

May 2011

## Healthy eating and beyond – the impact of cookery sessions

### What is this fact sheet about?

Across Scotland community food initiatives improve health and tackle inequalities by supporting people to improve their cooking skills. CFHS ran a survey (50 respondents) and hosted a roundtable discussion (21 participants, most of whom had also taken part in the survey) in February 2011 to explore the experiences of groups or tutors who run cookery sessions. Nearly all those who took part in the survey delivered cookery sessions regularly, including 33 who deliver these sessions most weeks of the year, or even daily. Many participants at the roundtable discussion had been involved in managing or delivering cookery sessions for several years and therefore have a wealth of experience.

This fact sheet aims to provide a snapshot of the impact of cookery skills and highlight some of the issues that initiatives need to consider when planning or developing cookery sessions.

### Where are cookery classes being delivered and who takes part in them?

The community food initiatives that contributed to this fact sheet deliver cookery sessions across Scotland in 11 out of the 14 NHS Board areas. The majority deliver sessions to more than one target group,

reflecting that cookery sessions are a key part of the respondents' role.

Overall, 20 different target groups were mentioned by survey respondents. The target group most frequently mentioned was Early Years (18), such as those working with children under the age of five years, their parents, pregnant women or young parents. Twelve respondents reported that they worked with a range of low-income groups or vulnerable people. Two groups reported that they delivered 'train the trainers' type courses for workers, so that they could learn to teach cookery skills themselves. All target groups are shown in the chart on page 2.

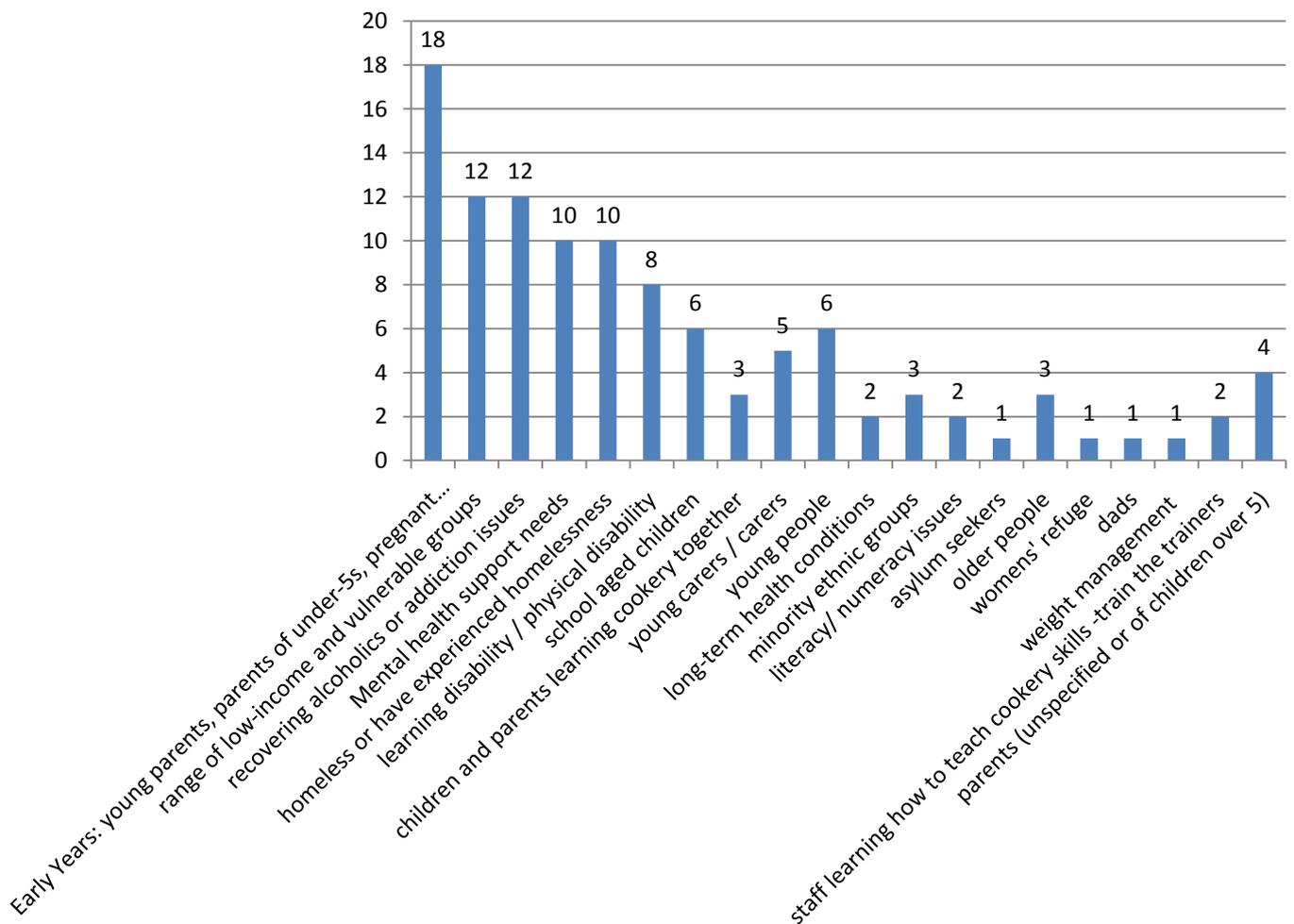
### What barriers to a healthy balanced diet do cookery sessions aim to address?

