

Heathfield Family Food Club Action Research

Summary

Based on prior local research and intelligence a food club trial was set up at the primary school on Heathfield with the aim to

- develop a replicable working model that does not place undue demands on the school
- create a baseline list of resources needed
- evaluate if this model is successful in reaching families not in receipt of free school meals (FSM)

Further case studies were produced looking at other food support projects happening in local schools.

Although it was not possible to produce a baseline list of resources, **food project success appeared to be underpinned by several common denominators:**

- senior leadership buy-in
- a nominated member of staff
- linking with the local community
- good, regular communication
- clarity of expectations
- ease of access

All projects were successful in reaching pupils/families not meeting the FSM threshold.

We also identified questions for more in-depth research:

- What allows families to access food support?
- How do parents relate to schools and support offered via schools?
- What enables parents to co-design and co-deliver own food solutions following the Covid pandemic and within the demands of the Cost-of-Living crisis?
- What allows schools and VCSE food providers to free up capacity to develop, adapt and run food projects?

There isn't *one* model that would fit all schools and, whatever model is used, input from the school in terms of time and support is required.

The background

A mapping exercise of emergency and VCSE food providers carried out as part of a project with DCF in April 2021 showed a number of geographical gaps, which in the large part have been filled. In Heathfield, however, there is still only limited availability of food support (it is covered by the district wide food banks and residents can access Bovey Food Hub in Bovey Tracey).

St Catherine's CofE Primary School has a FSM rate of 30 % and the DCC research carried out 2021 shows us that "there are around twice as many households with children experiencing very low food security that are not receiving FSM as there are actually receiving free meals".

Schools have been identified as key partners both in identifying children/families who may struggle even if not meeting the FSM threshold and in potentially being a delivery location with an understanding that this is not their core work and staff and resources are stretched.

An engagement event with Action for Children in Heathfield and listening activity with Home Start parents (some of whom live on the estate) indicated that many families are already doing all they can to reduce spending and some parents expressed a need for open access food provisions such as

- Affordable food clubs or hubs
- community fridges
- local “tin on the wall” food collections

There was also some appetite for up skilling/skill sharing and food related projects with the latter.

Heathfield is predominantly an industrial estate but also has some housing. It is located 2 miles south east of Bovey Tracey and is next to the A382 and A38 roads. In 2011 it had a population of 1832.

According to the 2011 census more than half of the property are rented and, again more than half of residents are classed as semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, as well as those on benefits.

The majority of residents fall into the 30 – 60 age group, with a higher number of single households. According to the IMD Index 2019 income deprivation affecting older people and children is higher than in surrounding areas with the latter showing an increase from 2015 to 2019.

There are two shops retailing food at a premium cost: a small Spar and Mole Valley.

Heathfield has a CoE primary school, this is also where the local community church meets and a Community Centre that runs some paid for activities (kick boxing, Pilates, dog classes, Rhythm & Rhyme) and is available for hire. Youth Genesis does offer some street based youth work on a Friday evening.

There is also an Action for Children Children’s Centre next to the school which does no longer run open access groups, though they are trying to engage residents to set up a volunteer led parent & toddler groups, which they are finding very difficult.

Historically it has been difficult to engage residents for Teignbridge CVS and still is for the Community Centre which is volunteer run by a local couple.

Heathfield is also one of the areas earmarked by Learn Devon to run slow cooker and money management courses.

The Pilot

Delivery Partners and Model

We worked with St Catherine’s CofE Primary school to set up a pilot food club to operate out of the school at the end of one school day a week. During the pilot the school and Teignbridge CVS worked together to introduce the concept by showing families the range of food available and offering it for free. This was with the aim to also help engage those families who are not eligible for FSM and who are currently not accessing food support and those who may not be eligible to access referral only food support.

Teignbridge CVS negotiated with Bovey Food Hub who receive (paid for) surplus food via Devon & Cornwall Food Action and FareShare to deliver free food for this pilot (in increasing amounts) to the

school. We did ask them to adapt their model for working with the school, as they usually work in community venues with a group of local volunteers who undergo in depth training.

