

Nottinghamshire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer

FOOD Clubs

Children's Centre Service Staff Key Findings

September 2021



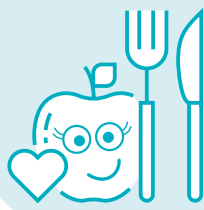
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INTRODUCTION

The following findings are based on interviews conducted with the staff responsible for facilitating the FOOD (Food On Our Doorstep) Clubs hosted by the Children's Centre Service at Harworth and Ravensdale in July 2021. Whilst FOOD Club participants were collecting their weekly box, members of the Children's Centre Service teams were asked a series of questions by an independent evaluator. On average, 3-hours was spent on site at each of the Children's Centre Service hosted clubs. The findings have been analysed and are presented below in emerging themes.

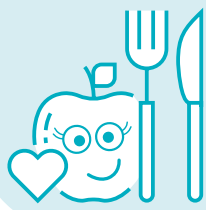
BACKGROUND

FOOD Clubs were established by Family Action, a national charity, to provide good-quality food at a low cost, while also reducing food waste. It costs £1 a year for a family to become a member. Once a member, families can purchase a box of food items each week worth £10 to £15 for just £3.50.

Family Action works with FareShare, the UK's national network of charitable food redistributors who take good quality surplus food from across the food industry and get it to various charities and community groups throughout England. Food safe surplus food typically includes items with packaging / labelling errors, stock that's become surplus due to forecasting errors, stock below minimum life on receipt (MLOR), fruit and vegetables past their best before end (BBE) date, stock past their BBE date, quality rejections (e.g., 'out of spec') etc. Surplus food that gets distributed therefore changes week-on-week.

As part of the Nottinghamshire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Programme (COTP), two FOOD Clubs were established and hosted by the Children's Centre Service in Ravensdale and Harworth during 2020. As part of the COTP (focused on influencing the early years food environment), requests were made to Family Action to distribute 'healthier' surplus food items, and membership limited to those that live or work within approximately 15-minutes of the Clubs (as standard) with a child under the age of 5-years-old. In Spring 2021, two additional COTP FOOD Clubs were opened one hosted by the Children's Centre Service at Summer House, Sutton in Ashfield and the other at Ollerton (co-delivered with Life Spring's Church in a community setting). A similar evaluation with Children's Centre Service staff and Club participant interviews will take place early in 2022 following a similar timeframe of operation.





FINDINGS

Quality of food and value for money

Children's Centre Service staff responsible for overseeing the distribution of the surplus food agree that the FOOD Clubs offer good quality food at a low-cost.

The quality of the food is good. We've had some difficulties with the freshness of fruit and veg, but I can count those times on one hand and we're now in week 34.

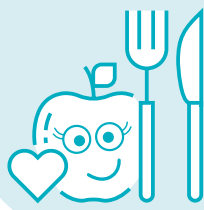
We'll get amazing fresh fruit and vegetables, lovely meat – lamb steaks and all sorts.

The proof is in the pudding.
If it's poor quality, they wouldn't be coming back!

You're getting around £10 worth of food most weeks for £3.50. Sometimes there's single items of food like meat included that's worth more than £3.50 alone.

It makes financial sense. You see people going to Aldi afterwards which is the right way round to do it, get your food box then top up your shop with what you need to turn it into meals.





Partnership working

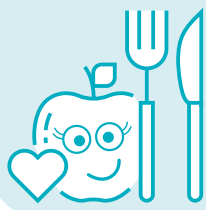
Interviewees felt that one major enabler for the success of the FOOD Clubs has been partnership working – whether this is through having a positive working relationship with Family Action, having senior leaders within the local authority brought-in to the approach, or linking into other community initiatives.

Family Action have listened to us and made changes if issues have been raised.

We've got a good working relationship with them [Family Action]. I'll get in touch and let them know how it's going. They're absolutely brilliant

We linked in with the food bank in the area and other services to help each other. There was a [time-limited] fruit and veg scheme in Worksop that was going on. You had to either be on universal credit or pension credit. Each month you paid £6, the scheme paid £6, and you got two hampers of fruit and veg worth about £25 delivered to your door. So that was something we tapped into and linked our participants into and vice versa.

