



Community cooking and healthy eating in Oxfordshire

GOOD FOOD OXFORDSHIRE REPORT

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Summary

Amidst compelling national and local insights, it became evident that a thorough re-evaluation and thoughtful consideration of cooking culture in Oxfordshire was imperative. In response to this, in 2023 Good Food Oxfordshire surveyed its network, and performed in-depth interviews with key informants, to better understand the landscape of cooking and healthy eating activities across the county.

To ensure representation we prioritised in-depth interviews based on the following criteria: firstly, inclusion of groups from geographical areas of public health concern or those identified as 'high' on the priority places index; secondly, we ensured representation from all districts in the county, and finally, we endeavoured to engage with individuals offering support or services to groups across the life course.

Our in-depth interviews revealed common challenges and successful strategies that supported engagement, learning and behaviour change around cooking and healthy eating in target communities. Key success factors were building trusted relationships with programme participants; adapting to meet the needs of the place and the group; having an influential leader who could 'make things happen'; and going beyond the learning environment to help embed changes and ensure ongoing support was available.

Shared challenges included affordability of healthy and sustainable food, funding limitations, accessing suitable spaces, and difficulties in measuring impact. While some groups were able to undertake structured evaluations, others found storytelling more compelling to showcase their initiatives' human impact.

Investing in cooking initiatives stands out as a pivotal aspect within community development for enhancing health and wellbeing, but it must be part of a broader strategy requiring changes in the food environment for comprehensive improvements. This research and wider stakeholder input

suggest that investment in this area aligns with a multi-faceted pathway to foster healthy behaviour changes and broader public health outcomes. Specific recommendations include:

- ✓ **Balance investment in novel and proven programmes:** Balance resources between seed funding for new innovative ideas and long-term sustained support for proven programmes.
- ✓ **Scale evaluation requirements:** Align evaluation requirements with the capacities of recipient organisations. Use storytelling as an impactful evaluation tool to illustrate human impact beyond metrics.
- ✓ **Enhance Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food:** Explore the possibility of a local programme, inspired by initiatives like the Rose Vouchers, to improve access and affordability for community groups and low-income families, fostering sustainable healthy behaviour change.
- ✓ **Empower Change Catalysts:** Support influential figures within initiatives, mirroring successful models like UN's investment in climate activists. Allocate resources for dedicated time and essential needs.
- ✓ **Tailored Peer Learning:** Create a forum for communities to share adaptable ideas and case studies. Utilise the existing CFN networks for knowledge exchange, tailoring approaches for each community.
- ✓ **Addressing Space Challenges for Community Impact:** Overcome the challenge of accessing suitable spaces for cooking initiatives. A recommended action involves considering how access to spaces can be facilitated, which could include creating suitable spaces during building redevelopment and piloting school and community group partnerships to unlock untapped potential in using school cooking facilities.
- ✓ **Greater collaboration between Social Prescribers and Community-Led Initiatives:** Social prescribers partnering with community groups and initiatives shows potential, using healthcare connections for outreach.

Introduction

In response to compelling insights and directives from the National Food Strategy¹, Childhood Obesity: A Plan for Action², and The Director of Public Health Annual Report 2022-23³ Good Food Oxfordshire (GFO) embarked on an exploratory journey throughout 2023. In addition to recognising the effects of the wider food environment, and adjunct social issues, on health and wellbeing, these reports underscored critical shifts needed in food and cooking culture, recognising the link between cooking skills, confidence and healthier dietary choices. Amongst other factors, the rise of convenience foods has precipitated a decline in essential cooking skills across societal strata and generations⁴, signalling the urgency for change.

The imperative to combat obesity through dietary modifications aligns with evidence indicating that increased home cooking is associated with healthier diets, reduced calorie intake, and a decreased likelihood of obesity and type 2 diabetes. Moreover, having cooking skills behaviours, as evidenced by systematic reviews highlighting the positive impacts of cooking classes on attitudes toward healthy food and improved dietary intake in both adults and children⁵.

The integration of Social Prescribing (SP) into healthcare frameworks has in recent years emerged as a holistic approach, offering the potential of a spectrum of benefits encompassing physical and mental well-being. Reports affirm that small-scale transformations, such as dedicating kitchen spaces to regular cooking classes, can catalyse impactful community changes^{6,7}.

Local strategies like the Oxfordshire Food Strategy 2022⁸ articulate ambitious goals for a Good Food Movement, aiming to cultivate healthy, sustainable food engagement through education, events, and campaigns fostering connections, knowledge, and skills. The focus is on building vibrant food communities, advocating access to healthy food, waste reduction, and supporting dietary options conducive to health and the planet.

Aligned with the Oxfordshire Whole Systems Approach to Healthy Weight action plan, the original proposal for this project sought to map existing activities, community assets, and intervention needs related to cooking and healthy eating. The aim was to gain a better coordinated, evidence-based, understanding of needs, best practice and opportunities for cooking, healthy eating and growing activities across the county and within different settings.

What we did

Throughout 2023 Good Food Oxfordshire have been talking to their network to gain an insight into the cooking and healthy eating activities that take place across the county. We wanted to map what was already happening, but also understand what the gaps, opportunities, challenges and barriers were for community groups to run these types of initiatives.

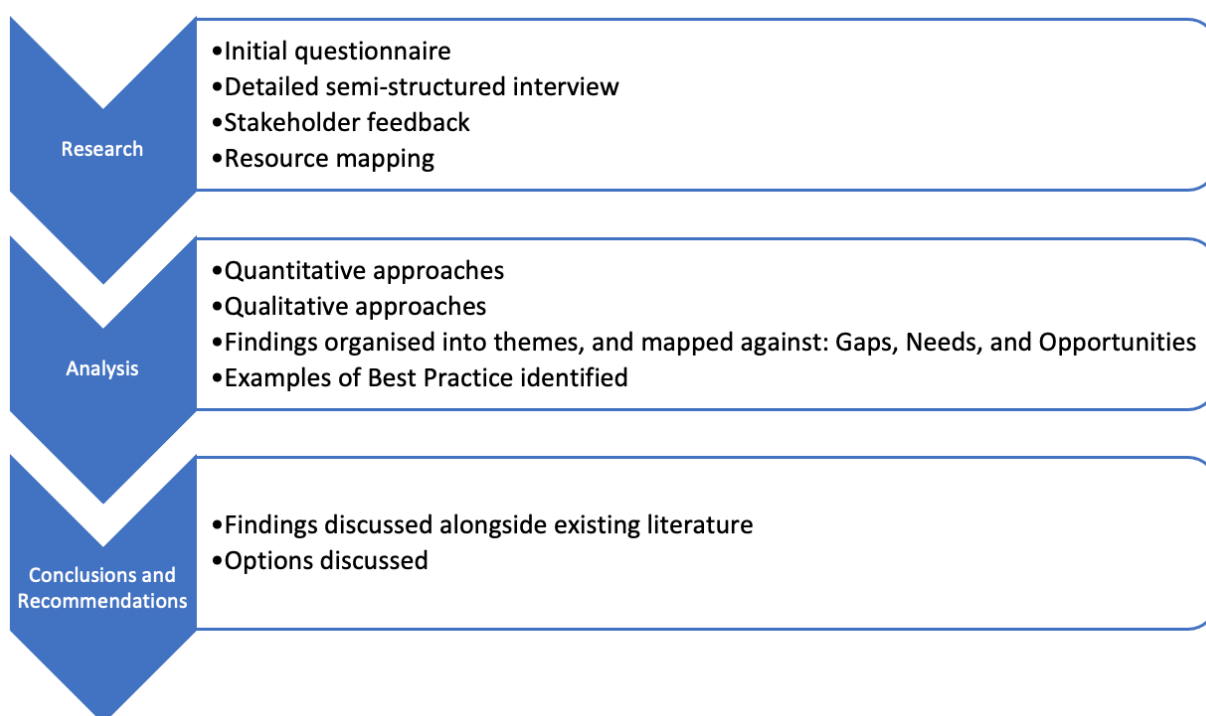


Figure 1: Overview of research methodology

Initially a questionnaire was used to gather some preliminary information from across the network.

