

The Food Train: Supporting older people to eat healthily at home

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Organisation: Food Train

Country: United Kingdom

Level of government: Regional/State government

Sector: Social protection

Type: Public Service

Launched in: 1995

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

Inability to go and do the weekly shopping can have a significant impact on the well-being of older people – apart from the inconvenience factor, it can also affect their health, as it means they may not be able to meet their nutritional requirements.

Accessibility is one of the three characteristics of food poverty – alongside affordability and education/cooking skills. Research indicates that those experiencing the greatest difficulties in food shopping are considered to be at the greatest nutritional risk.

To tackle this problem, The Food Train was established in 1995, with volunteers providing a grocery shopping delivery and home support service to older people to allow them to live independently at home. Created and driven by older people themselves, The Food Train began in Dumfries town but, due to the demand for its services, its expansion has been funded by the Scottish Government and local authorities, and it has since spread to Dumfries & Galloway, West Lothian, Stirling, Dundee, Glasgow, Renfrewshire and North Ayrshire.

Food Train services are available to anyone aged 65 and over who find food shopping difficult. The Food Train operates with a great deal of flexibility: there are no minimum or maximum amounts for ordering; people are able to get the service weekly, fortnightly or less, and either short-term or long-term. Older people can join The Food Train through self-referral or they can be referred by anyone else. The service is not linked to health assessments or means testing, which eliminates the bureaucracy of form filling and allows the service to start up immediately.

Why the innovation was developed

- In 1995 a community survey of older people in Dumfries highlighted that many people struggled with their weekly grocery shopping. The reasons included: not being able to drive; not being able to carry shopping home; and being unable to get out due to illness or a fall.
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Objectives

Improve access, Improve social equity

- As well as helping with collecting shopping for older people, The Food Train helps people in other ways, including aid for those that have difficulty writing their own shopping list due to visual or arthritis-related impairments;
 - Telephone ordering, with prompting for people who have memory problems;
 - A variety of payment arrangements to suit differing needs;
 - Help with checking, and unpacking of shopping
 - Help with opening tops, packets and so on if required;
 - Aid with returning, exchanging and getting refunds on items provided;
 - Signposting to other services via leaflets in shopping boxes.
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Main beneficiaries

Elderly people

- Elderly
- Community

Results

Service quality

Accessibility:

- The Food Train also provides unobtrusive advice for individuals about referral agencies in case individuals begin to have additional problems – helping individuals to manage their own conditions more effectively.

Responsiveness:

- The Food Train supports members of the community to live more independently through being able to stay in control of their lives and to enjoy a healthy diet. This helps to prevent malnutrition – reducing the likelihood of hospital admissions, and allows older people to remain in the comfort of their own homes within their community – greatly improving their quality of life.
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Other improvements

- The Food Train's work also has a beneficial impact on volunteers taking part. Volunteers have improved their mental and physical well-being because the project involves: working and doing things outside; increased social contact; getting a feel good factor from helping others; enabling volunteers to build upon their skills, increasing their employability.
- Social cohesion is bolstered by creating contacts amongst volunteers and customers, amongst volunteers, and between local enterprises and the community. This process also creates a culture of active citizenship. The Food Train has a positive economic impact for local shops, supermarkets and garages, enabling them to retain and attract new customers.
- The Food Train also contributes to the Dumfries & Galloway's Local Outcomes Framework, including: improving employment and business opportunities, maximising household income, caring for vulnerable people, reducing inequalities in health, leading healthier lifestyles, improving community safety, supporting communities, encouraging people to be responsible citizens.

Development

Design

Following the 1995 survey, a small group of volunteers in Dumfries responded to the community survey results and decided to get The Food Train going. A partnership with local shops/supermarkets was created to sort out the ordering system. Funds were secured from Solway Community Enterprise to buy a van to make deliveries. This service was marketed to local older people with a first set of deliveries in 1995 going to five customers. Small amounts of funding were received from the NHS and, eventually, the council.

The Food Train was set up as a company limited by guarantee, with charitable status being awarded in 1996. All customers are members of the company. Annual membership costs GBP 1. Each grocery delivery has a charge of GBP 2 (GBP 3 from April 2012). Food Train 'EXTRA' services (practical home support) range from a fee of GBP 3 to GBP 10 per job (dependent on the size and time required for each job). Household repair charges from other providers can range up to GBP 10 per hour and more, indicating the cost-effectiveness of the EXTRA service.