Participants at the roundtable discussion found that most of the target groups they worked with shared similar barriers when trying to prepare meals as part of a healthy balanced diet.

**Poverty** is a problem experienced by many when trying to access a healthy diet and **fuel poverty** in particular means that those running cookery sessions need to plan cookery sessions that will help people use fuel efficiently.

Participants also highlighted that people's

## Who attends cookery sessions? (target groups mentioned by 46 groups)



**lifestyles**, particularly when combined with poverty might mean that **a healthy balanced diet is not a priority**. Cookery sessions need to be realistic and teach easy, fast and tasty recipes, sometimes using more subtle healthy eating messages.

People attending cookery groups may also lack **confidence** and **skills**. Celebrating the groups' achievements can boost confidence and encourage further cookery at home. Support from peers or others during or after sessions will also help.

Younger people in particular might experience a **lack of role models**, such as parents or carers who prepare meals using basic ingredients. Intergenerational cookery (such as older and younger people learning together) or encouraging older people to recall memories of favourite meals and harnessing this experience, can inspire an interest in cooking favourite recipes.

Participants reported that the groups they work with have a **limited knowledge of food**, and when trying to eat a healthier diet are **confused by nutritional labelling** on food packaging and by **conflicting food**

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**messages within the media.** However, the 5-a-day message is easy to teach and the Food Standards Agency eatwell plate is useful for raising awareness of what makes up a healthy balanced diet. Some groups that are learning cookery skills with the aim of losing weight tend to have **unrealistic aims** about weight loss and weight maintenance.

Older people, particularly those living in rural areas or without adequate transport, may experience problems **accessing a wide range of healthier, affordable foods.** Older people dependent on care staff may find that **care staff do not have time or are unable to prepare healthy meals** for them.

## How are cookery sessions delivered?

Most survey respondents reported that they delivered cookery sessions weekly, over a period between four to ten weeks and that each session lasted between one and three hours, with two hour sessions most frequently mentioned. Most sessions were delivered to groups, but one respondent reported on working one-to-one within individuals' own homes. Cookery session participants often had a say in what they learned to cook, such as by saying what types of meals they liked and wanted to learn about, or simply by choosing from a standard set of recipes to prepare the following week.

Healthy eating messages were often incorporated into cookery sessions, by looking at labels, delivering Food Standards Agency 'eatwell plate' activities or by using and discussing healthier cookery techniques. Many groups emphasised the importance of experiential learning or hands-on cookery. Three groups ran sessions with children and their parents together. Three respondents highlighted the importance of having a shared meal at the end of cookery sessions, whilst others said that tasting new foods or tasting each

other's food was an important part of the cookery sessions.

Participants at the roundtable discussion reported that having access to locally or nationally produced cookery session handbooks and recipes aimed at healthy eating on a low-income helped with the planning of cookery sessions.

Participants at the roundtable discussion often use partner agencies to recruit or refer people for cookery sessions. This can help ensure that the most vulnerable individuals or those considered 'hard-to-reach' benefit from these sessions. However, this works best when partner agency staff have a full understanding of cookery sessions, work closely with cookery session staff and support and encourage their service users to put what they have learnt at cookery sessions into practice.

The roundtable discussion also briefly considered the facilities that are required to deliver cookery sessions. Some participants had access to training kitchens; others used table top electric cookers, including heat induction hobs (slightly safer with small children around) and gas stoves in community venues. Using table top cookers and arranging the tables in a circle makes sessions more sociable and can make it easier to see what everyone is doing. However, safety issues need to be considered, such as ensuring that electric sockets are not overloaded and that electric leads are out of the way. One participant reported that the school she worked with had appreciated a visit from the Healthier Scotland Cooking Bus.

