

IMPACT AND EVALUATION REPORT:

The National Lottery Awards for All Community Cookery Workshop Series

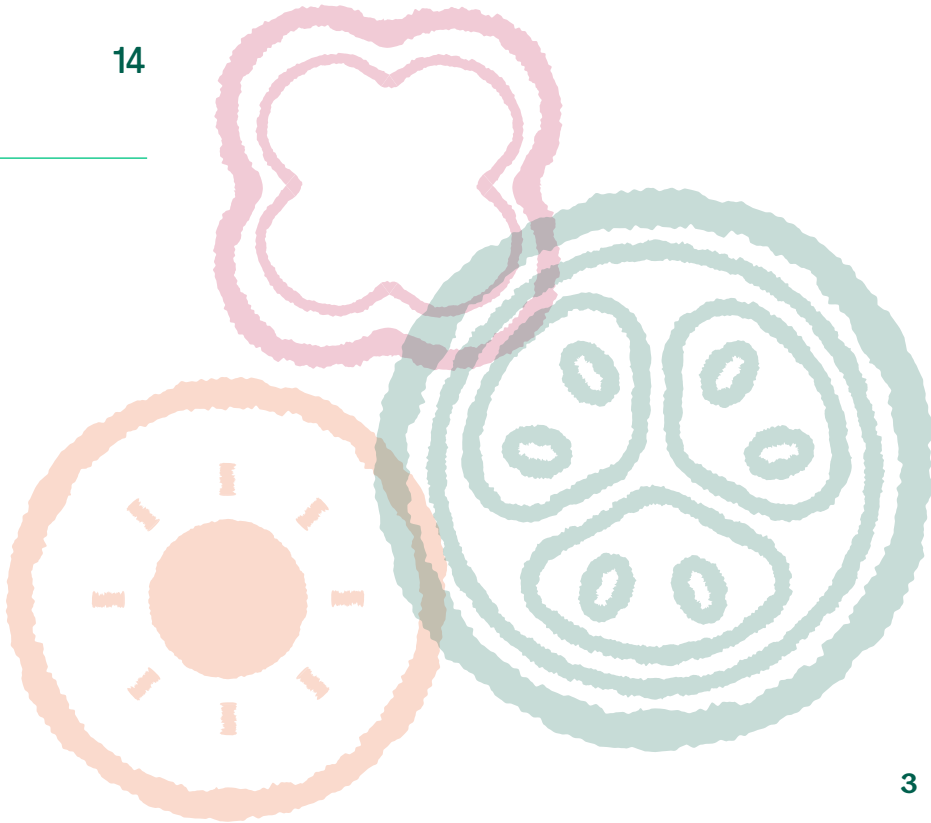




A selection of meals, cooked and prepared at one of our Community Cookery Workshops

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1. Executive Summary

Overview of the Project

The Community Cooking Skills project was delivered across three cohorts between July 2024 and March 2025, in partnership with Southway Housing Trust and The Pankhurst Trust (incorporating Manchester Women's Aid). The aim was to equip participants, primarily women from disadvantaged communities in Manchester, with the skills, confidence, and motivation to cook low-cost, nutritious, vegetarian and plant-based meals from scratch.

Delivered over six sessions per cohort, the programme combined hands-on cooking workshops with guidance on meal planning, food budgeting, batch cooking, and plant-based nutrition. Sessions were held in community venues in Ardwick, Burnage, and Chorlton Park, areas ranked among the most income-deprived in England.

Workshops were designed to be low-barrier, inclusive, and responsive to participant needs. Each cohort began with a focus group to shape the content, and participants were supported with take-home ingredients after each session and a set of utensils at the end to continue their cooking journey at home. Travel expenses were included for those who needed, and childcare was provided in one venue to enable participants to attend.

Key Findings

The evaluation, which included pre-and post-programme surveys and tutor observations, found clear and positive impacts across all key outcome areas:

- Daily cooking from scratch increased from 32.4% to 79.5% among participants.
- Use of fresh vegetables remained high, with participants exploring new ingredients and techniques.
- Fruit and vegetable consumption improved, with those eating 5+ portions daily increasing from 32.4% to 41.0%.
- Social connections flourished, with participants forming new friendships, engaging in group chats on social media, sharing food stories and photographs.
- Emotional tone shifted significantly, from anxiety and overwhelm to enjoyment, pride, and gratitude.

Confidence in cooking with fresh ingredients rose from 69.7% to 74.4%, with many participants describing themselves as "proud" and "motivated."

Tutors observed steady progress in food safety, cooking techniques, and recipe adaptation. The qualitative data revealed that for many, the program changed not just what they cooked, but how they felt about cooking and themselves. Many told of journeys which had begun with not feeling they were able to cook at all to regaining confidence to cook for themselves and their families.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation, the following recommendations are made for future delivery and potential expansion of the project into other areas or other groups in Greater Manchester:

1. Retain a low-barrier, participant-led format, allowing flexibility and reducing barriers to access, especially for vulnerable or underserved groups.
2. Scale through community leadership, supporting volunteers or past attendees to deliver or co-deliver future sessions.
3. Build on the success of social connection, including structured group chats and shared food experiences as integral parts of the program.
4. Implement simple follow-up tracking to assess longer-term behaviour change and wellbeing outcomes beyond the final session.
5. Strengthen and expand partnerships with community organisations, housing providers, and local services to embed the program more widely and sustainably.