The topics of enquiry were:

- ✓ the type of cooking or healthy eating activities
- ✓ how frequently the activities occurred
- ✓ the demographics of who utilised the activities
- ✓ what limitations the groups had in carrying out their activities including resources and reach
- ✓ the food that is used and where it is sourced from

The 32 responses received were collated and presented in an interim report. Findings from the questionnaire reveal prevalent food-related activities in Oxfordshire, primarily centred around gardening and cooking classes, often hosted in community or faith settings. Participants' motivations include access to food, social engagement, and skill-building, while limited awareness stands as a key barrier. Respondents identify barriers to healthy cooking and eating, highlighting challenges such as cost, nutrition knowledge, cooking skills, time constraints, and health considerations, with a significant representation of parents with school-aged children among attendees. A full copy of the report is available in Appendix A.

Responses from the questionnaire were also used to help populate a new category, 'Cooking Activity', on our community map: [Good Food Oxfordshire Community Map](#). The map has since been further developed to include 89 'Cooking Spaces', making it easier for groups looking to set up a new initiative to find facilities they can use in their local area. This enhancement was made possible by a systematic review of all the community spaces available to hire across the county, and by contacting a range of private businesses that may have kitchen space available to rent, or be borrowed free of charge, for example pubs, bars, restaurants and cafes, schools, colleges. Further activities and spaces will continue to be updated and added as they are identified.

We then undertook semi-structured interviews with community groups (8), cooking tutors (4) and Social Prescribers and Health and Wellbeing Coaches (3 people, 2 interviews) (Table 1).

Table 1: Interview breakdown		Codes
Community Groups	8	CG 1 - 8
Cooking Tutors	4*	CT 1 - 4
Social Prescribers and Health and Wellbeing Coach	2**	SP 1 – 2, HWC 1
<p><i>*Three of the cooking tutors had either run or organised cooking sessions within community groups, and therefore were able to offer a broad view than just from a cooking tutor perspective</i></p> <p><i>**Two interviews were undertaken with 3 individuals. One interview had 2 individuals (1 Social Prescriber and 1 Health and Wellbeing Coach)</i></p>		

Interviewees were identified from the existing GFO network, and prioritised based on:

- ✓ Geographical areas of Public Health interest/ areas identified as 'high' on the Priority Places Index9, a composite index of food insecurity using data from seven different dimensions.
- ✓ Geographic location, to ensure representation across the Oxfordshire Districts
- ✓ Life stages identified in the recent Health Needs Assessment as being important life transition stages: leaving home or becoming a new parent.

The main topics of enquiry were:

- ✓ Community Needs
 - Profile of people accessing the community setting
 - Current cooking confidence, skills and experience of these groups and what solutions community groups perceive as important
 - needs of those delivering cooking sessions
- ✓ Current offers
 - Different delivery approaches, and engagement
 - location training / initiative is held, and how they source resources (including equipment and food)
- ✓ Gap between needs and offer
 - identify gaps and opportunities in cooking and healthy eating activities
 - identify gaps in skills and knowledge in community groups
- ✓ Barriers
 - which barriers organisers have experienced in planning or holding cooking initiatives, including how the cost-of-living is impacting these activities
 - Explore whether cooking and growing initiatives link with local social prescribing networks or pathways

Two social prescribers, one of whom was interviewed alongside a Health and Wellbeing Coach from the same practice, were part of the interview process. The objective was to acquire a more cohesive, evidence-based comprehension of how cooking, healthy eating, and gardening activities align with the social prescribing pathway in various settings across Oxfordshire. Additionally, the aim was to explore potential adjustments to either the social prescribing pathways or the linked initiatives to bolster preventive care measures.

This report represents the findings from the initial questionnaire, in-depth interviews and wider stakeholder consultation that has been conducted throughout the project, including the Food Action Working Groups (FAWGs), Food Sustainability and Health Groups (FSHG) and Community Food Network (CFN) meetings as well as informal meetings and discussions.

Although the consultation has been broad and expansive in its outlook it is prudent to highlight that it is not exhaustive, and due to the nature of the recruitment process likely to contain some bias. Where bias is clear this is raised in the discussion. However, despite these limitations the analysis conducted reached saturation, meaning that enough data had been collected to draw conclusions, and it is unlikely that further research would have heralded any new insights.

Copies of the research protocols, detailing the analysis methodology, can be found in Appendices B – D.

What we heard - overview

Most of the groups (6/8) were created to support people within their communities and were therefore focused on people living within a certain geographical area. No groups provided activities or initiatives specifically based on gender or ethnicity. All groups offered their initiatives as in-person activities, with none currently organising online options. It was clear from the analysis that all the groups had multiple aims for their interventions, those listed were the ones stated explicitly, and the metrics are therefore only indicative. An overview of the interview characteristics can be found in Appendix E.

The interviews were transcribed and systematically analysed employing a methodology based on the PPOIISED framework (see protocols in Appendices B – D for details of the method). The coding and analysis approach allowed for the development of themes, which are summarised in Table 2. Descriptions of the themes, with supporting verbatim extracts, are provided in the following sections, along with a summary from interviews with the Social Prescribers, and views from the wider network.

Table 2: Summary of themes from interviews	
	Reaching and engaging priority people

What worked	Building Trusted Relationships	Taking time to build trust and engagement
		Being a trusted and respected community group
		Inspiring others
	Adapting to meet needs	Flexing course content and approach to support different group dynamics
		Accommodating individual needs
	Being an influential Leader	Bringing energy
		Being tenacious and resilient
	Going beyond the learning environment	Signposting and wrap around support
		Mental Health and social connection
Unlocking confidence		
Challenges	Affordability of healthy and sustainable foods	
	Funding, and accessing suitable spaces	
	Measuring and reporting impact	

What we heard - what worked

In our interviews, it became evident that certain groups encountered difficulties in managing successful cooking and promoting healthy eating initiatives. However, amid these challenges, there were also groups that achieved success. This section delves into these hurdles and illuminates the key attributes that distinguished successful groups.

Building Trusted Relationships

Reaching and engaging priority people

In several instances, groups encountered difficulties in attracting priority people (Box 1), who were the specific target audience for the initiative. Although it was relatively easy to fill spaces in their programmes, the challenge arose when attempting to engage individuals with limited skills, knowledge, or confidence in the kitchen—the precise demographic the initiative aimed to reach.

