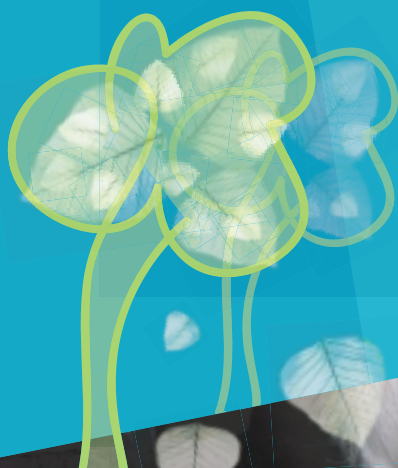


routes to health

Case studies of two community-run
mobile food shops



This newsletter highlights the work of two community projects from different urban and rural settings in Scotland — **Health on Wheels** in Paisley and **Roots and Fruits** in East Lothian. The projects run purpose-built mobile food shops in their local areas to address issues outlined in the *Scottish Diet Action Plan* (1996) linked to the access, affordability and availability of healthy foods such as fish, fruit and vegetables for vulnerable consumers on low incomes.

The Acheson Inquiry into Inequalities in Health (1998) recommends developing policies that would increase the availability and accessibility of healthier foods to people living in areas of deprivation.

As the following case studies highlight, mobile shops offer an innovative way of increasing access to healthy, affordable food for people who live in areas where there are no supermarkets and few shops selling fresh fruit and vegetables.

In areas serviced by local shops, prices are often expensive and stock is limited to items such as confectionery, biscuits, newspapers, alcohol and cigarettes. Those on low incomes face genuine obstacles to accessing healthy foods by having no access to a car and relying on infrequent public transport.

'A lot of people live in poverty and cannot access the supermarket. It is all very well a two-bus journey to a supermarket but if you are looking at taxi fares home you are looking at added costs...'

Research (WHO, 1990) suggests that increasing fruit and vegetable consumption could reduce deaths from heart disease, stroke and cancer by up to 20%. Local community action is seen as a key factor in improving the Scottish diet as set out in the *Scottish Diet Action Plan*. Local food initiatives can act as a catalyst for involving communities in addressing issues they themselves feel are important, working in equal partnership with community representatives and community-based professionals.

'I want the healthy choices facing Scots to be the easy choices.'
Jack McConnell MSP, First Minister, 2003.

Local food co-ops have developed in many Scottish communities. However, mobile shops are a new initiative and as a result, this research found no others like them in the UK. This meant that Health on Wheels and Roots and Fruits had no role models to follow. The two case studies therefore provide a rare and valuable opportunity for others wishing to develop similar initiatives.

This research, featuring case studies of the only two purpose-built mobile food initiatives in Scotland, was commissioned by Health Scotland in partnership with Have a Heart Paisley, East Lothian Roots and Fruits and the Scottish Community Diet Project.

Check list

Issues to consider when thinking about a mobile shop

Legal Requirements

- ◆ Insurance
- ◆ Road tax
- ◆ Street trader's licence
(one for each member of staff serving on the food van)
- ◆ Health and safety regulations
- ◆ Health and hygiene certificates

Practical Skills

- ◆ Stocktaking and ordering
- ◆ Book-keeping
- ◆ Staff management
- ◆ Time management and planning



Key Roles

- Project manager/ co-ordinator.
- Steering group or management committee, including local professionals and members of the community.
- Van drivers and sales staff.
- Health promotion advisers.
- Liaison with funding organisations.
- Customers — mobile shops depend on making good relationships with them.

roots and fruits

a rural project for towns and villages in East Lothian



Roots and Fruits grew out of a community conference organised in 1997 by the East Lothian Voluntary Organisation Network (ELVON) when local people decided there was a need to tackle food, health and poverty issues in their area. With community help, a group of volunteers bought a second-hand mini bus and began delivering fresh fruit and vegetables to rural areas. In 2001 Roots and Fruits won a National Lottery Award which allowed them to purchase a £29,000 purpose-built mobile shop, specially converted to allow wheelchair access.

'ELVON identified food and poverty as an issue, and the community conference obviously rung a bell with local people.'