We've linked up with [Family Action FOOD Club Assistant] who supports all of the FOOD Clubs in the area so sometimes we can redistribute among the sites to give a better range of food each week, for example exchanging tinned goods or bread.



FOOD Club promotion

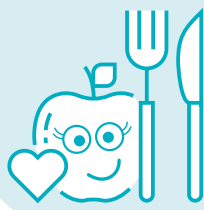
Promotion and increasing membership numbers has proved challenging throughout lockdown despite the need being there for many in the community. Interviewees are unsure whether this is due to the effectiveness of their promotional efforts, the influence of external factors such as COVID, or 'food welfare' / Children's Centre Services / building stigma.

We've had big conversations with local nurseries and primary schools, but I don't think the messages are getting through to the right people. COVID has also meant that we can't get there in person, they don't want us there ... I feel if I could get in and show them a box, show them what they're getting for their money we'd get more people signing up.

Once we can go more places, I will go out and catch parents. You just need one or two to sign up and they will bring their friends with them. Once you get them here, the chances are they'll keep coming unless their circumstances change – their work changes or they move to a different area.

I think there's a misconception with the FOOD Clubs that you need to be on certain benefits, or you need to be struggling, and it isn't that. We need to get that message across and tackle that stigma because it can benefit everybody ... One of our day cares that's not far from here, they have a lot of local families, and they have a lot of families with complex lifestyles and a high level of need. We've promoted to them and got a brilliant relationship with their nursery manager who used to work here but the response from families is no because 'you're trying to say I'm not feeding my family properly' or 'you're trying to say I'm neglecting my children'. There is that stigma for some of the families, if not with what we're offering then with the building.

There's no downside to the FOOD Club is there? So, is it stigma? Sometimes you don't buy something that's a bit cheap because there's a mindset that it's poor quality. Most of what we get in the delivery though is brand names, and even then, everyone knows the non-branded stuff is often made in the same factories, its just got different packaging.



Volunteers

Interviewees acknowledged the move to volunteer-led model for their FOOD Clubs once COVID restrictions eased would be beneficial. Most interviewees felt there would be challenges in recruiting and sustaining appropriate volunteers for the scheme. However, this should not necessarily be seen as a deterrent to continuing to run the FOOD Clubs with staff members, as the FOOD Clubs are viewed as core business.

We haven't got any volunteers and we can't start to look at this again until September. The whole idea was that it was going to be volunteer led but it's difficult to get volunteers in this area and the ones we had we've lost because of a change in their circumstances during COVID.

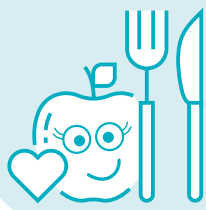
When we go back to business as usual [for the core Children's Centre Services offer], if we can't get volunteers then we'll carry on as we are. We can lean on each other and work collectively to make sure the FOOD Club isn't lost.

It's about getting the right volunteer. You want someone that's been through the process, someone that's part of the community and has experienced the benefits themselves. It's much more powerful than us doing it, but it's chicken-and-egg, you also want them to develop and move on.



For me, the FOOD Clubs have been successful because they are part of business as usual. We see this as very important ... We will try and make it work as best we can.

We see this as core business. We've had to prepare ourselves for when volunteers do eventually take over because we've enjoyed it so much. It's the nature of volunteers though that we'll always be involved at some level, to support the volunteers when they first start, or to take a lead if the volunteers aren't available.



Strengthening the role of Children's Centre Service

The FOOD Clubs have strengthened the Children's Centre Service offer and can act as a gateway to one another.

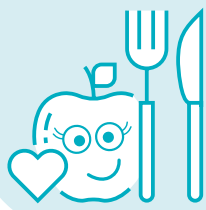
I think the FOOD Club and the Children's Centre are different things and they can act as a gateway to one another as things open up post-COVID.