Implementation

Tools used:

- The Food Train was run entirely by elderly volunteers until 2002. To be a volunteer an individual has to be over 16 years old. Dependent upon their voluntary role, the individual may be disclosure checked – and if they need a disclosure they will be unable to work directly with customers. Since 2011 this has been through the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) Scheme Record introduced by the Scottish Government.
- There are several roles that volunteers for the Food Train can play. They include: Drivers and delivery people, shoppers, promotional work volunteers, and office staff. All volunteers are required to undertake some basic training.
- All volunteers are required to undertake some basic training. This ensures that they understand how the Food Train operates, their role, and how the shopping service works. Trainees also have the chance to shadow an experienced volunteer or staff member to ensure they are comfortable with their role. Every so often additional training can be provided by The Food Train or a public sector agency.
- When volunteers join they are asked how often they can help and what are their preferred times and days for getting involved. This helps to safeguard success, as volunteering can be tailored to each individual's lifestyle and desired level of involvement. To ensure volunteers are well aware when they will be volunteering, so they can plan accordingly, a rota is drawn up a month in advance.
- Another method used to ensure there is open communication is through branch meetings, open to all volunteers, which are held every eight weeks. As well as disseminating news about the Food Train to volunteers, it gives an opportunity for The Food Train family to get together to discuss concerns, raise issues or share stories about how they have dealt with difficult situations and to celebrate when the service ran particularly efficiently.

Resources used:

- The economic evaluation calculated the direct costs of delivering The Food Train's services in 2008/09 were just over GBP 211 000. This consisted of: staff costs of GBP 81 900, central running costs of GBP 77 900, and delivery of shopping & EXTRA services of GBP 51 500.
 - This allowed for over 15 000 grocery deliveries, and 1,000 EXTRA home support visits. This generated GBP 31,000 in service charges to customers. Grants and donations were levered into the service equivalent to over GBP 193 000.
 - The importance of volunteers to The Food Train is demonstrated by an estimate made by an evaluation of the Food Train's economic value. It was estimated that the total unpaid time invested for the year 2008/09 was 27,500 hours. This works out as invested time equivalent to GBP 277,000 (using an average hourly rate for volunteers of GBP 10.10) .
 - The Food Train's customers benefit financially from not having to use transport to get to enterprises. Moreover, the delivery service has lower costs and higher quality service than alternatives. The same is true for customers of the EXTRA service. The Food Train's customers spent GBP 434,302 in 2008/09. There was a consensus amongst retail partners that The Food Train had a positive economic effect. Garages have benefited from the sale of diesel to tune of approximately GBP 11,000.
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Diffusion

- The public sector in Scotland recognised that there was great potential in the project. A four year funding package from the Scottish Government was awarded in 2002 through the 'Better Neighbourhood Service Fund'. This allowed one full-time staff member to be recruited initially to develop The Food Train across the region of Dumfries & Galloway (with an extra part-time member of staff in 2005). This investment ensured that by September 2005 The Food Train's grocery delivery service was expanded from approximately 50 to around 380 customers.
- Once the grocery delivery service became fully operational across Dumfries & Galloway in late 2005, the Food Train set its sights on another clear need of its members – an additional support service called The Food Train 'EXTRA' Service, which provides practical home support, helping the frailest with home tasks.
- In 2008 a planning process to expand The Food Train to other parts of Scotland began. The Scottish Government, Community Food & Health (Scotland), and West Lothian Council provided support to ensure that The Food Train in West Lothian started in September 2010 – providing a grocery delivery service with an 'EXTRA' service in development. Moreover, a Food Train in Stirling, providing a grocery delivery service, began in November 2011, following support from the Scottish Government and Stirling Council. In January 2012, a Food Train Dundee, supported by the Scottish Government and Dundee City Council, was established and now provides a grocery delivery service.
- Since August 2010 in Dumfries & Galloway a small pilot befriending service has been added to The Food Train to help the most socially isolated and lonely to get out and maintain and develop friendships helping them enjoy life. Funding just awarded will now help this new service move from pilot phase to region-wide activity.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- By creating a good relationship with local enterprises the service is able to provide choice for customers, establish a guaranteed source of provision, and have access to fresh and affordable food.
 - Partnership with the local community: The Food Train has developed a strong network within the community, allowing referrals for individuals needing assistance to be easily made from local agencies, groups, clubs or individuals who believe an older person may be in need of help. Its partnership with the community involves all services being delivered by local volunteers and coordinated by local staff.
 - The service's partnership with its members ensures that it listens and learns in order to provide members with what they need, when they need it, and ensure it is affordable. Members are especially able to shape the Food Train by voting at the AGM.
 - The Food Train has created a mutually beneficial partnership with its funders, which allows it to diversify and increase its range, whilst providing funders with a strong return on investment, and allowing local needs to be met, alongside wider benefits such as enabling a stronger, healthier community.
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Other information

The quality of the work that The Food Train provides has resulted in many awards such as:

Queens Golden Jubilee Award (2004)

Guardian Society Award (2004)

Best Practice in Volunteering (2005)

Age Concern Scotland Group of the Year (2005)

UK Charity Awards – Highly Commended (2007)

Healthy Working Lives (Bronze 2008 and Silver 2009)

The Herald Society Awards – Commended (2008)

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