The roundtable participants also briefly discussed what incentives are required to encourage people to attend cookery sessions. Overall participants agreed that the most important incentive was that many people would either be taking a free tasty meal home to their families or would be eating a free shared meal with others. Some community food initiatives found that giving away recipes and ingredients also

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encouraged people to continue to attend sessions and prepare recipes at home. One or two participants said they gave away equipment, such as blenders, as an incentive for people to complete courses. One participant also said that some individuals liked receiving a certificate for completing a course.

Participants also reported that some individuals are disappointed when a course finishes. Community food initiatives that are able to provide or refer individuals to higher level or new courses can help individuals maintain their enthusiasm and skills.

Training the trainers, that is, teaching staff and volunteers to deliver cookery within their own organisations, was discussed briefly and was suggested as one way of contributing towards sustainable community cookery.

## What are the benefits of cookery sessions?

Survey respondents were asked to give details of the intended aims of their cookery sessions. On average respondents selected around nine intended aims for their cookery sessions. Of these, the following were most frequently referred to:

- To increase participants' skills to prepare healthy meals (100%).
- To build participants self-esteem/confidence (97.7%).
- To increase participants' confidence to use recipes (93.2%).
- To increase participants' awareness of food and how it affects health (93.2%).
- To increase participants' food budgeting skills (90.9%).

Additional aims included to increase independent living skills; have fun; explore food labelling; train others to deliver their own cookery sessions and to increase participant's awareness of how food relates to climate change.

In addition, respondents were asked what differences they felt their sessions ultimately made; they were given statements to agree with and could add any other additional benefits.

The chart on page 5 shows that most respondents reported differences associated with improving the diet of participants and increasing their confidence to try new foods or recipes. These changes for participants differ slightly from the intended aims in that budgeting skills and social skills are not so prominent whilst food related skills and awareness are more so. This might be because it is more difficult to measure a change in social or budgeting skills.

Additional differences made for cookery session participants included the impact on families and friends; people moving on to attend other groups in the community such as exercise classes or smoking cessation groups; breaking down barriers between staff and service users; and increasing the confidence of people to move into higher education or employment.

## How are cookery sessions evaluated?

The survey found that most respondents evaluate their cookery skills sessions by:

- informal discussion (98%);
- questionnaires (91%);
- photos (72%);
- food diaries (22%); and
- formal discussion (20%).

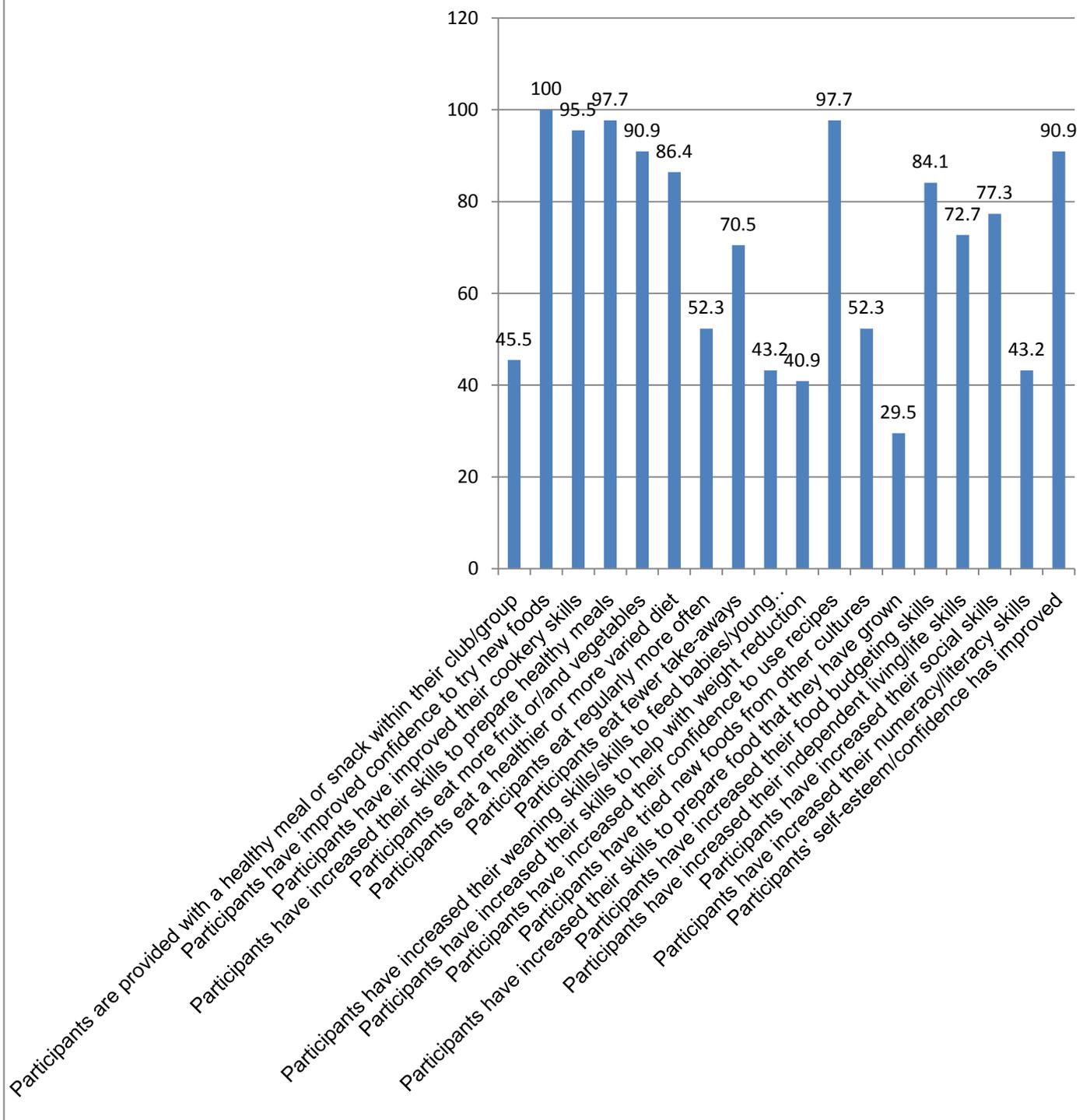
Many respondents evaluate their cookery sessions using more than one method.

