

Cook it!

An evaluation of a community nutrition education programme in Northern Ireland - the summary report



Health
Promotion
Agency

The history of **Cook it!** in Northern Ireland

Cook it! was originally introduced to Northern Ireland in 1995 by the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA) in a collaborative project with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust.

Having run for five years, this initial phase of the programme was evaluated in 2000. *Cook it!* was found to be a valuable approach to community based nutrition education. However, a number of recommendations were made as to how it could be improved. In conjunction with a number of community dietitians the HPA therefore revised and updated the programme, which included a redesigned resource manual with improved session outlines and recipe sheets.

In 2004 Big Lottery funding was secured to deliver the

programme for three years (until 2007). In this phase the programme was supported by a regional *Cook it!* officer based at the HPA, and managed locally by four *Cook it!* coordinators located in:

- Causeway Health and Social Services Trust;
- North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust;
- Southern Health and Social Services Board;
- Western Health Action Zone.

Each of the four *Cook it!* teams were responsible for training tutors at local level and provided them with updates and support visits as required. *Cook it!* teams included a registered dietitian (*Cook it!* coordinator), a development worker and administration staff.

An evaluation of the Big Lottery funded phase of the programme, which was designed and managed by the HPA with support from the local coordinators, ran between March 2005 and March 2007.

The aim of **Cook it!**

The programme aims to support people in the community who want to enhance their cooking skills and who have an interest in healthier eating, particularly where cost is a consideration. *Cook it!* offers hands-on practical experience of cooking and preparing food as well as enhancing individuals' knowledge of healthy eating and the hygienic handling of food.

The objectives of **Cook it!**

The objectives of *Cook it!* are:

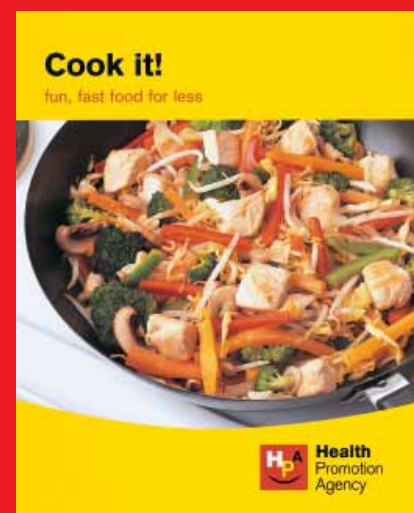
- to provide practical hands-on experience of cooking and preparing healthy food;
- to enhance the participants' knowledge of healthy food and nutrition;
- to increase participants' awareness about the safe handling of food.

The programme is designed to be practical and to encourage group participation. This includes group discussions and quizzes as well as the opportunity for hands-on cooking experience in at least four out of the six sessions and the opportunity to sample the completed recipes.

Programme outline

Cook it! is usually completed over six sessions, although the programme is extendable for longer periods if required. Each of the sessions examines a different topic.

- Session 1. Health on a plate
- Session 2. Find out about fibre
- Session 3. Fabulous fruit and veg
- Session 4. Counting on calcium
- Session 5. Protein providers
- Session 6. A little of what you fancy



The target audience

Cook it! is suitable for use with a wide range of groups in the community including:

- mother and toddler groups;
- women's groups;
- men's groups;
- older people in sheltered housing;
- older people in day care groups;
- residents in homeless hostels;
- young people leaving residential care;
- youth offenders or prisoners in rehabilitation programmes.

Other, more specialised groups have also used the programme. These have included mental health service user groups and brain injury clients.



Becoming a *Cook it!* tutor



Anyone wishing to become a *Cook it!* tutor must complete a registration form and fulfil the criteria for selection, which include:

- employers' consent;
- time commitment to deliver the programme;
- ability to access a suitable group to deliver the programme to;
- commitment to deliver at least two programmes within the year;
- commitment to attend network meetings and annual updates.

Cook it! tutor training provides the trainees with knowledge in basic nutrition and healthy eating messages, food hygiene, food safety skills and group skills. It also provides hands-on experience of a practical cookery session. Once trained, the tutors are equipped with the basic skills needed to deliver the six week programme.

From 2004 to 2007 tutor training was offered in the following areas:

- Causeway Health and Social Services Trust;
- Eastern Health and Social Services Board;
- Southern Health and Social Services Board;
- Western Health and Social Services Board.

Venues

The *Cook it!* programme is delivered in a variety of different venues throughout Northern Ireland, including community centres, church halls, sheltered housing, homeless hostels, day centres, drop-in centres and prisons.

Financial support

During the Big Lottery funded period *Cook it!* teams were able to offer the tutors financial support for delivering a programme. This small amount of money covered food costs or enabled *Cook it!* groups to buy equipment. Some areas also offered financial support for childcare arrangements. This encouraged women with young children to attend the course.

Partnership working

Partnership working proved to be a real strength of the Big Lottery funded phase of *Cook it!* The partnerships included:

- provision of core food safety and food hygiene information, including a Basic Food Hygiene Certificate course in some areas. This was delivered by environmental health officers from district councils located in the four areas where the programme was delivered;
- a half day workshop provided by the Education Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) on raising awareness of low literacy skills in all four areas;
- first aid training for tutors in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area;
- update sessions on food budgeting provided by the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland in the EHSSB area.

How we evaluated *Cook it!*

The *Cook it!* evaluation focused on the two groups crucial to the implementation of the programme: tutors and participants. It examined the tutors' views on the programme, and also assessed the impact on participants' shopping, cooking and eating habits.

