



Supporting 50 Families to Build Healthier Eating Habits and Lifestyles

Project Evaluation Report

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Funders and supporters:



Foreword

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Food4Heroes saw first-hand how access to nutritious food influenced both staff wellbeing and patient outcomes, with frontline NHS teams noting that obesity significantly increased the risk of severe illness and reduced survival rates. At the same time, the crisis exposed deep inequalities in healthy eating across the UK, as food poverty rose and many families struggled to access affordable nutritious meals. This report is in response to these challenges.

Food is one of the most effective and dignified entry points for strengthening communities. It brings people together, builds social networks, and creates the foundations for healthier, more connected lives. The 50 Families Project was established with this belief at its core but also with a charitable ambition: to understand how targeted, place-based investment can reduce diet-related inequality for families who face the sharpest barriers.

For Food4Heroes and Northamptonshire Community Foundation, this initiative represents a strategic philanthropic commitment to testing new models, listening deeply to lived experience, and backing community-led approaches that work. As donors and funders, our role is not only to resource activity but to convene, to learn, and to ensure that families' insights drive better practice and more responsive systems. This project embodies that approach.

Over the past year, 50 families took part in practical cooking sessions, peer learning, and culturally relevant food activities delivered by three outstanding local organisations: Home-Start Northampton, Power of the Mind Networks, and The Spring Charity. Their outreach, hub-based, and cultural/social delivery models illustrate that no single intervention is sufficient on its own yet each shares essential principles that philanthropy should champion: dignity, adaptability, creativity, and confidence in the strengths of families themselves.

The independent findings presented in this report provide compelling evidence. Families reported substantial increases in cooking confidence, healthier routines, and improved capability in making healthy food decisions. Children not only tried new foods but modelled positive behaviours that encouraged whole family change. Digital peer groups evolved into trusted informal support networks. Most importantly, families felt less isolated and more connected to community resources demonstrating the relational power of grassroots interventions when they are adequately funded.

These outcomes matter for funders and policymakers. They show that when investment reaches families through flexible, culturally aware, and community-led design, the return is not only behavioural change but strengthened wellbeing, resilience, and social capital. They also reinforce a core truth: if we aspire to



influence long-term health inequalities, philanthropic investment must be patient, sustained, and structured to support the hidden costs of safe and effective delivery.

Our thanks go to the delivery partners whose committed work underpins the impact recorded here, and to the University of Northampton for bringing rigorous evaluation and academic insight to the project. Above all, we extend our appreciation to the families whose participation, candour, and creativity have shaped the learning and legacy of the 50 Families Project.

Their voices sit at the heart of this report. Their progress and the barriers they still face provide clear direction for future investment.

As we look ahead, we hope that this evaluation and the accompanying What Works toolkit will support funders, commissioners, and practitioners to embed these effective approaches at scale. The message is unequivocal: when families are empowered, when support is relational and flexible, and when cultural identity and community belonging are respected, healthier futures become achievable.

We are proud to have supported this project together. Its impact will continue in the confidence, skills, and connections now embedded across Northamptonshire's communities.

The Project

The project was established to tackle food inequality by supporting families to make healthier food choices and maintain them over time. It explored how adults' decisions about food shape family well-being and highlighted the challenges that can prevent healthier lifestyles. The report presents insights into families' awareness, confidence, and skills as well as the value of community support for positive change. It also includes a toolkit that shares effective approaches for others to use, helping guide future practice and inform policy.

Charities Involved:

Home-Start Northampton

Home-Start Northampton is part of the national Home-Start network that offers volunteer, group, virtual and intensive support to families with at least one child under five. Weekly support is offered within the home or community setting, providing practical help, emotional support to create a stable and nurturing home environment and to enable children to thrive. Support aims to strengthen parent's confidence, reduce isolation and improve family well-being, particularly through challenging times such as bereavement, mental health issues, or financial pressure. Home-Start group support offers a welcoming space for parents and children to connect, share experiences, reduce isolation and receive practical help through themed sessions and peer support. In 2026 Home-Start Northampton will become Home-Start West Northamptonshire.



Power of the Mind Networks

Power of the Mind Networks is a charity that is dedicated to social inclusion, particularly for women at risk of marginalisation, using storytelling and shared experience to build confidence and community. The organisation works to challenge social and cultural stigma through dialogue, creative expression, and oral history, especially within ethnic communities. Alongside this, it offers practical weekly activities that strengthen wellbeing and connection, including Tuesday arts and crafts sessions; Thursday health and wellbeing sessions led by professionals who raise awareness of medical conditions and provide group exercise; and Saturday cookery sessions where participants learn to prepare a variety of African dishes. These activities help women find their voice, develop new skills and build supportive networks.



The Spring Charity

The Spring Charity is a small, community-based organisation located in the heart of Spring Boroughs Northampton, dedicated to supporting local families - particularly those with young children. The charity works to reduce isolation, improve wellbeing, and provide practical support through a wide range of inclusive and accessible services. These include early years stay and play, music and gardening groups, parenting programmes, family support sessions, mental health, healthy eating and wellbeing workshops, and skills-based courses such as cooking, crafts, and employability training. Everything offered is designed to build confidence, connection, and resilience, helping families to thrive and grow together, especially in areas of high deprivation.



50 Families Nutrition Project Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The 50 Families Nutrition Project supported families in Northamptonshire to make healthier food choices, build cooking skills, and strengthen social connections. Across launch and final surveys, in-depth interviews (charity leads and funder), and a family focus group, the project shows clear gains in awareness, confidence, skills, and community support. Structural barriers, especially food insecurity, cost, and health challenges, remain significant.

Summary of findings from pre and post questionnaires

This report showcases the findings from an initial and final survey distributed to participants from 50 families in Northamptonshire. The two questionnaires for each respondent sought to evaluate healthy eating and lifestyle perceptions and practices at the start and end of interventions delivered by three local charity groups. **Participation in the intervention activities, workshops and hands-on cooking has been found to substantially increase families' food-related knowledge and connections in various community networks. Across the families there have been positive shifts in cooking confidence, social engagement and understanding of healthy living.** Despite ongoing challenges around food affordability and physical activity barriers, the questionnaire identified that the interventions strengthened practical skills and fostered a more holistic awareness of health that encompassed mental, social and emotional well-being. These outcomes highlight the project's success in promoting sustainable lifestyle change and provide valuable insight for forging more longitudinal community-based health initiatives in the future.



Summary of findings from interviews

The 50 Families Project demonstrated that food-based activities can create positive change for families in Northamptonshire. **Parents spoke about feeling more capable in the kitchen and more confident when planning and shopping for meals. Many shifted away from convenience food towards fresh cooking, supported by recipes and peer encouragement. Children joined in readily, which often encouraged parents to introduce different foods at home. Families also talked about sleeping better, having more energy, and feeling less isolated through friendships formed at sessions and in WhatsApp groups.** Some asked for additional workshops, easier use of kitchen facilities, and support that reflected cultural or dietary needs.

Charities delivering the programme stressed the need for trust and persistence in engaging families. **They described how practical tools such as recipe cards, air fryers, and digital groups helped sustain learning between sessions.** Cooking activities also became a way of introducing other support, including parenting advice or access to specialist services. At the same time, they noted that hidden costs and stretched staff capacity made delivery fragile.

From the funder's perspective, the project acted as a pilot to explore new approaches to food insecurity. Using different delivery models allowed more families to take part and showed the value of adapting methods to local circumstances. **The clearest changes were seen in confidence and cooking ability, with families also developing stronger networks of support. Shifts in physical health were recognised as a longer journey that would require consistent investment over time.**

Summary of findings from family focus groups

Insights from family interviews show clear improvements in family life, with food acting as both a practical tool and a route to wider wellbeing.

Cooking confidence increased: Parents moved from reliance on processed meals to cooking from scratch, supported by recipes, air fryers, and peer learning. Parents described moving from reliance on ready meals to cooking fresh food daily. One parent reflected: "Before 50 Families I wasn't a great cook... now I cook everything every day from fresh."

Children engaged enthusiastically: Young children and teenagers prepared food, shopped for ingredients, and tried unfamiliar foods.

Healthier eating habits developed: Families reported better portion control, reduced waste, and more varied diets. Nutrition awareness grew, with parents learning to balance food groups and shop more carefully: "Loads of food would go off; now I'm thinking about quantity."

Wellbeing benefits were evident: Parents linked healthier eating to weight loss, improved sleep, and fewer flare-ups of health conditions. Sessions also boosted motivation and mental health, often combining cooking with dance or light exercise: "She made us dance... it gets you out of the house."

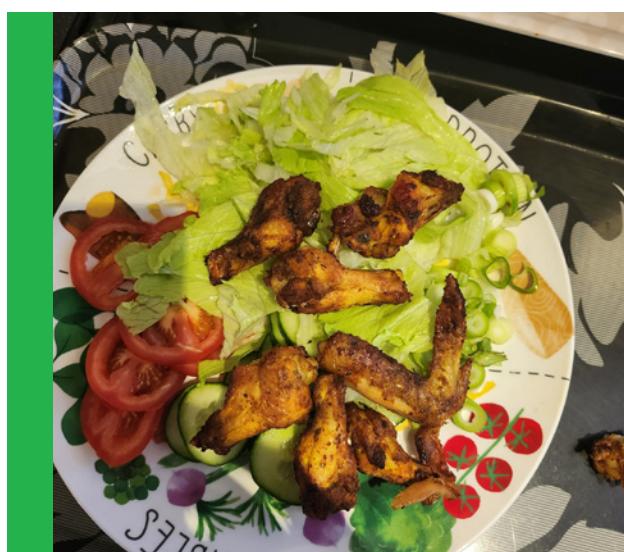
Community and peer networks flourished: WhatsApp groups and shared meals created strong bonds, reducing isolation. Families described the group as a space where strangers became friends and support extended beyond cooking.

Practical challenges remain: Families called for more kitchen access, longer projects, weekend sessions, and better resources such as larger air fryers, culturally appropriate ingredients, and allergy-friendly options.

