

# **A cookery course for refugee men**

## **Background**

The cookery course for refugee men was a public health intervention in Salford. Salford is in Greater Manchester and there are large areas of deprivation within the city of Salford. Prior to the dispersal of asylum seekers, under the 1999 Nationality and Immigration Act, Salford was an almost exclusively white city. The public's attitude to asylum seekers and refugees could be hostile, services for refugees were undeveloped and there were no refugee-led voluntary organisations.

The course was initiated by Cath Maffia, who worked as a development worker on the Wellbeing Project at Refugee Action, Manchester. Prior to this role she had been Salford PCT's specialist health visitor for refugees and asylum seekers.

Refugee Action is an independent national charity that works with refugees to build new lives in the UK. It provides advice and support to asylum seekers and refugees in ten regions across England. The Wellbeing Project was a preventive mental health project, which aimed to improve the mental health of isolated refugees and asylum seekers through participation in arts, sports, leisure and health activities.

## **Concerns confirmed by research**

Research undertaken by Cath Maffia, as part of a European MA study in Migration, Mental Health and Social Care confirmed concerns health professionals had expressed about the eating patterns of refugees and asylum seekers. Observations of young men in particular showed that they often lost weight after their arrival in Salford. The researcher noticed that their eating patterns changed dramatically from eating patterns in their home country, and it was felt that these changes could reflect the major changes in the lives of people who have been forced to flee from their countries.

Participants for the research were chosen to reflect, as far as possible, the nationality, gender and language mix of recent asylum seeker and refugee arrivals in Salford. They consisted of men from Iraq and Iran and African countries including Zimbabwe, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo Brazzaville and Burundi. Two women also participated.

The findings included the following:

- Major changes in eating patterns were universal, with most participants eating only one meal a day in the early stages of their time in Salford.
- Many were used to food being cooked by the women of the family and eaten communally. Asylum seekers and refugees were obliged by circumstance to eat alone, or with strangers. This could serve as a daily reminder of all that they had lost in terms of family, community, warmth and support.
- Weight loss was common, often as much as 14 kg.

- There were few ethnic food outlets in Salford, and this necessitated participants travelling considerable distances to find food that was familiar to them. This food was less fresh than it would have been in the home country, and more expensive than food which is more usually eaten in the UK.
- Several participants expressed dismay at the poor quality of food available in Salford, in particular the difficulty in finding fresh fruit and vegetables. Several participants said that they did not know how to cook English vegetables.
- Participants had difficulty in recognising food when it was displayed in supermarkets, for example shrink-wrapped meat.
- A lack of English language skills made shopping difficult.
- Cooking equipment they had was often of poor quality and inadequate.
- Most men had not cooked for themselves in their home country, and had to learn quickly.
- Several participants talked of preparing and eating food as a relief from boredom.

## **The Project**

In common with most other dispersal areas, Salford had very few services for refugees and asylum seekers at this time, although there were cookery courses for men, which were used by the indigenous population.

Two cookery courses for refugee and asylum seeking men were developed; the first was funded by the Wellbeing Project through the Home Office's Purposeful Activities for Asylum Seekers Fund. Salford PCT and the Local Authority funded a subsequent course.

The courses took place in the kitchen of a Methodist Community Church. This venue was chosen primarily for its central location, near to public transport links, which is an important criterion when working with refugees and asylum seekers. Giving an address can be insufficient if the individual does not know the area well, and landmarks such as a market, post office, and an imaginative approach to giving directions, are helpful. The project also learned that taking participants to the venue on the first occasion was often best.

The courses aimed to:

- Improve the nutritional status of individual men by showing them how to prepare cheap, tasty meals
- Provide participants with activity that would support emotional well-being by helping reduce isolation and supporting self-esteem
- Support contact with the host community

## **Working in partnership**

The cookery course was supported through multi-agency partnerships. Partners came from a range of statutory and voluntary agencies including Refugee Action, Salford PCT's Health Improvement Workers and a Practice Nurse from the Specialist GP Service for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, a Community Development Officer from the Local Authority, the British Red Cross, one of the private accommodation providers and the Community Church. The cookery teacher for both courses came from the Workers Educational Association.

