



FOOD FOR LIFE NOTTINGHAMSHIRE
EARLY YEARS PROJECT

SEPTEMBER 2020- JUNE 2022

FINAL REPORT



FOOD FOR LIFE NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

Food for Life was funded by Nottinghamshire County Council to work with seven nurseries across the borough, between Sept 2020 and June 2022. The work is part of the Nottinghamshire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Project (LGA).

The aim of the Food for Life element of the Nottinghamshire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer programme was:

To support seven nurseries in Nottinghamshire to participate collaboratively in the FFL Early Years award programme, testing our approach along the way and evidencing changes – and challenges - within these food environments.

This Final Report seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Has the project evidenced improvements in confidence, knowledge & skills in food and nutrition amongst Early Years practitioners?
2. Has the project evidenced an improvement in the nutritional profile of meals provided by participating childcare providers?

This report captures our impact and learning, focussing on the two questions highlighted above. It also includes case studies on two nurseries, Learning Tree and Creative Hands, and incorporates process evaluation so we can build on our learning for the future.

ENGAGEMENT DATA

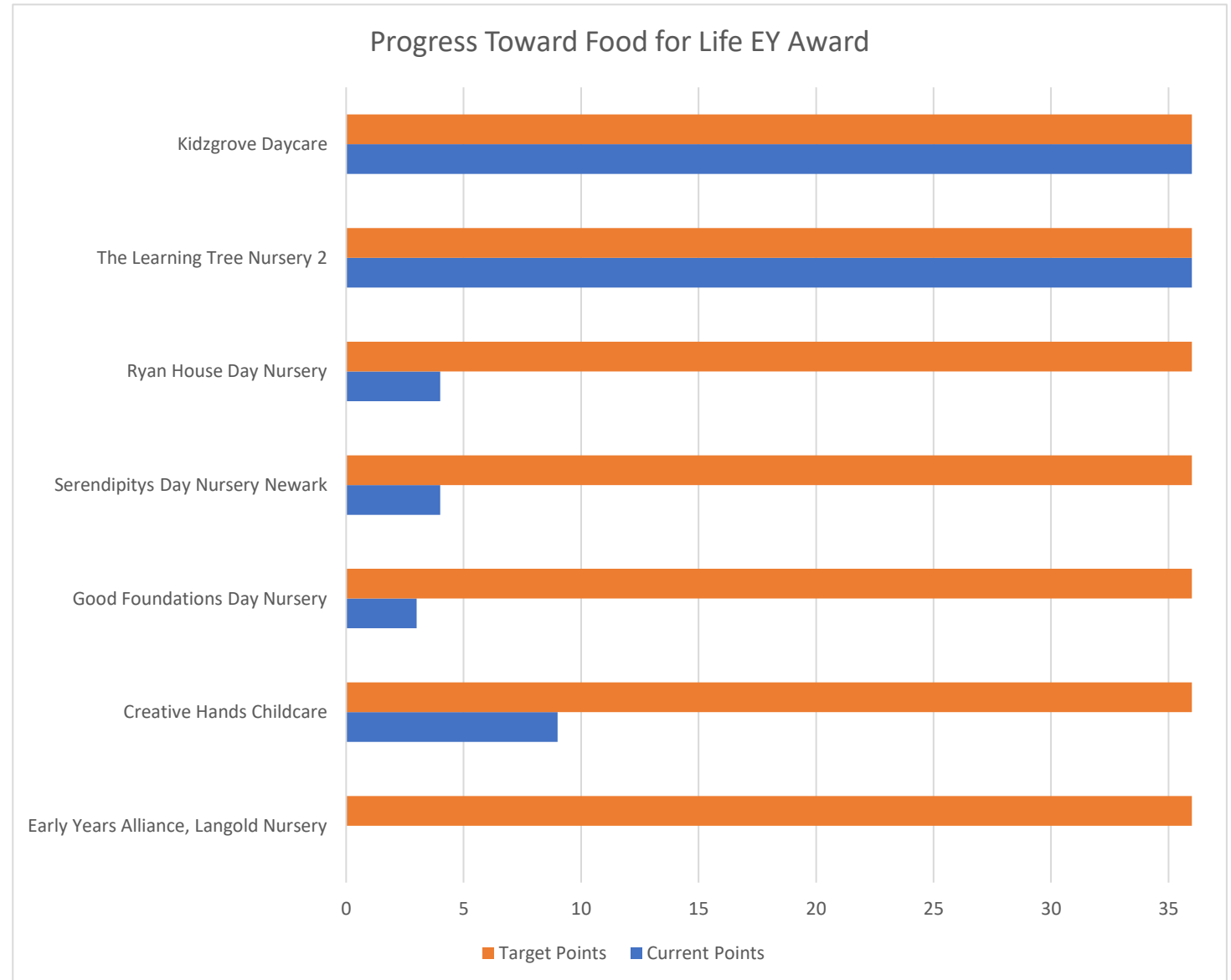
This table evidences the number of criteria that the seven nurseries completed towards the Food for Life Early Years award. There are 36 criteria in total.