Ripple effects extended the impact: Participants shared recipes with relatives, taught friends to use air fryers, and signposted each other to services such as food bag schemes and domestic abuse support.

Overall message

Families described the 50 Families Project as life changing. It improved cooking skills, built healthier routines, created friendships, and gave access to wider support in a non-judgemental way. The programme's strength lies in its combination of practical food education, child and parent engagement, cultural respect, and community connections. Sustaining and expanding this model would allow more families to benefit and deepen the long-term impact on health and wellbeing across Northamptonshire.



Summary of findings from charity lead interviews

Interviews with charity leaders provide valuable insight into how the 50 Families Project was delivered at an organisational level. Their reflections highlight the importance of trust, practical tools, and relational support in helping families build healthier lives.

Context and ethos: Charities work with families experiencing poverty, isolation, and complex needs. They emphasised a relational ethos: "We're here to support people, enable them, and provide a better life for their children."

Engagement and trust-building: Reaching families required persistence and creativity. Social media, WhatsApp groups, and consistent staff presence helped families overcome hesitation to join: "We realised very quickly that social media made [other] people jealous."

Cooking confidence: Practical sessions and provision of equipment like air fryers and blenders transformed families' ability to cook: "You can basically cook a roast dinner in there... families were so grateful."

Benefits for children and families: Parents described children trying new foods and building confidence: "A baby who had only ever had baby rice was given pepper sticks and carrots and merrily ate them all." Gains extended beyond cooking to self-esteem and daily routines.

Peer support and connection: WhatsApp groups created unexpected networks where families encouraged each other and shared recipes. Friendships were formed across divides: "People that would never have sat together for a coffee are now bonded."

Wider wellbeing: Cooking acted as a 'hook' into other support services, including parenting programmes, domestic abuse support, and English language classes. Families also grew confidence to access new environments such as the university.

Challenges: Both charities highlight hidden costs such as training, staff time, printing, safeguarding, and utilities, as well as the difficulty of sustaining projects once funding ends. Low confidence and practical barriers limited some parents' ability to join in cooking.

Recommendations: Leads called for funders to support flexible, realistic approaches. They stressed tailoring activities to everyday equipment, embedding digital tools for communication, and resourcing projects adequately so that staff capacity and continuity are secured.

Overall Message

From the perspective of delivery organisations, **the 50 Families Project succeeded because it combined practical food education with relational, trust-based support. Cooking was more than a skill: it opened doors to confidence, friendship, and access to wider services.** For future success, charities emphasise the need to recognise hidden costs and plan for sustained delivery so that gains in health and wellbeing are not lost when funding ends.



Summary of findings from Northamptonshire Community Foundation

Rachel McGrath, CEO of Northamptonshire Community Foundation (NCF), reflected on the 50 Families Project as an example of strategic philanthropy designed to test and innovate in response to food insecurity and health inequality. NCF's role was to convene between the donors, the delivery partners and the university, ensuring momentum and supporting collaboration.

Strategic rationale: The project grew from Food4Heroes' transition from pandemic food relief to long-term community health, and from NCF's own Hidden Needs report in 2023. It was framed as a pilot to understand barriers, trial approaches, and create locally responsive solutions: "This idea... really involves the whole family, understand barriers and challenges to healthy eating, and then have a test, learn, and innovate sort of project."

Choice of areas and inclusion: Target wards were selected based on deprivation and need, while Power of the Mind ensured cultural relevance: "They are working with Black African and British Caribbean families too, so that also makes us think about culturally appropriate nutrition."

Collaboration and diversity: Rachel valued the three models as complementary rather than competing: Spring's kitchen hub, Home-Start's outreach, and Power of the Mind's social and cultural focus. "There's no one right way to go about doing this kind of work."

Outcomes: Immediate gains are visible in confidence, skills, and social connection. Stories of "distance travelled" captured the impact, such as families venturing beyond their estates for the first time: "That step forward is just incredible." Longer-term health changes were seen as a slower process, but children's involvement offered hope for sustained generational benefits.

Challenges and resources: With around £40,000 distributed, capacity and hidden costs were ongoing issues. Rachel acknowledged the tension between short-term outcomes and the reality that genuine health shifts take years.

Legacy and next steps: A toolkit capturing the different approaches is seen as essential, along with creative outputs like a celebratory cookbook. Sustainability is uncertain, but the project has opened the door to continued partnership: "It may have had this unintended but fantastic result that they may want to continue to partner in some way."

Overall Message

Food4Heroes the primary funders alongside NCF, view 50 Families as a successful proof of concept, demonstrating that collaborative, family-focused food projects can build confidence, reduce isolation, and address inequalities in practical and dignified ways. The most immediate impact has been relational and behavioural, while long-term health change will depend on continued investment and sustained delivery. The project's legacy lies in the learning it has generated, the partnerships it has strengthened, and the potential to scale approaches that have proved effective.



The following sections introduce the project's background and context, including the research design and intervention activities, before presenting the detailed findings from the survey data and the qualitative data from the interviews. The report finishes with a 'What Works' toolkit and recommendations for funders, delivery charities and policymakers.

1: Project Aims, Design and Methods

1.1 Context and Rationale

Diet-related inequality is a recognised public health concern in the UK. Families on low incomes often face barriers to accessing and affording nutritious food, and children in deprived areas are more likely to experience obesity and related health conditions (Public Health England, 2019; Tunney, 2022). In Northamptonshire, the Hidden Needs report identified that as many as 21% of residents may be at risk of food insecurity, compared with a national average of 7% (Paterson-Young and Hazenberg, 2023). Contributing factors include financial hardship, isolation, digital exclusion, and difficulties in accessing affordable services.

While food banks and national programmes such as the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) scheme have provided essential short-term support, concerns remain about sustainability, food quality, and whether provision sufficiently meets cultural and family needs (Bayes et al., 2022; Chakrabortty, 2018). In response, the 50 Families Project was established to test how community organisations could engage families more meaningfully in developing healthier practices, and to examine whether hub-based, outreach, and culturally focused models can make a measurable difference to food inequality.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The project aimed to address food inequality by empowering families to make healthier choices and sustain them over time. It examined the relationship between adult food decisions and family wellbeing and identified barriers that limit healthier lifestyles. A further aim was to co-produce a toolkit that would capture effective practices for replication and policy influence.

Overall aim: to reduce diet-related inequality and empower families on low incomes to adopt healthier eating habits via practical, community-led support.

Objectives

The objectives were to:

- Explore how community organisations support families to engage with healthier eating practices.
- Identify changes in family food and lifestyle behaviours before, during, and after participation.
- Capture the perspectives of 50 families and charity leads through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
- Enable families to adopt healthier habits supported by local services.
- Produce a toolkit and recommendations to inform sustainable approaches to tackling food inequality.



1.3 Research questions

The study asked:

- What impact did the 50 Families Project have on adult participants and their families?
- How do families describe their food, nutrition, and wellbeing practices before, during, and after engagement?
- What barriers and challenges affect the ability of families to adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles?

1.4 Design and Methodology

The research used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, embedding collaboration between families, charities, and researchers (Dias and Gama, 2014). It was delivered with three partner organisations: The Spring Charity (hub-based support), Home-Start Northampton (outreach and volunteer model), and Power of the Mind Networks (culturally focused and social inclusion model). Northamptonshire Community Foundation and Food4Heroes supported funding, provided strategic oversight and convened donor and delivery partners, while the University of Northampton led the research.

This design allowed comparison across delivery models while ensuring family voice was central. The 50 families were participants and contributors, shaping activities and providing reflections that informed iterative changes during the project.

Methods

A multi-method evaluation combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Surveys with families were completed at baseline and end-point, covering dietary habits, cooking confidence, perceived barriers, and wellbeing.

Interviews and family focus groups were run by charity staff, researchers and research assistants, exploring workshop experiences and skills transfer to daily life. Additional interviews were conducted with charity leads and the funder to deepen understanding of impact and sustainability.

Examples of digital engagement were gathered through social media posts, all anonymised before analysis.

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data were coded thematically. Findings were triangulated across families, charity providers, and funder perspectives.

1.5 Ethical Considerations

The project received ethical approval from the University of Northampton Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Data were anonymised and securely stored in compliance with GDPR. Safeguarding and food safety were integral to delivery, with charity staff applying their existing policies and procedures. Risks relating to participation, data management, and staff capacity were monitored using a project risk register.

1.6 Outcomes

The project aimed to generate both practical and academic outputs. Practically, it sought to co-produce a toolkit identifying effective ways of tackling food inequality through community-led initiatives. Academically, it aimed to contribute to wider understanding of how participatory methods can address food insecurity and support long-term behaviour change. Dissemination included community events and celebrations, a cookbook, reports, conference presentations, and academic publications.

2: Intervention Activities of the Three Charities

2.1 Home-Start Northampton (Outreach Model)

Context

Home-Start Northampton supports families with at least one child under five who are experiencing challenges such as postnatal illness, disability, poor mental health, domestic abuse, bereavement, financial stress, and isolation. The charity provides practical and emotional support through trained volunteers and practitioners, aiming to create nurturing home environments where parents feel empowered and children can thrive.

Approach

Home-Start adopted an outreach model to ensure support reached families who might otherwise not engage due to anxiety, low confidence, financial pressures, or fear of judgement.

Delivery was flexible and inclusive, offering:

- Home-based activities tailored to family routines.
- Volunteer-led support on nutrition and budgeting.
- Digital engagement via social media for easy access to information and peer advice.

This approach respected individual circumstances and culture, reinforcing that one size does not fit all. It emphasised achievable and sustainable change through manageable adaptations to everyday routines.

Interventions

Online activities: Weekly challenges, recipe/photo sharing, and educational posts, with daily staff engagement to keep families active.

Face-to-face delivery: 12 group sessions for parents and children, plus 6 cooking sessions focused on simple, affordable recipes.

Volunteer support: 12 families received six months of tailored help, including cooking on a budget, managing food aversions, and building healthy routines.

Shared meals: Families prepared cultural dishes at home, then shared their recipes and photos digitally, fostering pride and cultural exchange.

