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Working Together for
Food Justice



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The Children's Kitchen Evaluation Feeding Britain

Impact Report

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INTRODUCTION

The Children's Kitchen (TCK) is a city-wide project based in Bristol, led by chef Jo Ingleby, BBC Cook of the Year 2015. It is part of the larger Pathways from Poverty project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. TCK commenced on 6th January 2020 and runs events, works within nurseries and children's centres in areas of Bristol with high levels of food insecurity. The project aims to increase 'food knowledge' to early years children (2-5 years old) and families across the city, including talking about cooking, growing produce, recycling, and food waste. Regular sessions in nurseries and FOOD clubs empower children and families to explore food in an exciting and informal way, with opportunities to cook produce with guidance from TCK practitioners and supervising staff. TCK works with a range of partners who provide various services across Bristol to increase the reach of the project. This evaluation shows the progress of TCK as of May 2021. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, findings show that the project is well received, highly successful and achieving all objectives.

PROJECT DESIGN AND PRIORITIES

By working closely with the Early Years teams at Bristol City Council, TCK has been able to set up a delivery model that has recognised the areas and individuals that will benefit the most from the project. Alongside the Project Director, five Project Development workers build relationships with new and existing partners in order to deliver the five core project aims:

- Encouraging young children to develop a taste for fresh produce through exploring food in their own way, following their interests and senses rather than recipes.
- Developing Food Hubs within Children's Centres who will then influence other early years settings across Bristol.
- Supporting onsite growing and links to surplus produce for children to eat and explore, and for families to take home.
- Enabling Early Years Practitioners to develop skills specific to working with young children and food, working alongside the Food for Life Early Years Awards.
- Supporting existing initiatives such as FOOD Clubs to provide cookery activities for families. Not just increasing skills but also providing free, or nearly free, produce for families on low incomes.

The project engages with large state-funded early years nurseries, and works with FOOD Clubs to offer demonstrations, workshops, and low-price food to families in Bristol. The nurseries are run by Bristol City Council, with more focus on a curriculum, as opposed to a care-centred approach adopted within private nurseries. The FOOD clubs ran by Family Action, a national organisation, offer good quality, low cost food to its local members. TCK and partners are able to introduce the topic of food into these settings in a fun way, with the hope of instilling cultural change in practitioners and children.

ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR

Overall, the project has reached thousands of people through its work. This includes:

- The nursery strand, reaching approximately **900 children** across ten of the 12 council-run nurseries in Bristol. There are plans, once Covid-19 restrictions lift, to reach at least another 250 children through already engaged and the remaining two nurseries.

- Through its partnership with FOOD Clubs, the project has reached at least **810 people¹** in the summer of 2020, across 45 family food sessions. Weekly, **120 families** are provided with recipes and attend cookery demonstrations, reaching another **360 people** each week. **2,000 family recipe booklets** were distributed over the school holidays in 2020/21 via the FOOD clubs. **750 FOOD Club families** (approximately 2250 people) were supplied with resources including seeds, pots, ingredients, and easy-to-follow recipes.
- **140 early years practitioners** have received hands-on training, with more to be reached via an online course.
- In partnership with Bristol Sport Foundation's 'Active, Healthy, Happy' campaign, TCK has provided recipes and cooking videos within a new app intended for children, achieving **6,000 downloads**. So far, across the campaign, there has been **10,000 online views** of TCK cookery videos, and a further **3,000 recipe booklets** distributed to families in areas of high food insecurity.

BEST PRACTICE

Consultees highlighted key factors contributing to the project's high engagement and positive views. They are the early years focus and beneficiary-led approach, and partnership working.

Early Years Focus and Beneficiary-led Approach

TCK and partner organisation consultees felt that **targeting children at a younger age has clear benefits** due to fewer external influences and entrenched behaviours such as not cooking with parents at home and unhealthy eating patterns. Consultees felt that long term cultural change within families, such as eating more fresh fruit and vegetables, is more likely to happen when engaging children early on. Some consultees also said that when involving younger children in a group setting, they are more likely than older children to engage, play and experiment with food, and eat new ingredients if they observe their peers doing the same.