Two nurseries (2/7) completed the full award.

A third completed all of the Food Quality criteria.

6/7 nurseries completed some criteria.

1/7 nurseries completed zero criteria (we later learnt that this nursery had had a change in manager and that information about Food for Life was not passed on).



Q1: HAS THE PROJECT EVIDENCED IMPROVEMENTS IN CONFIDENCE, KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS IN FOOD AND NUTRITION AMONGST EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS?

Food for Life delivered a variety of training inputs, designed to boost knowledge, confidence and skills in EY practitioners.



A screenshot of *Menu planning for the Early Years* webinar

| Training inputs | Date | |
|--|--|---|
| Themed emails to settings (include screenshot?) | Monthly | 7/7 nurseries |
| FFL Ringbinder posted | After enrolment | 7/7 nurseries |
| FFL Nottinghamshire Launch Webinar – led by FFL Nutrition Advisor, Diana Hawdon | 11 th November 2020 | Attended by 4/7 nurseries and two Notts CC staff |
| 1:1 bespoke launch meetings | 6 th Dec 2020 – 18 th Jan 2021 | 7/7 nurseries |
| Nottinghamshire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Community of Practice – training delivered by Food for Life Nutrition Advisor, Diana Hawdon, on (a) healthier menus (b) healthy snacks and Healthy Start | March – June 2021 | 3/7 nurseries |
| Three online units released to FFL Nottinghamshire Nurseries – <i>Intro to the Food for Life Early Years Award; Chicken Keeping; Farm Visits.</i> | 7 th April 2021 | 3/7 nurseries registered for the modules. One was completed by Creative Hands Nursery |
| Edible Growing for the Early Years, Live Webinar | 8 th June 2021 | 3/7 nurseries (Learning Tree, Kidzgrove and Langold EY Alliance) attended |
| Creative Cooking for the Early Years, Live Webinar | 29 th June 2021 | 3/7 nurseries (Learning Tree, Kidzgrove and Langold EY Alliance) attended |
| Menu Planning for the Early Years, Live Webinar - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRrRffSOEac | 10 th March 2022 | 2/7 nurseries (Learning Tree, Creative Hands plus 2 non enrolled Notts nurseries) attended. YouTube link shared widely. |

Given the context of covid, the majority of the training was delivered remotely. As a result, collation of in-training evaluation was more challenging to collate.

To evaluate confidence, knowledge and skills in nursery staff, we conducted three semi-structured interviews with the most engaged nurseries (Kidzgrove, Learning Tree, Creative Hands) in April 2022.

We can also assess the impact of the training inputs on knowledge, confidence and skills through the changes made within the settings – the programme outcomes.



5/7 NURSERIES EVIDENCED
AN IMPROVEMENT IN
KNOWLEDGE, CONFIDENCE
AND SKILLS

Project Outcomes against this theme:

2/7 nurseries have achieved their Food for Life Early Years award, evidencing that improved knowledge, confidence and skills have enabled changes to practice across the setting.

Achievement of the award requires a 'whole setting approach' to food, which requires oversight by the manager and participation by the cook and practitioners. Parents and children will be active participants in and beneficiaries of the increased confidence and knowledge around food.

Beyond these settings, three nurseries (Creative Hands, Ryan House and Serendipitys) completed a sufficient number of award criteria (regarding the nutritional quality of their menus) that we are able to track a positive improvement in knowledge, confidence and skills from baseline. This was supported by interview data.

SUPPORTING QUOTES

“Participating in Food for Life has given me the confidence to make changes in our menus and to share this learning with the three other nurseries in our chain. I understand about additives and the importance of freshly prepared food now.”

Laura Jones, Manager, The Learning Tree

“Before starting this we’d never heard of the voluntary food and drinks guidelines. Now every menu change is checked against them by both of us [Manager and Cook].”

Nursery Manager

“Before doing this I definitely wouldn’t have had the confidence to hire a cook who hadn’t worked in a nursery before. But I knew I was confident to help them to understand what our little ones need, so I could concentrate on hiring the person with the right passion. She’s amazing – she’s leading sessions with the children and is so passionate about food education”

Laura Jones, Manager, The Learning Tree

“Our staff know to be good role models when they’re eating and drinking with the children now. It’s in our food policy. They know now to eat balanced meals and only drink water in front of the children”

Chloe Wise, Manager,
Kidzgrove

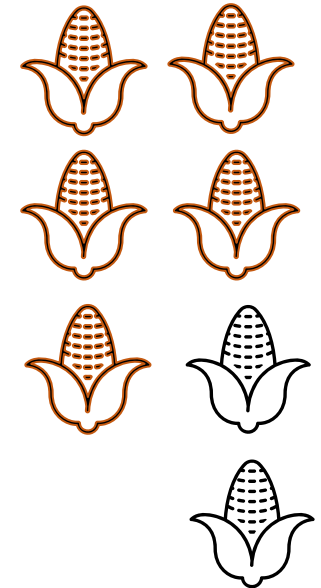
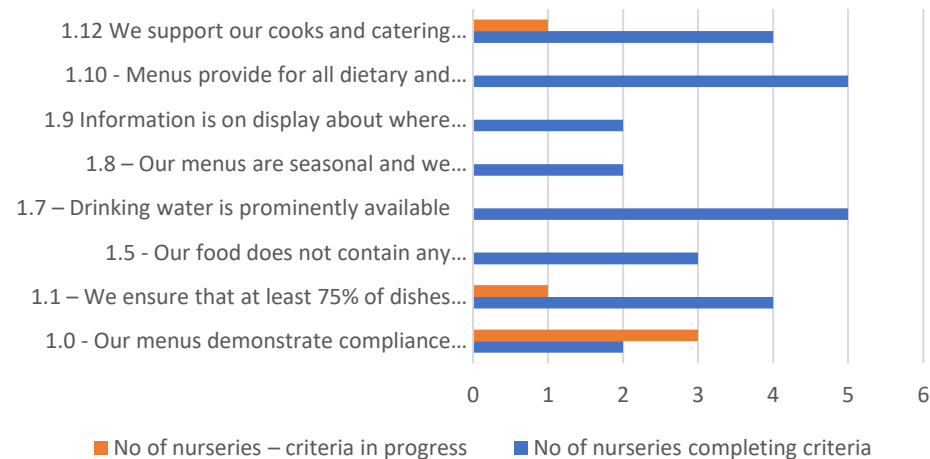
Q2: HAS THE PROJECT EVIDENCED AN IMPROVEMENT IN THE NUTRITIONAL PROFILE OF MEALS PROVIDED BY PARTICIPATING CHILDCARE PROVIDERS?

Five of the seven nurseries have actively prioritised engagement with the food quality elements of the Food for Life awards (shown in the table to the right).

In addition, these nurseries have evidenced that they are supporting their cooks with skills training and are providing menus that are seasonal and do not incorporate any endangered fish, battery eggs or imported meat. These principles help to evidence that the nurseries' procurement practices are supporting the local food economy and higher welfare production of fish, meat and eggs.

To support our evidence base against this theme, we collated baseline evidence from 6/7 nurseries and conducted follow-up interviews with 4/7.

Food Quality Criteria (Nutrition)



5/7 NURSERIES
HAVE EVIDENCED
PROGRESS
AGAINST THIS
OUTCOME

OUR REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY THESE FIVE MENUS AND THE CHANGES MADE BY THE NURSERIES INVOLVED ARE THEMED BELOW:

Early Years Voluntary Food & Drink Guidelines

Our baseline menu reviews showed that across the board, confidence in the guidelines was very low, with 2/3 of nurseries unfamiliar with the guidelines and supporting tools. By the end of the programme, all 6 of the nurseries that we communicated with were familiar with the guidelines (and stated that guidelines are printed and displayed in kitchens / menus are built around these and the FFL food quality criteria). Four of the nurseries had evidenced that they meet (and even surpass) the EYVF&DGs.