"So there's lots of people that want to come in the cooking class, lots of people that want to come here and see what we do, but actually finding the people, especially the mum struggling financially, finding them is so hard. It takes up all my time, so much of my time to find those people. And then when I do find them, they bottle it on the last week, on the first, you know, just before they come. And I spend days trying to support them, phoning them, driving to pick them up, discussing that" (CG6)

Some groups who were able to reach their priority people, faced challenges with ensuring attendance at their initiatives, despite initial interest and need in the community.

"the problem seemed to be the committing, not the desire." (CG5)

"I think it's really that the people that we are trying most to reach probably have quite stressful and chaotic lives and are not necessarily in a position to do another thing." (CG5)

"I think it's, as I say, having conversations with people... would you come to this? And them saying yes, and then actually coming are two very different things." (CG7)

"There was one lady who said, oh, this is not for me, because my kids only eat oven chips and fish fingers or whatever. But I'm just coming because my mate's coming type thing. And then she did a couple of weeks and took some food home. And her kids ate all of this and made vegetable lasagna or something. She was just like, this is ridiculous. They wouldn't touch vegetables. What's going on? And then she had them helping her chop stuff. And they were making stuff together. And it was just... what she was describing felt really life-changing. But when she came, she had no idea that it was going to be of any use to her" (CG5)

However, despite the challenges of getting initial attendance established, once individuals begin attending sessions regularly and start experiencing the benefits, the task shifts to encouraging them to move on and use their skills independently —a transition that often presents its own set of challenges.

"But that's why we're small, and that's why we're impactful. Because we find the people who really need it, not just the ones that just want to come. Anxiety, I put as a massive, and mental health, as massive barriers. Because they want to come, but they're terrified, shaking, and everything. And when they're here, then they don't want it to stop. They don't want it to end." (CG6)

Box 1 - Definition: Priority People

Priority people may differ between organisations, or between initiatives within an organisation. For example, groups may choose to prioritise those with limited skills, knowledge, or confidence, or they may choose to prioritise reaching people who may have the greatest downstream impact e.g. a parent who may pass on the skills and potential health benefits to their children, starting a generational cycle of change.

Taking time to build trust and engagement

It was clear from the interviews that groups that engaged individuals beforehand had significantly enhanced course success.

"We did one lot of these sessions and the first group that we did I sort of really carefully vetted everyone, spent a long time talking to everyone, making sure that they were really, you know, that I thought they'd mesh well together and they did and it was great. And the next course we did, I didn't take as much time doing that registration and we just had this group of like four really, really loud, really dominant, really extroverted mums, innuendos everywhere, you know, talking about absolutely and everything, anything and everything, and then we had four really quiet, really introverted, and it just, the whole balance of the sessions was really hard, it was really one-sided, and so getting that balance, I think, is really important." (CG8)

However, this process can pose heightened challenges in diverse communities where language barriers exist. For example, two groups, CG2 and CG8, both of which are based in Oxford City and serve a diverse population, reported that language was regularly a barrier for them, and often meant that people who would benefit from their initiatives were not able to.

Being a trusted and respected community group

Furthermore, trusted groups within a community often have greater success in engaging potential attendees due to established rapport and credibility.

"It's taken us as a project... a long time and this <organisation>, a long time to create a visibility within the community. And that's <helped> no end because we're sort of a bit of a trusted face now. And that's really, really helped. I don't think if we tried to do this when we first started, we wouldn't have the same uptake." (CG8)

"...I think for us, having places like us, and having those relationships. I think it's difficult if you're an organisation trying to do something new especially with someone like the County Council... some of the families we work with might have a bit of a negative view towards something like the county council, so if you're trying to start a new initiative, they might already have some negative thoughts towards you, so some of the families you might want to target are going to be even more difficult, so I think going through your charities like us <is the best way to access those that you want to target>... (CG2)

Box 2 - Home-Start's Innovative Approach to Nurturing Families in High-Deprivation Areas

Home-Start delivers Growing Minds, a school readiness initiative targeting babies and toddlers in two Oxfordshire high-deprivation areas through group activities or personalised support. Operating in an urban food desert, with limited local access to nutritious foods, Home-Start faced engagement challenges during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the lack of face-to-face contact with families. Leveraging local funding, accessed through GFO, they provided families with slow cookers and weekly recipe bags. The Project Lead, Lucy, recorded instructional videos, shared them with the group, and conducted weekly virtual meetings to discuss activities and share experiences.

The initiative gained local attention, attracting families interested in participating. Post-COVID-19, the slow cooker groups have continued successfully. Weekly gatherings involve joint ingredient preparation, discussions, and sharing outcomes via group chat after slow-cooking at home. To ensure group success, Lucy conducts interviews with potential participants, gauging their cooking skills and interest. Home-Start emphasises the interview stage's significance, not only for

understanding participants' needs but also for creating a cohesive and complementary group dynamic crucial to the initiative's success.

Home-Start embodies the theme of 'building trusted relationships.' They have earned trust as a respected community group, a position achieved through time and consistent efforts. Additionally, on a one-to-one basis, they invest time in fostering engagement with individuals, ensuring that their priority people proactively commit to and engage with their initiative.

Inspiring others

It was unmistakable from the interviews that impactful initiatives hinged on the presence of an inspirational figure. This individual played a pivotal role in igniting enthusiasm, fostering an embrace of the experience, and catalysing lasting changes among participants.

"he's just such an incredible energy in the kitchen. It just works so well, we've done some pop up demos with him and some of the students and his ability to engage them is really infectious so we know that yea that some of the students were utterly disengaged at the beginning of their time" (CG1)

"So we're really lucky the first time we did the group we had a parent who was really struggling with not actually the food side of things but a lot of anxiety, has two children with additional needs, is a single parent, struggles on her income, really isolated ... So she was just having a little bit of time and she came along to the group and she was in absolute breath of fresh air because while everyone's talking about how they chuck the nuggets in the oven she was talking about how she gets her veg from her granddad's allotment and how she keeps the cost down because she already had a slow cooker and she knows ... you can buy cheaper cuts of meat, cook them in there which is cheaper. So she was full of knowledge and just lacking confidence. So we asked her to come along to the next session and she did and she's now actually one of our volunteers. So she comes to every group and she's fantastic. ...it's not a formal arrangement that she manages <the Whatsapp group>...but she's very active on there and she really prompts conversations and she might call me and say, have you noticed someone hasn't messaged? Is it OK if I ask them a question? And so, you know, it's a kind of a really good tool to keep a dialogue going and to just open doors and ask questions. And she will flood it with fantastic recipes, that are really achievable. So she's kind of like our little secret weapon, particularly when it comes to that group, because she's really good. Because she's lived that situation, it's not top down from her. It's very much like, I get where you're at" (CG8)

One interviewee described the "magic gel" that ensured success of an initiative, highlighting that at times it is hard to clearly define: "I don't know if that's a person or whether it's a place or... I don't know." (CG7)

Box 3 - Nourish and Flourish Programme in Didcot Emphasises Community Engagement

Nourish and Flourish is a SOFEA programme run in partnership with the Didcot Primary Care Network (PCN). The overall aim is to provide free nutritional support within the community for individuals to improve their health and wellbeing, and to generate opportunities for preventative support with young people in the wider community. The programme is being piloted in Didcot, and currently has three core elements:

Nutritional Therapy Clinic – provides one to one nutritional therapy support. Working in partnership with the Didcot PCN, patients can be referred directly by GPs, Diabetic nurses and Social Prescribers.

Nourish and Flourish School Programme – focuses on providing preventative support for young people. Nutrition has been integrated into the math, biology, geography and history primary curriculum (year 5). The teachers are provided with lesson plans, slide decks, activities and resources, provision of a cooking session using surplus food, food growing opportunities and exercise – as well as SOFEA whole system approach utilising Social Prescribers at parent engagement sessions.

Nourish and Flourish Kitchen – launched in autumn 2023. This upcycled, and bespoke designed professional kitchen serves as a teaching space for SOFEA young people, instilling lifelong cooking skills, provision of food for others, and improving their employability opportunities – and longer-term through the development of social enterprises. Additionally, the kitchen aims to provide the wider community with opportunities for learning cooking skills, and Kerry has set up a Community Cooking Coalition of partner organisations in South and Vale, to cross-deliver such opportunities in 2024. The programme also aims to provide nutritional therapy cooking sessions, including patients assisted by the Nutritional Therapy Clinic.

This programme exemplifies the theme ‘Taking time to build trust and engagement’, as Kerry, the Programme Manager, dedicated significant time connecting with the local community and stakeholders. Development started by engaging with the community at the SOFEA larder, exploring what nutritional support people would appreciate, trialing pop up cooking demos and nutritional support, and conducting a comprehensive survey sent to all 40,000 residents registered with the Didcot PCN. Through partnership with local professionals, initiatives and organisations like Social

Prescribers, CAG Oxfordshire (Replenish), and You Move, Kerry gained insight into local concerns and developed a programme that extends beyond the traditional learning environment, offering additional support as needed.

The breadth and ambition of Nourish and Flourish is testament to Kerry's leadership qualities, including her tenacity, resilience and energy. This leadership is bolstered by years of networking in Oxfordshire and supported by the resources of a larger organisation.

Adapting to meet needs

Flexing course content and approach to support different group dynamics

Successful community groups understand the multifaceted needs and demographics of their specific area and its residents. By tailoring their approach to address these unique aspects, they can truly flourish.

"...Acknowledging that and saying to them, what do you want? Instead of just saying 'this is what we want you to do'... I think whenever you, they've got buy-in then, whenever you kind of give people a little bit of... they've got the connection, yeah, and they've got the buy-in then and it's kind of like they've got a little bit of ownership of it, to be honest, you know, and they feel much more connected in with it. And they feel that they're listened to and it's not just some boring old fart standing there, you know, telling them to eat celery"
(CG7)

"But it's about finding those opportunities for people to socialize. And I think that's the key, is that once you get people together and comfortable and safe, that's when they open up to you and let you know <what they need help and support with> if we get a group of people who enjoy each other's company and we can learn something together and find something together I think that's a better way of doing it." (CG3)

Accommodating individual needs

Some groups discovered the necessity of adapting their initiative designs to suit the specific needs of the individuals they aimed to reach.

CT3 described how they use a similar approach for different adult groups, but adapt to meet specific requirements.

"That was something that we had to change the language about really, instead of it's not a cooking lesson, it's a workshop or something like that. Because we were dealing with social housing clients, mostly dealing with social housing clients that were clients of the food bank. And they didn't want cooking lessons ...And then also the length of time. Some

people said, oh, you know, it has to be a certain amount of lessons, like 12 lessons, and we are never going to get these people to engage for that amount of time. So we sort of broke it down into four, so four kind of workshops all based around a different kind of theme." (CG7)

"So we realised pretty quickly that... a lot of parents weren't able to access these groups because they had high anxiety about leaving the house. You know, the programme actually started during Covid, we're just now through Covid. So, you know, we had that huge huge hurdle and then we had all the anxieties coming out so we're facing problems, well parents are facing problems like anxiety, mental health need, domestic abuse, addiction, you know financial difficulties, there's just a whole range of problems that are standing in the way before we're talking about oh do you know do you have space within your home to do this learning activity, could you possibly try this? Actually, we need to make sure that mum's safe in her home first of all and reduce the level of anxieties and things. So that's where the one-to-one support comes in as we kind of try and scoop up our more vulnerable families and offer a sort of slightly more tailored approach.' (CG8)

Going beyond the learning environment

Signposting and wrap around support

The interviews provided compelling evidence that cooking and healthy eating programmes offer superior advantages beyond simply enhancing people's nutrient intake. Food brings people together, creating a space for shared experiences, conversations and an opportunity to signpost people to other types of social support.

"I realised that it's much more than just the food that we're offering. So that's when I set up the warm spaces and we have a space upstairs where before the Larder we'd offer tea, coffee and snacks and somewhere warm for people to come together." (CG3)

"...the other thing that came out of it is it was a really safe space for young people to talk. So when we were doing it, it was really nice it was amazing how many times the kids were just opening up about things that were going on. It might have been something at home, at school or their friends, it just wasn't what I was thinking of, or thinking would happen.

For me it was about growing food making things out of wood, not wasting things, things like that. But actually it was a really safe space for kids to open up." (CG2)

"I mean, we are seeing more increase in people reaching out. Okay, so that's positive. You know, people are asking for help... you know, they are asking about whether they can get help with this or with that or something else. So I think that the groups, community groups and food groups in particular, are being seen as the places to go to get help." (CG7)

Mental health and social connection

Furthermore, these gatherings foster strong social connections and often provide natural support for mental health.

"we just talked about special food we cook and people join us from over the world and they start talking to us about different food, the similarity, the differences and it just makes us more social actually and encourages us to speak about other things." (CT1)

"Thursday a meal will be created for all staff, all students all volunteers, any visitors to sit down and have meal together. That will be the first time that some of those students will ever have sat down and had a meal." (CG1)

"Yeah, they are anxious. They don't want to leave the house. And some of them have had to go and pick up. They've been trembling. One person was sick when she arrived with nerves. So yeah, a lot of it is confidence building, and self-esteem issues, and mental health issues." (CG6)

Unlocking confidence

Consequently, the development of culinary abilities and social connections also boosts individuals' confidence, positively impacting various facets of their lives.