We can tell the families that come for the FOOD Club what we're doing at the Children's Centre so that for those people that have never used us before can start to realise what we're about.

Are the people that come for the FOOD Club the same people that come for our activities? Not necessarily, no ... referrals have come off the back of this for other things because you can have a conversation with someone about the support they need, whether it's breastfeeding or family work.

Some of our families really need this and it's just been lovely to be able to provide it and reassure them.

I've been doing work with families for over 20 years and sometimes you can be repeating work with people, but it doesn't have the impact you'd hoped because as a service you withdraw from them once that support comes to an end. Whereas this, because there's that week-on-week consistency, you can keep checking in with people. For some of the families, this will strengthen the other support they receive through the Children's Centre because of the constant connection.



Changes to eating habits

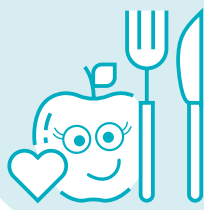
The FOOD Clubs have given participants access to affordable fresh ingredients (at no risk) and improved their eating habits / food behaviours.

What we provide is generally healthy stuff. We tend to get fruit and veg. There're very little treats like bars of chocolate. The fact that our families are collecting it and eating it will make them healthier.

Lots of what we've had [in the boxes] they wouldn't buy because they're an expense that their children might not like, things like mango, celeriac, or fennel. Then you hear back that their kids are enjoying trying different foods.

They've tried foods they wouldn't have tried because they've not felt like they have paid for it. Celeriac is one that people have taken away and enjoyed, they never would've bought celeriac from a supermarket.





Impact on well-being

A significant impact of the FOOD Clubs has been in respect to the well-being (feeling good and functioning well) of participants and Children's Centre Service staff. This includes tackling isolation, reducing financial worries / anxiety, improving the relationships between parents and their children through cooking / eating together, and improving staff well-being during lockdown.

Isolation

This has helped people get out and about, it's given them something to connect with during lockdown. We've had occasions where people have not turned up because they're isolating so we've dropped off the food box to them to keep that connection. Some come and have a chat and stay a while talking. If you look at the wider picture it has helped tackle isolation, it gives them a purpose.

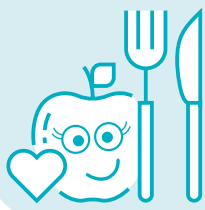
Financial worries

You've had people, those that have been furloughed, say that it's really helped us over this difficult period.

It's definitely had an impact on well-being because it's took that pressure off families with financial help.

Most of our members have been furloughed or lost income because of COVID so the food boxes are something extra to not worry about.





Improving parent / child relationships

[[Participant] is one of those people, families, that all Children's Centre have got. She comes and does everything, a regular. She's a single mum that struggles with her well-being. She's had massive amounts of input from us in terms of parenting programmes, activity sessions, and 1-2-1 support. She used to see mealtimes as 'you've got to eat' so feeding her son was a necessity and she'd eat later because that's her time to be on her own. Since starting the FOOD Club we've had conversations with her where she comes and tells us about the meals she's making, 'me and [son] have made this together', or 'me and [son] have done this together'. Big differences in that sense for her. She's so thankful and it's made such a big difference to her, she can't speak highly enough of it.



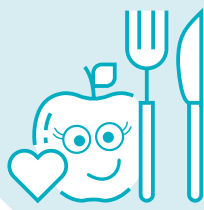
We know what family life is like and you can't do it all the time but even if they're cooking or eating together as a family now-and-again, then it brings so much, that experience for them.

Staff well-being

We've loved it because we've not seen any parents for a year. It was so nice to see families again. It was nice to see people coming back to the Centre.

We're not used to being sat in front of a computer so getting back to face-to-face has been a godsend. We have such a giggle when the food comes, and everyone chips in to get it ready.

It was a lifeline for the staff as well because they'd not been doing their normal job. They'd been talking to families on Teams and over the phone during the pandemic but it's not the same. They'd got into this job to talk to families, and it was amazing to see that passion back in the staff team because they felt like they were helping again.