The Community Cooking Skills project has shown that with the right approach (practical, inclusive, and community-driven) cooking can be a powerful tool for improving food security, health, and connection. The success of this pilot creates a compelling case for further investment and wider rollout.



2. Introduction

Background and Objectives

The Community Cooking Skills project is a targeted intervention designed to address food insecurity and promote wellbeing among individuals and families experiencing financial hardship in Manchester. Delivered through a series of six practical, community-focused workshops, the programme equips participants with essential cooking skills, empowers them to prepare nutritious, low-cost meals, and fosters meaningful social connections through shared food experiences.

Developed in collaboration with The Pankhurst Trust and Southway Housing Trust, the project’s primary objective is to help participants confidently cook meals from scratch, while also improving their understanding of vegetarian and vegan proteins, effective shopping strategies, and sustainable meal planning. In doing so, the program aims to enhance household food security, reduce reliance on processed foods, and improve overall community wellbeing.

The overarching aims of the project are to:

- **Build culinary knowledge and practical cooking skills**
- **Promote the use of nutritious, affordable ingredients, particularly vegetables, and plant-based proteins**
- **Encourage meal planning and bulk cooking as cost-saving strategies**
- **Strengthen social ties and community resilience through shared cooking experiences**
- **Contribute to improved wellbeing for individuals living in disadvantaged areas**

Structure of the Report

This Impact and Evaluation Report is organized to provide a comprehensive account of the Community Cooking Skills project, its delivery, outcomes, and impact. The report follows a structured format as outlined below:

Methodology

This section details the evaluation framework used to measure the project’s success. It includes descriptions of the data collection methods (such as surveys, tutor observations, and focus groups) and the analytical techniques employed to assess outcomes.

Project Implementation

An overview of how the workshops were delivered, including a description of session content, the timeline and scheduling of cohorts, and the key resources (staff, venues, materials) used to support implementation.

Participant Demographics

This section presents cohort profiles and provides information on the participants involved across all sessions.

Outcomes and Impact

Findings are presented in alignment with the project’s core outcome areas:

- **Improved Cooking Skills**
- **Improved Knowledge of Vegetarian and Vegan Proteins**
- **Cooking More Food from Scratch**
- **Improved Confidence in Food and Cooking**
- **Increased Use of Vegetables and Fruit in Meals**
- **Improved Social Links in the Community**

A summary of the data analysis is included to demonstrate change over time and overall program impact.

Discussion

This section offers a deeper interpretation of the findings, examining how they relate to the original project objectives. It includes reflections on lessons learned during delivery and considers the longer-term legacy and sustainability of the program.

Conclusion

A concise summary of the outcomes achieved and the project’s overall impact, followed by practical recommendations for future programs or scaled-up delivery.

Appendices

Supporting materials such as survey tools, observation forms, focus group prompts, and additional data tables are included here to supplement the findings and provide transparency in the evaluation process.

3. Methodology

Evaluation Framework

The evaluation framework for the Community Cooking Skills project was designed to measure progress across key outcome areas through a consistent and accessible approach. The evaluation was embedded in the program structure, focusing on change over time between Session 1 and Session 6 using a mix of observational, self-reported, and quantitative indicators.

The framework aligned closely with the program's goals, which included:

- Building confidence and competence in cooking from scratch
- Promoting the use of vegetarian and plant-based proteins
- Encouraging low-waste and budget-conscious cooking practices
- Increasing the use of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Strengthening social bonds through food

This framework avoided collecting personal demographic data, in line with the project's values of creating a welcoming, low-barrier space, particularly important for participants from vulnerable backgrounds.

Data Collection Methods

Three core tools were used to gather data:

1. Session 1 Survey (Baseline)

- Gathered using individual post-it notes responses and group hand-raising, simplifying data collection and maintaining accessibility.
- Participants were asked about how frequently they cooked from scratch, used fresh vegetables, and ate fruit and vegetables.
- Open-ended responses captured confidence and attitudes using prompts like "What words come to mind when you think about cooking from scratch?"

2. Session 6 Survey (Final Evaluation)

- A structured anonymous questionnaire captured participants' reflections on change over the course of the program.
- Questions assessed changes in cooking habits, confidence, use of fresh ingredients, likelihood of cooking different dishes, and social engagement (e.g., connections made in the group, WhatsApp chat use).
- Responses included both scaled options ("a little more", "some more", "lots more") and open-ended questions.
- The survey also asked about enjoyment and future intentions regarding cooking and eating habits.

3. Tutor Observation

- Tutors completed structured observations after each session, using a 1–5 rating scale and written comments to assess group-level cooking skills, food safety, and recipe adaptation ability.
- From Sessions 4 to 6, tutors also recorded instances of storytelling, food sharing, and social interactions to gauge social cohesion.
- Session 6 observations captured specific evidence of learning outcomes related to vegetarian protein knowledge and the ability to adapt traditional meat-based meals.

All data was compiled into internal spreadsheets for analysis, allowing for cohort-level comparison and overall trends across the project.

