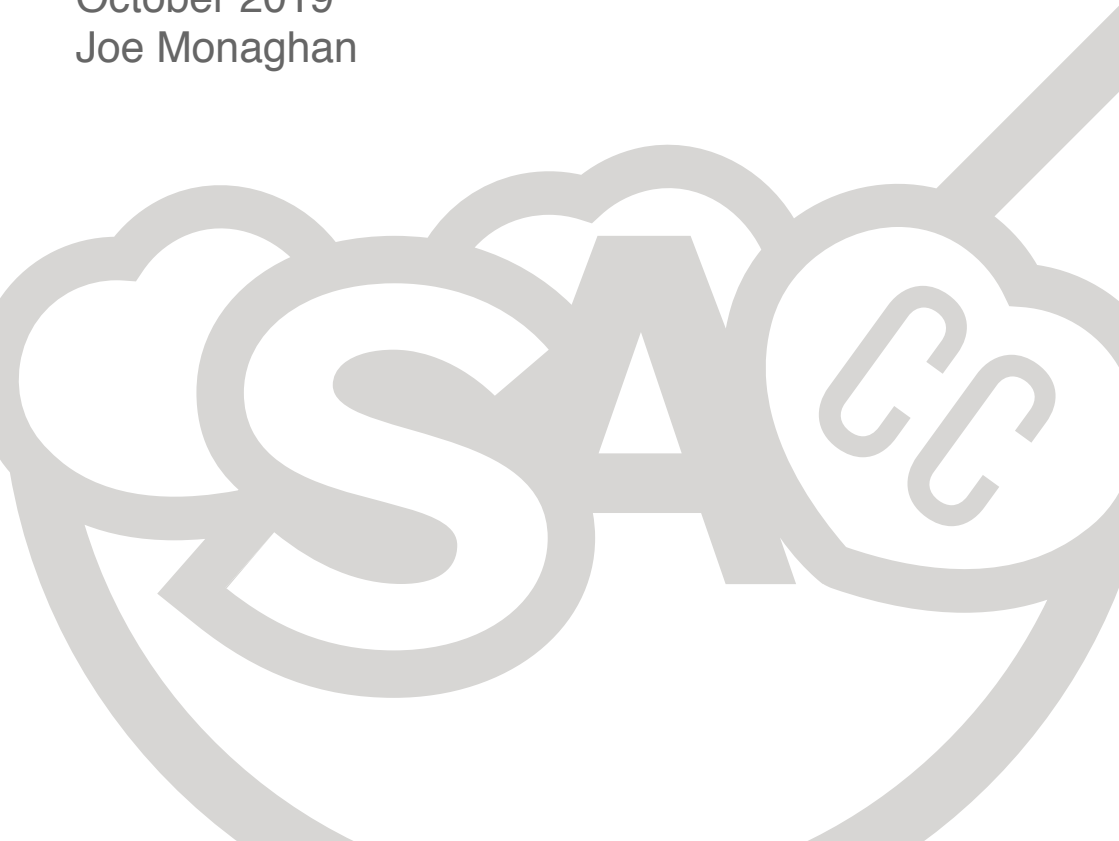




REPORT OF AN EVALUATION OF THE CARING COOKS PROJECT

Sandwell Advocacy
October 2019
Joe Monaghan



ABOUT SANDWELL ADVOCACY

Sandwell Advocacy is a registered charity that has been providing independent advocacy throughout the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell since 1993.

It is a well-established community-based organisation with a proven track record of providing high quality advocacy support. Sandwell Advocacy's objective is to support individuals who are in situations where they are vulnerable and their rights at risk. It has a team of qualified advocacy practitioners and trained volunteer advocates delivering a range of specialist advocacy projects throughout Sandwell. They support people in ensuring that their needs, rights and wishes are respected and taken into account in the planning and delivery of health, social care, education and related services.

Sandwell Advocacy supports people in having their voice heard.

Many of the individuals that Sandwell Advocacy supports feel that they have no meaningful involvement in decisions that directly and profoundly affect their lives. The organisation has an outcome focused approach that works with individuals to ensure that they are placed at the heart of the decision-making process. It supports people in ensuring that they are able to explore avenues open to them, to discuss options thereby ensuring that they can make informed choices. Ultimately, Sandwell Advocacy supports people in having their voice heard and in securing control over what happens in their lives. This support helps them to feel more confident in articulating their needs and in realising their rights and wishes more effectively.



BACKGROUND TO THE CARING COOKS PROJECT

The Caring Cooks project evolved from earlier work with young carers and is unique in that the application for funding for the project was co-produced by staff and users.