At the roundtable discussion, participants were asked to consider the evaluation methods they use and to share the advantages and challenges of using these methods. Below are some details from their feedback:

### Informal discussion

Informal discussion is a popular method of evaluating activities as it allows a facilitator

**What difference do cookery skills sessions make to participants?  
(percentage of 44 groups agreeing with statement)**



to capture the views and experiences of people throughout the sessions. Evaluating in this way can enable a tutor to gain an understanding of participant's current knowledge and awareness. By

understanding the needs of the group future sessions can be tailored to ensure that these are appropriate for them. This can build empowerment of people and increase their ownership of the sessions.

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Evaluating this way does not enable the tutor to gather any facts or figures for reporting. It is also important to be very aware that whilst this approach can be less intimidating, it is equally important to ensure that everyone gets a chance to contribute to the discussion.

## Questionnaires

Questionnaires are a popular evaluation method as they are seen as an effective way of gathering information. In particular, they enable a tutor to ask each person the same questions, ensuring that they get consistent feedback. They are also useful for gathering information at the beginning of a course (i.e. before or at the start of the first session) and then gathering comparable data after the course is completed (i.e. after week 6 or 8). This allows community food initiatives to demonstrate the change that has been achieved as a result of someone taking part in their course.

Questionnaires also enable groups to gather quantitative (facts and figures) and qualitative (narrative) data that are complementary to each other. One participant also reflected on the value of 'being quantitative' about softer outcomes, for example by asking people to answer questions on a scale (eg. on a scale of 1 to 5, had their confidence to use a recipe improved?).

At the roundtable discussion participants agreed that the main challenge with using questionnaires was around literacy issues. If someone does have literacy issues and does not receive the right support for completing a questionnaire, this can affect information gathered and might put them off attending future sessions, and impact on their wellbeing.

## Photos

Participants at the roundtable discussion agreed that photos are a powerful way to demonstrate the difference made by community food and health activities.

Participants reflected on the phrase 'pictures speak a thousand words' and highlighted that they feel that they are particularly useful when sharing information with stakeholders who are not necessarily involved in community-based activities on a day-to-day basis, such as policy makers. One participant used photos to create a DVD that showcased their work and highlighted the impact. This DVD incorporated photos as well as text and sound.

All participants at the roundtable discussion agreed that photos can provide a powerful message but recognised that they need to be used in conjunction with other methods as well.