Analysis Techniques

The project used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis:

Quantitative Analysis

- Frequency data from Session 1 and Session 6 surveys (e.g. meals cooked from scratch, fruit and vegetable intake) was compared to assess change.
- Trends in hand-raising responses were tallied for overall reporting.
- Tutor ratings were averaged across sessions to track changes in group competence.

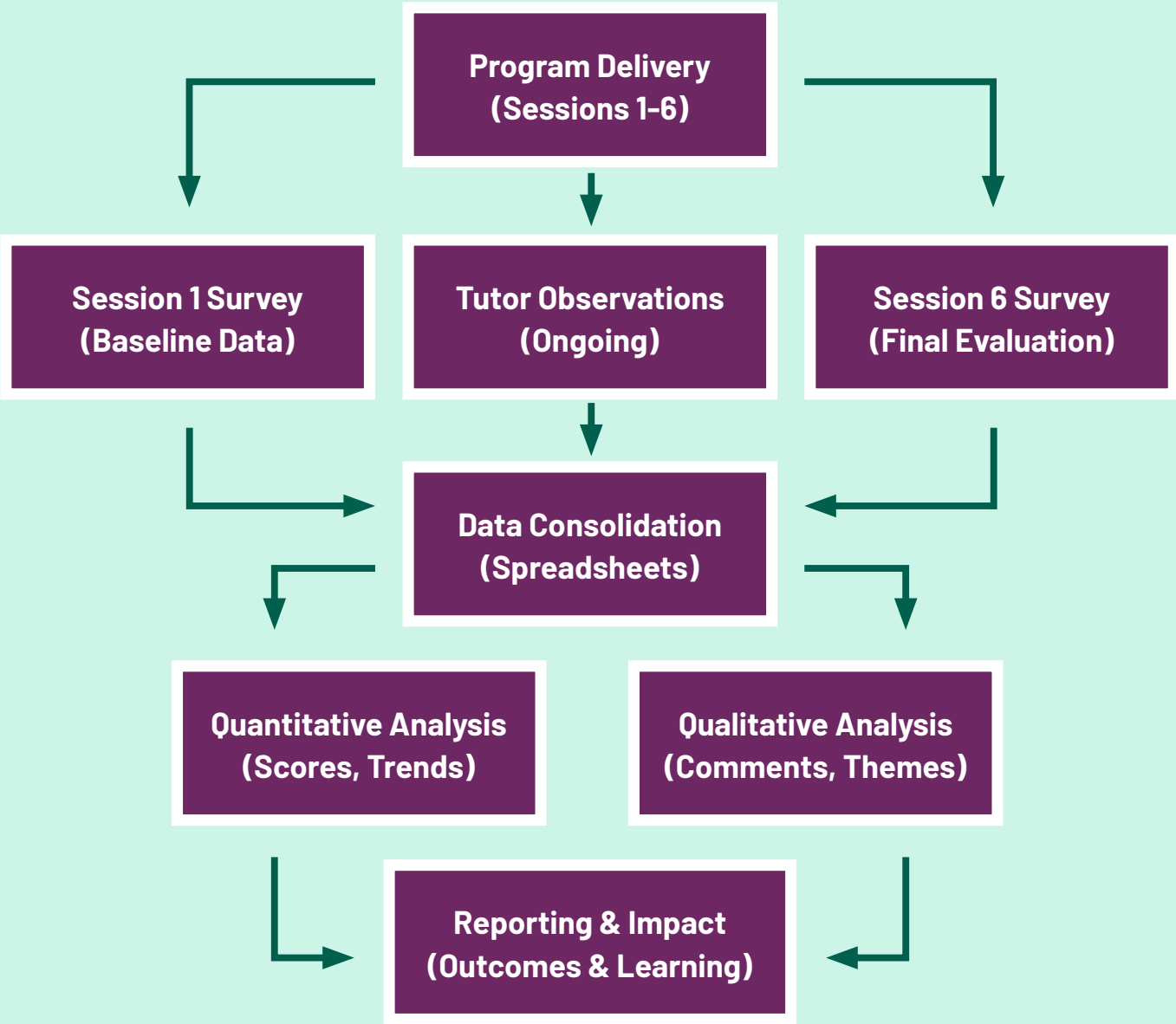
Qualitative Analysis

- Open-ended responses from final surveys were themed for insights into confidence, enjoyment, and current and planned behaviour change.
- Tutor narratives and comments provided additional depth, highlighting anecdotal evidence of growth, challenges, and social connection.

This evaluation design ensured a rich understanding of both measurable outcomes and participant experience, while respecting the need for safety, inclusivity, and low-barrier engagement.

Alignment with Outcome Frameworks

The planning and evaluation of the project is underpinned by both a Logic Model and a Theory of Change (ToC) approach. The Logic Model provided a structured framework for mapping the relationship between programme inputs (e.g. staffing, venues, equipment), activities (hands-on workshops, take-home ingredient packs, social cooking events), outputs (number of sessions, participant engagement), and measurable outcomes. Meanwhile, the Theory of Change guided the broader evaluation strategy, helping to clarify how and why the programme was expected to create impact. This included assumptions about participants’ barriers (such as lack of confidence, financial constraints, and limited social support) and the pathways through which the project would support change, from skill-building and confidence to behaviour change and improved wellbeing. The evaluation tools and outcome indicators were directly informed by this framework, and the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a comprehensive analysis of both expected and emerging outcomes.



