



Real Food Works

Formerly Trading As



Project Review, August 2008

"I feel much more confident about being able to provide healthier food for my family."

This comment, from a young Ashington mum, at the end of one of our **'Big Cooks & Little Cooks'** courses sums up what we, as an organisation, are all about.

The organisation started operating in November 2004 with the aim of addressing the poor health statistics in Wansbeck, a part of the former mining area of Northumberland. Since then the aim has changed from being a response to the issue of access to fresh fruit and vegetables, to one which addresses wider and more fundamental aspects of the poor diet and health of the district.

It's in the bag!

In 2004 a partnership was formed between a number of organisations, concerned with the poor health indicators for Wansbeck e.g. Northumberland Care Trust, Wansbeck Healthy Living Centres, East Ashington Development Trust, Greening for Growth and Blyth Food Co-op, with the express aim of improving access to fresh fruit and vegetables for those in the most deprived council wards.

This aim was a response to the assertion, made by many in the community, that the main reason preventing them from eating a more healthy diet, i.e. one including the government's recommended **'5 a day'**, was not having access to affordable and locally available fresh produce.



The name chosen for the new initiative **'Wansbeck Real Food'**, reflected the view of the group that what was needed was a shift from 'food as fuel' to one which appreciated the intrinsic value of 'real food' i.e. that which nourishes the mind and feelings, as well as the body.

Funding for the project was provided by **Northumberland Care Trust**, initially as part of it's **Five-A-Day** initiative. This was extended in conjunction with **Neighbourhood Renewal** funding through **Wansbeck Initiative**.

Based on the earlier experiences of food co-ops operating in Blyth it was decided to establish a number of similar consumer outlets in the most deprived wards in Wansbeck. These would supply fresh produce sourced from the Gateshead wholesale market and from local producers, and deliver it to the food co-ops located in a range of community settings including Healthy Living Centres, day care centres for the elderly, training organisations and community buildings.

Development of the project:

- November 2004 - project starts operating as Wansbeck Real Food
- April 2005 - first food co-ops open for business
- June 2006 - *What's Cooking!* launched
- First Good Food Coach recruited
- July 2008 - Real Food Works incorporated

Some Facts & Figures:

Wansbeck Real Food Co-ops delivered over:

- 2300 orders
- 2000 bags of fresh vegetables
- 2200 bags of fruit
- 400 salad bags

'What's Cooking?' has:

- Worked with 63 partners
- Delivered 360 sessions
- Involved over 11,750 participants
- Worked with all ages from 4 to 94 years



By April 2005 eight of these co-ops were established and in the year following over 1,600 orders for more than 2,800 bags of fresh produce were delivered to 200 members of the food co-op. The bags, which contained a varied selection of seasonal fruit and vegetables, were competitively priced - some 30-40% cheaper than local supermarkets and were delivered with recipe sheets to help the recipients prepare tasty, nutritious and varied dishes.

Very soon however, two significant issues emerged: firstly, and most importantly, the customers ordering the produce were invariably those who were already eating fresh foods – the ones we



needed to reach (i.e. those living on ready meals and take-away foods, high in fats, salt and sugar) were not interested in ordering from the co-ops.

This led to the second problem, in line with experience in other parts of the country: namely, because of the limitations inherent in the 'food co-op bag' model, customers would very quickly revert to buying from their, more convenient, former source, with the result that the number of orders reduced significantly.

These limitations included:

- the need to remember to order every week,
- being around at a fixed time to collect the order
- the fact that the customer had no control over the content of the bags (what was supplied was based on seasonality and best value)

As a result of a review in early 2006, of the impact of the project, it was decided to change the aims of the project and to focus our efforts on awareness

raising, education and cooking skills to try to reach those in the community who lacked these resources and were therefore unable to make the necessary changes in their diet.



What's Cooking?

In order to deliver our new aims a series of strategic decisions were taken:

1. We would need to take the '**real food**' experience out into the community, rather than expecting people to come to us
2. In order to successfully do this with our limited staff, effective partnership working was essential
3. We would need to be mobile and self sufficient because of the limited facilities for teaching practical cooking available in the community
4. A mixture of demonstrations and hands-on cooking experiences were needed to ensure that we engage with the maximum number of people possible
5. The information we provided would need to be realistic and practical and a key element to acceptance would be the opportunity to 'taste the experience'

As a result of these decisions and the very fortunate availability of a small van, in June 2006 our '**What's Cooking?**' outreach service was launched.

Over the following months our unique approach, using **microwave cooking**, engaged with all ages in the community from toddler groups, schools and youth organisations to the Women's Institute and residents in sheltered accommodation.

This latter was in fact our 100th session – arrived at in just six months.