"one of our mentors worked with a young parent from the area, and the reason being was the young parent was finding it difficult to look after her children, but also how to feed them properly, so what we did was we worked with her on how to make meals from scratch, and so every week the mentor used the kitchen downstairs and they would get random ingredients and together they would work out what they could make, and what the outcome from that was... she was then making these at home, and friends were coming over to the house because they liked the food as well, so she was feeling really positive about herself, but it also meant then that she was in a really good position for her kids to come back home because they were being fed, and they were being looked after." (CG2)

"I think there's massive broader benefits. Two people who attended, well actually three but one of them is not volunteering with us. Three of our first eight families are now volunteering in community projects which I think is absolutely fantastic and that is firstly as a means to kind of raise confidence but also with the outlook of trying to gain employment as their children are getting older. So, you know, that's an absolute win. And there are the other things, you know, children are trying more food." (CG8)

"... the answers I've got have been very surprising, often to do with confidence, social confidence, and resilience, actually, as well as, yeah, sort of pride that they are able to do this thing they didn't think they were going to do." (CT4)

"It's how we change the way we support people that empowers them as well and offers them that dignity. So it's the evolution of community support, I always say that. "I think it's about being in spaces that encourage that, listen to their voices, being heard." (CG3)

"a lot of it is confidence building here and reducing loneliness as well as healthy eating." (CG6)

Box 4 - Rose Hill Junior Youth Club's Holistic Approach to Youth Development

Rose Hill Junior Youth Club, thriving for 12 years, offers inclusive after-school sessions for children and young people aged 5-16 in the area. The sessions, which encompass various enrichment activities, including cooking, provide opportunities for skill development. If participants wish to recreate a dish at home, the group purchases the ingredients for them. Acknowledging local deprivation, the club ensures that every attending child receives a hot and nutritious meal.

During the pandemic, the club initiated an allotment project to address the need for outdoor activities. This project serves as a learning space for children to cultivate plants, explore nature, and craft practical objects from recycled materials like pallets. Beyond its success in fostering gardening skills and a connection with nature, the allotment project has become a safe space for the children to engage in meaningful conversations.

Rose Hill Junior Youth Club stands as a trusted and respected community group. The allotment project is a prime example of their adaptability to community needs. Originally designed to enhance gardening skills and access to nutritious food, it unexpectedly became a source of social connection. The project evolved into a space where children felt comfortable opening up about their worries and concerns, showcasing the club's multifaceted impact on community well-being.

Being an influential leader

Bringing Energy

However, for any initiative to succeed, it fundamentally relies on the community group organising it to have a sturdy foundation. Through our interviews, although not often explicitly articulated, it became evident that these groups often originate with a driving force—an influential figure that brings energy. These individuals serve as catalysts, leveraging their connections and leadership to spark involvement, gather resources, and unite diverse stakeholders.

Being tenacious and resilient

These influential figures bring guidance and influence and play a pivotal role in garnering support, establishing credibility, and propelling the necessary momentum, especially in the nascent stages of

a new initiative. They are often tenacious and resilient. Home Start in Littlemore is a great example of this.

“...last September when sort of cost of living crisis kind of really began to take hold we started a well-being and health group partnership within <area>, so that's kind of all local partners, so local church, local school, local nursery, local parish council, the local MPs, things like that, all come together and have a conversation about what the problem is.

And it kind of felt a little bit like we were the only people that had that really direct contact with the community that could actually have that voice of... So then I actually ended up bringing a parent along with me and she was like, what are you all doing? You're all sat here chatting. I need some food. My kids are hungry....” (CG8)

Nevertheless, for sustained impact, the group benefits immensely from fostering a supportive culture. Such an environment creates opportunities for passionate and knowledgeable members who might initially lack the confidence or skills to emerge as influential leaders. Nurturing this supportive atmosphere encourages their growth and contribution, amplifying the group's potential for substantial and enduring community change, thereby reducing the risk of relying on a single figurehead for the organisation's ongoing success. Examples of where this has been done well can be seen in Chippy Larder, and Cherwell Collective.

In response to being asked: ‘but you’re really central to this, aren’t you? If you weren’t here, would this continue?’: **“that was one of the criticisms that came up, that what if something happened to you? What would happen, you know, how would it run? And since then, I've made a concerted effort to empower all the volunteers around as well. And so if anyone says, oh yeah, but you can do it you can do it as well come on and it's about sharing those skills and giving people the opportunity to get on with it and do it.” (CG3)**

Box 5 - Chippy Larder's Evolution Beyond Food Provision

Chippy Larder, based in Chipping Norton, West Oxfordshire, serves both the town and the surrounding countryside. Originally set up to address the needs of individuals and families facing food, fuel, and educational deprivation in an affluent area, the Community Larder aimed to provide affordable food without stigmatising those in need. Rizvana, the founder, shares, 'I realized that it's much more than just the food that we're offering. So that's when I set up the warm spaces, and we have a space upstairs where before the Larder, we'd offer tea, coffee, and snacks and somewhere warm for people to come together.'

Over time, the initiative has adapted to address diverse community needs, introducing community lunches that promote a sense of togetherness. Chipping Larder serves as a compelling example of how food can unite a community, embodying the theme of 'Going beyond the learning environment.' By providing a safe space for individuals, Chippy Larder can offer additional support and services in a dignified manner, effectively responding to evolving and emerging community needs.

Moreover, Chippy Larder exemplifies the theme of 'being an influential leader.' Rizvana's early efforts in establishing the larder showcased energy, tenacity, and resilience, earning the group's trust within the community. Over time, the organisation has grown and evolved a supportive culture, enabling other individuals to take the lead on initiatives, fostering sustainability and resilience.

What we heard – challenges

Beyond the challenges effectively navigated by specific groups, there existed universal hurdles prevalent across all the groups we engaged with. This section aims to depict these shared challenges.

Affordability of healthy and sustainable food

Many groups discussed the challenges in accessing appropriate food. While the option of surplus food from the Oxford Food Hub exists, its availability can be uncertain, and some organisers commented that the choices available are not always aligned with the health standards desired. Moreover, steep prices for fresh ingredients posed a barrier.

"And then some people who are a bit like, oh, where do you get the food from? Well, like with Food Hub, they're like, oh, no, thank you." (CG8)

"We're trying to use surplus food, and we're trying to use those kind of hubs, but they're not reliable as in there's lots of white bread, which we don't want... And you can't guarantee that the food that you... I mean, we could improvise, obviously, if there's a courgette or a pepper instead, that's fine. But sometimes there's something, sometimes there's nothing." (CG6)

All interviewees that were asked agreed that teaching children about cooking and healthy eating is incredibly beneficial. However, the impact might be limited if their parents are not involved or if access to, or affordability of, nutritious food is a challenge.

"... it's okay doing something in school, but you're just doing something whilst the child is at school. And we need to change the mindsets of the parents... That's not really going to change the mindsets of the parents and they haven't got any money. Then, you know, the kids learning how to cook something at school, great, fantastic, really fantastic, but when they get home and mum says, well, I've got £1.75... you're going to have pizza and chips, because... I can buy pizza and chips for four kids for £1.75, or I can go and buy a bunch of bananas for £1.75, but you'll be hungry again in 10 minutes, wanting more food." (CG7)

"we do have a high level of poverty here, in the students...and this has come back in discussions before that we can empower them to make their own decisions, but they don't hold the purse strings and that is a fundamental bottom line. You can teach a child how to be healthy, but if the family as a whole can't afford to, how do we get beyond that barrier..." (CG1)

This sentiment was echoed for other groups teaching adults, who must be aware that whatever they teach needs to be replicable at home, and therefore affordability of ingredients is a key consideration.