Child-focused activities: Play-based interventions (messy play, mystery boxes, simple bread and soup packs) built food familiarity and confidence.



What Works Best

Home-Start recommends that others replicate:

Flexibility and co-production: tailoring interventions to families' strengths, barriers, and needs; offering varied modes of engagement (home, group, digital).

Child-centred learning through play: encouraging children to explore food through touch, taste, and cooking simple recipes and making healthy eating fun.

Active WhatsApp groups: moderated, supportive digital spaces with recipe sharing, peer advice, supermarket deals, polls, and resources. Parents valued relevance, positivity and, the non-judgemental tone and the chance to share and connect with other families who had similar issues.

Small, achievable changes e.g., adding vegetables and protein to packet noodles rather than expecting families to abandon familiar meals.

Celebrating culture: encouraging families to share recipes and traditions digitally, creating safety, pride, and inclusivity.

2.2 The Spring Charity (Hub Model)

Context

The Spring Charity is a small, community-based organisation in Northampton supporting families from pregnancy through early childhood. Many families face poverty, insecure housing, the cost-of-living crisis, trauma, domestic abuse, isolation, and poor mental health. Spring combines practical support (food, clothes, essentials) with emotional support and community activities such as stay-and-play, lunch clubs, and craft cafés. The 50 Families Project aligned directly with this mission, providing joined-up support to some of the most vulnerable families in Castle Ward, helping parents feel safer, less alone, and better able to cope.

Approach

Spring adopted an inclusive, and practical model that enabled families to take a lead. Cooking and food activities were designed to be fun and woven into everyday life, with children actively involved at every stage. Workshops were run in small groups to ensure personal attention and shaped by participants' preferences (e.g. choosing recipes). Nutrition information was delivered conversationally rather than formal teaching. The environment was deliberately warm and welcoming, with food-themed games, crafts, decorations, and posters to spark discussion. Engagement was sustained through daily activities (breakfast clubs), consistent digital communication (online groups), and supplementary wellbeing initiatives such as the 'park passport' which encouraged families to visit parks and collect stamps.

Interventions

Cooking workshops (monthly, term-time): Small groups of 10 families at a time with families receiving recipe cards and ingredients to take home.

Healthy eating embedded in daily life: 240 breakfast club sessions, weekly lunch club, seasonal food boxes, and healthy packed lunches for trips.

Digital engagement: two WhatsApp groups with weekly recipe sharing, competitions, and discussions (52 activities across the year).

Practical resources: Provision of air fryers, cooking charts, takeaway boxes, and baby air-purifying plants symbolising growth and a fresh start.

Family wellbeing: the park passport encouraged affordable physical activity; stay-and-play sessions and allotment gardening linked food with play, exploration, and nature.

Ongoing support: Access to family support workers for 1:1 guidance, plus trips and community activities to reduce isolation.

What Works Best

The Spring Charity recommends that others replicate:

Accessible language and design: making flyers, recipes, and resources simple, non-intimidating, and appealing.

Co-design with families: allowing participants to choose recipes and activities for increased engagement and ownership.

Consistency of touchpoints: combining structured workshops with daily and weekly activities (clubs, digital engagement) reinforced habits and built trust.

Celebrating participation: recipe competitions, giveaways, and rewards boosted confidence and created positive momentum.

Creative, symbolic elements: small touches like plants, passports, crafts, and child-safe cooking tools made the project memorable and engaging.

Whole-family involvement: encouraging children to take part alongside parents' support for learning, bonding, and resilience.



2.3 Power of the Mind Networks (Cultural/Social Model)

Context

Power of the Mind Networks is a grassroots organisation focused on wellbeing, cultural identity, and community belonging. Many participants were from African and Caribbean backgrounds, facing challenges around isolation, food insecurity, and stigma. The charity promotes social inclusion and positions food as a route into community connection, cultural celebration, and wider family support. For the 50 Families Project, they placed particular emphasis on culturally appropriate foods and building practical cooking skills that helped families cook well on a budget.

Approach

Their delivery model was culturally responsive and socially grounded, using cooking sessions and shared meals to celebrate heritage, reduce stigma, and create supportive peer networks. Sessions acted as a 'soft gateway' to wider support needs, while also integrating movement and fun activities for children. The group met twice a month (23 times across the year), with each activity typically lasting around four hours (11am-3pm). Delivery was staffed by around four people, often including a chef of African heritage, who brought authenticity and trust to the sessions. The team also purchased African-origin ingredients to ensure cultural relevance and comfort for families.

Interventions

Group cooking and shared meals, with families preparing dishes that reflected their cultures and traditions, including plantain, cassava, chicken breast, sweet potatoes, potato wedges, sausages, fish and wraps.

Equipment-led learning with air fryers as the central tool, demonstrating how to prepare healthier meals quickly and with less oil in small kitchens. These were donated to the 50 Families Project.

Budget-focused cooking: sessions emphasised making healthy meals cheaply while improving knife skills, seasoning, and portioning.

Cultural inclusivity: families were encouraged to shop at local ethnic grocers, adapt recipes, and share their food stories.

Child and youth engagement: hands-on preparation and tasting help children build confidence in trying new foods.

Community support: the sessions created a space where families could share challenges such as housing, finances, or domestic abuse.

Movement and play: dancing and active games linked food workshops to physical activity and wellbeing.

What Works Best

Power of the Mind recommend that others replicate:

Celebrating culture by using familiar traditional dishes as entry points to healthier eating reduces stigma and builds pride.

Air fryer-based recipes proved transformative, making healthy cooking fast, affordable, and achievable at home.

Authentic ingredients and trusted cooks lowered barriers to engagement and encouraged families to try healthier versions of well-loved foods.

Regular, longer sessions gave families time to cook, eat, and talk, strengthening peer bonds and opening access to wider support.

Whole-family involvement ensured children and parents learned together, building shared skills and confidence.

Joy and belonging were central: food, music, and dance created inclusive, transformative experiences.

Collaboration and visibility at shared events, such as the celebration day at the University of Northampton, reinforced pride and strengthened the group's sense of belonging.



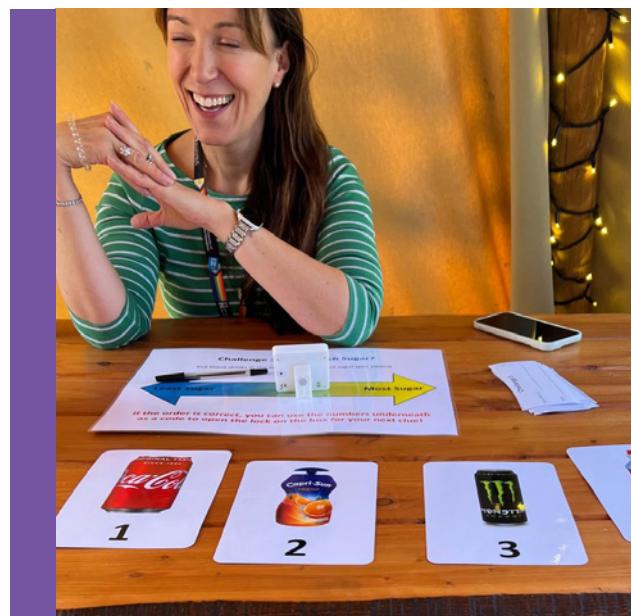
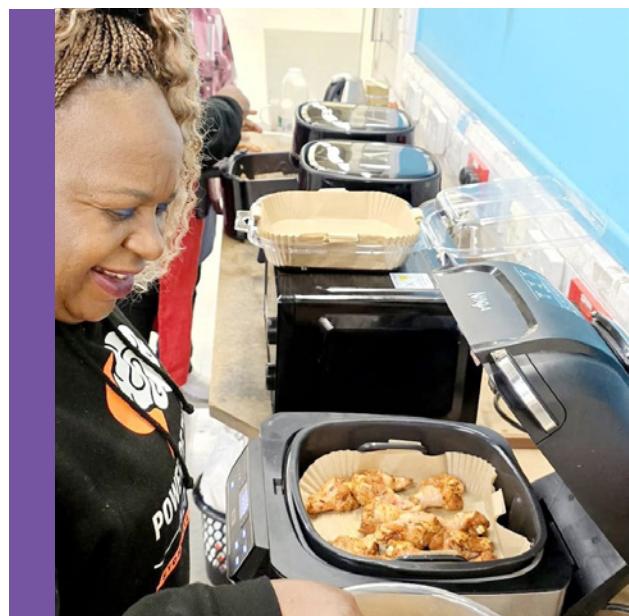
2.4 Comparison of Charities' Approaches

Category	Home-Start (Outreach)	Spring Charity (Hub)	Power of the Mind (Cultural/Social)
Context	Supports families with children under 5, often facing isolation, postnatal illness, mental health challenges or financial stress.	Community-based hub in Castle Ward supports families facing poverty, housing insecurity, trauma or isolation.	Grassroots group engaging African and Caribbean families, tackling isolation, food insecurity, and stigma.
Approach	Outreach-led, flexible, and inclusive model with home visits, volunteer support, and online engagement.	Hub-based, family-led, inclusive model with teaching kitchen, daily clubs, and creative wellbeing initiatives.	Culturally responsive, social model using cooking, shared meals, and dance to build confidence and connection.
Interventions	Weekly online challenges, 12 group cooking sessions, volunteer support, and play-based food activities.	Monthly cooking workshops, breakfast clubs, weekly lunch club, food boxes, WhatsApp groups, park passport, and allotment gardening.	Group cooking, shared meals, cultural recipes, child/youth engagement, movement/dance, offering peer support and initiating discussion of sensitive issues.
Toolkit Insights	Flexible delivery, child play-based learning, active WhatsApp groups, achievable small changes, cultural celebration.	Accessible language, co-design, consistent touchpoints, celebrations/rewards, creative symbolic elements (e.g. plants, park passports).	Celebrate heritage, use food to open wider support, peer bonding, whole-family involvement, and joyful inclusive sessions.

Table 1: Comparison of the charities' approaches.