The rationale for choosing the food club model for this pilot/action research was that it is a stigma free way of accessing affordable food and also would allow the project to develop – for example into a recipe club (an idea that the school was keen to develop later down the line). A food club was also open to families who have in the past not needed to access food support and may not be eligible for referral only emergency support. The school was a neutral venue to find out about it.

In tandem Teignbridge CVS Community Matter Development Workers were working on the estate to engage residents to listen and connect.

Week 1

2 boxes-

The order model was based on the model the Bovey Food Hub uses that offers £ 15 food boxes that contain a mix of ambient goods (tins, jars, dry goods, fresh fruit, and vegetables, chilled and frozen). Parents were informed of this food club pilot via the school newsletter, social media, and a letter home.

The school has no chilling and freezing facilities, so Teignbridge CVS did request no chilled and frozen food to be included.

The food delivery was arranged to arrive between 1 and 3 pm as these fits in with the school timetable.



The school set up tables prior to the delivery and Bovey Food Hub unloaded onto the tables in front of the school. This location was chosen as parents file past this after collecting their children.

The delivery included chilled and frozen items (including ice cream) most of which had to be thrown away. Delivery is in a variety of banana box size boxes (cardboard and plastic) and some plastic bags. Cardboard boxes were recycled by the school, plastic crates returned.

The pilot phase was supported by a community development worker from Teignbridge CVS, who with a member of school staff encouraged parents to have a look, talk about food hubs and take food for free.

Only around 10 parents stopped and engaged, but a number of children helped themselves to fruit and some of the vegetables, with parents and staff taking tins, jars and dried goods.

Bags would have been useful. The weather may not have helped as it was drizzling. Some parents said they felt they could not take the food as not homeless (and interestingly the school staff pointed out that they were families in need).

This was an opportunity to create interest and talk about food surplus and how this helps everybody. Fresh (defrosted) Cornish Pasties were a hit with the children.



Week 2

4 boxes –

Teignbridge CVS reiterated that no frozen or chilled food should be delivered. Paper and plastic bags were brought along.

This time two boxes of Cornish Pasties were included which straight away attracted the children and more parents engaged this time- around 20.

3 boxes were unpacked, 1 left to show content.

It was an opportunity to talk to parents how food on the tables could be used to make a variety of meals and all the food groups included (protein, carbohydrates, vegetables etc).

Parents were interested in taking food and being able to choose between pasta or rice, brown or white bread, pasta sauce or pesto etc

We also talked about how ingredients can be prepared in a slow cooker. This week we realised that with parents taking “meal ingredients” the number of bags was not sufficient. Still, apart from around 6 tins it all went.

We realised that parents picking up children from school (with many walking) taking a box was not feasible for the majority.

Week 3

7 boxes -

Teignbridge CVS discussed with Bovey Food Hub the introduction of food bags rather than food boxes as they can be carried easier on school pick up.

The Food Hub agreed to produce £ 5 equivalents food bags (21).

Unfortunately, food did not arrive in bags. Luckily many parents brought bags, with around 25 helping themselves. There were many conversations about the food club and how it works. It was good to show what £ 5 buys in comparison with other local shops.

St Catherine's Food Club

Over 20 of our families collected their first food bags this Tuesday as part of our Affordable Food club. We have carried out a price comparison and parents save on an equivalent shop more than £ 9.38 at Heathfield Spar (who did not have all items in stock), £ 8.45 when shopping at Tesco and £ 2.93 when shopping own brand at Aldi, so the food club does give clear savings!

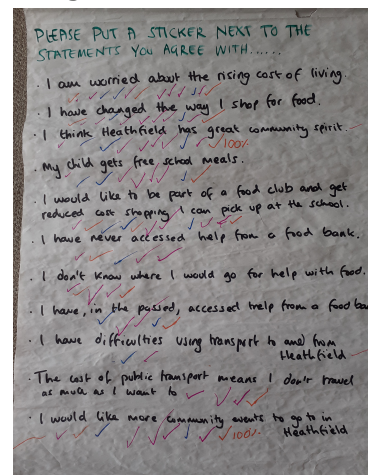
If you would like to order £5 food bags for your family please speak to Linzi or Becca in the school office for more information. Order and pay by every Friday. Collect the following Tuesday.

