

Community retailing in hospitals Notes from round table discussion 14 January 2010

Community Food and Health (Scotland) has known for some time that some community food initiatives are running stalls selling fruit and vegetables in hospitals and health centres. We wanted to find out more about this work: what they were doing; why; what has worked well; and how they have overcome any difficulties that they have faced. We wanted to gather this information for two purposes.

- We want to share information about this work with other community food initiatives and NHS boards.
- We want to write a guide for community food groups and NHS staff who are thinking about or planning to set up an outlet or stall, in a hospital or health centre.

In January 2010, CFHS held a round table discussion with representatives from Edinburgh Community Food Initiative, NHS Dumfries and Galloway, Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership, CFINE, NHS Forth Valley and Falkirk Council for Voluntary Service. All of them have experience of setting up and running fruit and vegetable outlets in hospital, or hope to do so in the future.

Why do they do it?

The time was right and the opportunity was there.

In March 2008, NHS boards were advised that they are expected to make their hospitals health promoting through implementing the [Health Promoting Health Service Framework](#). Action 10.4 below is one of the six specific actions boards were expected to implement:

‘10.4 Food and Health: increase access to competitively priced fruit and vegetables through retail outlets in acute settings.’

In addition to this, NHS Boards are also promoting healthier eating to their staff through the [Healthy Working Lives scheme](#), by encouraging them to buy and eat more fruit and vegetables.

At the same time, a number of community food initiatives were looking for ways to expand their work and increase their income through social enterprise activities, using the skills and resources that they had. Setting up fruit and vegetable outlets in hospitals and health centres was seen as one way of doing this.

Some NHS staff were working closely with their local community food initiatives and knew that they had expertise in selling fruit and vegetables and encouraging people to buy it. As a result, NHS Boards and local community food initiatives saw an opportunity to work together.

How do the stalls operate?

Between them, the community food initiatives at the roundtable discussion are running nine stalls, with plans to open another four.

Most outlets and stalls run once a week. In two hospitals the stalls are open twice a week, and in another hospital the stall is open for four days a week. The number of hours that the stalls are open varies from hospital to hospital but most are open from the morning until afternoon visiting time. Some stalls are sited near the main entrance to the hospital while others are placed near different entrances. In one hospital the stall runs outside the main entrance.

Only one of the stalls has a permanent site. The others have to be set up and cleared away every day - the equipment and produce have to be delivered and collected daily.

Unlike other businesses running in hospitals, none of the community food initiatives have to pay rent for their stalls.

Most of the customers buying from the stalls are staff, but visitors and patients also buy from them.

The stalls are run by a mixture of both paid and unpaid workers. Some community food initiatives employ part-time staff solely to work on their stalls. Volunteers work alongside paid staff on some stalls. All of the community food initiatives sell the produce on the stalls for more than they buy it for. The mark-up added by each initiative varies and is between 20% and 35% of the purchasing costs. If the cost of buying some staple products (eg. bananas) is very high, some initiatives may sell these at a loss to encourage people to buy them.

What makes a successful stall or outlet?

Location

The key to a successful stall appears to be its location. Those that do best are located near the main entrance of hospitals. However, other locations can be equally as good: one stall runs beside a busy oncology out-patient clinic and operates successfully.

One NHS board allowed the community food initiative to run stalls at two hospitals, outside the main entrances. This works well during the summer, but staff find it difficult working outside the rest of the year. An alternative site has been found in one hospital however, it is not near a main entrance and fewer people are buying from the stall than did before.

Management support

Support from the NHS board and hospital management is essential. As well as providing rent-free sites for the stalls, some NHS boards provide small amounts of funding for particular food-related activities. One board funded the set-up costs for the stall in the main hospital in their area. Other boards fund small pieces of work that bring the stalls more income. For example, in one hospital, the stall has been

funded to supply fruit for patients in the psychiatric wards. In another, the stall provides fruit for specific hospital departments. Some stalls also run fruit and vegetable taster sessions or are linked to other healthy eating or health promotion activities taking part in the hospitals. Some plan to run more joint activities, including cookery sessions for staff.

NHS boards also provide 'in kind' support. Several hospitals promote the stalls to staff using their internal email systems. In one NHS area, discount vouchers for staff to use at the stalls are included in the staff newsletter.