Existing and former users of Sandwell Advocacy's Young Carers Advocacy Project, who comprise the user engagement group, had identified the need for this project. They had informed the organisation that many of their families rely on foodbanks and that they wanted to be able to plan and prepare healthy food with the ingredients supplied. Many of the provisions, particularly tinned goods, distributed at the foodbank were not familiar to them. For example, one person had enquired "what do you do with pilchards?" They had expressed a desire to expand the range of their cooking skills as well as learning more about locally grown healthy food and to showcase their journey through various mediums.

Funding for the Caring Cooks Project was secured from the Postcode Local Trust with the project commencing in July 2018. The project aimed to deliver the following activities:

- Healthy eating and food preparation to create healthy food from ingredients commonly supplied by local foodbanks
- Food Hygiene accreditation
- Understanding how local foodbanks work and how the project could engage with them
- Understanding how locally grown organic healthy food can be produced that is affordable and accessible
- Growing organic healthy food
- Producing a series of films, blogs and vlogs that highlight the experiences, journey and outcomes of the young people taking part
- Producing a digital toolkit showcasing the achievements of this project and how other groups and organisations can replicate the project activities on a wider scale

It was envisaged that young carers and their families who accessed the advocacy service would be the primary beneficiaries. The project planned to work with local foodbanks, training providers, Salop Drive Market Garden and digital consultants in delivering the project.

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation has taken the form of interviews with the project staff and a meeting and discussion with the core beneficiaries.

The latter commenced with a lunch that was planned and produced by people who use the project. This allowed for them to talk to me at their own pace over several hours in a very relaxed atmosphere. A great deal more time has been spent reviewing the many evaluation reports that have been very efficiently produced throughout the life of the project. In addition, I have had time to view video footage, photographs, materials produced. I have also reviewed the publicity materials used. In this report, I give greater emphasis to the views of the users as I believe this is the best way to gauge the success of the project.



THE VIEWS OF PEOPLE USING THE PROJECT

I have obtained the views of the young people using the project in two ways. Firstly, through the notes that the staff team have recorded of the consultation, reflection and evaluation sessions held with them throughout the life of the project. These have been meticulously recorded. Secondly, I was invited to a group activity at the Sandwell Advocacy office on 8th August 2019 in time to join the young people for lunch, which they had prepared. I was surprised by the warmth of the welcome that I received. Most of the six people had met over the two years of the project and there was a noticeably very positive vibe to the session. I gathered the information that I required by engaging informally with the group and allowing them to set the pace. They were very articulate, and this made my task all the easier,

Those present told me about the elements of the project that they had enjoyed the most. The work on the allotments and strawberry picking together with making hanging baskets was the first thing that the young people enthused about. Close behind was the trip to the Good Food Show which the project had arranged and experiencing the different foods on offer there. Seeing the celebrity chef Nadiya Hussein was clearly a key development. Quite apart from the excitement of being in her audience, she had related some of her own difficulties to the young people. This had resulted in them feeling better about their own situations and having a sense of solidarity with her. They had clearly also enjoyed their other celebrity encounter with Ainsley Harriott.

Cooking healthy food was clearly something that they had thoroughly enjoyed, and the skills learnt here were among many that these young people will carry with them to later life. One person described how she had used her newly acquired skills by cooking at home for the first time ever because the project had given her the confidence to do so. A particular triumph and further confidence boost was the fact that her sister had eaten all her portion and enjoyed it.

Enthusiasm was also expressed about visiting the market garden and learning about vegetables e.g. butternut squash that they were not previously familiar with. They detailed to me how they had carved pumpkins for Halloween and made pumpkin pie. The Halloween event seemed to have been very popular with those involved. They explained how they had made butternut squash soup and had filmed this activity, thereby helping them to understand the steps of film making.

They also explained how they had interviewed people managing the local Foodbank. They had learnt how to film and record and were subsequently studying photographic skills. I was able to view this footage when I interviewed staff at an earlier date and had been very impressed by it.

One of the young people was able to use her filming experience with the project as part of her Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Although they had clearly enjoyed the film making, they had found some of the technical elements to be boring. However, there was a refreshing acknowledgement that they had to do the “boring part” in order to do the “fun part”.

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One person explained to me how she had been very shy when she first joined the group and being involved in the photography had helped her confidence greatly. She went on to tell me that when they visited the Foodbank, she had been given rice, something that she had never cooked before. This was one of a number of references people made to learning about unfamiliar food items.

Another event that had proven popular was the fabric manipulation session. I was able to see some of the products from this including a decorated bag and a very clever adaptation of the Sandwell Advocacy logo introducing an image of a watermelon.

The young people had particularly enjoyed a visit that had been arranged at a local Asda store, where they had an opportunity to see behind the scenes. This had involved meeting staff and seeing for themselves how a big store operates. The group had introduced the staff to an ice-breaking party game.