The overall aim was twofold:

- to evaluate the process of running, organising and managing *Cook it!*
- to assess whether the provision of an interactive nutrition education programme, alongside the development of skills, made an impact on people's eating patterns.

Tutors

Following acceptance onto a *Cook it!* tutor training course, each tutor completed a pre- and post-training questionnaire. The pre-training questionnaire was carried out immediately before training started and asked about knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in relation to personal eating habits. The post-training questionnaire completed at the end of the second day of training enquires about tutors' confidence in completing the different tasks associated with *Cook it!*

In addition to the pre-training questionnaire the baseline evaluation also took account of information provided on the tutors' registration forms, including previous nutrition training.



A year after their training a follow-up questionnaire was also sent to tutors who completed the pre- and post-training questionnaires.

Participants

The HPA developed two questionnaires to assess participants' nutritional knowledge and behaviour with regard to shopping, cooking and eating.

The pre-intervention questionnaire was administered prior to the start of each programme. The post-intervention questionnaire was administered at the end of the final day of the six week programme. This allowed us to assess whether there had been improvements in knowledge and behaviour over the six weeks.

A follow-up questionnaire, which participants completed six to nine months after completing a *Cook it!* programme, looked at the wider impacts of the programme such as confidence, self-esteem and participation in physical activity.

A sample of 478 participants completed both the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, with a total of 350 participants consenting to the longer-term evaluation. From this group, a 50% sample was taken and 175 follow-up questionnaires were sent out, resulting in a response rate of 37% (65 responses).

As an incentive, all questionnaires were entered into a prize draw.

Group discussions

The evaluation included focus group discussions, which were carried out with people who had taken part in a *Cook it!* programme six months previously.

In total, five focus groups were carried out: three with mother and toddler groups, one with older people and one with young men from a drop-in centre.

A further three 'mini focus groups' were undertaken with more specialised groups: one with individuals who had mental health problems, one with brain injury participants, and a group of participants from a homeless shelter. The tutors of these three specialised groups were also interviewed as part of the qualitative research.

Key findings

Behaviour changes reported by tutors

- The majority (89%) of tutors reported that *Cook it!* training helped them gain confidence in nutritional knowledge.
- Nearly half of the tutors (46%) were consuming the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables per day one year after training.
- Tutors showed many improvements in nutritional knowledge. For example, after training more were aware that the statement: 'Honey is better for you than sugar' was incorrect.
- Nearly three quarters (71%) gained confidence in delivering nutritional courses.

Participants' shopping, cooking and eating habits

- Immediately after completing the six week *Cook it!* programme more participants reported looking at food labels when choosing what to buy. Further significant improvements were noted in the long term.
- After taking part in the programme significantly fewer participants reported buying the same foods every week.

"I mean they do this big advert you know, only 80 calories and you are automatically attracted to it but when you turn it round the fat content could be very high." **Sure Start group participant**

"I wouldn't be afraid to cook any food now and I'd be willing to try different things." **Homeless group participant**

- The frequency with which participants consumed convenience foods decreased following *Cook it!* Further decreases were seen after six to nine months.

"People thought that to make something from scratch was a huge task and this course showed that it wasn't." **Sure Start group participant**

- Many dietary changes were observed. Participants said that after the programme they consumed fried foods and high fat snacks less frequently and consumed more fruit and vegetables each day.

We are getting more modern in our cooking with stir-fries and pasta. It makes a nice change from the traditional meals." **Older people's group participant**



Wider impacts for participants

- Sixty three percent of participants reported that the programme had helped them to be more confident generally.
- Many individuals took up physical activity as a result of *Cook it!*

"If you can achieve one thing it gives you confidence in other areas to go out and achieve." **Homeless participant**

"I think when you are going (to Cook it!) it motivates you more to do exercise and you are feeling better." **Southern Sure Start**

- Many participants welcomed the social inclusion the programme brought and reported 'meeting with friends every week' as one of its most enjoyable aspects.

"To get out of the house... just to meet mothers in a similar situation giving ideas and that, it was great. It was a very social thing." **Southern Sure Start**

- Participants shared the nutrition messages they had learned with friends and family. Many encouraged their children and partners to consume healthier foods through providing the healthier recipes at home.

"My mum especially; she enjoys the stuff and so does my granny and they're starting to cook them as well." **Western Sure Start**

In conclusion...

The *Cook it!* programme is a regional nutrition education programme which is delivered in the community by members of the community. Extensive evaluation found that it is an enjoyable approach and that the programme aims of increasing knowledge of nutrition and food hygiene, enhancing cooking skills and motivating changes in eating patterns were met.

The social aspect of the programme was reported to be popular and beneficial. Wider impacts were also seen, including increased self-esteem and participation in physical activity.

The *Cook it!* programme stands out as an excellent example of a tiered nutrition education programme that can improve individual nutritional knowledge, impact on eating behaviour and also influence other aspects of lifestyle including physical activity, confidence and self-esteem.

It is anticipated that ongoing work to achieve long-term sustainability for the *Cook it!* programme throughout Northern Ireland will be successful.



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The three year Big Lottery funded *Cook it!* programme was delivered through a partnership agreement between:

- Causeway Health and Social Services Trust;
- Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland;
- North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, covering the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area;
- Southern Health and Social Services Board;
- Western Health Action Zone covering the Western Health and Social Services Board area.

The programme was also supported regionally by environmental health officers from the local councils and the Education Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA).