

Notes from the INFORMATION EXCHANGE held on 14th Dec 1999 in Glasgow at the Scottish Community Diet Project on COOKING SKILLS COURSES

Despite the proximity of Christmas, the short notice and the inclement weather a very knowledgeable group of practitioners from a variety of backgrounds and interests met to exchange information on the subject of cooking skills courses.

Some attending were about to set up courses, others were already in the process of doing so and or keen to build on previous work in the field. All wanted to understand more about what these courses could achieve and how best to achieve it. One participant was embarking on a national study into exactly that.

It was noted that information had been provided from a couple of areas who were unable to attend (ie C.A.F. in Faifley & Grampian Health Promotion) and that notes from the discussions had also been requested from several others. Copies of evaluations from Grampian and Glasgow were made available as well national/local resource packs, community publications and other relevant material.

The initial discussions concerned ensuring a common definition was being applied. Everyone felt cooking skills courses were about far more than basic cooking skills. Most had experience of courses that also contained shopping skills and food safety, some included basic nutrition and others subjects like food labelling and additives.

All agreed that no course could ignore the context in which the educational experience was occurring. The circumstances participants in courses were experiencing on a daily basis in terms of income, access to shops, availability of fresh produce, access to equipment and competing priorities, had to be reflected in both the course content and the manner of its delivery.

Target groups were felt could be applied geographically to anyone interested or, often more successfully, targeted at specific groups such as new parents, or young people.

Course participants were also recognised as being varied not only in their circumstances but also in the skills and experiences they already possessed. Their motivations for getting involved would also vary as would what they felt they got out of participating.

No-one could come up with a better descriptive term for all the activity that has increasingly come under the banner of *cooking skills courses* but all felt a wider appreciation of the complexity of this form of intervention, in terms of motivations, delivery and outcomes, was essential to improving practice and maximising its effectiveness.

The discussion then turned to looking at what makes a successful course and a number of key points met with general agreement.

♣ Creche provision is vital

- ♣ Transport provision can help
- ♣ Venues should have the appropriate equipment
- ♣ Venues and tutors should avoid reinforcing or reviving negative experiences of past formal learning
- ♣ Courses must be 'hands-on' and participative
- ♣ Courses must be relevant and appropriate
- ♣ Courses tutors must show empathy and understanding
- ♣ Patronising tutors or 'victim-blaming' content will have participants voting with their feet
- ♣ Good local tutors can be an advantage - if well supported
- ♣ Some tutoring can be to entire class but others may require one to one
- ♣ Interest in and content of courses should be as influenced from the 'bottom up' as 'top down'
- ♣ Course content, delivery and structure must be entertaining as well as educational
- ♣ The skills and experience of participants must not be underestimated and should be utilised
- ♣ Courses should be a positive experience for participants
- ♣ Recipes and techniques applied must be replicable in participants own home, using accessible food sources, and reflecting cost limitations
- ♣ Participants should have the opportunity to contribute ideas
- ♣ Participants should be encouraged to experiment
- ♣ The role of intermediaries in identifying and encouraging participation should be recognised and utilised
- ♣ Introductory or 'taster' sessions could assist viability of later courses

Other issues covered included linking courses with existing initiatives such as food co-ops and community cafes or focussing on specific aspects of cooking skills such as during weaning.

The potential benefits of taking advantage of related initiatives such as the Community Cafe Resource Pack, Natural Cooking of Scotland or Healthy Choices Award Scheme were also noted.

The potential role of retailers was also touched on, including the efforts of the Scottish Co-op. It was recognised that again this required to be looked at in terms of existing local provision.

The impact of the recently established Social Inclusion Partnerships, Community Schools and Local Healthcare Co-operatives was touched on as was the potential relationship with Healthy Living Centres and the relevant Health Demonstration Projects.

The national research being commissioned by MAFF was outlined and a number of issues concerning research and evaluation raised.

- ♣ The relative values of shopping diaries, till receipts and weighed intake as measuring tools – the first was generally felt to be most familiar to participants and the last least likely to guarantee co-operation
- ♣ The importance of reflecting the range of motivations and outcomes in research models
- ♣ The benefits of applying both quantitative and qualitative evaluation techniques
- ♣ The benefits of deferred evaluation to discover or even follow change over time
- ♣ The importance of including the ‘non-food’ outcomes (increased self esteem, confidence etc) and their recognition as intrinsically linked with changes in dietary behaviour

The discussions concluded by stressing the importance of sharing skills and experiences between practitioners as well as listening to course participants. Everyone wanted to avoid reinventing the wheel, improve understanding of this form of intervention and optimise its effectiveness.

The Scottish Community Diet Project agreed to ensure the subject was adequately covered and promoted in future conferences, training events and in its newsletter and planned website.