Teignbridge CVS did a price comparison that was shared with the school and other schools in the United Schools Federation and our partner Bovey Food Hub:

Parents save on an equivalent shop more than £ 9.38 when shopping at Heathfield Spar (who did not have all items in stock), £ 8.45 when shopping at Tesco and £ 2.93 when shopping own brand at Aldi, so the food club does give clear savings!

Week 3 was also an opportunity to engage with parents and we used a simple method to measure food related worries and actions.

It showed that of those participating 13/25 are worried about cost of living, and as a result of this 11/25 have already changed the way they shop for food, only 9/25 who took food say their children receive free school meals, 12/25 were interested in becoming a food club member. Worryingly 5/25 do not know where to go for help with food.



This also highlighted other issues around transport, showing the importance of making food available locally.

We discussed move away from plastic bags with the food hub.

week 4

10 boxes –

Bovey food Hub contacted us to say that due to the national shortages of food surplus Devon and Cornwall Food Action may now no longer be able to supply the hub and this resulted in the Food Hub having to buy in produce to supplement the bags.



We agreed on a typical bag (see left), but with a range, so ingredients vary from week to week.

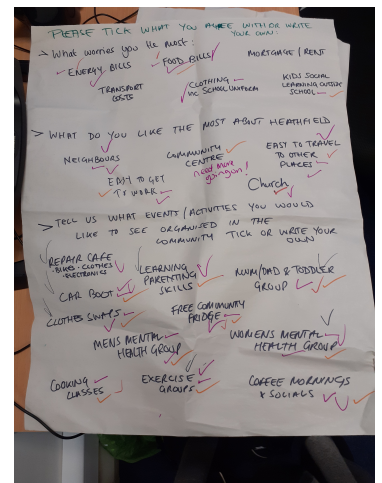
The 10 boxes equal 30 food bags. This time we did have enough bags and parents were able to choose and bag their own goods. This was quite work intensive as we had to explain what can be taken. We also explained how parents can sign up to the bags. There was some confusion as we had initially said £ 15 boxes, but there was agreement that £ 5 bags are more affordable as less money up front.

We also took orders for next week, with a total of 20 families signing up for 24 bags.

We did take the opportunity to ask more questions around food and cost of living and found out that out of energy bills/ food/transport/housing costs/clothing/social learning, food costs were what most people worried about.

Parents also indicated a need for local mental health groups, a community fridge, repair café, clothes swaps, cooking classes and more.

Following week 4 we did have a meeting with the school and the food hub who agreed to run this as a branch of their Bovey Food Hub and deliver goods for bags starting the following week. This would include cotton bags that parents will need to return week by week.



The school agreed to

- remind parents to order
- support their ordering on a jot form via school office
- support parents filling in the membership form
- hand out membership cards
- collect payment

The Food Hub agreed to

- deliver at the set time
- provide a card reader if needed
- offer and mark food in response to any dietary requirements

week 1 post trial

The school supported parents to fill in membership form and place their first order as well as collecting payment in advance.

18 families ordered 21 bags, but on the day two other families who had ordered but not paid turned up with payment. Orders are now taken via the school for w/b 31/10 (after their 2 week half term). Out of the 18 families 7 were in receipt of free school meals.

School staff packed food into bags and there were two boxes of surplus potatoes and carrots for people to help themselves. There was also a bonus that week of 4 pints blue top milk per bag.

Parents were encouraged to order via the Bovey Hub during half term.

Following the pilot, Bovey Food Hub continued to support parents through free membership and deliveries to the school which can be ordered on a weekly basis as needed. They did suggest that the school purchases a fridge for storage as that would also enable other surplus to be shared.

Additional Offer

Following promotion by the school, six families and one member of staff attended a free Learn Devon Slow cooker course (2 x2 hours) in November 2022.