Future

Overwhelmingly, interviewees felt that FOOD Clubs should be rolled out further in every community and opened to those families with older children too.

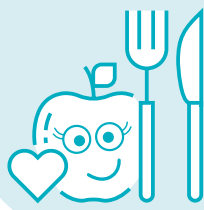
Every community should have a FOOD Club. I have no doubt some areas will be flying. What's not to like. You get decent quality food at a low price.

All families can struggle around the finance element and healthy eating so I would like it to be 0 to 19, all families regardless of what age their child is. Then we could start promoting through primary and secondary schools and get the numbers up ... We've got the room to accommodate more fridges and freezers.

As a family focussed service, I can't see it being a problem to open up to the older ones [families with children over 5-years-old]. This area has such a need you should be able to support those or even anyone in the community.

I would open the FOOD Clubs to people without children too. Most people are part of a bigger family so why shouldn't grandparents' benefit?





Nottinghamshire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer

Interviewees also felt that more could be done to tie the FOOD Clubs into the Children's Centre Service offer, strengthening their role as a community food asset, and better leveraging the role that food can play in family dynamics / interactions.

Originally, we were going to do more with this. Prior to COVID we were going to do a cook and eat session or demonstrations alongside the FOOD Club. All these things were potentially going to happen so it's about following through on that. A demonstration would be good so you can show what you can make from the food box then have a conversation about nutrition.

Helping them with budgeting and getting fresh food is one thing but they might not know what to do with it. The next stage would be to show them how to make a meal. Get them involved in making it here so they can make it for their family at home ... we need to do something as a service, but it [the decision] needs to come top-down.

Some interviewees raised concerns that post-COVID 'business as usual' might result in the FOOD Clubs getting lost.

There is a commitment because it could easily fade away if it's not given the right support or focus.

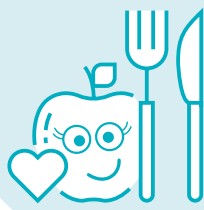
My little girls meal from the other day, made using last week's food box. I get so stuck on different ideas for dinners, so we love getting to try new things each week!

That looks absolutely delicious Sophie 😊 we are so pleased that you are embracing the whole concept of the Food Club and trying new things for the whole family. Well done! And please carry on sharing your photos and meal ideas. Looks delish 😋



Taken from a post on Gedling FOOD Club's Facebook page

Healthy eating is something I'd like to build on in the future, and factor into our offer ... We did do the holiday club before the pandemic, and it was brilliant. We would get the families in to make a healthy breakfast and lunch together. The children would be on low level tables with safety knives to help prepare the food, demonstrations about how to make bread from scratch, we would do physical activities too. It was the whole day offering the whole package.



OBSERVATIONS

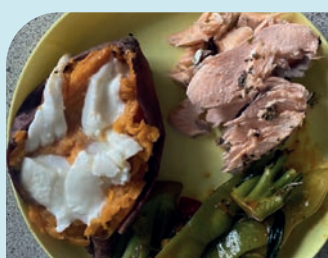
The link between low income and unhealthy eating, and health inequality as a key driver of unhealthy weight is increasingly supported by research and acknowledged by policy makers. Based on the findings above, using the Children's Centre Service and Council buildings as a conduit to deliver FOOD Clubs has proved beneficial for all parties involved with positives attached to food waste, early help, and public health outcomes.

Some well-being outcomes, particularly those in respect to isolation and staff well-being, may be less replicable outside of COVID lockdown conditions. However, eating habits / food behaviours could be strengthened further if the FOOD Clubs (and other food elements) are further tied into the core Children's Centre Service offer as suggested by the interviewees. Although, it is unclear at this stage whether the focus on healthy surplus food could be maintained by surplus food suppliers in the future as part of an expanded COTP FOOD Club offer, or whether this element would be lost at scale.