2.5 Toolkit Insights from Charities

The shared recommendations for the 50 Families Project toolkit emphasise the importance of flexibility in delivery, offering different ways for families to engage depending on their needs and circumstances. Families valued being able to shape the programme themselves, whether by choosing recipes, suggesting activities, or sharing their own food traditions, and this sense of ownership helped sustain participation. The charities also highlighted the effectiveness of focusing on achievable changes that could fit into everyday routines, supported by regular opportunities to practise skills and build confidence. Children's involvement was seen as central, with playful, hands-on approaches helping them to develop food familiarity and encourage parents to try new ideas at home. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp provided a low-barrier route to advice, encouragement, and shared learning, with many parents reporting that these peer networks were as valuable as the formal sessions. Celebrating success and maintaining a positive, supportive environment was consistently important, whether through rewards or simply sharing a meal together. Finally, the organisations stressed that food worked best when linked to wider aspects of wellbeing, from physical activity and social connection to access to other forms of family support. Such connections created a more holistic and lasting impact.



3. Questionnaires: Pre and Post Survey Analysis

3.1 Survey Distribution

The study involved three charities from which 50 families were selected. Charity 1: 20 families; Charity 2: 20 families and Charity 3: 10 families. The questionnaires to the families aimed to capture insights on healthy eating and lifestyle perceptions and practices. There were two questionnaires which were completed by lead adults in the 50 families: both before and after main charity activities and workshop interventions. The initial questionnaire was distributed in June 2024. Some families had already been introduced to the project and started activities in their respective charities from as early as May 2024. More than a year later in July 2025 the end of project final questionnaire was distributed for completion by those families involved in the project. Completion of the final questionnaire and sections within it was optional. With inclusion in mind, families were given a choice of responding via the survey or through focus group interviews at the end of the project (the interview data is reported in section 4.1). The initial survey received 50 responses while the final survey received 35 responses.

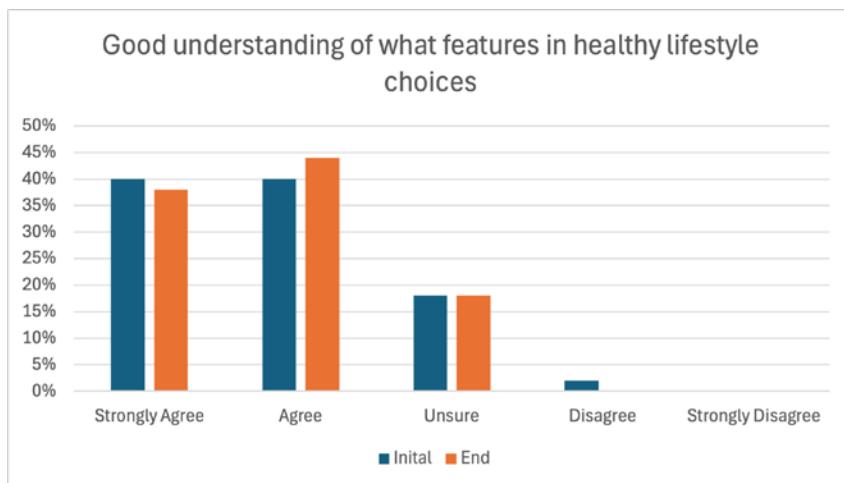
3.2 Participant Demographics

	Survey responses
Age	- 48% were between the age of 25-34yrs. - 38% were between the age of 35-44yrs.
Gender	- 98% female - 2% male
Ethnicity	15 White British 14 European heritage 10 Black African/Caribbean 4 Asian 1 Mixed
Marital status	50% single 38% married 12% other
Children under 18yrs	98% yes 2% no <2yrs – 12 3-5yrs – 24 6-8yrs - 16
Food spending	19 families spend >£70/week
Have needed access to food banks	40 families

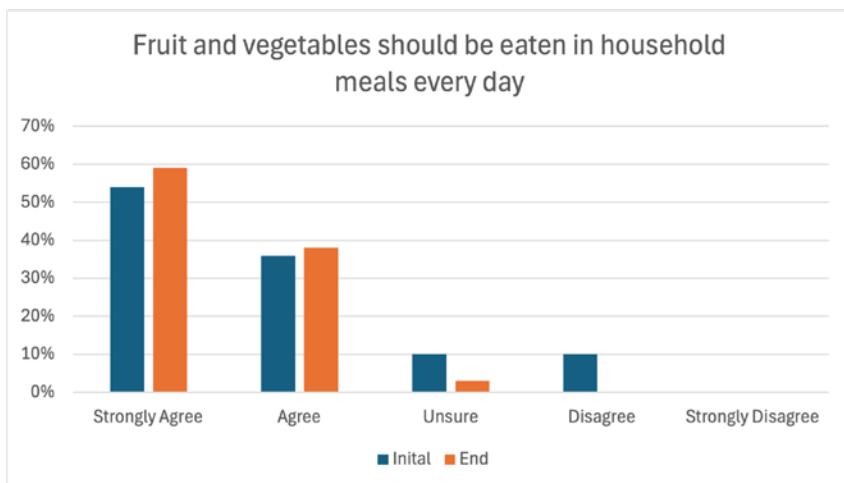
3.3 Food, Health, and Physical Activity

- Parents have good health: 76%-82% (baseline and final percentages)
- Child/children have a healthy lifestyle: 56%-63%

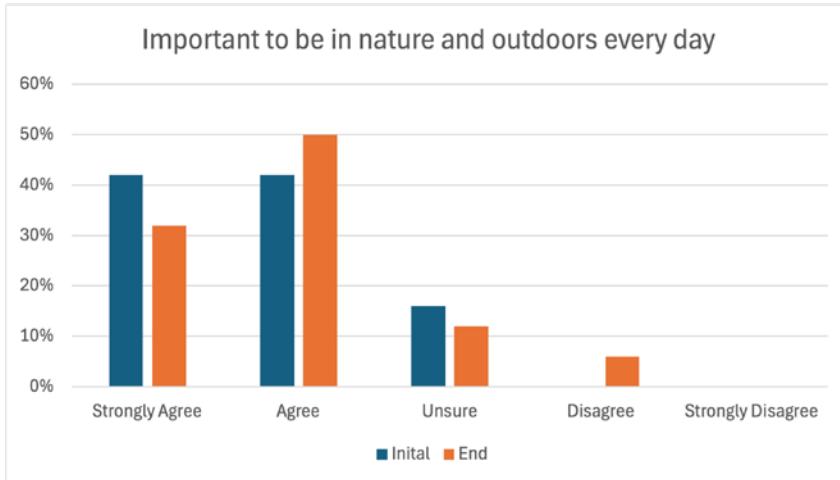
The results from the initial and final questionnaire suggest some small but meaningful changes in perceptions and behaviours around food, health and physical activity. Parents expressed confidence in their own health improving slightly with 82% rating their health as average or better in the final survey compared with 76% initially. The proportion of parents describing their child's lifestyle as healthy also rose. Although reported physical activity among adults declined by 11%, the number who rarely or never engaged in physical activity halved, suggesting more families participated occasionally but fewer sustained regular exercise. Household challenges around food affordability, cultural/heritage food availability, and child food preferences remained persistent themes across both the initial and final surveys.



Dietary habits showed mixed trends with parents acknowledging the importance of fruit and vegetables but also highlighting their personal challenges with food costs and processed food consumption.



Across both surveys parents suggested that some food ingredients were either unavailable or unaffordable. And several participants identified the difficulties linked to managing children's eating habits especially fussiness, peer influence and the temptation of sugary foods. Initially the motivation to cook varied and some families cited time, energy and mental load as barriers to preparing meals from scratch. Health-related issues further complicated these challenges with participants mentioning a combination of physical and mental health conditions, including allergies, asthma, diabetes and ADHD as well as concerns about nutrition and the need for vitamin supplementation. Mental health and anxiety also emerged as both health challenges and barriers to physical activity.

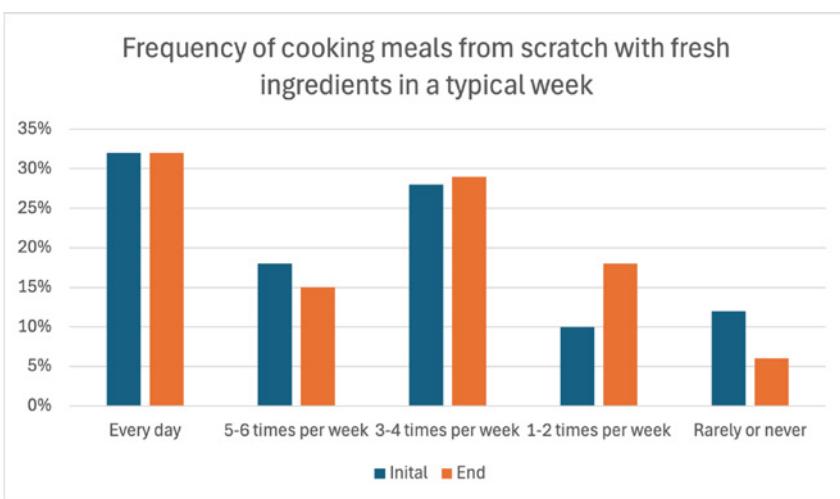


Participants described struggles with cost, confidence and motivation to leave the house for exercise, with walking often cited as the most feasible but inconsistently maintained activity.

3.4 Skills and Cooking Information

- Sufficient equipment to cook from scratch: 60%-74%
- Able to cook meals from scratch with children: 60-71%
- Participation in cooking workshops: 32-97%

The findings from skills and cooking questions in the survey highlight growth in participants' cooking confidence. This included the capacity to prepare meals from scratch.



Access to basic cooking equipment and utensils increased notably, suggesting that the project helped address some practical barriers to meal preparation.