One of the many sessions we delivered for Northumberland Care Trust was for young people from whom we received the ultimate accolade for our smoothies and wraps when the youngsters who took part proclaimed:

"... the Good Food Dudes were awesome!"



It became clear that our innovative approach, using microwave cooking, demonstrated a number of key benefits, particularly for those with little or no cooking skills/experience:

- They do not have to learn a 'new technology' i.e. using a 'stove and pans', as they are usually comfortable using a microwave to re-heat food.
- It removes the 'cooking takes too long' barrier, because they already think of microwave cooking as quick.
- The food you can't cook in a microwave i.e. deep fried/or baked pastry foods are things we generally need to cut down on anyway!
- Microwave cookery is safer for busy parents, as you do not have to 'stand over' the cooker whilst the food cooks.
- It the healthiest way of cooking vegetables; because you need to add little or no water and the food cooks quickly, so the nutrients are preserved better than by any other method.
- Over 87% of kitchens have a microwave and for some it is their only means of cooking.
- It is energy saving - there can be up to 75% saving on the power used, compared to gas or electric.
- Microwave ovens are cheap to buy and the cookware needed is also inexpensive.

One young mum came back the week after we had been learning about salt reduction, to say that her health visitor - *'had given her a pat on the back'* for reducing the salt in her child's diet.

Community Good Food Coach

By April 2007 it became clear that the services we offered could not be developed further with just one member of staff and so a decision was taken to recruit and train an assistant – whom we named our

'Community Good Food Coach.'

In partnership with the county dietician we ran an accredited nutrition skills course and from the eight participants we were able to offer one the opportunity to join our team.

Over the following year we delivered an increasingly diverse range of sessions and the growing demand for our services outside of Wansbeck, saw us being paid to deliver sessions from Sunderland to Berwick and across to Haltwhistle in the west.

We have developed two distinct programmes for our **'hands-on'** cooking sessions:

- ***'BIG COOKS & little cooks!'*** – in which we work with children and adult family members together, producing a range of food over a 3-4 week course
- ***'Cooking's Cool!'*** – working with groups of young people or adults on courses tailored to their needs.

There are three key elements to these programmes:

1. Nutrition and food & kitchen safety knowledge delivered through some practical activity
2. Participation in the production of quick, tasty and nutritious dishes
3. Sitting down together and sharing the food produced

Because the sessions are informal, practical and above all fun, the messages learned are seen to be relevant and have a direct impact, not only on the participants, but also within their wider networks.



BIG COOKS & little cooks!

By the end of 2007 we also had available a trailer equipped with our 'outside event kit', comprising a gazebo, generator, BBQ & tables etc. This enabled us to deliver our '**Good Food Dudes!**' cook & taste demonstrations at range of outside events including Druridge Country Park, The Borders Green Festival, Blyth Ridley Park and Morpeth Town Fair - truly a case of taking 'everything including the kitchen sink!'

In June 2008 we celebrated the second anniversary of launching our '**What's Cooking?**' outreach service and we have over the two years, worked with more than 60 partner organisations and **delivered 360 cook & taste sessions** helping over 11,750 people to realise that eating well does not have to be "costly, complicated, time consuming and boring!"

Feed The World!

As the funding for the **Wansbeck Real Food** project was coming to an end, in March 2008, it was clear that there was a growing demand for our services and an increasingly significant aspect of our work was that we were being paid to deliver many more of our sessions *outside* of Wansbeck District. This potential for income generation, and the need to formalise the structure of the project led to the decision, in July 2008, to establish the organisation as a **Social Enterprise Company**, Limited by Guarantee and to change the name of the organisation to reflect our wider geographic remit

Wrapping up.

In reviewing the work of the past four years we recognise that we have developed a unique and innovative model for delivering healthy eating messages. Our vision for the business is to use the experience and reputation that we have gained to extend the scope of the work that we do both in terms of content, (we have a number of exciting ideas about this), and also by extending the geographical spread of our work. At the same time we look forward to developing opportunities for volunteers and trainees to gain valuable experience from working with us.



BIG COOKS & little cooks! session



Some comments from our participants:

Adults:

"... he tried a lot more fruit - so my fruit shopping bill will increase!"

"It has made me look around for different & healthier foods"

"We've learned how much you can do by cooking home made food in little time and effort"

and children:

"I learned what is healthy and what is not"

"I didn't think I liked soup - but I do"

"I learned how to combine ingredients to make nice things"

Real Food Works

Cleasewell Hill Healthy Living Centre,
The Square, Guidepost,
Choppington.
NE62 5DF

Phone: 01670 827955

Mob: 07951 500258

Fax: 0870 7065716

Email: david@realfoodworks.co.uk

Web: www.realfoodworks.co.uk



Real Food Works is a Social Enterprise
Company Reg: 6630597
(Formerly T/A Wansbeck Real Food)