As a result of engagement with the Food for Life programme, Creative Hands nursery has built the confidence to move from a bought-in frozen meal service to a freshly prepared menu (see Case Study 2). Their menu now meets the Early Years Voluntary Food & Drink Guidelines across the board.

“The online training has meant we can confidently check every menu against the guidelines and know that we meet them.” David McCarten, Creative Hands Nursery, interview data, 15th April 2022

“We have printed a copy of the Eat better Start better standards. This has been shared with the cook and the leadership team. The next time we have a menu change we will refer to the standards.” Kidzgrove Nursery Criteria Submission, 12/11/20

Freshly Prepared Menus

Evidencing that nurseries are providing a minimum of 75% freshly prepared dishes on their menus is a vital criteria of the FFL award. It evidences that the children are enjoying the nutrient density and range found in fresh whole foods. As well as a freshly prepared menu reducing the unnecessary incorporation of trans fats, artificial additives, sugar and salt, it will lead to an increase in provision of foods that are high in nutrients that are common risks for deficiency in the under 5s (vitamins A & C, iron, zinc and dietary fibre).

5/7 nurseries have evidenced that their menus are at least 75% freshly prepared at follow up, compared to 3/7 at baseline

Incorporating Non-Dairy Proteins

Incorporation of non-dairy proteins in all menus was identified as an area for development when menus were baselined in 2020. This has improved in six of the nurseries' menus, where we now see a greater range of pulses, beans and Quorn products incorporated across a three-week menu cycle.

We have seen more incorporation of bean dips in tea menus (in three menus). Incorporation of non-dairy proteins is important in ensuring dietary variety in children that are vegetarian, and can boost the fibre content of meals for all children.

"For the pasta bake we are going to add red lentils cooked and blended and added to our homemade sauce as before the children would eat them! Vegetable curry we are going to add chickpeas to our homemade sauce. Thank you for the suggestions and we will let you know how we get on!" Kidzgrove criteria submission, 6/1/21

"Following lengthy discussions with Alastair and Hannah (at Food for Life), we have changed a meal on our Winter menu that did not contain a non-dairy protein. We have since changed this dish (Macaroni Cheese) to Broccoli & Mushroom (adding quorn chicken) one pot pasta dish as recommended. The children did enjoy it and we served it with crunchy vegetable sticks and a warm wholemeal crusty bread" Laura Jones, The Learning Tree, 5/11/21

Cook and Team Supported with Training

Enhancing the skills and knowledge of the kitchen team is a core element of the Food for Life ethos, ensuring that strengthened understanding in the nutritional needs of the under 5s can filter through the kitchen and menus.

The cook at Kidzgrove, Gemma, has been involved in the Food for Life programme and has been funded to complete an Advanced level three in Food and Hygiene as a result of the improved food culture at the nursery. *“Gemma often consults with staff about what meals the children are enjoying or how we can improve the ones that they aren't.”*
Kidzgrove criteria submission, 4/6/21

“We have a Nursery cook who prepares the lunch and cooked teatime pudding such as: Homemade cake/biscuit and a Teatime Assistant who prepares the Tea. Both are newly appointed within their roles and during their recent induction (June '21) I made reference, discussed and sign posted them both to the Eat Better Start better Early Years Voluntary Food & Drinks Standards and Food for Life.” The Learning Tree Nursery criteria submission text, 9/8/21

Additional Notes

- * Three nurseries identified that they have removed dried fruit as a snack option following FFL training (oral health link)
- * The nurseries have reported that they have been sharing their learning with nurseries beyond this cohort. The Learning Tree, for example, is in a larger chain of five nurseries, and all have incorporated the learning from the Mansfield site into their practices.
- * The increased confidence around nutrition is filtering down to parents and children, with a more confident use of language to describe menus and greater communication of menus, nutrition and food provenance in 6/7 nurseries. *“Now we know exactly what’s in (each dish), and why it’s been included. We talk to every parent about our food offer now.”* David McCarten, Creative Hands, Interview data, 15th April 2022

CASE STUDY ONE: THE LEARNING TREE NURSERY

About The Learning Tree Nursery:

The Learning Tree is a large nursery (with around 65 children on roll) in a homely setting in Sutton-in-Ashfield. Around 11 staff are employed and their manager, Laura Jones, has led their Food for Life activity since enrolling in the programme in November 2020.