4. Project Implementation

Description of the Workshops

The project was delivered through a series of six structured workshops for each of three cohorts, focusing exclusively on vegetarian and plant-based cooking. The sessions were designed to build participants’ confidence and skills in preparing nutritious, affordable meals from scratch, while promoting sustainable cooking and fostering community connections.

Each cohort began with a facilitated focus group to shape the session themes. As a result, the workshop content addressed a range of relevant topics, including:

- **Cooking with vegetarian and plant-based proteins**
- **Low-waste and sustainable cooking practices**
- **Batch cooking and time-saving techniques**
- **Budget-conscious meal planning**
- **International dishes**
- **Dishes that could be easily adapted to suit a variety of ingredients**
- **Including more vegetables in meals**

The first five sessions in each cohort were hands-on, skill-building workshops, while the sixth session served as a celebratory event where participants showcased what they had learned by cooking for invited guests. These events not only reinforced learning but also celebrated the participants’ achievements and strengthened their social networks.

Each session consisted of a tutor guiding the group in creating a main dish and accompaniments. The participants cooked in pairs following along with the tutor. At the end of each session, the group would sit together, eat, share their feedback on the session and the dish, and chat. Each participant was given a recipe pack each week containing the recipes for session. The recipe pack also included costs for each ingredient if it were bought at a supermarket and the total cost of the dish. This was to help participants work new dishes into their budget but also show how inexpensive cooking vegetarian and vegan dishes is.

All workshops were designed to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, where participants could share food stories, learn from one another, and gain confidence in their abilities. Our lead tutor is well experienced in working with diverse groups. Part of their skill set is creating a safe space for participants to experiment with food and learn new skills. This was particularly useful with vulnerable groups.

At the end of each session, participants received ingredients to replicate the meal at home. At the conclusion of the program, each participant was also given a set of essential cooking utensils, based on tutor recommendations and participant feedback, to support continued cooking at home. This gesture was well received and enhanced the project’s long-term impact.

Timeline and Schedule

The programme was delivered across three cohorts between July 2024 and March 2025. Each cohort completed the six-session program over a series of weeks, with workshops typically running weekly sometimes with a break for school holidays, depending on venue and tutor availability.

- Cohorts 1 & 2 were delivered in partnership with Southway Housing Trust, held at Westcroft Community Centre and Old Moat Sure Start Children’s Centre, respectively.
- Cohort 3 was run in partnership with The Pankhurst Trust (incorporating Manchester Women’s Aid).

Each session lasted approximately 2 hours, allowing time for instruction, practical cooking activities, discussion, and shared meals.

Resources

The project was funded by The National Lottery Awards for All and supported by contributions of time and admin support from delivery partners and local volunteers. Resources were thoughtfully allocated to ensure high-quality delivery, participant support, and long-term impact. Any food remaining at the end of each session was given to the participants. Each participant was provided with a sturdy reusable food container to transport leftovers each week. They were also given instruction on how to store and reheat the meals. All equipment purchased to support delivery will be used in future projects.

Staffing

Each session was staffed by:

- 1 Lead Tutor – responsible for session delivery, content adaptation, and participant support
- 1 Teaching Assistant – supporting hands-on learning and participant engagement
- 1 Catering Assistant – assisting with food prep, logistics, and health and safety
- Support Staff- programme creation, project management, and admin were undertaken by other permanent members of the COOK! team.

Facilities and Equipment

Workshops were delivered using mobile cookery equipment including portable stoves, pans, knives, chopping boards, and other small equipment and utensils. Existing equipment was supplemented using project funds to accommodate larger group sizes and to ensure safety and efficiency. Each venue supported delivery with the provision of tables, chairs, suitable venue, and access to cleaning facilities.

Funded Costs

The grant funding covered:

- Staff salaries in delivery, planning, and project management
- Ingredients and consumables
- Equipment
- Travel and transport for delivery staff and participants
- Administrative support
- Provision of childcare to reduce barriers to attendance

Volunteers and Community Involvement

Each delivery venue provided local volunteers who supported the advertisement, recruitment, and retention for the sessions. They also supported in delivery in terms of set up and break down of each session. Their involvement helped embed the programme within each community, offering additional peer support, a point of contact at each venue, and strengthening the social dimension of the project.

This well-resourced, community-centred delivery model played a critical role in the program’s success, enabling participants not only to learn but to build confidence, share experiences, and take practical steps toward more sustainable, nutritious eating habits.



5. Participant Demographics

This section outlines the profiles of the three cohorts that took part in the Community Cooking Skills programme. While no formal demographic data was collected, by design, some contextual and anecdotal information helps to illustrate the nature and reach of participant engagement.

Participation Overview

A total of 36 participants completed the program across three cohorts. All participants were female, though this was not intentional. The all-female participation occurred organically and likely reflects the nature of the community partnerships involved and cultural beliefs about the gendering of cooking. One of the cohorts was delivered in partnership with The Pankhurst Trust (incorporating Manchester Women’s Aid) and formed part of a drop-in service for women who have experienced domestic abuse. As such, an all-female cohort was inevitable. The remaining two cohorts were both delivered in community centres who have historically experienced difficulty engaging with men in their areas.

