.

The [Food](#) Cultures project, which delivered a range of activities with eight different partner organisations across the city, investigated whether food education programmes, when delivered in a sociable context and in an enjoyable way, could influence behaviour, improve diet and ultimately [long term health](#).

The results revealed that many participants developed a range of new skills and confidences in areas such as cooking and growing. They reported an increase in cooking dishes from 'basic ingredients' instead of eating packaged meals, and many reported changes in their wider eating habits. Many of the projects also produced a range of associated social and [psychological benefits](#) such as increased confidence, teamwork skills, and a general feeling of wellbeing.

Funded by NHS Plymouth and led by Real Ideas Organisation and Plymouth University, the programme worked in partnership with

representatives from public health, housing, youth and the civic and social enterprise sectors. The research could now go on to inform practice and policy across the health sector.

Dr Clare Pettinger, of the University's Faculty of Health, Education and Society, said: "Young males are known to have low intake of fruit and vegetables and older people are vulnerable to poor nutrition – and these two groups currently receive little targeted intervention support.

"So the results from Food Cultures are important because they reveal just what can be achieved when innovative food projects are used – they can improve confidence and self-esteem, provide skills, and change food habits of a lifetime."

Among the eight funded streams of Growing, Cooking, Eating included Devonport's Life House Hostel and Greenbank Young Men's Project. At the hostel, young residents undertook nearly 80 sessions of their choosing over a four-month period, and included working with a professional chef to learn new cooking skills; growing herbs and vegetables in a small allotment area; a variety of day trips and visits related to food growing establishments and outlets; and collective eating experiences where the participant cooked meals for other residents and external visitors.

At Greenbank there were food-related day trips, including a day of sea fishing and visits to an abattoir and an organic farm, in order to broaden the participants' horizons and inspire them to buy and cook from fresh ingredients. There were lessons with a local chef, and weekly sessions with a youth worker.

Extensive surveys were conducted with six of the eight projects – all of which had engaged participants in elements of growing, cooking and eating. Overall, nearly 20% reported that they had started growing

activities, from indoor plants to vegetables, and there was a 36% decrease in those who said they did not grow at all. There was a 10% increase in meals cooked from scratch, and a 34% decrease in the amount of convenience food eaten. The results also recorded a rise in the number of portions of fruit and vegetables consumed.

The majority of participants reported food-related skills benefits, such as better understanding of food preparation and its techniques, cooking and healthy eating. But they also recorded more general benefits such as improvements in social confidence, teamwork and self-esteem.

Ed Whitelaw, of RIO, said: "Health education work has often been just about giving people information. The problem is that this is just 'leading the horse to water', but we also need to help it drink, and this is about giving people confidence also. Then, if we want 'the horse to keep drinking' i.e. if we want people keep eating healthier food, we need to make it enjoyable. We need to help people develop a more positive relationship with food and this is often about trying to improve people social circumstance – developing a better food culture.

"At a time of radical change within the health service, Growing, Cooking, Eating is a timely demonstration of the value of partnership working and community food projects. Food by its very nature crosses boundaries and disciplines so development of good and innovative partnerships in this field are vital."

Professor Debra Lapthorne, Director of Public Health for Plymouth, added: "The food cultures project combined the best of the evidence base around food and nutrition, added a pinch of the innovative approaches found in the third sector and finished it off with a dash of fun to create a winning recipe for behaviour change. Obesity and [poor nutrition](#) are growing problems in our city and this approach demonstrated that by giving people the right knowledge, skills and

support we can help them make healthy choices and healthy meals."

More information: [realideas.org/sites/default/fi ...
d_cultures_final.pdf](#)

Provided by University of Plymouth

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