It was clear to me that all of the people that I spoke to understood really well the reason for the project and were making full use of what it had to offer. This included developing culinary skills – something I was able to appreciate in the lunch that I shared with them.



DISLIKES

The level of satisfaction with the project activities was such that I had difficulty in finding things that the young people disliked. With regards to a Food Hygiene course that the young people had participated in, there was general disappointment. It was felt that they had been treated as 'kids' and it had been too like a factory approach and not particularly fitted to their experiences and requirements. They really need to know how to cook safely at home e.g. using and storing sharp cutlery etc. However, despite this, something positive had come out of this activity with a subsequently very useful contact with the West Midlands Fire Service.



GAINS

When I asked the young people what they saw as the main gains of their involvement with the project, the first thing that was unanimously felt was that they had gained confidence. That was so evident to me from early in our meeting as they were clearly comfortable with my being there, but more importantly there was such a warm interaction between them and the staff team. Other gains that were highly rated was the fact that they felt safer in the kitchen and had been able to use ingredients that were new to them such as rocket and butternut squash. Several people enthused about the filming they had done and how it had inspired them to do more.



UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

One person explained to me how she and her family had visited Essington Farm and enjoyed it so much that they returned for another visit. They subsequently eat a lot more fruit and vegetables. The young people described for me their group visit to Salop Drive allotments. This is where 'Ideal for all' organic produce is grown, and they had planted cabbages and done some scoop and swirl planting. They had seen foxes there as well as bees making honey and had taken sunflowers home with them. Three of the young people were now involved in volunteering both at Sandwell Advocacy and with other local groups.





THE VIEWS OF PEOPLE WORKING ON THE PROJECT

I met with the staff team, consisting of Helen Charles, Juanita Williams and Sharon Wilson on several occasions, and they provided me with the notes and papers that I required in order to undertake the evaluation. I also met with Majida Siddique who volunteered with the project.



The media training involved interviews with the organisers of the local Foodbank.

Their enthusiasm for the work that they had been undertaking was evident from the very first meeting. I also met the other staff members at Sandwell Advocacy, as the organisation works holistically. This makes for a secure base for the project with the whole team understanding the project and being familiar with the young people involved in it. Although most of what Helen and Juanita expressed was confirmed in my meeting with the young people, they were able to provide me with additional information that wasn't covered in the session with the users. A forum had been held in October 2018 which had included the pumpkin carving for Halloween referred to earlier. The media training had commenced in February 2019, and I was able to view a video made by the young people with the support of an experienced film maker. This involved interviews with the organisers of the local foodbank, which was part of a network of 15 across the Black Country. An added bonus of this activity had been extending the foodbank personnel's awareness of advocacy and of the needs of the young people and their families. The staff team agreed that the young people had found the technical learning (e.g. digital) boring and that it there had been some reluctance to do it.

During the Easter holiday period, they had taken the group to Salop Drive Market Garden. This had involved some cooking, photography, filming and interviewing on the allotments there. There had also been some planting out and the young people had picked some salad leaves to eat with their lunch. On the second visit they had done more cooking, planting and filming. The staff team felt the young people had enjoyed most of the activities in which they had been involved and had worked well with the professionals involved in the photography and filming. They also agreed that the fabric manipulation session had been very successful and explained that everyone had taken home the materials they had produced.

The team also agreed that the tour of Asda had been surprisingly enjoyable with the group learning a lot about what happened behind closed doors in the store. They had a demonstration from the forklift truck driver, went in the chiller and the freezer and had been intrigued by the size of the water tank holding all the water for the sprinkler system. Helen and Juanita had also found the Food Hygiene course disappointing and felt that it wasn't particularly relevant to either the young people's age range or home environment. However, the experience had not been entirely negative with the young people now considering developing their own training.

The team had clearly monitored the feelings of the young people and adapted to reflect these in their work. One disappointment had been the not uncommon issues around young people not turning up when they say they will. This problem had been addressed in part by asking parents with transport to bring their children to sessions.

Reflecting on the project over the year, both Helen and Juanita and the rest of the team at Sandwell Advocacy felt that it had been a success. They felt that the young people had really grown in confidence because of it and it had given them a positive outlook as to what they were capable of. The group had shared experiences and learning that would stay with them in the years ahead, and that mutually supportive friendships had developed.



CONCLUSION

I have undertaken numerous evaluations over many years, which have involved trying to gain the opinions of the people who have been the beneficiaries of advocacy support.

This is often difficult either because people are not always comfortable about sharing their views or they have difficulty in expressing themselves. This evaluation was refreshing because these young people were so ready to tell me what they thought, and I just needed to listen and take note. What might have been a difficult task proved to be a most uplifting experience. They clearly felt that the greatest outcome of their involvement with the project was that they had gained confidence. This was evident not only in their willingness to respond to my enquiries as individuals, but strikingly in the feeling of collective empathy and solidarity.