"when we were doing these we were always thinking about how much things cost, as these costs effect for families, especially for families in our area, and also what tools did they have available." (CG2)

Funding and accessing suitable spaces

Community groups and cooking tutors face funding hurdles that impact their operations, often relying on volunteers due to insufficient funds. Securing funding is time-consuming, diverting attention from essential community services.

"I think some of that is due to the fact that... I'm getting on with providing the support and... they can be really time consuming." (CG3)

"we realised it's a bit like that chicken and an egg this, you can't get funding until you've got data but you can't get data until you've done a pilot, so it was a real challenge to get that going" (CG1)

CG6 found, as a social enterprise, they experienced a similar challenge before their reputation was established, and now finds it an easier process, especially as they have built professional relationships with some of the local funding bodies, although their funding position does mean they still have to rely on voluntary help to make their operations feasible. Furthermore, CT3, who has experience of running several sessions both as an independent cooking tutor, and for a local community group, has found their last few grant applications were unsuccessful, stating that they

felt funding was easier to access immediately after COVID, when social connection seemed to be of higher public health priority.

Despite some success with accessing funding, it remains the biggest challenge for CG8's programme. Although they recognise they could run their sessions with volunteers, thereby reducing the funding required, due to the nature of the programme safeguarding issues may be disclosed during the sessions. If this were the case they would need to be managed correctly, and consequently the organisation feel that should be the responsibility of a paid member of staff.

CT4, who is affiliated with a local community group, and runs cooking sessions exclusively from their facilities, confirmed that their work was reliant on grants. As a condition of a large grant the group received, they were supposed to be trying to grow the income generating element of their business, thereby reducing their long-term reliance on grants. Despite ambition this has proved challenging, as their lease only allows them to operate until 5.30pm, limiting their ability to run evening courses for paying members of the public.

Additionally, several groups encountered obstacles in securing suitable spaces for cooking programmes. Some groups have forged partnerships with other local groups to overcome this obstacle, as showcased in Box 5, but for others it has been an insurmountable barrier, meaning that, despite aspiration and need initiatives have not been able to get off the ground.

Box 6 - Sustainable Wantage and Down to Earth Community Cafe: Synergising for Community Impact

Sustainable Wantage, an established community action group, focuses on environmental protection and community strengthening from The Mix, a central community space where they manage a community fridge and distribute surplus food. They also run a weekly Community Larder at another venue. The increasing demand for food over the last few years prompted the recognition of the need for cooking classes to boost kitchen skills and confidence, however, overcoming challenges like space constraints and the availability of knowledgeable facilitators became crucial for success.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kate Farrington, founder of Down to Earth Cafe, identified the need for a food surplus cafe to address environmental, food, and social justice locally. Situated near the town centre, the cafe also organises community meals and warm spaces in response to the cost-of-living crisis, along with initiatives like Small Steps, providing children with a healthy breakfast, a homework club, and environmental activities.

Collaboration between the two organisations, with shared values and missions, has yielded significant benefits. Down to Earth's well-optimised, welcoming, space, particularly for cooking courses facilitated by Kate's expertise, has addressed The Mix's challenge of finding a suitable space for identified community initiatives. Down to Earth benefits by aligning initiatives with local needs and promoting them through The Mix, reaching priority people who may not respond to traditional advertising methods. Jo Harvey at Sustainable Wantage said "having Down to Earth Community Cafe now in town, run by somebody I know well has been a total game changer, because it's ... a much easier process now, and her having those facilities available has changed how we can think about what we might be able to offer."

Measuring and reporting impact

SOFEA's Nourish and Flourish programme stood out as one that had a clear evaluation approach:

"...we have the pre-questionnaire for the students, post questionnaire for the students, parent questionnaire, teacher feedback form um and then the contributors feedback too... They have to pre-programme their scaling their knowledge ... They self <evaluate>, we've no other way of doing it basically, but it's all relative though, so you know the main thing is it's about the percentage shift that is going on , and it's regarding the number of NHS guidelines that they are following pre-and post. So last year for example, we saw a lift of about 50%, it was over 50%, shifting from having less than the recommended NHS guidelines for fruit and veg to actually having it and more." (CG1)

In contrast to this many of the other groups have limited capacity to effectively measure the true impact of their initiatives and find that relying solely on quantitative metrics overlooks the depth and human dimension of success.

"...So we had a community learning contract through <local higher education provider>. So, we were doing them through that. So there were certain criteria that had to be met to be able to do them through that and receive their funding. So it had to be a qualified teacher. We had to have a lesson plan. We had to have a policy for how we recruited people and various other bits of paperwork. So yeah, it was quite formal, behind the

scenes. That was just a way of accessing that money at that time... It's quite a long-winded process. But, you know, it gives you really good information. But when you get to the point where everybody's just going, oh, not this again, then it doesn't give you any information...we have given up because it's a paperwork nightmare" (CG5)

Storytelling emerges as a powerful alternative, offering a vivid portrayal of the real transformations resulting from these initiatives.

"They don't want that. They want testimonials. They want life-changing stories, all of which we can give them. They tell me things, and then they tell me something better at the end of the course. And you can really see. Even the photos at the beginning and end. So I feel like the paperwork trail is for who, it's not necessarily for them, it's not necessarily for me" (CG6)

What we heard – connecting with the Social Prescribing Pathway

The interviews with the Social Prescribers in different areas of Oxfordshire showcased diverse practice models. One offered short term (approximately 6 weeks) patient support, whilst the other extended assistance until patients no longer required it. While neither currently recommended cooking initiatives due to local service unavailability, both emphasised their necessity, particularly programmes aiding budget-friendly cooking.

Echoing earlier findings, the Social Prescribers and Health and Wellbeing Coach underscored broader social advantages, noting:

"the food is literally the carrot that draws everybody in because everybody needs food and then other areas are identified around food that they need support in. So, you know, I think there's a lot of different things there."

However, access and availability emerged as the prime challenges for these professionals. Patients often hesitated or were unable to travel beyond their immediate vicinity, emphasising the significance of location. Additionally encouraging attendance posed difficulties, requiring considerable time investment to build patient confidence. For instance, a patient referred to the gym needed substantial support before finally committing:

"She was there then, okay, I'm going ahead and doing it. Because I was giving it <time>, it's almost like I was believing in her and being there to do that thing."

The interviews emphasised the necessity of cooking programmes in Oxfordshire despite their current lack of availability. Professionals highlighted the broader social benefits while acknowledging challenges like accessibility and patient commitment

What we heard – wider stakeholder engagement

In addition to our formalised interview process we have also been gathering evidence and opinions from discussions with our wider network through our regular forums and meetings or adhoc conversations.