The flexibility of the project and being beneficiary-led is key to its success as **each cooking session is adapted to the needs and wants of children or families**. There are no strict recipes and there is opportunity to adapt and experiment with flavour combinations. All sessions are voluntary, so beneficiaries can decide what they want to plant, taste, prepare, and cook. This retains engagement and interest and provides a sense of ownership over what they have made during the sessions, rather than simply watching a demonstration. Consultees felt that because the project targets early years children and incorporates active participation, it results in younger children feeling empowered to make their own informed choices about food and are therefore more likely to enjoy the sessions.



"The children are much more likely to try and eat something new if they see another child eating it, especially within early years." – The Children's Kitchen consultee

"It's a simple approach to target early years... you can't have a three year old in a cooking group without a parent there." – The Children's Kitchen consultee

¹ Based on an average of three people per family, provided by The Children's Kitchen

Partnerships

TCK has shown excellent ability in *working alongside city-wide partners, not duplicating work, complimenting existing services and activities, and building resilient relationships*. Partnership working has allowed for a greater number of children and families to be reached and increased engagement. The network of diverse local partners includes:



TCK carefully selects partner organisations to collaborate with to *expand and diversify its existing services, plug gaps, and tailor activities to fit with existing services*. For example, the project has partnered with Travelling Kitchen to extend their cookery workshops for school age children to now cater for early years children. TCK run and co-lead events with partners, for example, incorporating healthy food with physical activity by conducting cookery workshops for families attending a series of events with Bristol Sport Foundation. The project also addresses shortcomings in existing services. For example, one consultee felt frustrated that food banks are only able to supply emergency food parcels for families but often they do not know what to do with the ingredients provided. TCK plugs this gap and teaches families how to cook.

The project has been successful in utilising the specialist skills, expertise, and local knowledge of partners to create a model that works well for the communities it serves. Specialist partners are able to work with TCK to tailor activities based on their understanding of the beneficiary group, considering what already works, and focusing on what is likely to get a positive response and high engagement. Also, partners benefit from often being able to build close relationships with families and can therefore refer families to TCK if they think they will benefit.

“It’s always an open conversation and making sure we’re not repeating stuff, we make sure we know what each of our roles are. Everyone’s experts in different things.” – The Children’s Kitchen consultee

“The collaborative approach is great. We’re really utilising the experts across the city and what they’re particularly good at, they’re leading that. This makes the project so much stronger when all these organisations’ strengths are realised and put to use... We can get the most out of the communities we work in and are most familiar with.” – The Children’s Kitchen consultee

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Beneficiaries have increased their vocabulary with new ingredients and developed confidence in trying new healthy food. Incorporating food in a fun way removes barriers such as fear or apprehension in trying new fruit or vegetables. All consultees reported that building breadth of knowledge of ingredients was a main outcome of the project. Beneficiaries are introduced to a variety of food types including herbs and spices and are educated on new flavours and flavour combinations. Practitioners have witnessed beneficiaries become more adventurous over time.



Children in particular are empowered and supported by the gentle encouragement by practitioners to touch, taste and try the food. Consultees reported that this approach results in children returning home after sessions and telling their parents what they liked to eat, and what they enjoyed about the sessions, often resulting in parents involving their children in cooking and purchasing ingredients that the children have enjoyed.

The project has **increased skills around growing produce**, and children have enjoyed growing a diverse range of food from seeds, being taught where food comes from, learning about sustainable horticulture and environmentally friendly ways of producing food. Many of the nurseries and children's centres now have their own growing facilities, due to the work of TCK and its partners.

"We have broad beans, pumpkins, onions, garlic, herbs, peppers. We are trying to teach them more natural ways of deterring insects. Instead of pellets, we're using coffee and eggshells. We have compost bins at the nurseries too... The children are very protective over what they're growing." –

Project Development consultee.