Now a registered charity, Roots and Fruits delivers low cost fresh fruit, vegetables and tinned foods to around 300 customers across 19 towns and villages in East Lothian. The mobile shop is part of a wide-ranging health promotion project, which also includes local food co-ops, a community garden, and deliveries to nursery schools, day centres and sheltered housing. The whole project is co-ordinated by a community development worker who also runs cookery classes, workshops and regularly involves community groups in the work of the project.

The aim of Roots and Fruits is to promote good health among the people of East Lothian by encouraging healthier eating and providing access to good quality fruit and vegetables to local communities at an affordable price.

Community involvement has helped secure a steadily developing project. Community members can take an active part in the project by becoming volunteers or joining the management committee. Roots and Fruits is currently overseen by a voluntary management committee of 12 members which includes ELVON, Lothian NHS Board and local residents. The project employs six part-time staff: the development worker, two van drivers/sales people and three outreach workers.

Funding comes from a mixture of statutory bodies and charities. Currently the two main sources – East Lothian Council and NHS Lothian – give between them £24,000. Additional funds have come from Lloyds TSB, the Tudor Trust, and the Scottish Community Diet Project. However, continually tapping into short-term funding streams to cover basic running costs such as trader's licences, road tax and insurance is time-consuming and can drain the resources of a small project like Roots and Fruits.

Hidden costs are a problem for the projects. Roots and Fruits can't afford a garage so the van is parked in a side street near the home of one of the drivers. A small wooden hut provides rent-free storage for provisions delivered daily by a commercial wholesaler. This helps to save money. However, legal requirements incur additional expenses such as health and hygiene certification courses, health and safety requirements, and hygiene inspection visits.

All the part-time staff certainly do more than they are paid to do and the produce is sold slightly above cost price to help cover petrol expenses. The time and resources required for ongoing evaluation is another hidden cost, particularly as this activity was not costed for in the original application.

The van is in use from Monday to Friday and stocks a range of fresh fruit and vegetables not available in small local shops. It also delivers requests for pre-packaged foods. However, the van's weekly visit is also a social occasion; for some customers the driver may be the only person to call that day.

'... have you time for a cup of tea, Davy?'

Customers have spread by word of mouth. Some of our customers are women aged over 65 and housebound. However, mothers with young children also welcome the convenience of a mobile shop and a recent survey showed most of them understood the healthy eating message of the van.

Potential continues to grow as Roots and Fruits discovers and responds to new community needs. The linked community garden offers opportunities for widening educational work with schools as well as growing food to sell, but the range of work puts additional demands on securing realistic funding and risks overstressing staff. Future development is very much dependent on strong relationships with funders.



'Roots and Fruits provides all sorts of added value that straight contracted services would not – good community service – good community stuff.'



health on wheels

→ an urban project for housing estates in Paisley



Health on Wheels developed from the Renfrewshire Food Federation — a group of community organisations concerned with local food issues. A 'food mapping' survey of local shopping and eating habits highlighted problems of access to shops in parts of Paisley. The federation had experience of running food co-ops and decided to seek funding to start a mobile shop selling fresh food at affordable prices. However, it took almost ten years to turn the idea into reality. Despite strong community support, workers described the development process as a 'long hard struggle'. In 2002, fully funded by Have a Heart Paisley, Health on Wheels began deliveries in a specially converted van.

The aims of Health on Wheels are:

- To increase access to affordable healthy food.
- To offer a service to the frail, elderly, disabled, or families with difficulties.
- To provide deliveries to local food co-ops.
- To provide retail and commercial training for local people.
- To provide employment for local people.

Community involvement was essential to develop the project. Managed by Renfrewshire Food Federation, Health on Wheels is run by a volunteer project manager who is also chair of the federation. The three paid staff consist of a full-time driver, a part-time driver/store person, and a full-time sales assistant who works on the van. The project has also had strong support from the Have a Heart Paisley community team and for the first year, a community health worker from Renfrewshire Community Health Initiative helped with organisation.

'... it's about community engagement — the community identified this need through the food mapping exercise.'

Funding proved difficult in an area where several community projects compete for limited resources. The aims of Health on Wheels linked well with those of Have a Heart Paisley — itself funded by the Scottish Executive to run a wide-ranging health promotion scheme in Scotland's largest town. However, the federation's first bid was rejected. A second bid was then submitted amounting to half the original bid, leaving out a number of estimated running costs such as a co-ordinator/administrator post. Even then it might have failed without the support of an NHS Board health promotion worker who pointed out wider benefits of the project.