These discussions show that, in addition to other changes to the food environment, there is a strong appetite for more cooking initiatives across the county. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- ✓ An initiative outlined in the West Oxfordshire FAWG action plan involves the creation of a best practice model for a community cooking project, intended for expansion across the CFN (Community Food Network). West Oxfordshire District Council leads this effort with support from Chippy Larder, Cornerstone, Witney and West Oxon Foodbank, and GFO.
- ✓ Discussions with Cherwell Collective echoed the identified themes, reflecting their own experiences. They highlighted the shift in focus from relying on influential individuals to cultivating an inclusive environment that empowers everyone to contribute and take the lead. Moreover, they emphasised the critical role of location in their cooking sessions' attendance. Their transition from a smaller, intimate space, which garnered high demand, to a larger one led to a drastic decline in attendance. Members expressed feeling uncomfortable and "exposed" in the larger setting. This underscores the significant impact of seemingly minor factors on the success of initiatives, emphasising the need for nuanced and adaptable design in these programmes. Additionally, they detailed the hurdles encountered while attempting to establish connections with Social Prescribers in the area. They highlighted significant financial investments made in fostering relationships and promoting their services, which, unfortunately, have yielded limited success.
- ✓ Interactions with a Social Prescriber operating in The Leys, assisting individuals exhibiting multiple indicators of non-communicable disease risk, underscore the demand for cooking initiatives. They also highlight the challenges that people face in securing funding to kickstart new initiatives. This Social Prescriber effectively secured access to a shared pool for group exercise sessions and connected with a Nutritional Therapist for nutritional guidance. Presently, there's enthusiasm for organising cooking sessions to assist individuals with lower incomes. However, challenges have arisen concerning funding for a suitable space, equipment, and securing a facilitator for the sessions.

What we heard – discussion

Although this analysis delves deeply into cooking initiatives, it's vital not to isolate its findings. The essence lies in understanding that while this report focuses on cooking initiatives, it should not exist in isolation from the changes needed in the broader food environment. The report serves as a lens through which we can acknowledge the interconnectedness, underscoring that wider environmental changes are essential for holistic improvements in health and wellbeing, albeit beyond the specific focus of this analysis.

Contrary to certain suggestions in the literature, which imply that cooking initiatives might not suit lower socioeconomic groups¹⁰, our findings paint a different picture. They unveil a strong appetite for these initiatives across the county, emphasising their potential impact and relevance within these communities. However, it's essential to recognise that their effectiveness thrives within a network of supportive measures that encompass accessibility and affordability, creating an ecosystem where these initiatives can deliver the most impact.

While several interviews underscored the importance of tailoring interventions to specific life stages, particularly during pivotal transitions such as leaving home for the first time, there is evidently a requirement for initiatives that span the entire lifespan. Leaving home for the first time presents a crucial opportunity to impart essential skills and behaviours that can have a lasting impact on overall well-being. Nevertheless, as consistently highlighted in the analysis, the need for such initiatives is universally applicable across all life stages. The emphasis should lie in developing programmes within trusted groups that align with the distinct needs of their respective demographics.

One prevalent challenge consistently highlighted was funding. While funding is essential, there's a shared sentiment among respondents regarding the need for a balance in evaluation and reporting requirements. Overly stringent demands or convoluted application processes deter potential applicants, hindering the accessibility of crucial funds.

The establishment of new initiatives also poses significant challenges. Having influential advocates or change catalysts championing these causes can significantly impact the success and acceptance of such initiatives. These individuals can leverage their connections and embed key lessons,

facilitating the adoption of new behaviours within the community. However, building trust within vulnerable communities remains a pivotal yet intricate aspect. There's often an inherent distrust of statutory services, necessitating new organisations to work ardently to establish themselves within these communities. Breaking down barriers requires time and consistent efforts to establish credibility and rapport.

Paradoxically, while funding is crucial for new initiatives, respondents noted a disparity. There was a general feeling amongst the interviewees that funding opportunities seem more readily available for new projects compared to established organisations. This discrepancy poses a challenge for sustainable funding models, impacting the continuity and growth of initiatives that have already proven their worth, and garnered trust, within these communities.

In essence, the discussion showcases the multifaceted challenges and opportunities surrounding cooking initiatives for lower socioeconomic groups. It underscores the need for nuanced approaches, balancing funding accessibility, community trust-building, targeted intervention strategies, and sustainable programme development to enact lasting positive change within these communities. For funders contemplating investment in community cooking initiatives, we have compiled a list of factors to consider when reviewing proposals (Box 6). This guide is not designed as a scoring system for funding applications but aims to prompt thoughtful consideration of factors identified through our research.

Box 7 - Factors to consider for Funding New Local Cooking Initiatives

- ✓ To what extent is the group established or trusted in the community, or is it building a presence towards that?
- ✓ To what extent does the proposal include funding for additional purchasing of nutritious food if charitable donations are not available (where appropriate)?
- ✓ To what extent does the proposal describe the priority people the initiative is designed for, and articulate how they will reach and engage these people?
- ✓ To what extent does the proposal include time and capacity for building relationships with the priority people, and consider how the approach can be flexed to allow for different group dynamics?
- ✓ To what extent is the group able to offer additional support, or have appropriate signposting skills and materials available when additional needs arise?

- ✓ To what extent does the proposal consider supporting the development of skills outside of the classroom e.g. through a peer support group, or by providing food or equipment to use at home?
- ✓ To what extent do they have an inspirational leader who will support engagement in the initiative, either inside or outside the learning environment?
- ✓ To what extent does the evaluation approach measure impact, and is it sized proportionately for the funding available?

This checklist is for guidance only, based on the findings from this review, and is intended to be additional to normal due diligence activities.

Gaps in the analysis

As noted earlier in the report, the research methodology used here may have introduced some bias into the findings. For instance, among the eight groups interviewed, only one was involved in a cooking intervention within a school setting, and therefore may have influenced the findings reported.

Moreover, while employing a mixed methods approach, the primary emphasis of the study has been on the insights derived from key informant interviews, which constitute a qualitative approach. Even though saturation was achieved during the analysis phase, indicating that enough data had been collected to draw conclusions, it's crucial to acknowledge that the methodology employed does not deliver a comprehensive gap analysis concerning the geographical areas requiring new initiatives or whether a specific demographic is being underserved.

Furthermore, the influence of confounding factors also needs to be considered. For example, affecting behaviours does not solely originate within group settings but extends to external sources like social media. While this research did not delve into how social media impacts the cooking and healthy eating behaviours of the target groups, the analysis highlighted the significance of 'influencers'. Exploring how these influencers shape behaviours warrants further investigation despite not being within the scope of this current research.

Recommendations

Within the realm of social change and community development, investing in cooking initiatives emerges as a practical and impactful avenue among many for improving health and wellbeing. However, it stands as one facet of a larger strategy that must include broader changes within the food environment to create comprehensive and sustainable improvements.

Cooking initiatives offer more than culinary skills; they can serve to take down barriers and act as essential tools to assist vulnerable populations, often playing a crucial role in aligning with broader public health objectives through opportunities for signposting and providing essential support. By channelling resources into these initiatives, we can extend a helping hand while also promoting a healthier and more equitable society. Grounded in research and stakeholder insights, it's evident that, alongside other changes to the food environment, investing in cooking initiatives represents a multi-faceted pathway.

The strategic directives derived from this research underscore the need for tailored investments, nuanced approaches, and enabled change catalysts. Each recommendation serves to guide toward inclusive, impactful, and lasting transformations across diverse socioeconomic communities. These investments and nuanced approaches hold the potential not only to address immediate challenges but also to foster sustainable change and resilient communities.

1. Balance investment in novel and proven programmes:

In navigating strategic resource allocation, a two-fold approach emerges as imperative.