Approach to Demographic Data

The project team made a conscious decision not to collect personal demographic data (e.g. age, ethnicity, income) from participants. This decision was grounded in a desire to create a space where the focus remained on food, learning, and cooking, rather than on personal circumstances or identities. For some participants, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, this approach helped reduce barriers to participation and fostered an inclusive and safe space.

Geographic and Socioeconomic Context

Each of the three venues was selected based on local levels of deprivation, using the Income Deprivation Domain of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) in England. The areas served were:

- **Ardwick** – ranked within the 10% most income-deprived areas in England
- **Burnage** – also within the 10% most income-deprived
- **Chorlton Park** – ranked within the 3% most income-deprived, indicating very high levels of need

These locations were chosen in collaboration with community partners to ensure that the program reached residents in areas with the greatest levels of financial hardship and food insecurity.

Anecdotal Observations

While no formal demographic survey was conducted, tutor feedback indicated a diverse mix of ages and ethnicities among participants. This diversity enriched the sessions, with a variety of food traditions, cooking styles, and cultural experiences being shared informally among participants. This organic exchange became an added value of the program, reinforcing its community-building objectives and making the sessions more inclusive and dynamic.

6. Outcomes and Impact

Quantitative data summary

AREA	BASELINE	AFTER PROJECT	DIFFERENCE
Participants who ate 5 or more portions of fruit and vegetables	32%	53%	19%
Cooking from scratch more often	32% of participants cooked from scratch every day	91% of participants said they were cooking from scratch more	59%
Increased confidence in cooking	62% of participants stated they were confident cooking	74% of participants stated they were more confident	12%
How many people knew more than one person in the group (as a friend)	57%	93%	36%
Have you posted messages or read messages in the group WhatsApp chat?	N/A * WhatsApp groups were set up after first sessions	68%	68%

The Community Cooking Skills project produced positive changes in participant behaviour, confidence, and cooking ability across all three cohorts. Data from the baseline and final surveys, as well as tutor observation ratings, demonstrate measurable improvement in all six outcome areas.

Improved Cooking Skills

Tutor observations recorded a steady improvement in cooking skills over the six-week programme. Ratings increased from an average of 3 (acceptable) in Session 1 to 4 (good) or 5 (excellent) by Sessions 5 and 6. Specific areas of growth included:

- **Food safety and hygiene:** Participants followed good hygiene practices and showed improved understanding of how to avoid cross-contamination.
- **Recipe adaptation:** By mid-programme, groups began adjusting recipes to taste, experimenting with spice levels, and choosing ingredient substitutes confidently.

Tutor comments:

“In pairs, they were choosing how much chilli to add, tasting and discussing alternatives.”

“All the pairs talked about what to put in their side dish and they all came out slightly different. Some of the salad had no dressing but all where well-seasoned”

Improved Knowledge of Vegetarian and Vegan Proteins

All meals delivered were vegetarian or plant-based, and participants learned to prepare protein-rich dishes using lentils, beans, tofu, eggs, and dairy substitutes. Observations showed marked improvement:

- Knowledge of vegetarian protein sources increased from average scores of 2 (poor) to 4 (good) by Session 5.
- Tutors noted confidence in creating balanced meals and open discussions about plant-based diets and dishes.

Participant quote:

“Just to say thank you Maz I never cook with just lentils and beans, but I now have the confidence to cook a vegan dish at least twice a week to start.”

Cooking More Food from Scratch

Survey data shows significant behavioural change:

- 100% of respondents in the final survey reported they were cooking more from scratch than before the programme.
 - Of those, 30% said “a little more,” 30% said “some more,” and 40% said “lots more.”

Participants frequently commented on replicating meals at home and feeling proud of cooking for themselves or their families.

Participant quotes:

“Just to say thank you, I never cooked with just vegetables before—now I do every day!”

“Maz and her team were absolutely incredible. thank you so much. I made a beautiful lentil curry the other night with the ingredients I was given after the session. I am now cooking at home a lot more thanks to COOK with the vegetarian society.”

Improved Confidence in Food and Cooking

Final surveys showed strong improvements in confidence:

- Most participants (over 80%) reported feeling more confident cooking.
- 60% rated their confidence gain as “lots more” or “some more.”

- Words written by participants at baseline like “overwhelmed” and “can’t be bothered” were replaced at the end with “proud,” “happy,” and “thankful.”

Thematic Coding Summary: Improved Confidence in Food and Cooking

The qualitative data from the first sessions shows several recurring emotional themes identified:

1. Positive Emotions & Openness

- Words: HAPPY PROUD ENJOY MOTIVATED
- These responses suggest that some participants entered the programme with a positive or curious outlook, or previous enjoyment of cooking.

2. Anxiety or Low Confidence

- Words: nervous, anxious, overwhelmed, worried, frustrated, bad cook
- These reflect a lack of confidence or previous negative experiences, which aligns with the programme’s goal to build food confidence and reduce fear in the kitchen.

