

Name of local authority:
Nottinghamshire County Council

Name and email of local authority contact details:
Andy White – Andy.white2@nottscc.gov.uk

Short title / description of piece of work and how it fits into the wider Trailblazer project

Early Years provider survey

As part of our work with the Early Years sector and the Food Environment we decided to consult with providers (childminders, day care, after school clubs) to establish levels of knowledge, awareness, confidence and skills regarding food and nutrition. Our aim was to set a baseline from responses to help us measure progress and success against our overall project objectives. We also wanted to identify the needs of the Early Years sector and any further support required in relation to the food environment, adopting a whole systems approach.

Project description:

- *The problem you were seeking to address*

The Early Years sector has the potential to be a key driver to help influence and impact the rising childhood obesity challenge within the UK. Bearing in mind the amount of time children spend in Early Years settings, we identified an opportunity to maximise the impact of improving the food environment for children and families utilising them. As the Early Years sector had been fully involved in the discovery phase of the Trailblazer, we had well established links and were confident that they would want to be involved in the next phase of this work.

There is currently a knowledge gap nationally and locally regarding the food environment within Early Years. The survey set out to gather further insight and intelligence, to provide a baseline for evaluation purposes and for the project team to identify workstreams to work through for the remainder of the project.

- *How you approached solving the problem and who with (e.g. with local providers, service users, CCG etc). Any existing relationships/partnerships built on or new partnerships?*

We used the Nottinghamshire COTP project proposal and evaluation framework as a basis for the survey and drafted a prototype in partnership with our colleagues within early childhood services. We were looking in particular to identify confidence levels within the sector, the nutritional content of meals and snacks and the level of knowledge and skills within the workforce. We were interested in identifying training and support needs and whether Early Years providers would be keen to come together on a regular basis to share good practice, knowledge and experience around food and nutrition.

The first draft of the survey was shared and prototyped within the Council's Early Years Strategic Consultation Group with Early Years sector representation and was our first involvement with this group. The survey was adapted based on feedback and a more refined prototype was sent out to a small cohort of Early Years providers. The feedback from this second prototyping phase was incorporated into version 3. We then utilised the support from the national evaluators ICF for further comments and refinement. We took this back to our Early Years strategic partners and project team for final sign off. This co-productive approach enabled us to ensure that our survey was fit for purpose, based on the knowledge and experience of relevant stakeholders.

Once the final paper version of the survey was signed off we worked with our communications team to transfer it to an online digital platform, using their specialist knowledge to refine the questions further and help provide us with the right balance of both qualitative and quantitative data. By the time the survey was ready to be released it was early April, which coincided with the beginning of the national lockdown. At this time, the sector was responding to the Pandemic by continuing to provide care for key worker children. We decided to proceed with the release of the survey to start further consultation with the sector. The survey was sent out using the existing portal for Early Years providers, ensuring that all settings were included.

- *What the solution(s) are and how are people being supported to understand / use them?*
- *Who is the solution benefitting and how?*

A very positive response was received with over 270 completed surveys representing 22% of all providers within Nottinghamshire. The survey results, analysis and next steps can be found within the final Early Years survey report and infographic.

How is the approach being sustained?

- The findings of the survey have enabled us to identify key workstreams that we will continue to develop over the remainder of the project. Working with our Delivery Support Partner we will develop a Community of Practice (COP) focused on food and nutrition, incorporating Early Years Providers and parents. The key aim of the COP is to develop a forum for shared learning and experience with a food and nutrition focus.
- *What is the impact or expected impact?*
- Wider opportunities to share resources, ideas and good practice across the Early Years sector.
- Working with parents to ensure a co-productive approach to developments around food and nutrition.
- Increasing confidence, knowledge and skills within the Early Years sector.

- Building community capacity to develop food and nutrition action research projects and initiatives.
- Creating a direct link to the Public Health team to ensure consistent healthy eating messages within the Early Years sector.
- Forging new partnerships within the Early Years sector to help improve the food environment and support providers making the improvements they want to see based on the feedback from the survey.
- *Key learning points (good and bad)*

Through our co-productive approach to the survey development and implementation we were able to design a survey that was fit for purpose and locally relevant. We had the full buy in of the Early Years senior leadership team at design and delivery level. This enabled us to consult with the sector in the design phase and ensure effective dissemination of the survey at a time of significant challenge due to the Pandemic. We included an incentive to complete the survey (food hamper) although we are uncertain as to the impact this had on completion rates. Our reflection is that that this was the first opportunity the sector had to share their experience and best practice in relation to food and nutrition more widely, and that this in itself generated significant interest and acted as an incentive.

The importance of ensuring sufficient dedicated time and expertise for the survey analysis. It took us a lot longer to complete this piece of work than we had anticipated, although this was in part due to the additional demands on our time due to the response to the Pandemic.

We gained a huge amount of insight from the survey responses regarding what different settings currently do, what works well for them and how they would benefit from additional support. This has given us a strong foundation to develop our Community of Practice.

We are very happy to share the survey we developed with any Local Authorities interested in using it as a framework to consult with their Early Years sector.