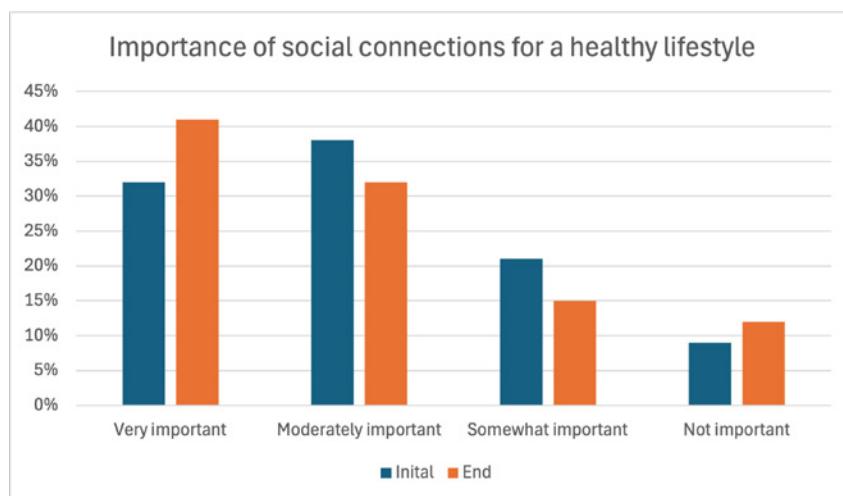
This improvement likely reflects both direct support from the charity interventions and the increased motivation among participants to engage in home cooking.

The rise in households equipped to cook also supports the wider goal of fostering independence and long-term sustainability in healthy eating and lifestyle habits. Cooking with children also became more common by the end of the project, with 71% of families reporting that they now prepare meals together. This shift from 29% illustrates a growing emphasis on family involvement and intergenerational learning, where cooking was seen as both an educational and bonding activity. Participant feedback highlighted that children's engagement helped improve their interest in new foods and their understanding of healthy eating, making cooking a positive, shared experience rather than a daily task. The most striking change was the increase in participation in cooking workshops and activities with the charities, which rose from 32% to 97%. Such a growth demonstrated strong community engagement and enthusiasm for hands-on learning. Many parents reported enjoying the workshops and valuing the practical demonstrations and social interaction. These interventions not only enhanced cooking skills but also built social connections and confidence, reinforcing the importance of informal, community-based approaches to health and lifestyle education.

3.5 Social Networks and Influence

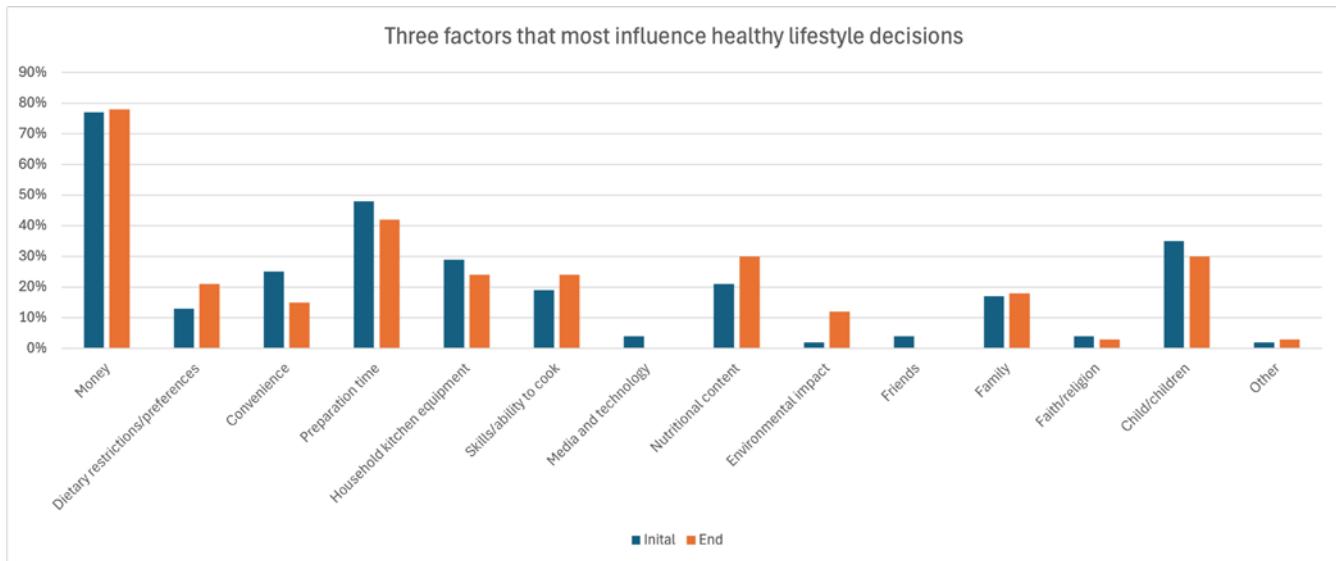
- Participants who rarely/never engage in social activities: 59%-35%
- Participants that engage socially 1-2 times in a week: 27%-50%
- The influence of friends and family shifted towards a shared culture, ideas and collaborative cooking.
- Definitions of healthy lifestyle expanded to include mental, emotional and social well-being.

Findings demonstrate a clear improvement in social engagement and connection across the project duration. The number of families who reported rarely or never participating in social activities dropped significantly, while those who met with friends or extended family at least once or twice a week nearly doubled. These trends across the surveys indicate that the intervention not only encouraged healthier eating practices but also fostered stronger social bonds, which are essential for sustaining lifestyle changes. The increased social interaction provided opportunities for families to share experiences, support one another and exchange healthy living ideas in informal settings.



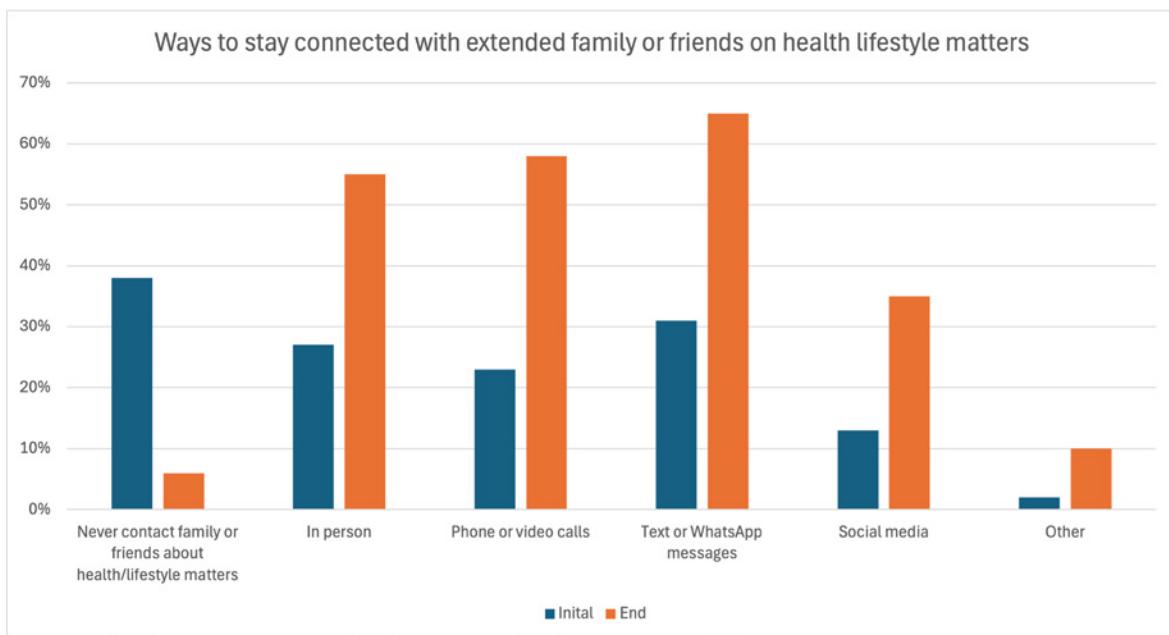
The influence of friends and family on participants' attitudes toward food and health and physical activity also evolved throughout the project. Initially, respondents described external influences as mixed as some extended family members offered sweets or unhealthy snacks to their children.

But by the end of the intervention parents reported a shift towards shared cultural practices and collaborative cooking. This could suggest a newly emerging environment where social ties (and peer influence) support healthier choices with friends and family members.



Interestingly, there was increased reporting of involvement in a faith and religious community, a rise of 6% was noted. However, the influence of community on healthy lifestyles appeared to decline from 28% to 13%. This may suggest that participants relied on personal motivation and peer support within the programme rather than faith-based networks for health and lifestyle decision making. At the same time participants' definitions of a healthy lifestyle broadened to include mental, emotional, and social wellbeing. This indicates that charity interventions deepen understanding of health as a holistic concept rather than purely physical.

Technology played a vital role in maintaining participant engagement in the 50 Families Project and interventions from across the charity groups. The use of digital platforms was largely recognised by respondents to the questionnaire as a tool to stay connected with extended family and friends on health and lifestyle matters.



The use of platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook enabled families to connect easily, share food-related content and queries in real time, and sustain motivation through social encouragement beyond each charity intervention activities and workshops. Across the two surveys there was a growing recognition in the open responses to questions that social connectedness and balance are integral to overall wellbeing.

3.6 Selected Open Responses

Participant voices were compelling in many of the open question responses in both the initial and final survey. The enjoyment and change in wellbeing were articulated by one member who stated:

“I was part of [their cooking] class. I had a lot of fun and thoroughly enjoyed learning alongside other mums which positively impacted my mental health.”

Furthermore, the interconnectedness of food, cooking skills, equipment and physical health were positively captured by one family:

“I had a positive experience, my daughter has a restrictive diet, she joined in with the prepping and even tried some new foods in the process, some of the meals are on our weekly family menu and the additional gift of an air fryer has helped speed up cooking times and even my 14-year-old can use it.”

There were numerous final comments that confirmed the fun and informative nature of involvement with the charities and the university. Most respondents in the survey drew on aspects related to the wider community in their overview of their experiences.

“Being part of the cooking class has been a wonderful experience for me and my family; we learnt how to prepare healthy meals for less different recipes and the support [from the charity] is amazing.”

“The experience was a good way of connecting with other people in the community as well as learning different lifestyles.”