In the original project proposal, several key changes were identified in terms of indicating the difference that the project would make. These included developing skills around planning and preparing healthy meals; understanding how healthy food options are produced and accessing them locally and growing fresh organic food. There was clear evidence, as detailed above, that this had been achieved and that there was enthusiasm from the beneficiaries to learn more. Other key changes anticipated were improving technical skills around film making and technical expertise around the use of digital platforms. These included the production of a digital toolkit highlighting how this work can be replicated. Rather than develop blogs and vlogs the young people had preferred to concentrate their efforts on film and social media. The digital work is particularly impressive and professional, and the recipe videos are so good that I'll be using them myself. There was clear evidence that these key changes had been experienced despite the early wariness of some of the beneficiaries to throw themselves into some of the more complex elements of this work.

Another key change that had been anticipated was the production of recipe cards that would be distributed via the Black Country Foodbank network. This had also been achieved and was in progress when I met with the beneficiaries in Summer. They were particularly enthusiastic about this activity.

The project has clearly been a success and in many ways that can only be fully appreciated when one meets the beneficiaries. When I asked them what they would say to the funders if they met them, they responded with "thank you". When I asked what they felt that they had gained from the project, the most common response after confidence was mutual support. However, several also replied that it had made them more understanding and willing to think more about other people. There were numerous anecdotes too with one person telling me that she never had a meal without meat and now her favourite meal includes chickpeas. Another person explained that she would like to be a farmer or a diabetic consultant specialising in dietary needs because her sister has diabetes.

Their experiences with the project have obviously impacted on the people in the group with them asking "Why can't we help other people?" They expressed a wish to help others to learn more in order to give something back. Some would like to help collect things for the Foodbank and help more people to access it. There was clearly a desire to develop further some of the skills and strengths people had gained. This included a desire to go on learning about healthy eating, cooking and filming. A Caring Cooks YouTube channel was mentioned as something they wanted to develop further.

The only disappointing aspect of the project was that it had attracted the involvement of only one male, and he had subsequently dropped out. However, it was clear that the female only environment had many positive impacts that might not otherwise have developed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that this innovative project has been successful, and possibly in additional ways that were not necessarily envisaged when it was initially developed.

The positive attitude of the young people that have been involved is quite striking and hopeful. They are keen to be proactive in helping other young people living through similar experiences. They have a very organic sense of what real advocacy is about, which would make them excellent potential advocates. These young people have commenced a journey that they are keen to complete. There are several ways in which the work of the project could be developed and some of them involved in and these include:

- Encouraging greater participation from young people of all genders
- Carrying forward some of the current work around cooking and eating healthy food
- Accessing child friendly food hygiene training, possibly involving the young people as practitioners
- Exploring further the links with the Fire Service
- Develop further the links with the local Foodbanks and exploring the potential for greater access to advocacy by their users
- Supporting the group members in developing and utilising their obvious ability to be natural advocates

I was deeply impressed by the passion of the young people involved to give something back to the communities. It would be a shame if this was not harnessed to help make an even greater difference to people living in situations of serious disadvantage and isolation.

Joe Monaghan

October 2019



Carrying forward some of the current work around cooking and eating healthy food.

ABOUT

JOE MONAGHAN

Joe is a freelance consultant and is the elected Chief Officer of the National Coalition of Advocacy Schemes.

He has been active in voluntary and community work in a variety of roles since 1965. Joe has been involved in most of the major developments in advocacy at national level, and has played a leading role in development and provision of advocacy in Liverpool over the past 27 years. He has been active for the past 30 years in a charity that supports families in the city that are experiencing poverty. He lives and works in one of the most socially deprived areas of Liverpool and shares his office with a Food Market which is part of the Fair Share network.

Joe has personal experience of long-term mental health difficulties and the social exclusion and disadvantage that accompany these. He also has personal experience of being a primary carer, and feels that these factors help to inform his approach both to advocacy in particular and to life in general. Joe believes passionately in facilitating, encouraging and nurturing the capacity of human beings to support each other, whilst appreciating the conflicts and barriers that can obstruct this.



CREDITS

Black Country Food Bank
Blue and White Creative
Creative Black Country
First Response
Ideal for All
Infamous Arts
Joe Monaghan
My Time
Nash Coaches
Paula Beddoe (ASDA Community Champion)
Reel Access
Salop Drive Market Garden
Sandwell SMBC
The Well Food Bank (Tipton)

With special thanks to the young carers and their parents/guardians

For more information visit:
sandwelladvocacy.org/caring-cooks-project



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