Those who attended received a free slow cooker after the second session.



The course was also attended by Home Start Teignbridge (who offer support to families with young children) and ECOE (who offer practical energy advice and support). This opened the discussion on fuel poverty with out it being assumed, and budgeting.

Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) showed all participants improved their knowledge on how to use a slow cooker and associated benefits to health and energy use, all participants greatly increased their knowledge on slow cooker menu planning according to need, budget and time.

A money management course is being planned between the school and Learn Devon.

Week 14 post trial

Numbers of families have dropped to five, three of which are not on eligible for FSM.

After conversations with the school a further promotion activity was supported at the school, offering free food as a draw and a reminder of what is included in the £ 5 bags. This was well received by the parents, and a number of parents signed for bags the following week, but unfortunately only 4 families paid in advance.

Week 28 post trial

Bovey Food Hub and the school decided that it is not viable to continue to run a Food Club at the school and it has stopped. Some of the families now obtain their food via the Food Hub in Bovey Tracey and the school is in the process of putting together a funding application to support their breakfast and after school clubs with food.

Feedback

Bovey Food Hub:

What did you think were the challenges and how were they overcome?

Lack of admin time both at school and Bovey Food Hub. Food Hub did what we said we would do and were clear it could not include promotion - that's where CVS input was appreciated and helped. Ongoing families do seem to need more support – this is a family liaison issue, planning ahead is needed.

Maybe some families do not want to engage with the school – so does it work having school as 3rd party?

Communication with the school is difficult. Orders ought to be in by Friday lunchtimes, sometimes have to chase on Mondays.

Do families want to pick their own?

What worked well?

Having free food definitely was a draw and having it out on the table was brilliant, you were great working & liaising with the school.

It is really good that the school is so proactive and taking the time to think about families' needs and also the admin time

Chatting it through with Anja helped to reflect and get clarity.

What would you do differently?

Have poster with QR code and then help families to register and order via QR code.

St. Catherine's:

What did you think were the challenges and how were they overcome?

Initially the delivery of frozen and chilled produce, but this was rectified though it took a little while to get it right.

Boxes were difficult to manage, but much easier for school now that parents pack their own bags (saves time!)

Not all dietary requirements were catered for, but the Hub did include some gluten-free alternatives.

There was more paperwork and forms for parents than we thought, and they did ask for need, so there was some stigma attached. We needed to support parents to fill out forms and remind regularly about ordering and paying, taking payments was quite time intensive for staff. Staff sickness made it difficult to push and remind parents.

Did parents feel obliged to sign up after receiving free food?

What worked well?

Having the price comparison was really useful.

It was great having extra hands on deck on the food club days to support staff.

Food Club saves families money and time, offers real support. One bag feed single parent with one child for $\frac{3}{4}$ of week

What would you do differently?

(no answer given)

Parent:

What did you think were the challenges and how were they overcome?

Food offered often is close to the use by date which can make it difficult to keep if not using up soon, particularly if we are paying for it.

It was difficult to pick up a box, having bags made it much easier.

It would be better if we could pick our own vegetables.

Some people find it difficult to have the money ready when needed to pay for order.

What worked well?

Very convenient to be able to pick up from the school and it saves me an awful lot of money.

Slow cooker course helped me to think how to use, store and freeze food, lots of good ideas.

What would you do differently?

It would help me to be able to pay by BACS.

Additional Intelligence:

Following the Acts of Kindness model (a resident-organised free food shelf with the motto “Take what you need, give what you can”) food shelf was set up in one of the residential areas in Heathfield. This model operates successfully in a number of smaller towns and villages in Teignbridge and a local resident set up the shelf outside her house, which was stocked by other local residents. This was promoted at the school and on the local Facebook page. The resident found that the shelf was depleted very quickly by 2 families and linked with Teignbridge CVS to find out about referral pathways/signposting for more support. This information was shared with those families, who said that they had already received help from the district wide food banks in the past and were no longer eligible. After around 6 weeks the shelf was taken down as it was felt that these families were taking advantage of the facility which was stocked purely by donations from others locally.