In April 2025 all the 50 families and associated charities were invited to attend a funded event called 'Nourishing Connections Festival' at the University of Northampton. This event included a carousel of activities to support the core interventions undertaken across the three charities. The final survey also included feedback from the participants on the value of the visit.

“The festival was a great day out. It was nice speaking to different people and doing different activities dotted around. The food examples and demonstrations were excellent.”

“I enjoyed mingling with different people and learning from different cultures and backgrounds.”

“We had a wonderful time networking with other organisations sharing ideas for a healthy lifestyle.”

Although there was a dominance of positive narrative responses across the initial and final questionnaire some persistent challenges remain. These were largely expressed in tandem with the cost of food and time related challenges. Many of the challenges cross numerous aspects of family life.

“Healthy options are more expensive, so even though I know they are better for you, we cannot afford to eat this every meal every day.”

"One food challenge I influence in my household is reducing our sugar intake. Since I try to cut sugar from my diet, I often cook meals and snack from scratch instead of using store-bought or processed foods. This affects how we plan meals, shop for groceries and how much time we spend at cooking at home."

"The costs. Country parks (the parking charges are very expensive). The gym costs are just way out of my price range. I really wish my children could learn to swim but I can't take them all on my own and the cost for memberships are just too pricey. If there was a more reasonable family deal it would be better. The kids are bored of walking to the same parks and seeing the same things although I do keep encouraging them."

In the final survey participants were asked to reflect on their experiences over the year. The word cloud below captures the responses.



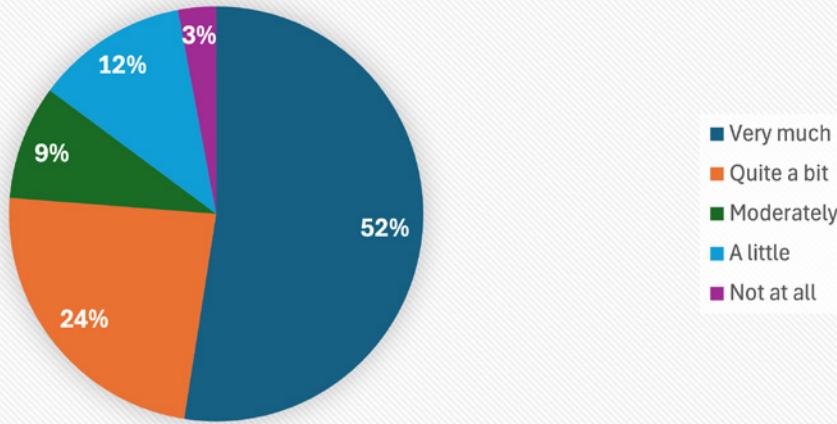
3.7 Survey Conclusions and Recommendations

- 5% of participants more confident in making healthy food choices.
- 73% formed new friendships or support networks.
- 75% highly valued the group/community environment of the 50 families' Project.

Attitudes to physical activity became more flexible, with fewer strongly agreeing exercise must happen daily (4% decline).

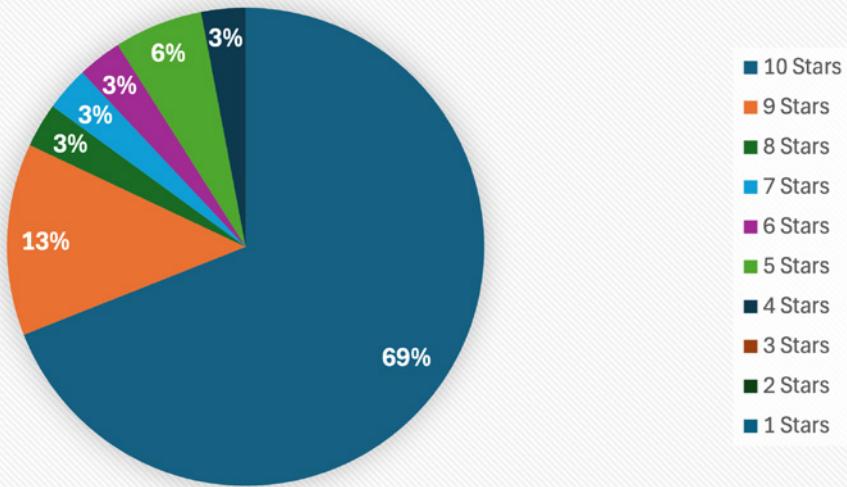


Being a part of the 50 Families project increased family awareness of healthy eating and lifestyle choices



The findings from the initial and final questionnaire improved awareness, confidence and community for the 50 families that participated. Data indicates that 73% of participants developed new friendships and support networks which influenced family confidence with cooking from scratch and trying new things out. Throughout the duration of the project charities and the University of Northampton have supported the knowledge development and interactions of 50 families. In the final survey specific questions were posed that pertained to being involved in the research project. Participants indicated that being part of the research project and charity interventions resulted in increased family awareness of healthy eating and lifestyle choices. These final respondents felt more confident in making healthy food and lifestyle choices.

Overall experience in the project
(1 star - very poor to 10 stars - excellent)



Although perceptions related to the cost of fruit and vegetables rose slightly in the survey responses, participation in the charities' activities and the University of Northampton's 50 Families 'Nourishing Connections Festival' on campus both had a strong positive effect on families. Families reported a stronger understanding of healthy eating and lifestyle principles, supported by a noticeable increase in hands-on cooking activity.

Taken together the survey findings indicate that the charity interventions have led to knowledge and confidence growth around healthy eating and cooking. Participation in their workshops alongside the University of Northampton event has had a strong effect. Social engagement increased, while physical activity level needs further support. Therefore, future projects may focus on maintaining engagement, reducing barriers to activity and continued use of informal peer-sharing online platforms (especially with community and celebratory elements).

4. Thematic Analysis of Interviews

This section presents the themes that emerged from the interview data.

4.1 Family Focus Groups

1. Cooking Confidence and Skills

Families describe striking improvements in their confidence with food. Many had relied on nuggets, chips, or ready meals and some admitted to being anxious about cooking meat or starting meals from scratch. Through practical sessions and peer support, parents began cooking regularly and felt proud of their progress. Simple tools such as slow cookers and air fryers were seen as game changers, saving money and time while encouraging healthier choices: "Not using any oil [in] the air fryer." Confidence often grew through learning alongside others, with one participant admitting they only learned to use the air fryer when another parent demonstrated it. Cooking also became a source of enjoyment and discovery. Families experimented with foods ranging from Thai curry and butternut squash soup to Nigerian, Caribbean, and Korean dishes. For many, the variety was as important as the skills, showing that healthy eating could be creative, affordable, and fun: "I feel more confident now. I wouldn't have even tried half of this before."

2. Children's Engagement and Learning

Parents consistently highlighted the enthusiasm of their children. Youngsters chopped vegetables, mixed ingredients, and tried foods they would usually refuse: "Now they ask to help. That never happened before." Parents recalled moments of pride: "My best photo ever is Justyna walking around with the biggest pepper... she thought it was an apple." For children with additional needs, engagement was more limited but still meaningful, with some contributing small tasks while gaining exposure to new foods. Teenagers also became involved, particularly with shopping and meal preparation. Parents noted that this turned shopping trips into learning opportunities: "Three teenagers help with shopping, running around saying 'Can you get...'" Families valued how these activities encouraged children to explore food more independently while still connecting with their culture, for example by adapting recipes to reflect religious dietary needs.

3. Healthier Eating Habits

Parents described moving away from convenience meals towards healthier and more varied diets. Several mentioned planning meals in advance, buying ingredients in bulk, and making better use of food before it spoiled. One participant explained: "Instead of going for just expensive, unhealthy things, it's now gotten better health-wise for myself and the children." Awareness of nutrition grew as families discussed protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and calories in ways that felt accessible: "It makes you feel proud, like you've actually done something good for your family." Air fryers, smaller portions, and recipe cards reinforced practical steps towards healthier eating. Above all, parents reported that cooking had become enjoyable: "[It] made cooking fun", "Keeping minds engaged [is] part of the fun."



4. Health and Wellbeing Benefits

The benefits of the programme were not limited to food. Families spoke about sleeping better, losing weight, and experiencing fewer health flare-ups, crediting the sessions with helping them step outside their comfort zones: "Some days, just coming here was the biggest thing I did." Movement was often built into the sessions through dancing or playful activities. This combination of food and activity was seen as uplifting. Families also valued the presence of local organisations such as MIND, Groundworks, and NHS Alliance, which provided informal access to wellbeing services in a non-stigmatising setting.

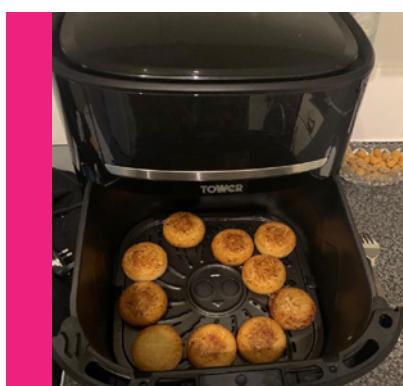
5. Social Connections and Community Support

One of the most consistent themes was the friendships and networks formed through the programme. Participants described how strangers became close friends: "Before we didn't know each other, now we're sisters." The WhatsApp groups kept connections alive, with families posting photos, sharing deals, and offering encouragement. This sense of belonging was emphasised throughout. One parent reflected: "What I like is this is like a safe space, not judged." Shared meals and group celebrations reinforced these bonds, with participants explaining that food became a way to stay connected outside the sessions: "You come in as strangers, but you don't leave like that", "I don't feel on my own with it anymore."

6. Practical Barriers and Suggestions for Improvement

Some participants were frustrated by the limited kitchen facilities in certain venues, which restricted opportunities for more ambitious cooking. Families expressed a desire for additional sessions and for activities to run over longer periods. Parents also asked for weekend sessions so older children could take part.

Resources were another concern. Families requested bigger or multiple air fryers, more culturally specific ingredients, and allergy-friendly food options. These requests underline the importance of ensuring future projects are well-resourced if they are to meet families' expectations.