## **Course content**

The first course ran for 10 weeks and catered for refugee or asylum seeking men who lived in Salford. Men were recruited through a number of contact points such as men already known to Cath Maffia through her professional roles, private accommodation providers, the specialist surgery and the Local Authority asylum team.

The first meeting was a shopping trip to a local supermarket, to familiarise the men with the UK food purchasing culture. At subsequent classes the teacher brought the basic ingredients, and together they cooked three dishes each time. The choice of food to cook was discussed with the men.

Each class culminated in the men sitting down and eating together; any food left after this was taken home for consumption later.

The second course also included men from the host community and participants from the first course were involved in its planning. The second course followed a similar pattern of activities, but the course ended with the participants hosting a celebratory lunch to which local people were invited.

## **Benefits and outcomes**

Preparing food had many positive aspects for the participants. For example:

- Several felt that food was one of the few areas in their lives where they could exercise some choice.
- Most participants said that they ate less when unhappy than when they felt happy, and more when eating with others than when eating alone.
- All participants instinctively understood the importance of food in addition to its nutritional aspects, and talked of food as a gift and as a way of sharing.
- As time went on and people became more settled and less acutely distressed, the eating patterns of the home country reasserted themselves whilst adapting to local conditions. This served as a metaphor for the way in which lives are being re-built to a different pattern, and is probably an indicator of adaptation and improved mental health.

The participants benefited by learning how to cook cheap, nutritious meals for themselves and their families and friends. This gave them a chance to share their skills with others.

Bridges were built with the host community on the second course. This non-threatening meeting point, where both refugees and local men were learning basic skills, proved a positive experience for all involved. The men from the host community benefited by being exposed to other cultures. The refugee men benefited by increasing their understanding of UK culture. Some enduring friendships developed between refugees and local men, as conversation blossomed over the shared meals.

Those PCT Staff and the teacher who had previously had no contact with refugees and asylum seekers learned about the issues facing the victims of forced exile. Staff also learned how to work with people whose first language was not English. Multi-agency working between statutory, voluntary and the private sector and relationships between professionals improved.

Evaluating whether well-being was supported is not easy, and it can also be difficult when the participants' first language is not English, but feedback was very positive.

*'I wish the course had been available when I first arrived in the country when I was 18. I lived on chocolate and eggs for the first two months,'* Iranian man.

*'I have had problems with food in the past. Now I am eating more because I am cooking more interesting food, and my children are eating better. Last week I cooked for a friend, and that made me feel really good,'* Man from Zimbabwe.

It was clear that the men felt better about themselves. It is recognised that social isolation can cause mental health problems, and the courses went some way towards alleviating such isolation.

Two of the men from the first course were involved in the planning of the second course, and one of them participated for a second time and is intending to pursue a career in catering.

### **Lessons learned**

The numbers attending the first course were disappointing, despite the demonstrated need and conversations with refugee men which indicated enthusiasm for the course. The project identified several reasons for the failure to recruit large numbers. These included:

- Health issues are not high on the agenda of men who are extremely anxious about their asylum claim or about their families back home.
- It is very difficult to obtain information about new arrivals, and therefore the project was dependent on other agencies passing on the information about the course. These agencies often had other priorities.

- Leaflets are known to have only a limited impact in attracting harder to reach groups, including refugees and asylum seekers. Word of mouth was deployed as the most effective way of spreading information.
- It is necessary to go the extra mile to facilitate the men's attendance, for example taking people to the first class, reminding and encouraging them. As many refugee men were experiencing chaotic, complex lives, several found it hard to prioritise the courses.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests some men could not be convinced to try an activity they associated with the occupation of women.

One of the main problems faced by the project was that it was reliant on other agencies to spread the information. The difficulty was that some agencies, which held information about new arrivals in the city, were unwilling to share this information because of concerns about data protection. To overcome this, the project needed more dedicated time by a health visitor or community development worker who understood the sector and had access to, and the trust of, refugees and asylum seekers, and could give the support and encouragement required to get the project underway.

Cath Maffia