There is also a lack of clarity on whether the FOOD Clubs are sustainable without volunteers once the Children's Centre Service return to 'business as usual' post-lockdown. Children's Centre Service staff are both positive and hopeful. However, there is a decision for senior management to make in respect of where the FOOD Clubs sit in relation to core Children's Centre Service business and where they might be placed alongside competing operational / strategic priorities. Should senior management decide that it is not sustainable to continue hosting FOOD clubs through the Children's Centre Service, then consideration should be given to whether other council / community settings could be encouraged to host the function.



Just would like to say a massive thank you to all of you at Summer house in Sutton in Ashfield, you can't even imagine how much you helping people, at least to us, the kids loving their "surprise treat" on Wednesday as there's always one. They also enjoyed their healthy dinner today baked salmon with mixed herbs, sweet jacket potato with a bit of cheese on top and steamed runner beans with broccoli. Thank you again.



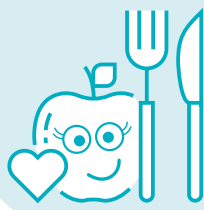
*Food club user –
Summer House
Children's Centre*



I just want to say thank you for my food box today. There's not one thing that won't get used! I wasn't expecting any meat products so it was a lovely surprise, especially the pack of sea bass! I made a fish curry with it using the potatoes, tomatoes and the green beans! It went down a treat with the whole family! Thank you.



*Food club user –
Summer House
Children's Centre*



Acknowledgments

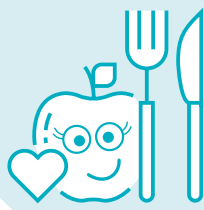
Being one of the local authorities selected to be part of the Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Programme has enabled us here in Nottinghamshire to test the limits of existing powers/ levers and to develop innovative solutions to local obstacles to enable ambitious local action on obesity. One of the objectives in our trailblazer programme is to make access to affordable healthy food easier for local families. In October 2019 a visit was made to meet the Family Action team and attend a FOOD club hosted in a Children's Centre in central Manchester. During the visit the project team could see how the club worked, and heard about the impact it was making to families.

Fast forward 2 years, which included the start and on-going response to the global pandemic, when a light has been shone on food insecurity and access to food, and there are now (November 2021) 15 FOOD clubs running across Nottinghamshire. Over half of the clubs are hosted by the Children's Centre Service and others within other community venues. Funding is secured to ensure that across Nottinghamshire there will be 30 FOOD Clubs by March 2022, making the County the biggest provider of Family Action FOOD Clubs in the Country.

The Nottinghamshire Trailblazer project team would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank everyone who has enabled and supported the delivery of FOOD clubs in Nottinghamshire.

- The **Family Action** team for working with us on this ambitious roll out and sharing the vision of a network of FOOD clubs to support local families and developing the relationship with FareShare to ensure healthy food is delivered to every club
- Colleagues from **local District and Borough Councils** who have taken the leadership of the project into their own geographical areas and aligned strategic objectives with us.
- Colleagues within the **Children's Centre Service** for testing this model with us and helping to find solutions to barriers which we've faced along the way, along with supporting delivery and volunteers to make the FOOD clubs successful in short timescales. Also thanks to staff for supporting the evaluation, collecting data and contributing to interviews, all of which help us to demonstrate the impact and difference the clubs make to local families





- **Local families** for attending the clubs, trying something new and their feedback, not only through the interviews for this report but also sharing photo's of the delicious meals prepared with the food – keep sharing!
- Our external evaluation partner **Adam Billson** (Adam Billson Consulting Ltd) and **Sara Mair** (Mair Education) for undertaking interviews with local families and Children Centre Service staff team, the wealth of information gathered and presented demonstrates the impact of the FOOD Clubs, not only in terms of what we wanted to achieve – improving access to affordable healthy food, but also wider positive unintended consequences, which collectively provide the evidence for sustaining this work.
- **Your Health, Your Way** service delivered by ABL for their skills in making recipes for the food delivered into the clubs, ready for families to take home and make at home.

Finally a thank you to wider partners who have supported and encouraged from the side lines, seizing opportunities to work in partnership to make FOOD Clubs and other activities of the Trailblazer approach in Nottinghamshire a success.

Nottinghamshire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Project Group