The nursery has been highly engaged in the Food for Life Early Years Award programme, with their manager actively participating in the *Community Food Hubs* project led by Food for Life, as well as every training webinar and evaluation call that has been offered. They have also been regular contributors to the *Early Years Community of Practice* led by Nottinghamshire County Council, developing their knowledge and sharing with other local early years settings. The Learning Tree achieved their Food for Life award on May 18th 2022.



A Spring display created by The Learning Tree children, celebrating their understanding of food & farming

The Impact of Food for Life in the setting

Food Quality – the setting has been proactive in thinking about their menus, despite recognising they were at a good quality to begin with. They have been open to feedback around areas for improvement and have evidenced this through more inclusion of non-dairy vegetarian proteins and a focus on incorporating more seasonal fruit and veg in their menu. They have worked on changing some of their desserts, removing some bought in products and replacing with fruit or homemade desserts. The Learning Tree is committed to continual improvement around the quality of food they offer. They are about to launch a new menu that has been developed using the Food for Life criteria and *Eat Better, Start Better* guidelines

Laura has taken pride in making her menus descriptive, to make the dishes sound as appealing as possible and to encourage literacy and conversation skills to develop around mealtimes.

The Central Role of the Cook – A new cook was recruited during the lifetime of the programme and Laura was confident enough to take a risk on hiring a cook who hadn't worked in a nursery before. The nursery prioritised recruiting a candidate based on their interest in taking food out of the kitchen and into the classroom, confident that they could pass on their knowledge around nutrition for the under 5s.

This decision has paid off, and the new cook is engaging really well with food education at the nursery, particularly *The Children's Kitchen* sensory food education activities:

"Helen, the Nursery Cook, is fully involved in The Children's Kitchen sessions and from being trained by Martha, she led her first independent session this week with the children exploring plums, butternut squash and cherry tomatoes! It was fab and the children were so engaged!" Food for Life criteria submission, 23/2/2022

Food Education – The Learning Tree has integrated food education across their mealtimes, learning and play. They have embraced the *Children's Kitchen* sensory food sessions, initially led by Martha (Family Action) and now delivered by nursery staff. The link with *Children's Kitchen* means that children from families that enjoy *Food on Our Doorstep* packages from the local children's centre can be confident that their children are familiar with the fresh fruit and veg in the packages thanks to the playful, exploratory sessions at nursery.

The Learning Tree has also developed their growing area through their time working on their Food for Life criteria, sharing some activities that the children love on the Food for Life portal: *"Picking the podding peas in the nursery garden listening to the 'pop' as we pod them, passing them to the cook who then added them to a vegetable stew. The children really enjoyed 'hunting' for the garden peas in the pie! Clean plates and full tummies all round and a brilliant conversation during the lunch time as we found the peas!"* Food for Life criteria submission, 8th August 2021

During the *Community Food Mapping* workshop that Food for Life led in March, Laura also committed to finding a way to involve parents in the vegetable growing beds at The Learning Tree, enabling them to share their love of food education with parents, and for some parents to benefit from more involvement with the nursery – and one another.

Sharing their learning

Vitality, The Learning Tree has been sharing their learning throughout the programme. Whether through the *Community of Practice*, online training sessions, or the *community food hub project*, Laura and her team have been brilliantly open about their successes and challenges, enabling a culture of learning and sharing to develop. Laura has also ensured that she has shared her learning with the other four nurseries in the Learning Tree family. We can very well imagine a food ambassador role for The Learning Tree in the future!