## Creative and active approaches

All participants at the roundtable discussion agreed that evaluation methods that are fun, visual and engaging are best. These methods are most appropriate as they are inclusive and encourage people to become involved. This also results in the most valuable information for evaluating activities. Roundtable discussion participants and respondents to the survey shared a range of creative approaches. This included games, such as using a Food Standards Agency eatwell plate mat with replica foods to assess change in a group's knowledge, and other games and quizzes. Some groups also presented pictures, questions or simple charts on a 'sticky or graffiti wall' or flip chart and encouraged people to attach post-it notes, sticky dots or stickers and votes to these. This was used for finding out what groups wanted to learn as well as for evaluation purposes. Some groups also use TV formats such as Come Dine with Me and Ready Steady Cook towards the end of cookery sessions to indicate levels of cookery skills.

## Food Diaries

Some roundtable participants reflected on the use of food diaries as a way for measuring changes people make to their eating habits. Some groups ask cookery session participants to set themselves targets on a weekly basis and then use the

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diaries to measure their progress for achieving these targets. Some roundtable participants felt that this approach was best when weight loss was an intended outcome. Whilst food diaries can provide a useful tool for people as they are personal and encourage reflection, they can be very time consuming for a tutor to interpret and demonstrate change. In addition, some people may find it hard to complete them due to being unable to recall and not wanting to admit what they have eaten.

## Evaluation top tips

Overall, participants agreed that a mixed method approach was often best and enabled evaluation to be tailored to the needs of the tutor and the cookery skills session participants. Below are some top tips which participants of the roundtable felt would help others evaluate cookery skills sessions:

- Make it fun;
- Make it simple;
- Keep it relevant;
- Know what you want to measure;
- Make time to do it;
- Be organised;
- Make it participative;
- Use appropriate methods;
- Return to your aims and your funders aims
- Gather baseline information.

## Gaps in current evidence for the impact of cookery skills sessions

Considering the methods that community food groups are using to evaluate their activities, the roundtable discussion participants reflected on some gaps which they could potentially pursue for gathering more evidence on the impact of their cookery skills sessions.

Participants agreed that it would be valuable to be able to **follow up participants** after they have attended the last cookery skills

session, possibly four to six months later. This would help establish the real impact of the sessions by asking if participants are eating healthier, using any recipes at home or sharing their learning with friends and family. One participant was exploring the possibility of following up participants by telephone, however, it was thought this may be difficult because people change their mobile numbers or may not be contactable at home. Some participants were unsure about the implications of the Data Protection Act (1998) for storing contact details. Some participants reflected that they often see people who have taken part in their cookery sessions at a later date, either because they work in small communities or when people engage in other community based services. Whilst this is an opportunity to hear about any changes which people have made to their diet it is often hard to capture this information in a way which is useful for reporting.

Some participants highlighted the value of speaking to other partners to establish the impact of cookery skills sessions on individuals that have been referred. A couple of participants reported that they received information from local Health Visitors or support workers. Participants at the roundtable discussion agreed that speaking with other partners provided valuable information about how people have been able to use their skills and knowledge at home. Participants at the roundtable discussion felt that this approach was valuable and could be used more frequently and more formally.

It is also worth noting that it was highlighted on page 4 that the differences made from cookery skills sessions were slightly different from the intended aims. This could be that the focus of cookery skills sessions results in these more specific changes; however, it could also be that measuring the impact on budgeting skills and social skills is more difficult. This anomaly should be explored further.

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## What next?

Participants were keen to share resources such as toolkits and recipes; CFHS plans to make more of these available on its website. CFHS also plans to explore ways of supporting cookery skills evaluation work over the next year, including sharing suitable evaluation materials and finding out further information about the wider impact of cookery skills.

## How we gathered this information

In late December 2010, we distributed a link to a survey monkey to over 600 people who receive our e-bulletin. CFHS team members sent the survey to people on their email address lists. The link to the survey was also available on our website. Participants were able to take part in a free prize draw and three respondents received prizes worth £50 each. We sent email reminders to individuals that we knew were regularly involved in co-ordinating and delivering cookery sessions across NHS Board or local authority areas. All those that took part in the survey were invited to attend the roundtable discussion and a handful of

others, such as researchers with an interest in this topic were also invited. The survey closed in mid-February 2011.

**Thanks** to individuals for the following organisations for taking part in the roundtable discussion. Building Health Communities, East Ayrshire Council, Dundee Healthy Living Initiative, Edinburgh Cyrenians, Edinburgh Food and Health Training Hub, Fife Community Food Project, Glasgow University, Highland Council, Huntly Food and Health Group, Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership, NHS Ayrshire and Arran, NHS Forth Valley, NHS Grampian, NHS Tayside, South Sector CHP – NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland and Urban Roots

**Thanks** to those who took part in our on-line survey.

**Resources, toolkits and recipes for cookery sessions and information about evaluation methods** are available on the CFHS website. We also have a fact sheet that highlights this information.