Food in Schools – other models:

Dawlish College

Teaching staff at the school are observing that the cost-of-living crisis and associated impact on food availability in the home is an issue and has a noticeable impact on student behaviour and tiredness in the classroom. The school has a 9.8% students who are eligible for free school meals.

English teacher and former chef Paul Hayes runs *Ready, Steady, Cook!* a broader curriculum cooking skills session which is free and attended by 60 + students, this is in lieu of an after school club. The aim of this is to impart wider cooking skills and to destigmatize accessing food support/food surplus. Students attending are roughly split between those who are in receipt of FSM and those who are not meeting the threshold but are in food insecurity. Participating pupils are able to take food home to reheat.



The current challenge is around resourcing produce for the sessions and establishing a sustainable way of doing this as initial funding that has been used to procure equipment has run out. With support from Teignbridge CVS the school succeeded in accessing a Cost-of-Living grant to help purchase long life cupboard staples.

The school is also in the process of exploring the setup of a growing space project/allotments on school land which could also be used by the school and share surplus to the cooking class and VCSE organisations in the Dawlish area.

The college is linked well with the local community, businesses and with local organisations, notably Dawlish ROC who support the project with surplus produce from their FareShare delivery and donations, and following CVS input are now linked in with other relevant organisations/groups such as the South Devon Food Alliance and Helping Dawlish (a collection of groups who came together to support the local community during Covid and continue to coordinate efforts around the cost of living crisis). The College is also exploring how they can draw in their caterer *Innovate Catering* to support this work, possibly across a project also involving other schools in the Dawlish Learning Partnership.

According to staff the immediate benefits to the school are the opportunity for students and staff to develop good relationships beyond the context of a formal classroom setting as well as encouraging dialogue around food between school and home.

Exminster Community Primary School

Exminster Community Primary School worked with Westbank Health & Wellbeing Centre in 2021, identifying and referring families who they knew struggle to cook raw ingredients to family cooking sessions.

Through collaboration with Teignbridge CVS and local foodbanks cooking equipment was also issued to the families.

Like other primary schools we know of, Exminster collects food for their local foodbank, but they do keep behind some of it to pass on directly to families they know are in food insecurity (“bypassing the middle man” and referral process where appropriate), while also signposting to support available locally (i.e. warm well lounge & food larder which is open late), this is managed by the Family Support Coordinator. The percentage of pupils eligible for FSM is 12.9 %.

The school purchased a number of thermos lunchboxes and left over school lunches get distributed to families in food insecurity including those in temporary accommodation.

The school also raises funds so food technology lessons do not require children to bring in ingredients.

As allotments are adjacent to the school, they are also exploring to have a surplus/glut box by the gate for parents to help themselves during the growing months.

“Oh my gosh, food in tummies means the children are ready to learn and not set apart. It is rewarding to know that the changes we empower parents to make can help them break generational moulds in regard to cooking and eating.”

Hannah Parker, Family Support Coordinator

Westcliff Primary Academy, Dawlish

The larder at Westcliff Primary Academy opened at the end of the last Covid lockdown – driven by the School’s Ethos Committee and very much supported by Senior Management. Westcliff Primary Academy has currently 380 pupils, of which 28.8 % are in receipt of free school meals.

Initially a larder with ambient goods was set up in a foyer area just outside Family Support Officer’s office. Due to this location it falls to the joint Family Support Officer to maintain and develop the larder with support of admin staff and local donations from parents, local charities and businesses.

The school also runs a toddler group and profit raised there plus donations received for their pre-loved uniforms mean the school can buy in extra food when needed.



Prior to setting up the larder, Family Support Officer Linda Hodder referred lots of families to one of the local Foodbanks, this now happens in much lower numbers. The school shares the local *Worrying about Money? leaflets* to signpost to further support as well.



The larder is used regularly by 10 families and many more on an occasional basis, plus families where the pupils have left and other local residents. Stigma for families at the school is low, as the larder is easily accessible and in the same location that offer pre-loved uniforms and winter coats as well as a books children can borrow. However other local people accessing, need to call the school and arrange to come in, as it is not a walk in location for the public. Parents seeing the family support officer need to walk through the larder, so it is very easy to offer and "there is less shame attached as no need to ask".