7. Spillover into Wider Networks

The influence of the programme reached far beyond the original participants. Families shared recipes with relatives, taught friends to use air fryers, and encouraged others to join: "When they want to do it, you do it." One parent said simply: "I tell everybody everything all the time and get everybody to join." The groups also acted as a bridge to other services and support networks. Participants discovered food bag schemes, domestic abuse counselling, and community pantries through conversations that began in cooking sessions. For charity leaders, the project created a natural and non-threatening route into difficult topics, making support more accessible to families who might otherwise have stayed isolated.

Conclusion

The interviews and focus groups show that the 50 Families Project had wide-ranging impacts on families' everyday lives. Parents gained confidence and skills in the kitchen and children engaged with food in new ways, and families adopted healthier eating habits. Beyond food, families forged new friendships and accessed support from local organisations. Challenges remained, particularly in terms of kitchen access and sustaining the programme over time. Yet families described the project as transformative, emphasising that food was a means to better health and also a foundation for building trust and community.



4.2 Charity Lead Interviews

1. Context and Ethos

Both Spring and Home-Start emphasised that their work takes place within communities facing high levels of deprivation, instability, and isolation. Spring operates in Castle Ward, “one of the most deprived wards in the country,” where families often lack basic resources, have histories of poor experiences with statutory services: “There’s six of us living in a one-bedroom flat where we can’t cook... our world is this estate.” Home-Start described working with families with at least one child under five, many of whom struggle with confidence, mental health, and low financial security. The ethos across both organisations is based on trust: “It takes time. You don’t just walk in and people trust you.” As the Spring lead put it: “It’s not our role as practitioners to judge people. We’re here to support people, enable them, and provide a better life for their children.”

2. Engagement and Building Trust

Securing engagement was a significant challenge. Families were often wary of formal organisations such as universities. Spring noted that careful messaging and social media visibility helped overcome this: “People were knocking on our door every day asking to join.” For Home-Start, trust was built through outreach and gradual involvement: “Our families have such low confidence, particularly with cooking, that they don’t always want to share it with others.” The use of WhatsApp was highlighted as an effective, low-pressure entry point, with families willing to share photos of meals online even if they lacked the confidence to cook in group settings: “They might not come to a group, but they will post a picture.”

3. Cooking Confidence and Practical Skills

Both leads emphasised the growth in cooking confidence. For Spring, demonstrations of simple recipes often overturned parental assumptions: “Parents would say, ‘my child won’t eat carrots,’ but then the child sits there merrily eating carrots.” Providing equipment was described as transformational. Air fryers and blenders were repeatedly cited as affordable, space-saving tools that helped families shift towards healthier meals. Home-Start highlighted how even basic skills, such as making an omelette, became milestones for parents with little prior experience: “Once they knew how, they loved it. It became a really nice snack for children.”

4. Child and Family Benefits

Charity leads stressed that children benefited alongside parents. At Spring, children were actively involved in preparation, offered choices about food, and encouraged to try new tastes in supportive environments. Home-Start found that children’s excitement about food sometimes outweighed parental hesitation, with older siblings also joining in fruit kebab making and healthy play activities. Both organisations described a “whole family benefit” where skills, routines, and confidence rippled out into extended households.

5. Social Connection and Cohesion

The importance of peer networks came through strongly. For Spring, the WhatsApp group not only shared recipes but sparked real friendships: “People that would never have sat together for a coffee are now bonded.” Families were also encouraged to continue connections outside the project, for example through park trips supported with simple resources like free ice pops. Home-Start found that WhatsApp peer support surprised them by how quickly it took root: “Strangers with very different needs found relationships through food.” Both leads highlighted how non-judgemental spaces allowed families to open up about challenges such as budgeting, allergies, or managing neurodivergent children’s diets without fear of criticism.

6. Wider Wellbeing and Empowerment

For Spring, food sessions linked naturally into parenting programmes, domestic abuse support, language classes, and school readiness. Families grew in confidence to access new environments, including the university: "People that would never have left the estate came to the event at the university and felt proud. They had a swagger talking about it afterwards." Home-Start stressed that WhatsApp provided a lifeline for some parents: "This became a definite source of support... it kicks off again around teatime with parents checking in."

7. Challenges and Hidden Costs

Both leads pointed to hidden costs as a barrier to sustaining projects. For Spring, essentials such as staff time, training, utilities, and printing were difficult to cover: "Staff time is the bit that never gets counted properly", "I can't just grab two mums off the street. I need staff who understand child development and safeguarding." Home-Start highlighted that while social media support worked well, in-person cookery was harder to sustain due to low parental confidence and practical barriers such as transport and childcare. Both charities noted the challenge of maintaining momentum beyond the funded period, with the need for realistic, ongoing funding models: "You can't do this on goodwill alone."

8. Recommendations for Practice

Charity leads emphasised the need for realism and flexibility. Spring advised tailoring recipes to simple equipment and using digital tools effectively: "Don't give people paper surveys — they'll end up scrunched outside the building. Do it on phones." Home-Start stressed the importance of peer-led support and realistic expectations: "We keep it real. Children eat cake, we eat cake, that's fine. It's about helping families be confident to try new things." Both called for funders to recognise hidden costs and invest in staff capacity so that gains in confidence and wellbeing are not lost.



4.3 Interview with Funders

1. Strategic Rationale and Role

John Brownhill, founder of Food4Heroes confirmed that financial and strategic support is needed because "...the modern world gives us many new dietary dilemmas, and it's not always easy to know what we should put on our plates." Rachel McGrath described her role as convening between the donor, the delivery charities, and the University "...to help keep the momentum going by convening timely meet ups so the projects can check in with each other and with the donor." The Foundation framed the 50 Families Project as a piece of "strategic philanthropy," designed to be responsive to local need and aligned with Food4Heroes' evolving mission to tackle poor nutrition and reduce pressures on the NHS: "This was never about quick wins."

2. Why This Project?

Food4Heroes shifted from providing hot meals to NHS staff during the pandemic to tackling longer-term issues like childhood obesity and food insecurity. The 50 Families Project was created as a pilot also rooted in NCF's Hidden Needs report, which identified priority wards in Northamptonshire where deprivation and poor access to healthy food were most acute.

3. Choice of Areas and Inclusion

The project focused on Castle, Spencer and Lings in Northampton, and Queensway and Victoria in Wellingborough. Power of the Mind's involvement was also a deliberate choice to ensure cultural inclusion: "They are working with Black African and British Caribbean families too, so that also makes us think about culturally appropriate nutrition." Localities were selected based on need, feasibility and capacity: "We had to be really mindful of different organisations' pressure points."

4. Collaboration and Diversity of Delivery

Rachel praised the way three very different approaches were brought together: Spring's teaching kitchen, Home-Start's outreach into homes, and Power of the Mind's social gatherings. She emphasised that the project avoided being prescriptive, instead showing that multiple models can be valid and complementary.

5. Outcomes and Impact

The funder stressed that immediate gains were clearest in confidence, skills, and social connection, while physical health changes would take longer: "The emotional and mental well-being, I have no doubt that that's been a big factor. Will somebody's BMI have come down dramatically in that period of time? I think that would take a longer piece of work." She highlighted personal stories as evidence of achievement, such as a Spring family attending the University celebration day: "It had been the first time in a long time that they'd actually ventured beyond the estate." Children's involvement was seen as especially important, with the project modelling healthier behaviours across generations: "It's really healthy modelling for the children... even if the adults aren't gaining in the longer term, that kind of modelling is significant."

6. Resources and Challenges

The project received around £40,000 across all partners. Rachel acknowledged that hidden costs, especially for smaller charities, were a challenge: "It might be an idea for us to revisit that in that case." She noted that resource capacity and timescales were ongoing constraints, with some intended outcomes requiring years to become visible: "You're testing things that might not work, and that's okay."

7. Legacy and Next Steps

Looking ahead, Rachel described the importance of producing a toolkit, capturing different approaches without being overly prescriptive: "I think it's much more empowering to say these are different ways that you can do it." She also welcomed the idea of a celebratory cookbook to showcase families' journeys. Sustainability remains uncertain, but there is hope the project could continue or be scaled: "It may have had this unintended but fantastic result that they may want to continue to partner in some way."

Conclusion

From the funder's perspective, the 50 Families Project demonstrates the value of collaborative, place-based philanthropy. The project has shown that family food interventions can begin to address inequality and wider wellbeing: "If you want to shift the dial... you've got to invest at an earlier point of need, but you won't necessarily see results for perhaps a decade." Rachel stressed that the greatest impacts so far are relational and behavioural, with longer-term health outcomes requiring sustained investment. The pilot has strengthened partnerships, created a platform for learning, and positioned the toolkit as a legacy resource to share: "What matters is what you learn and what you change next time."



4.4 Synthesis of Family, Charity and Funder Perspectives

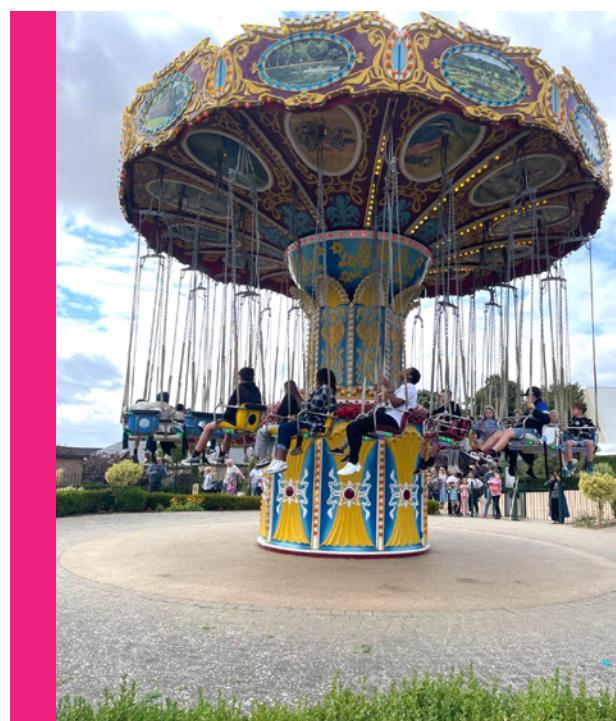
Overall Synthesis

The perspectives converge on the idea that the 50 Families Project succeeded because it was relational and practical. Families describe emotional and personal transformation; charities highlight the delivery effort and hidden costs that enabled those changes, and the funders frame the programme as a pilot that provided evidence and learning for future investment. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that the project improved confidence and community connections, while also highlighting the importance of long-term resources and sustainable delivery.