Firstly, allocating funding toward new and innovative endeavours, such as providing modest funding allocations (around £5000-7000) for pilot initiatives, or offering seed funding to empower a group in testing novel approaches within their community or promptly launching a new initiative upon identifying a gap or opportunity. The funding for these short-term innovative initiatives requires smaller and agile allocations, with appropriately scaled reporting requirements, specifically designed to encourage innovation and pilot pioneering approaches. These initiatives serve as experimental platforms, fostering creativity and exploration, ultimately paving the way for potential innovative solutions.

Secondly, larger funding allocations (£20, 000+) should be made available for longer-term investments in established, proven programmes – longer term, and/or large funding allocations can

serve to recognise the notable impact from having a trusted group delivering an established programme which has already showcased its efficacy, proving their impact over time. Sustained financial support is essential for the growth, consolidation, and the capacity of these initiatives to bring about lasting societal change. This backing allows them to operate without the perpetual concern for ongoing financial viability or the significant time investment required in securing additional funding.

As a next step, quantifying the cost of impact emerges as essential, yet challenging, given the diverse nature of initiatives. For novel initiatives piloting new approaches, utilising storytelling as an evaluative tool stands out as a promising method to gauge impact.

2. Scale Evaluation Requirements:

When allocating funding, it's crucial to ensure evaluation requirements align with the scale and capacity of the receiving organisations. Small funds burdened with extensive impact assessments or demanding data collection methods pose challenges for resource-constrained entities – Informal feedback has pointed out that, in certain cases, a substantial amount of time is needed to create, gather, and analyse data to meet the criteria set by funders. In these situations, as much as 20% of a modest funding allocation (around £5000) may be necessary for this aspect of the project – arguably diverting time and funds from delivering the vital frontline services.

Interviews revealed storytelling as a powerful tool for illustrating human impact, offering a more accessible and engaging approach for both fund recipients and providers, serving as a valuable alternative to intricate evaluation demands. It not only serves as a compelling way to demonstrate the human impact of interventions but also affords change catalysts and their beneficiaries the chance to reflect on the transformations they've experienced¹¹. It goes beyond meeting funders' requirements, offering a meaningful platform for individuals involved to introspect and share the profound changes catalysed by these initiatives. The Old Fire Stations serves as an example of where this has been done locally to great effect¹².

Clearly, there is an imperative to measure and assess the impact of initiatives, not just for funders but also to enable community groups to articulate the benefits they've gained for future business cases. However, it's recommended that this be scaled appropriately to the available funding.

Furthermore, the establishment of a peer support network (Recommendation 5) offers an opportunity to enhance capacity and expertise in evaluation approaches and techniques. Employing a 'see one, do one, teach one' model through a network of similar organisations is a scalable approach, requiring light-touch funding to facilitate peer network teachers in sharing their experiences with other organisations.

3. Enhance Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food

The analysis of interviews brought attention to the substantial obstacle posed by the high cost of healthy and nutritious foods for community groups wanting to run cooking initiatives. Additionally, the access and affordability of these items beyond the learning environment, when individuals are at home, presented a challenge for sustaining long-term healthy behavioural changes.

As a result, we recommend conducting preliminary scoping work to assess the feasibility and potential impact of introducing a local programme aimed at enhancing access to nutrition and sustainable food for low-income families or community groups.

An initiative, such as the Rose Vouchers as made possible by the Alexandra Rose Charity¹³, could address the underlying barrier of limited access and affordability to nutritious food, facilitating sustainable changes in healthy behaviour over the long term.

4. Empower Change Catalysts

Harnessing the power of influential change catalysts requires robust support systems. Offering dedicated resources financial backing and mentorship can empower individuals within their organisations, aligning with successful models to drive impactful societal changes. Examples of where this type of approach has been successful include:

- ✓ UN – who have invested in changemakers for climate action, that they describe as 'ordinary citizens, driving extraordinary change'¹⁴
- ✓ UnLtd – whose model of investment includes providing funding for social entrepreneurs, the impact of which can be seen in their most recent impact report¹⁵, and example case study ¹⁶.
- ✓ Changemakers – who have invested in people who demonstrate a human-centred approach to democratising access and information for the people around them ¹⁷.
- ✓ Oxford Community Foundation manage the Sankalpa fund, which invests in changemakers¹⁸

We estimate that the initial cost projections for an initiative supporting six change catalysts would require an investment of £70,000 for the first year. Change catalysts would be individuals from a variety of different organisations (community groups, charities, non-profit organisations, or those providing front-line support) that are already established in their own organisations. The funding would compensate their organisation to allow them to dedicate one day per week for a year to building relationships and catalysing change, along with additional resources allocated for purchasing necessities to support their initiatives. Offering them additional mentorship would help them to grow as an influential leader. This form of investment would emphasise the positive influence that influential individuals can have within a community, presenting an exciting prospect for the realisation of innovative and flexible opportunities.

5. Tailored Peer Learning with Community Nuances

Establishing a peer-to-peer network or forum for sharing ideas and case studies is imperative. Such a forum should offer adaptable frameworks that recognise the distinct dynamics of each community. Acknowledging the limitations of universal approaches underscores the importance of tailored and nuanced methodologies to foster effective learning and idea exchange among peers.

The Community Food Networks (CFNs), chaired by GFO, present an optimal forum to initiate these peer-to-peer idea exchanges. Among the three scheduled meetings in 2024, allocating one session specifically towards knowledge sharing—whether structured as a meeting or a flexible drop-in session—could significantly enhance collaborative learning and exchange.

6. Addressing Space Challenges for Community Impact

Addressing the challenge of accessing suitable spaces for cooking initiatives remains a significant obstacle for numerous groups. GFO's strategic review of available spaces underscores the urgent need for further exploration, emphasising the dearth of suitable locations throughout the county. A recommended solution involves considering how access to spaces can be facilitated. For instance, the creation of suitable spaces during the redevelopment of buildings, such as the new community centre in The Leys, presents an example of how an opportunity can be leveraged to address this issue.

Another potential solution lies in partnering schools with community groups during breaks, unlocking the untapped potential of utilising school cooking facilities. To support this, we recommend initiating a pilot programme. This programme could pair partner schools, such as private or secondary schools with suitable teaching kitchen facilities, with local groups. By unlocking the potential for groups to use teaching spaces during unused times, this initiative addresses the challenges posed by space constraints.

While previous experiences have revealed barriers related to access and safeguarding, we believe that with a focused intervention, these barriers can be overcome, creating a framework for broader use. It is recommended to conduct the pilot in different areas of the county during the school summer holidays, offering an opportunity to unveil various possibilities and break access barriers for community initiatives.

If the pilot project proves successful, the approach could be scaled to include other school breaks and weekends, providing a sustainable and adaptable solution to address challenges associated with accessing suitable spaces for cooking initiatives.

7. Collaboration: Social Prescribers and Community-Led Initiatives:

Engaging social prescribers in community cooking and health programmes seems like a promising partnership to promote, as they can leverage their healthcare connections to reach potential beneficiaries. However, it's crucial they match referred individuals with the capacity and skills of community groups. Overwhelmingly complex cases may strain these services, emphasising the importance of aligning referrals with the support capabilities of these community initiatives.