

Case study Community Connections Mobile Food Store

Summary

The Communication Connections Mobile Food Store is an award winning primary care trust (PCT) funded grocery van travelling between deprived areas in Great Yarmouth and Waveney, with two on-board Health Trainers offering advice on lifestyle choices and healthy eating. They say “Our business is not to sell vegetables, but to change behaviour”

Background

The project was devised by health improvement team managers at Great Yarmouth and Waveney PCT and took only three months of preparation to implement. Research into Greenwich Community Foods helped to consolidate plans, but really it was the willingness and availability of local partners in the third and private sector that enabled it to develop so quickly and uniquely. A three year grant covering employee’s costs and overheads was secured via their public health budget.



Planning



The area was identified as having one of the lowest rates of fruit and vegetable consumption in the UK. Also, unemployment levels are high. An NHS tool; MOSAIC was used to map the worst deprived zones, which formed the first schedule of stops for the van – as time went on, the less popular stops were weaned out and residents elsewhere requested the van. Stops can be outside libraries, schools, church halls, and traveller sites. The van now has 22 stops over a five day week, and has to tell people asking for new stops that whilst they can supply an autonomous food co-op, as it does with the Lowestoft Fresh Produce Co-op in Gunton, there is little lee-way in their timetable.

Procedures

Once they had decided on running the project, the PCT put out a tender for third sector partners to operate the van, and Community Connections (CC), a well-reputed local development agency, won the contract. The two Health Trainers are employed by CC. A manual is kept in the van for reference on systems in case the regular drivers are away. Evaluations are performed regularly, by the Diet and Health group at University of East Anglia.

Produce

McCarthy’s – a vegetable merchant in Norwich – had already been considering setting up a community food enterprise and when contacted, were eager to collaborate. They donated the project a van and kitted it out with shelving, etc. and supply the scheme with produce every day. The wholesale price the produce is bought for is what the customers

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pay; there is no mark-up. The van carries a wide range of fresh produce and also sells bread, milk and vitamins, the latter covered by Healthy Start vouchers. Produce is not organic but much of it is sourced from East Anglia

Promotion

Word of mouth has definitely been their best publicity, but they have also appeared in local and national news, on the radio, and done leaflet drops door-to-door. The charisma of the Health Trainers – one has a background in youth outreach work – certainly contributes to its acceptance and popularity amongst customers. Activities include supplying recipe sheets, taster sessions, cooking sessions and signposting to services like Stop Smoking and weight management. Cheap healthy snacks are provided at local schools. All customers get fruit loyalty cards – buy 6 items get one free.



Progress

Great Yarmouth Mobile Food Store has turned around the prospects of Lowestoft Fresh Produce Co-op since it began to act as their supplier. The two enterprises have a mutually beneficial relationship, and together have made Fridays into 'Healthy Eating Fridays' on the Gunton Estate, Lowestoft.

Last year, the Mobile Food Store (MFS) saw up to 850 customers in a month – in 2010 this increased to an average of 30 customers per stop. Their six month evaluation demonstrated that customers increased their average fruit and vegetable intake by more than one portion per day.

A case study of the project appeared in Customer MATTERS, a review of public service innovation published by the Cabinet Office, and the Department for Business have also expressed their interest. In 2009 the MFS won a Health Enterprise East award in the 'prevention & wellbeing' category, for which they received £2,500 towards continuing their good work. They were also nominated for the 2010 award.

An exit strategy has been planned in case the project cannot attract funding beyond its initial three years; this involves devolving operational responsibilities to groups of residents at each van stop. Currently the recipient communities aren't seen as ready for this step, so the project is working with Sustain's regional food co-ops adviser to deliver training and help take forward this plan.