Hidden costs. A long delay was caused by a wait for the environmental health compliance certificate, legally required for the specially converted van.

'Staff were in post for nearly three months before they started trading.'

High staff turnover increased costs as each new member of staff needed a new trader's licence. Running the mobile shop drew on administrative and retail skills, which the staff, through difficulties accessing training, lacked. As well as highlighting the staff's vulnerability, a robbery added to delays and increased costs as the van had to be fitted with security grilles and video monitoring.

The van, delivering from Monday to Friday, stocks a wide range of food including fresh fruit and vegetables, pre-packaged goods, bread, and fresh meat and fish. Health on Wheels intended to generate substantial income towards running costs from weekly sales but that proved unrealistic. The van's original route — covering all Paisley — was revised to focus on areas of greatest need and least spending power.

Customers are mostly women and more than half are aged over 45 years although the van also delivers fruit to two children's nurseries. A survey showed most customers were 'very or fairly satisfied' with the service but fewer than half had noticed the healthy eating information and recipes. However, the project's first year review undertaken by Have a Heart Paisley noted that sales of fruit and vegetables 'showed a marked increase'.

The future. Health on Wheels has ceased operating since the original research for the case studies was undertaken. The group agrees their original aims and objectives were probably too ambitious. Although they coped admirably, members felt they probably relied too heavily on volunteer support. Nevertheless, valuable lessons were learned and a local voluntary organisation has offered to continue running the mobile shop. The new project, Health Matters on the Move, will carry on the good work, to provide training and support for volunteers managed by a steering group together with community representatives.

'...it's different doing a wee barra where you have only volunteers and you just purchase the fruit and sell it on the stall.'

Discussing the Key Issues

The Right Ingredients

The two case studies applied community development approaches to their work, involving local residents and other partners in the project's activities from the beginning; this encouraged a strong sense of community ownership and helped both projects identify and respond to expressed health needs specific to local communities. **In what way do you think such an approach would influence the development of a similar project?**

More Than One Way to Skin a Rabbit?

Both projects experienced the conundrum of what foods the van should stock. Roots and Fruits chose a straightforward approach carrying mainly fresh fruit and vegetables which allowed them to reinforce the healthy eating message, while Health on Wheels provisioned their van with a wider range of foods; the latter approach is designed to encourage those with poorer diets to use mobile food shops so that additional health promotion work can be undertaken, such as focusing on healthier cooking methods. **Which approach would you choose and what factors would influence your decision? Can you think of alternative approaches?**

Sticking to the Recipe?

The aims and objectives of each project should be outlined from the start, with all partners having a clear idea of what the project is doing and why. If not clarified from the beginning, health messages can become confused and the project's activities can drift from the original aims and objectives, causing concern for funding bodies. However, if your project involved local communities as equal partners, would a degree of flexibility be required to ensure that lessons were learned and appropriate changes to practice incorporated?

The Proof of the Pudding...

A mobile shop can bring much wider benefits to the community than just deliveries of healthy food; van drivers and sales staff often combine many additional skills ranging from doing health promotion work to undertaking informal support and minor social work tasks. For many customers the van is also a place to meet and have a chat with neighbours, the van's visit encouraging new contact with members of the community which can sometimes reveal further opportunities for project development. **Do you think such hidden benefits are valid? How would you evaluate such additional outcomes?**

Calculating Change

Evaluation must be planned and built into the budget from the start – partly because it is often required by funders to justify funding but also because it is a helpful way of assessing progress and planning future development and improvement; it does not have to be ambitious. To begin with Roots and Fruits only had time to track the number of customers and what they bought. However, this kind of 'process evaluation' can be very useful; it is better to keep it simple and do it well than to keep delaying evaluation just because it seems very daunting. From the linear evaluation guide below, how would you best evaluate a similar project?

Issues – Baseline – Inputs – Project Outputs – Process – Impact – Outcomes

If you would like to know more about any aspects of the work reported here, please contact:

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Scottish Community Diet Project, Tel: 0141 226 5261, www.dietproject.org.uk

Health Scotland, Tel: 0131 536 5500, www.healthscotland.com



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