CASE STUDY TWO: CREATIVE HANDS NURSERY

About Creative Hands

Creative Hands is a large nursery in Broxtowe, with around 100 children on roll. When we first met Creative Hands, in November 2020, they were frustrated that their frozen meal provision meant that they were unable to achieve a Food for Life Early Years Award. They understood that to achieve the award, they would need to evidence that the dishes on their menu were at least 75% freshly prepared and that they met the Early Years Voluntary Food & Drink Guidelines. While they took pride in the fresh snacks and teas that they prepared, their lunches and desserts were all cooked from frozen. They decided to look into ways to cooking food for the children in their care from scratch, using the Food for Life criteria as a guide.

The Impact of Food for Life in the setting

From frozen to freshly prepared: turning their menu around - Within a year, Creative Hands had transformed their food service, developing a home-cooked menu on a three-week cycle. By May, manager David McCarten had met all of Food for Life's *Food Quality criteria*, evidencing that the nursery was offering a menu built on 83% freshly prepared dishes that were meeting the nutritional guidelines for the under 5s as well as all of the cultural and dietary needs of the diverse children in their care.

"We didn't know what was in the food we were serving before. We knew the name of it but the ingredients were a mystery. Now we know exactly what's in there, and why it's been included. We talk to every parent about our food offer now." David McCarten, interview data, 15th April

2022

The nursery manager reported that parents were delighted with the new menu and that the take-up of hot meals had risen from below 70% to 80% of children. They have moved from plastic plates to crockery, providing a more homely eating experience to the children. The children are really enjoying the meals and David notes that *“the kids are ready for sleep more now because they’re eating a fuller meal. They’re licking the plates clean!”*

Importantly, during a cost of living crisis, Creative Hands has been able to deliver these changes without increasing their food budget. The cook is really enjoying their job now and keen to continue to improve the menu based on feedback from parents and children.

“The online training has meant we can confidently check every menu against the guidelines and plan them to meet them.” David McCarten, interview data, 15th April 2022

Developing their approach to food education

In order to embed a whole setting approach to food, Creative Hands is looking to make the connection between their fantastic menus and the learning, play and experiences that the children in their care enjoy.

After completing Food for Life’s online *“Organizing a Farm Visit”* training, the manager has booked for every single child in the nursery to visit the nearby Bluebell Dairy in September (this means five groups of twenty children!). David has also found a way to ensure that the children’s food education can be maintained on a daily basis, creating a small growing area behind the nursery. They’ve had to think carefully about how to keep it well maintained without the children treading all over it! The ambition is that the growing area links to the menu and helps the children to enjoy their healthy, home cooked meals even more.

PROCESS EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS

Given the small scale of the project investment and the context of the pandemic, we feel the project has generated a good amount of engagement and a lot of learning about the factors that drive positive changes in the food environments and food sourcing of early years settings. Here is a summary of our learnings:

- Our knowledge and understanding of setting needs was greatly amplified during face to face 1:1 visits and training sessions. The settings, too, communicated that this was the best way for them to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence. They also valued webinars and learning networks, but not as highly.
- It is vital for any universal public health project to invest in the continuing improvement of private day nurseries. We have learnt that assumptions in fund-giving from businesses / philanthropists mean that private day nurseries can't access financial support for additional projects eg food education, farm visits. As the diversity of intake at private day nurseries has grown (built on increased access to free childcare for children at 2,3 and 4), private day nurseries are a key route to ensuring universal access to good food and food education.
- To ensure sustainability and a whole-setting approach, staff beyond the nursery manager alone need to be engaged in the programme. The manager at one of our participating nurseries left in 2021. The high motivation of this manager wasn't shared with the other nursery staff, and consequently the opportunity for positive change left with the manager.
- Our exploratory work around *Community Food Hubs* led us to the conclusion that EY staff resource alone is not enough to generate reciprocal routes into the local community / local food economy. Nursery staff need a robust web of support around them to ensure they can build relationships with their local food system that can be sustained.
- Throughout the project, cost was communicated by the nurseries as a barrier to investing further in high quality ingredients. This will only be compounded over the coming year, through cost of living / supply chain issues
- It is easy for settings to be demotivated by technical / project management issues. One of our nursery's submissions was implicated in a technical failure (with Food for Life's CRM), in July 2021. At project close, they shared with us that this put them off participating.



Themes for future engagement:

- Tea time menus (ensuring a more diverse menu, incorporating fruit, vegetables and non-dairy proteins)
- Further education on snacks (within the nursery and into the home)
- Sharing learning with the families linked to the nursery