3. Barriers or Mental Load

- Phrases: “can’t be bothered”, “worry about deciding what to cook”
- These responses indicate mental or emotional fatigue related to cooking, suggesting the need for simple, empowering approaches.

Comparing the qualitative data from first and final sessions, the analysis strongly supports the project’s anticipated outcomes: participants not only improved their cooking skills, but also their confidence, joy, and connection through food.

Most Frequent Positive Terms from Final Session Survey:

ENJOYED	COOKING	FOOD
GROUP	SKILLS	LEARNING
CHAT	FRIENDLY	PICTURES

Thematic Coding Final Session Data:

1. Social Connection & Belonging

- Words & phrases: friendly, group, chat, people, WhatsApp, pictures of food
- Participants repeatedly referenced the enjoyment of connecting with others, particularly through the group WhatsApp chat and shared cooking experiences.

2. Empowerment & Confidence

- Words: skills, learning, try, confidence, proud
- Many responses reflected a sense of personal growth; participants felt more able to cook independently, try new recipes, and take pride in their cooking.

3. Gratitude & Appreciation

- Phrases: thank you, grateful, meeting wonderful people, enjoyed every minute
- These sentiments suggest the sessions provided more than just skill development; they created a meaningful and emotionally positive experience.

Summary Comparison (Before vs. After):

THEME	FIRST SESSION LANGUAGE	FINAL SESSION LANGUAGE
CONFIDENCE	overwhelmed, nervous, bad cook	confident, proud, enjoy cooking
EMOTIONAL TONE	anxious, can't be bothered, worried	happy, grateful, fun, thank you
SOCIAL CONNECTION	minimal references	friendly, chat, group, people
ENGAGEMENT WITH COOKING	passive or unsure	active, trying new things, learning skills

Session 1 - Word cloud



Final Session - Word cloud



Tutor reflections echoed these findings, noting increasing independence, reduced anxiety in the kitchen, and willingness to try new things.

Increased Use of Vegetables and Fruit in Meals

Changes in eating habits were supported by both quantitative and qualitative data:

- Daily vegetable intake increased for most participants. At the start of the programme 66.6% of participants stated they ate less than 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day. This number dropped to 50% after the final session. In one cohort, 37.5% of participants stated they ate 3 or less portions. anecdotally after data collection 2 participants told the tutor they didn't eat fresh (or frozen) fruit or vegetables at all, they never cooked from scratch. This number dropped to 25% by the end of the programme.
- From surveys, 78% of participants reported regularly cooking with fresh vegetables at the start of the programme. By the end of the programme, 100% were preparing at least one meal a day with a full portion of vegetables, showing a clear positive shift in everyday vegetable consumption.
- Participants credited the sessions with helping them "think differently about vegetables" and learn easy, appealing ways to include them.

Improved Social Links in the Community

Social connection emerged as one of the most valued aspects of the programme:

- In the final survey, most participants reported being friendly with "all" or "many" group members.
- Tutors observed increased food sharing, storytelling, and peer encouragement from Session 4 onward.

WhatsApp group chats were also used actively by most participants:

- 75% engaged in messaging, with food photos, recipe suggestions, and positive reinforcement shared among group members.

Participant feedback:

“The group was so friendly, I’ve made real friends.”

“I enjoyed seeing pictures of people’s food—they made me want to try cooking it myself.”

Data Analysis

Data from baseline and final surveys was compiled into spreadsheets and reviewed side-by-side to assess individual and group-level change. Key themes from open-ended questions were coded and analysed, and tutor observation scores were averaged across sessions. This mixed-method approach enabled triangulation of quantitative outcomes (e.g. increased vegetable consumption, cooking frequency) with qualitative insights (e.g. confidence, social interaction), painting a clear picture of the programme's positive impact.

7. Discussion

Linking Outcomes to Deeper Insights

The Community Cooking Skills project set out to achieve a range of practical and social outcomes: improving food knowledge and cooking skills, enhancing confidence, and strengthening community connection through cooking and eating. The data presented in the Outcomes and Impact section confirms measurable change across all core indicators, particularly in cooking from scratch and confidence levels.

However, while those metrics show positive trends, the qualitative data reveals deeper stories of transformation. Participants not only learned new skills but began to associate cooking and eating together with enjoyment, agency, and community belonging. This section considers what these changes suggest about the programme's potential impact, how outcomes relate to the original goals, and what can be learned for future delivery.

Interpretation of Findings

Cooking from Scratch

The increase in participants cooking from scratch daily, from 32.4% to 79.5%, is among the strongest indicators of success. This result reflects the practical and hands-on nature of the program including the skill of the delivery team, which gave participants the skills, confidence, and repeated experience preparing achievable meals with fresh ingredients.

This outcome is particularly meaningful in the context of food insecurity. By giving participants strategies for low-cost, efficient, plant-based meal preparation, the program has directly supported household food resilience and economic wellbeing. During the sessions there was regular discussions of how to batch cook, how to store and reheat leftovers, and how to use the same ingredients across multiple meals: again, providing skills and knowledge to help stretch budgets. Many of the participants were members of food clubs or food pantries where fresh vegetables and fruit are often given to members for no charge. The ability to use many different vegetables in a variety of ways was especially welcomed.