Partnership working

Partnership working is another factor in an outlet's success. One stall is managed jointly by the NHS board and the local council for voluntary service. This means the skills and expertise of both organisations are being used to make sure the stall is run properly. In another hospital, the Healthy Working Lives scheme gives every staff member who completes a walking route a voucher for a piece of fruit provided from the stall. In turn, the community food initiative gives a small percentage of their sales income to the Healthy Working Lives scheme. This community food initiative also makes up fruit pots for the WRVS to sell.

Attracting customers

Selling more and different products is important to keep existing customers and attract new ones. Most of the community food initiatives are selling fruit baskets in some hospital wards, or they want to. One stall sells pre-packed fruit bags, and dried fruit, nuts and preserves, to attract customers in the winter months when there is a smaller range of fresh produce. Some stalls run a pre-ordering system, which is attracting new customers.

Using different ways to promote the stalls is important. One community food initiative provides fruit baskets for the hospital radio station to use as competition prizes. Another initiative actively promotes all their other services and activities and finds that this increases sales at their stalls.

Finding out the best times to open has taken trial and error. Opening very early in the morning or later in the day, to catch staff going to and from work, didn't attract many customers.

What challenges have the stalls or outlets faced?

Management support

Some community food initiatives have faced barriers to establishing an outlet or stall with hospital sites. In particular, some initiatives have experienced reluctance from management in allowing them to operate in hospitals. It can also be more difficult to get permission to operate a stall in a [Public-private Partnership](#) (PPP) hospital because of the more complex management arrangements, and it usually takes longer. It took one community food initiative two years to get permission to begin selling.

Location

Some stalls do not have a permanent site within the hospitals, meaning they lack storage facilities for equipment and produce. This means that transport costs are increased, as well the time required to set up and clear away stalls. For some, this means having to shut the outlet earlier than if they had a permanent site. At the moment, different leases are produced by NHS boards for each stall. One community food initiative has a different lease for the three stalls they run in their NHS health board area. The Scottish Government is aware of this.

Produce restrictions

Some stalls are restricted in what they can prepare and sell at the hospital sites. One stall is not allowed to sell packaged produce because of potential conflict with other retail outlets in the hospital. Produce which could be considered as a 'gift' could potentially impact on licences of other retailers.

All of the hospitals with stalls have had concerns about infection control, particularly around selling 'dirty' produce, preparing fruit and vegetables at the stalls, and staff storing their purchases on wards. Selling 'dirty' produce is not allowed at some stalls and limited for other stalls that are sited in public areas, due to potential cross contamination from soil. Some stalls are not allowed to prepare fruit and vegetables on site at all, but this is being challenged in one hospital. One initiative can sell 'dirty' produce, but must have a portable sink, brush and shovel at both of their stalls, and must carry out risk assessments. One community food initiative has managed to overcome concerns by selling bagged produce in the hospital.

Recruiting volunteers

One community food initiative finds it difficult to recruit volunteers to work on the stalls. They are recruiting people through the Future Jobs Fund to staff their stalls.

Attracting customers

Sales from all the stalls fluctuate significantly, depending on the time of year. The highest number of sales are made during the summer months when soft fruit is available. Sales normally drop before Christmas but pick up afterwards. This year, the sales are not increasing again as quickly as expected.

In some hospitals, a small number of staff have questioned why a community food initiative has been allowed to open up a stall.

Some community food initiatives are concerned about their customers' lack of cooking skills.

What opportunities are out there?

Some outlets and stalls are already linking in with national programmes e.g. with Healthy Working Lives. Stalls may benefit from linking to others as these may bring access to other resources and support, bring in more customers or provide staff to work on the stalls. The **healthy living award**, Future Jobs Fund and the Scottish Grocers Federation's Healthyliving programme are three examples.

Some stalls are already selling a wider range of produce than they used to. Increasing this even further is one way that stalls may be able to attract new

customers or keep existing ones. Some stalls are actively seeking new customers by making it easier for them to buy produce e.g. through the pre-ordering schemes.

What has happened with the stalls since the round table discussion?

Since the roundtable discussion in January we have had some updates from the community food initiatives operating stalls in hospitals.

The initiative operating near the oncology out-patient clinic is now opening two days a week, due to success of sales in this location. This initiative has also opened for one day a week in two additional NHS sites.

Unfortunately, one stall has had to close down. This is as a result of different factors which have influenced the stalls ability to continue. There are, however, plans to pursue alternative opportunities in future.

Following this discussion, CFHS intend to prepare a guide for community food groups and NHS staff who are thinking about or planning to set up a fruit and vegetable outlet within a hospital site. If you have questions, comments or additional learning you would like to share with us, please contact Katrina or Anne.

February 2010