Theme	Families	Charities	Funder
Ethos and Approach	Families valued safe spaces.	Charities saw their role as enabling.	The funder framed the project as strategic philanthropy.
Engagement and Participation	Families enjoyed hands-on participation and overcame hesitation through sessions and peer encouragement.	Charities explained that engagement required persistence, creative communication, and culturally relevant activities; social media visibility helped draw families in.	The funder saw engagement as a deliberate strategy, combining three models to maximise inclusion across communities.
Skills and Behaviour Change	Families reported increased cooking confidence, reduced reliance on processed food, and better planning habits.	Charities highlighted that basic skills and equipment, such as using air fryers or making omelettes, transformed family routines.	The funder recognised behaviour change as the clearest short-term impact.
Benefits for Children and Families	Families expressed pride in children's willingness to try new foods.	Charities saw children experimenting confidently when supported.	The funder saw children's involvement as crucial to long-term change.
Social Networks and Community	Families described strong new friendships and digital networks.	Charities reported peer support networks as powerful, with strangers bonding over food and shared challenges.	The funder valued social connection as evidence of reduced isolation, with visits to the University symbolising progress.

Wider Wellbeing	Families described improvements in sleep, weight, and confidence, alongside access to other services.	Charities explained that food served as a bridge into wider services.	The funder described the project as boosting wellbeing and modelling positive behaviours, while noting that long-term change requires sustained investment.
Challenges and Resources	Families wanted more sessions, better kitchen access, and improved resources such as larger or culturally specific equipment.	Charities emphasised hidden costs, including staff time, safeguarding, and utilities, which made delivery fragile.	The funder acknowledged that £40k was stretched across partners and stressed that genuine health shifts need long-term structural investment.
Legacy and Future Directions	Families spread impact informally by sharing recipes and encouraging others to join.	Charities called for toolkits, resources, and continuity structures to enable replication and growth.	The funder prioritised the toolkit as a legacy resource for sector learning, while also valuing celebratory outputs such as the cookbook.

Table 2: Synthesis of Perspectives.



Summary of key findings from interview data

The 50 Families Project had a strong impact on participating families in Northamptonshire. Parents became more confident in the kitchen, shifted their food choices towards healthier meals, and developed habits that helped them plan and manage shopping more effectively. Children were actively involved in preparing and tasting food, which encouraged families to introduce greater variety into their diets. Many participants also reported improvements to everyday wellbeing, and they spoke warmly about the friendships and peer support that developed through group activities and digital networks. Families did, however, highlight areas for improvement, including the need for more sessions and resources that reflected cultural and dietary differences.

Charities delivering the programme stressed the importance of trust and persistence in keeping families engaged. They found that practical tools such as air fryers and online groups made a real difference to sustaining change. Food activities also created pathways into other forms of help, ranging from parenting support to advice on domestic abuse. The organisations underlined that hidden costs such as staffing, safeguarding, venues, and materials put pressure on delivery and made long-term continuation uncertain.

From the funder's perspective, the project acted as a pilot to test and refine different approaches to reducing food inequality. The three models, hub-based, outreach, and cultural/social, were seen as complementary, together broadening the project's reach and relevance. Gains in confidence, skills, and social connection were clear, while deeper health outcomes were recognised as requiring long-term investment. The funder placed particular importance on capturing the learning in a toolkit so that the approaches can be shared and adapted more widely.

Taken together, the evidence shows that programmes focused on food can achieve much more than an improved diet. They build confidence, support children's development, reduce isolation, and create pathways into wider wellbeing. Families, charities, and the funder all expressed concern about sustainability, making it clear that reliable resourcing is essential if progress is to be maintained and scaled.



5. What Works Toolkit and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of 'What Works'

Evidence points to a set of practices that were most effective in driving positive change. These can be summarised as the 5 Ps:

People: kind facilitators; parent champions; safeguarding-ready team.

Place: small groups; real kitchens; child-friendly corners.

Practice: quick recipes; take-home kits; monthly cook-together; weekly online challenges.

Pride: celebrate attempts; share stories; community showcase; mini-certificates.

Pathways: warm referrals at the session; follow-up texts; track outcomes.

Key approaches that made a difference were:

Flexible delivery models: Combining outreach, hub-based, and social approaches ensures families can engage in ways that suit their circumstances.

Trust and non-judgemental ethos: Welcoming spaces reduce anxiety and encourage participation.

Hands-on cooking with children: Involving children in food preparation builds family habits, increases food familiarity, and motivates parents to experiment.

Simple tools and equipment: Affordable items such as air fryers, slow cookers, and recipe cards made healthier cooking achievable at home.

Digital peer networks: WhatsApp groups and other online platforms provided low-barrier routes to ongoing social connections.

Celebration and reinforcement: Cookbooks and recognition of progress helps sustain motivation.

Food as a gateway: Cooking sessions provide a natural entry point to wider wellbeing and support services.

Cultural respect and adaptation: Encouraging families to share their food traditions creates pride and inclusivity.

5.2 Recommendations

Building on these findings, the following general recommendations are suggested:

- Projects should be sustained beyond short-term pilots, as longer funding cycles are needed to secure lasting health outcomes.
- Future funding should take account of hidden costs such as staff time, safeguarding, training, and practical resources, which are essential for safe and effective delivery.
- Families consistently requested more opportunities to cook together in fully equipped kitchens, so investment in access and facilities is important.
- Online peer groups should be treated as core elements of delivery rather than add-ons, since they extend learning and reduce isolation.
- Affordable, family-friendly exercise should be integrated more fully alongside food initiatives to strengthen links between diet and physical activity.
- Provision should reflect families' diverse traditions and needs by ensuring access to allergy-friendly and culturally specific foods.

- Families should be involved in co-designing activities, as this ensures relevance, fosters ownership, and supports sustained engagement.
- The ripple effects of family learning should be encouraged by supporting families to share recipes and resources beyond the project.
- Legacy resources such as toolkits and cookbooks should be created to help replicate success in other communities.
- Cross-sector partnerships between universities and organisations should be promoted so that grassroots delivery is connected with research.

Targeted recommendations for funders, delivery charities and policymakers:

For Funders and Commissioners

- Adopt multi-year grants so behaviour change can take root and health gains become visible.
- Fund full delivery costs, including overheads, staff training, safeguarding, utilities, digital moderation, and celebration events.
- Commission mixed delivery models in the same programme to widen reach.
- Incentivise shared kitchens by supporting block bookings and mobile kit for cook-together sessions.
- Embed evaluation budgets and require a small, consistent indicator set across providers.

For Delivery Charities

- Start digital first for the hesitant, then invite into kitchens; maintain weekly posting routines.
- Co-design menus each term with families; keep recipes low-cost and adaptable.
- Prioritise child roles every session; provide child-safe tools and visual prompts.
- Integrate movement with short, fun activities that need no specialist kit.
- Formalise referral pathways with local services and track uptake.
- Plan for succession: train volunteers and parent champions to sustain online and in person groups.

For Policymakers

- Align with local holiday activities and health strategies to unlock kitchens, minibuses, and small grants for equipment.
- Support community food infrastructure (pantries, surplus schemes, culturally specific suppliers).
- Back practitioner toolkits and peer learning networks, so models can achieve sustainability and reach.

5.3 50 Families Nutrition Project Toolkit

This toolkit suggests a series of practical sessions for participating families.

1: Safe, welcoming delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a non-judgemental tone from first contact; use plain, friendly language across flyers, online, and in-person intros. Keep group sizes small; offer creche or play corners and flexible session times (e.g., school hours plus a weekend or evening slot). Use ice-breakers built around food (e.g., taste tests, mystery box, family recipe share).
2: Hands-on cooking that fits real life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach 30–40 minute, low-cost recipes using common kit (e.g. air fryer, hob) and supermarket basics. Provide take-home cards, ingredients, and labelled storage boxes. Include child roles every session (e.g., chop, measure, stir) with child-safe knives.
3: Equip homes to reduce barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starter kits: air fryer or slow cooker (one per family where feasible), measuring cups, chopping boards, containers, thermometer, child-safe knife. ‘Cook once, eat twice’ templates; freezer labels; portion visuals.
4: Digital peer support that actually runs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up moderated online groups per site; post 3–4 times weekly (e.g., recipes, supermarket deals, polls). Run light-touch challenges with small prizes (e.g., lunch boxes, hand blenders). Agree simple group rules (kindness, safeguard concerns).
5: Culture and inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite families to choose recipes; adapt for faith, allergies, sensory needs; map local ethnic heritage grocers. Celebrate cultural dishes; spotlight healthy swaps without losing identity or flavour.
6: Food as an opening for wider help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-locate 10-minute drop-ins (e.g., debt advice, English language support, NHS and wellbeing support). Use ‘warm referrals’ from trusted staff after sessions.
7: Movement add-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build 10–15 minute movement blocks (e.g., chair dance, family games) into food sessions. Partner with leisure trusts for £1 passes or family tasters.
8: Continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monthly cook-togethers with full kitchen access (book community kitchens/college kitchens). Termly celebration (cookbook pages, certificates, showcase meal).



THE £5 PICNIC CHALLENGE

1 You have £5 to spend.

2 Choose at least one item from each category (Fruit & Veg, Protein & Dairy, Main, Snack, Drink).

3 You can mix shop-bought and homemade options.

4 Add up your total – did you escape under budget?

★ Bonus: Build a basket that covers your 5-a-day



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UON Research Centres



CADE: Centre for Active Digital Education



CARE: Centre for the Advancement of Racial Equality