Confidence in Cooking

Confidence in cooking with fresh vegetables reported through surveys increased from 69.7% to 74.4%, supported by tutor observations of participants taking greater initiative, asking more advanced questions, and personalizing recipes in later sessions.

More revealing, perhaps, are the emotional shifts expressed in the qualitative feedback. Baseline responses included terms like "nervous," "overwhelmed," and "bad cook." By the end of the program, these had been replaced by "happy," "proud," "grateful," and "motivated." This transformation in emotional language suggests a reframing of identity: from someone who struggles with food, to someone who is capable and empowered. People are much more likely to continue cook from scratch if they feel confident and happy to do so. Helping participants overcome this confidence barrier was integral to the success of the programme.

Use of Fresh Ingredients and Diet Quality

Though the percentage of participants who said they regularly used fresh vegetables remained relatively steady (from 78.4% to 76.9%), the program appears to have enhanced how those ingredients are used, particularly in plant-based meals and batch cooking.

The modest increase in those eating five or more portions of fruit and vegetables per day (32.4% to 53%) should be viewed in light of other programme benefits. It may reflect more accurate self-reporting at the end of the project, or a growing awareness of what constitutes a full portion. It is also likely that while many participants increased their intake, they had not yet reached the 5-a-day threshold within the short timeframe of the program. Some participants reported eating zero to 3 portions of fruit and vegetables a day at the beginning of the programme. Helping these participants to begin their journey to eating 5 or more portions is just as important (if not more) than those who went from eating 4 to 5 portions.

Lessons Learned

Keep it Practical, Relatable, and Low-Barrier

The most successful aspects of the project were those grounded in real-life cooking challenges: batch cooking, low-waste practices, and time-saving techniques. Using real ingredients, familiar settings, and inclusive language helped participants feel immediately comfortable.

Importantly, the decision not to collect demographic data was respected by participants and likely contributed to a sense of psychological safety—especially in the cohort of women who had experienced domestic abuse. By removing perceived judgement or formal barriers, the sessions stayed focused on food, learning, and community.

The inclusion of child-care provision enabled multiple attendees to have the time to participate. Those with pre-school children would not have been able to attend without it. In another cohort, participants did not have the funds to cover travel to and from the sessions, the project funding covered this so they could attend. It is incredibly important that some flexibility is budgeted for. To remove whatever barriers there are, which will likely be unknown until the programme begins.

Social Belonging is a Powerful Outcome

Participants consistently identified the group dynamic, peer support, and WhatsApp chat as key parts of their positive experience. These unstructured, participant-led spaces for sharing food photos, recipes, and encouragement helped extend the impact of the workshops beyond the sessions.

The fact that many participants described being "friendly with all" or "meeting wonderful people" points to a deeper, possibly more lasting form of social capital. All of the participants were female (not by programme design). Many of these women are primary care-givers and experience isolation due to this, economic, and locational factors. Giving people the time and space to connect with others from their community is not to be undervalued.

Behaviour Change Happens in Layers

The evaluation revealed that behaviour change is multifaceted. While some participants immediately changed habits (e.g. cooking daily, trying new ingredients), others showed more subtle signs, like becoming curious about new foods or beginning to plan meals more intentionally.

The inclusion of take-home ingredient and recipe packs and cooking utensils supported this transition by enabling practice outside of sessions, helping to integrate cooking into their regular routines easily. Participant comments suggest these resources made a meaningful difference in applying new skills at home.

Mixed Methods Tell the Full Story

Quantitative data showed upward trends, but the richness of the evaluation came from combining this with qualitative insights, both open-text responses and tutor observations. Together, they revealed not just what changed, but how and why.

For instance, a participant may not have significantly increased their vegetable intake, but may have learned to stretch vegetables across meals, cook them in new ways, or feel proud of trying. These shifts are often early signs of deeper, sustained behaviour change.

Legacy of the Project

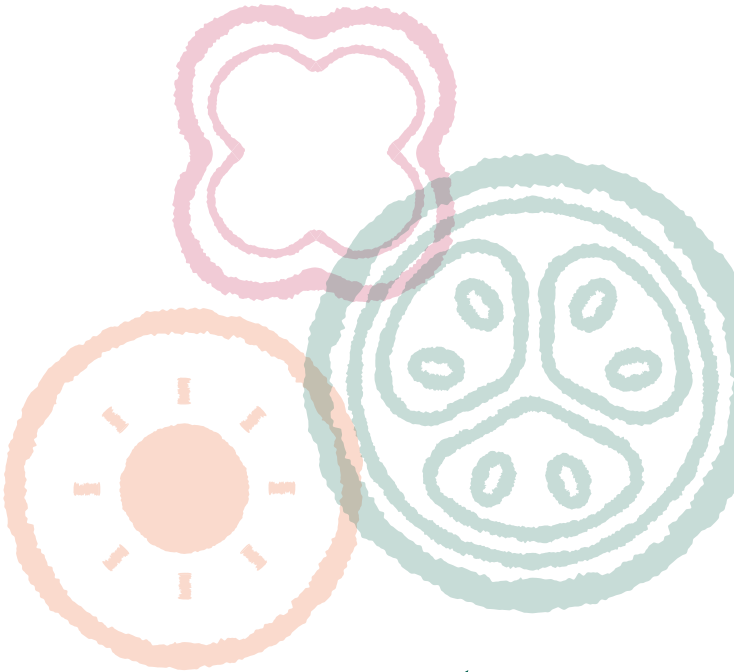
The project has left a solid foundation for potential longer-term impact:

- **PARTICIPANTS:** Many reported feeling empowered to cook more regularly, try new dishes, and continue engaging with peers from their cohort.
- **VOLUNTEERS:** Local volunteers gained skills and confidence through their involvement, with some expressing interest in continuing or supporting future sessions. One community venue gained funding to deliver weekly community cooking sessions after running this project in partnership with The Vegetarian Society.
- **PARTNER ORGANISATIONS:** Collaborations with Southway Housing Trust and the Pankhurst Trust were strengthened, providing a model for embedded delivery in trusted, accessible venues.
- **RESOURCES:** The mobile cooking equipment, reusable session plans, and evaluation tools offer a sustainable structure for future rollouts.

There is clear potential to scale the project, train community facilitators, and embed cookery sessions into wider wellbeing or community engagement programs. With continued funding and capacity, the legacy of the Community Cooking Skills project can grow far beyond these initial three cohorts.

Summary Table of Key Findings

OUTCOME AREA	KEY FINDINGS
COOKING FROM SCRATCH	Daily cooking from scratch increased from 32.4% to 79.5% across participants.
USE OF FRESH VEGETABLES	Remained high, with 76.9% regularly using fresh vegetables by the end of the program.
COOKING CONFIDENCE	Confidence in cooking with fresh vegetables rose from 69.7% to 74.4%. Participants reported feeling “proud” and “motivated.”
FRUIT AND VEGETABLE INTAKE	Those eating 5+ portions daily rose from 32.4% to 41.0%.
EMOTIONAL IMPACT	Language shifted from “anxious,” “overwhelmed” to “happy,” “grateful,” “confident.”
SOCIAL CONNECTION	Participants formed new friendships, shared food stories, and engaged actively in group WhatsApp chats.
PRACTICAL LEGACY	Take-home ingredients and utensils enabled continued cooking at home. Volunteers gained skills to support future delivery.



8. Conclusion

Summary of Outcomes and Impact

The Community Cooking Skills project has demonstrated clear and meaningful outcomes across three cohorts of participants in some of Manchester's most income-deprived communities. Delivered in partnership with Southway Housing Trust and the Pankhurst Trust, the programme provided a safe, supportive, and practical learning space that helped individuals build essential cooking skills, improve their confidence, and foster new social connections.

Key achievements include:

- Improved cooking confidence, with participants feeling more capable, independent, and proud of their skills.
- Increased awareness and use of plant-based proteins.
- A rise in reported fruit and vegetable intake, suggesting progress toward healthier eating.
- Strengthened community bonds, with participants forming new friendships and engaging in peer-led sharing through WhatsApp groups.
- A shift in emotional tone, from anxiety and low self-efficacy to pride, enjoyment, and gratitude, highlighting the program's wider wellbeing impact.

A 47% increase in daily cooking from scratch demonstrating a significant shift in everyday food habits.

In addition to these measurable outcomes, the qualitative feedback consistently emphasised how valued the sessions were, not only for their practical benefits, but for the sense of connection and purpose they fostered.

Future Recommendations

Based on the evaluation findings, several recommendations can guide future delivery and potential scaling-up of the project:

1. Continue Using a Low-Barrier, Participant-Led Approach

- Avoiding formal demographic collection helped create a safe space, particularly for vulnerable women.
- Retaining the focus on cooking, food, and shared experience was critical to high levels of engagement. By not asking questions outside of eating habits and opinions of the programme, participants were reassured that the only purpose of the sessions was to engage them in cooking and social eating.

2. Scale Through Community Leadership

- Train volunteers or past participants as peer facilitators to increase capacity and sustainability.
- Develop a "train-the-trainer" model using existing tutor materials and equipment.
- Provide 'starter-kits' of mobile cooking equipment for community venues to continue cooking and social eating projects.

3. Leverage Social Elements

- WhatsApp groups and shared meals proved highly effective in deepening engagement.
- Build these elements into the structure of future programs and consider facilitating alumni groups or follow-on sessions. The first cohort organically formed a WhatsApp group with no guidance from deliver staff. It was such a successful means of creating a safe space for communication and connection about food, the delivery team suggested the creation of a group in the remaining 2 cohorts.

4. Strengthen Follow-Up and Long-Term Impact Tracking

- Consider a simple follow-up survey 3–6 months post-program to track ongoing behaviour change.
- Gather additional case studies and stories that capture long-term effects on wellbeing, family routines, and budgeting.

5. Maintain Strong Partnerships with Trusted Organisations

- Community delivery partners were essential in reaching target groups and providing welcoming venues.
- Deepen collaboration with local networks, housing trusts, and support services to embed the project more widely.

With its emphasis on empowerment, community, and practical learning, the Community Cooking Skills programme offers a replicable model for tackling food insecurity, social isolation and supporting wellbeing through inclusive, hands-on education. The results from this evaluation suggest that continued investment in similar initiatives could deliver lasting change in local communities.

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