Beneficiaries have learnt about the importance of reducing food waste as a result of the project through having access to cook and eat surplus produce provided by FareShare South West. Cooked meals are produced using perfectly good ingredients that would otherwise be thrown away. This has allowed early years children to learn the benefits of healthy home grown produce, whilst also introducing them to the problems associated with food waste.

"My impression is that nothing is out of bounds, no fruit or veg can't be used."– The Children's

Kitchen consultee

During sessions, **children and adults have gained culinary skills in the kitchen** and are exploring and trying new cooking methods. They have increased their confidence using kitchen equipment e.g., chopping using plastic knives, and cooking food using firepits. Parents have the security of TCK for support if they are unsure using certain cooking techniques or ingredients.



"We've used banana leaves as plates, cracked coconuts, and cooked yams."– The Children's Kitchen consultee

Practitioners have been able to gain skills and confidence in teaching and working with food with early years children. They have learnt new techniques and approaches from TCK practitioners and are now able to practice them without support. For example, most nursery staff did not feel comfortable using fire with young children but with guidance from TCK, they have become more confident in doing so.

OUTCOMES FOR FAMILIES

Alongside the achievements of the work in nurseries, via the **FOOD Clubs, the project directly involves parents with early years children**, with many consultees reporting this to be key to the success of the project. Early years children are more dependent on their parents, meaning it is essential for them to be present during sessions at FOOD Clubs. FOOD Club consultees reported that parents play an active role and are empowered to make their own choices during sessions. They are able to ‘learn by doing’, try new ingredients, cooking techniques, and recipes whilst with their children. Consultees felt that this direct contact with parents will increase the likelihood of instilling healthy eating patterns amongst families.



Parents have learnt that using healthy produce such as fruit and vegetables can be cost effective when making family meals. The focus on fresh ingredients is apparent during The Children’s Kitchen cooking sessions and demonstrations; and families have the opportunity to learn more about nutrition and healthy diets, with many realising that ready meals are not always the cheapest and healthiest options available.

Although the project is not advertised directly as a healthy eating initiative, **fresh produce is supplied and contributes to the making of all meals** during cooking sessions. Many consultees reported that this gentle approach means that more families attend sessions as they are less likely to be deterred when signposted, but also results in the promotion and acceptance of a healthier diet.

“It’s really important we’re aware that some of the places we’re working in is that there’s real food insecurity and food poverty. Food justice is what the children’s kitchen is about, removing barriers to eating healthy, but doing it not in an obvious way.” The Children’s Kitchen consultee

“It’s thinking about how families can budget every week and how they think about different ingredients. Starting up these conversations is important.” – The Children’s Kitchen consultee

Cultural and healthy changes are already happening within families. Some consultees reported that parents can be resistant when trying new food, but over time, the sessions can create a cultural shift when they witness other attendees and their children enjoying new experiences. Some consultees reported that most parents on low income are not able to risk wasting money on food their families will not enjoy. During the cooking sessions and demonstrations, families can try the ingredients, as well as the finished meal at the end.



Families are less likely to experience food insecurity and the need for emergency food as a result of the project. A core part of the projects activities is that families who live in areas of high food poverty are fed. Following many of the sessions, beneficiaries are provided with healthy meals and food parcels with recipes to take home. Further, consultees said that, together with the sessions, this can allow parents to develop and build confidence in replicating this and making free meals at home.

During TCK sessions within FOOD Clubs, **parents can observe and be involved in their children’s learning journey.** They can see their children enjoying the sessions and can also take pleasure in the activities themselves. Consultees reported that it brings families closer together, mentioning that often parents’ feedback that they enjoy the sessions because they are able to have fun and spend quality time with their children, which they are rarely able to do.

Involving parents and families in sessions delivers a number of social benefits, as it allows families to interact with each other, meet others, and build relationships within their local community. This can provide families, in particular those that are isolated, an outlet where they can relax, and enjoy spending time with others. Consultees reported that this has wider wellbeing impacts on the families the project provides services to, resulting in them being happier and healthier.

