

Scottish Community Diet Project

Effective working on food issues with Scotland's Black and Minority Ethnic Groups

Roundtable Discussion Notes, October 2002

Working with black and minority ethnic groups, refugees, and asylum seekers on community food issues involves a diversity of approaches and is a growing focus for many community food and health initiatives throughout Scotland. Local and national agencies are also charged with a responsibility for engaging more effectively with these heterogeneous communities and many are already doing so with varying degrees of success.

This round table discussion brought together a diverse range of participants with wide ranging experience, knowledge and interest in exploring the topic further to help identify areas for future action at both local and national levels. While some participants worked with local communities, others worked within local and national agencies such as local authorities, NHS departments, voluntary groups, and the Health Education Board for Scotland. All were keen to work together and share practice, skills and knowledge, and this energy to co-operate with each other was articulated loud and clear. All had an interest in community food activity either in a voluntary or professional capacity, and many also had involvement in wider health issues as well as other agendas such as social entrepreneurship, food retail and the environment.

It was recognised that this diversity of background and motivation was matched by the diversity that exists within the country's black and minority ethnic communities in terms of size, distribution, history and other factors. As everyone was in agreement that food is an excellent vehicle to engage with Scotland's black and minority ethnic communities, the main issue for discussion was how to make the most effective use of this vehicle, both in the short and longer term.

Definition: What are the Issues?

Defining the specific food related problems faced by Scotland's different ethnic groups is not easy due to the breadth of variation between and within these ever changing communities. For example, the smaller population size of ethnic communities in rural areas compared to urban areas can have a significant impact on local access and availability to culturally specific foods, and also access to specialist dietary advice from health professionals such as doctors and dieticians. Equally many ethnic groups living in urban locations also have limited access to cultural foods that are within easy reach and affordable, especially if populations are limited to only a few individuals or families. Small retailers rarely stock wide ranges of specialist foods, unless demand is high. This raised the issue of how food is sourced and distributed across Scotland by retailers, and the need to identify suppliers of specialist food such as cash and carries and make this information more widely known across the country. This was an immediate action, which the Scottish Community Diet project proposed to take a lead on.

Some participants felt that Scotland already has a diverse food culture in terms of its growing number of international restaurants, and as a country '*we should get our finger out and stop saying ethnic foods are unusual*', but instead push a multi-cultural food agenda to ensure the widest range of foods from all cultures are as widely available throughout all of Scotland.

Gaps: What is needed?

Many participants were looking for support, while others were looking for ideas for new pieces of work and opportunities to work together and add value to new or existing activity.

Training on the topic was a key issue for many, while others had a keener interest in commissioning new research or undertaking resource production.

One participant was involved in the training of hospital caterers in Glasgow to ensure that the dietary needs of patients from ethnic minority groups were better met. This was especially to address the dietary needs of patients from Glasgow's Asian community whose rates of obesity and heart disease are accelerating considerably faster than the rest of the Scottish population. It was felt that such catering training should be available across Scotland to not only hospital staff catering for the infirm, but also to school caterers and others, including public sector organisations hosting events involving food for the wider population.

Effective ways of engagement with minority ethnic groups was also explored. One participant shared the problems encountered when well-meaning attempts to prepare culturally appropriate foods were rejected by the very people the foods were intended for without any explanation. Asking groups directly about what they want and need was suggested as one approach to helping overcome such barriers to engagement. Another approach would be learning from the many examples of good practice taking place in England and elsewhere. Again the SCDP would be one of a number of national projects in a position to share and promote the lessons from further afield.

Websites, including that of the Scottish Community Diet Project, should increase their appeal to a wider section of Scotland by ensuring there are more links to organisations with specialist knowledge of minority ethnic issues such as Positive Action on Housing. A specialist website was also proposed with food advice available in a variety of different languages that would be particularly useful to health workers giving advice to patients.

Future Action: What can we do?

This meeting initiated a discussion on minority ethnic food issues in Scotland, but by no means was conclusive. Many of the issues raised will require future and more in-depth discussion.

Immediate

Activities that the Scottish Community Diet Project proposes to take an immediate lead on include profiling the main suppliers of specialist ethnic foods in Scotland for circulation amongst groups and retailers. It currently is reviewing the content of its website and will endeavour to increase weblinks to include a wider number of ethnic groups and agencies. Sharing good practice work with ethnic communities across the UK will continue to be an item covered in the project's quarterly newsletter, Fare Choice.

Short-term

Glasgow Healthy City Partnership produced the resource pack 'Food For Thought' in 1999, which specifically targeted the dietary needs of Asian and Chinese communities living in Scotland. The Partnership's Food and Health Working Group is currently exploring how best to evaluate this resource and how to take this work forward in the short term. Copies can be obtained on request by contacting Jan Cresswell, Senior Health Promotion Officer for Nutrition at Greater Glasgow NHS Board (Tel: 0141 201 4964 or Email: jan.cresswell@glasgow-hb.scot.nhs.uk)

Future meetings, especially with those agencies and groups not represented at this meeting are a priority for future action at both local and national levels. Sharing the notes from this round table meeting to these unrepresented agencies is one way to help initiate this process and open lines for future discussion.

Long-term

The scope, range and nature of long term activity will be influenced by a number of factors, including the outcomes of the above immediate and short-term actions. The development of new and updated resources, the undertaking of new research, and the creation of new web sites, networks and working groups, all need to be matched by evidence of need as well as the willingness of agencies and groups to work together in the true spirit of shared responsibility and equal partnership. The Scottish Community Diet Project is committed to keeping this item on its agenda and continuing to forge links with others to ensure it is also an item for action on theirs. Follow up meetings and activities will be circulated at regular intervals to those with an interest in working together to help keep the momentum for action strong. .