Children are involved in checking dates, some parents/grandparents in picking up food surplus from food redistribution charities. The fridge/freezer was donated.

The larder is used flexibly and the Family Support Officer has used goods in the past to offer children breakfast if they arrive hungry.

Parents are informed about the larder on the school website and Facebook and via the Seesaw App, in particular when there is a large surplus to be shared.

It can be a challenge to find time to deal with the larder, in particular deliveries and keeping on top of the dates, the solution has been to do little bits at a time when going through. Another challenge is to make sure to have enough bags so parent can take food.

The school is interested in accessing slow cooker courses for their families as well.

Evaluation and Summary

The aim of this action research was to

- **develop a replicable working model that does not place undue demands on the school***
- **create a baseline list of resources needed ****
- **evaluate if this model is successful in reaching families not in receipt of FSM *****

What the action research showed is how **complex issues around food insecurity** are and how many **contributing factors there are when setting up food project**, which is clearly reflected in the feedback we have received from delivery partners and participants and the reason I wanted to share a detailed case study of the action research.

On the one hand, schools are ideally placed to know which of their children come to school hungry and which families are in food insecurity. Hunger also impacts on learning and behaviour at school, so schools do benefit from addressing this. Primary schools in particular are an obvious place for families to obtain food support as they are the one place parents access on a daily basis when picking up their children, which makes it easy and convenient during term time.

On the other hand, issues around stigma were raised both by the school and the provider – do parents really want the school to know about their food insecurity? Basing food club membership around need also meant that there was some stigma attached to signing up – and that may be why the free

model during the pilot which focused on the food surplus angle was easier to accept and access for parents. There could also be an issue of managing food support during the holidays.

Worryingly our interactions with parents highlighted that around 20 % initially did not know where to go for food support.

The action research showed that the food club (both during the trial phase and ongoing phase) was successful in supporting families where the FSM threshold is not met and this is also case for the other models we looked at. (*)**

It also allowed us to introduce families to a variety of food support models on offer (Food Club, open access food shelf, food banks, Bovey Food Hub).

In conclusion:

Although the action research did not allow us to produce a list of baseline resources, there clearly are **common denominators** that can help to make school-based food projects successful (**):

- **senior leadership buy-in**
- a **nominated and supported member of staff** who is responsible for the provision as part of their role
- **linking with** relevant organisations and groups in **the local community** can help with funding, resources, support and signposting
- good, regular **communication** is key, both between the school and the parents and the school and any external providers
- having **clarity around expectations** what can be offered/delivered by all partners
- making it **easy and ideally free to access** for pupils/parents

There are **questions raised** that would benefit from being explored/tested further (*):

- What allows families to access food support?
What makes it “easy to access”?
 - Location?
 - Free access?
 - Communication methods?
 - Minimal sharing or personal information?
 - Flexibility around ordering/pick ups?
 - A variety of payment methods and flexibility when to pay?
 - Appropriate packaging?
 - Offering choice?
- **How do parents relate to schools and support offered via schools?**
Are all parents happy to engage with the school and share food insecurity concerns?
- **What enables parents to co-design and co-deliver food solutions?**
Particularly those who struggle physically and mentally following the Covid pandemic and within the demands of the Cost-of-Living crisis?
- **What allows schools and VCSE food providers to free up capacity to develop, adapt and run food projects?**
 - funding?

- admin support?
- dedicated staff member?
- suitable location in school?
- parent support?

There isn't *one* model that would fit all schools and, whatever model is used, input from the school in terms of time and support is required. (*)

Food support in schools, which ever form it takes, can contribute to help families in food insecurity in a small but valuable way, particularly for those families who do not meet the FSM threshold and who have not needed to access support before.

Schools are in a good position to offer crucial signposting for those families and can benefit through improved behaviour and learning.

Anja Kroening-Maynard
Teignbridge CVS
1st May 2023