“It’s about getting the adults to appreciate how valuable this type of learning is and that their child actually did some cooking today.” – The Children’s Kitchen consultee

“The Children’s Kitchen’s project has a community feel, it’s a place where everyone can come together, it’s not just nursery-focused. Families can meet new people and share their experiences with food.” – Project Development consultee

For many families, TCK provides an opportunity for them to ‘be visible’ in their communities. Consultees reported that some parents, particular those located in deprived communities with young children, are very isolated from professionals and aren’t involved in or able to attend regular sessions or activities. Consultees said that being present during sessions allows families to feel supported and cared for. Further, it enables agencies to discover what is going on at home for some families, such as difficulties in parenting children, domestic abuse, or financial struggles. Consultees said that the project is able to use food as a ‘way in’, to start conversations with families about wider issues, and make referrals to agencies to provide additional support.

DIVERSITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

TCK has built diversity and accessibility into its offer. ***The project is inclusive, encompasses cultural differences, and is representative of the diversity of Bristol.*** Consultees report that a focus on diversity and flexibility helps children and their families feel relevant and included in the project, increases engagement from different communities and brings people together. Consultees also felt that this approach has increased the number of families and children who are more likely to engage and stay engaged with the project.

The project aims to work with families who will benefit most, strengthening the project’s impact across Bristol. The differing levels of ability and skills, socio-economic status, and demographic, work well during the sessions, as this can enable peer learning. For example, some children have access to healthy food, are able to participate in cooking at home, and can identify fresh fruit and vegetables, whereas some cannot. This provides an opportunity for everyone to be involved in the same experience, regardless of their background.

“The cooking sessions are pitched right at the children’s’ level; whatever their understanding, they can access it.” – The Children’s Kitchen consultee

Resources provided to beneficiaries are accessible and provided wherever possible, including online cooking videos, recipe booklets, and ingredient boxes. The online recipes also feature food from around the world, highlighting the diversity of Bristol; recipes are available online in 16 different languages, increasing the reach of TCK. There is also a ‘Cook the Rainbow’ cookbook coming out soon where community chefs have contributed cultural recipes.



RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Throughout the pandemic, *TCK has been able to continue its activity and increase its presence in Bristol*. During lockdowns, the project was unable to continue face-to-face work with children in nurseries. FOOD Clubs were able to expand and continue cooking outside, following the appropriate safety regulations with fewer families present at one time and tables far apart. Online content has also been regularly updated, home learning sheets have been given to children, and boxes of food have still been sent into nurseries even without the project team being able to be present.



WIDER IMPACTS

Despite the very short time the project has been running, there is already clear evidence of wider impact. Many consultees described how the project does vital work in tackling the public health crisis of child obesity and poor nutrition amongst children, reporting that they feel the project will *improve longer term health of beneficiaries* by encouraging a healthier diet. Numerous consultees said they felt that the project will *reduce demand for emergency food and reduce food insecurity* for the families it supports. Some consultees also felt that the project will *alleviate poor mental health amongst beneficiaries*, by increasing happiness and wellbeing through its activities.



LEGACY

Clearly, the impacts of the project will continue, and many consultees discussed a range of ways in which these can be maintained. Many discussed that *to maximise wider impacts, it is vital that the service continues*, and its services are provided to as many early years children as possible. To create longer term impacts, consultees felt that beneficiaries must have access to sessions on a regular and continual basis. As children move into school, they are likely to carry learning from the project with them, retaining a positive connection with healthier food, and associate food with fun. It is therefore vital, if impacts are to continue, that *food related education also continues in subsequent years* i.e., in primary school education.

Early years *practitioners have learnt how to lead food and cookery sessions independently*, and most consultees reflected that this is key to the project's legacy, and sessions could continue without the support of TCK practitioners. It is therefore crucial that nurseries have sufficient budgets and resources to enable the continuation of food education in early years settings.

Consultees discussed ways in which the project could be expanded, these included expanding and *replicating the model* to include privately run nurseries, other early years services, other cities (Nottingham taking an interest via Feeding Britain), and other vulnerable groups such as those experiencing homelessness.

"The lasting impact is that the city won't let it finish, we have proved that this approach works well and is already having an impact on families as well as children." – The Children's Kitchen consultee