



Eat Well for Oral Health: Learning and Legacy September 2025





Foreword: Chief Dental Officer

The Scottish Government remains committed to reducing oral health inequalities, so that everyone in Scotland feels empowered and able to access high quality and sustainable oral health care services. In line with our Programme for Government, this is driven by improving capacity and access to Primary Care and shifting the balance of care, with an increasing emphasis on preventive, community-based support and self-care.

We recognise that, for many reasons, certain groups are less likely to engage with the dentist - such as people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or ethnic minority groups. This is why our advocacy and support is focused on those who live in vulnerable situations and those who look to anchors within the community to offer advice and connections. Good oral health is key to general health and well-being and we therefore must maximise the availability and consistency of key services, particularly those which have the greatest impact on those experiencing poverty.

Our collective efforts to do that starts with the availability of early, preventative interventions. Many of these interventions and the associated knowledge-base begin at community level - including Eat Well for Oral Health - and I am pleased to deliver the final report of this project.

Although the project has come to the end of its grant period, the impact of the interventions remain and the focus now shifts to how we can replicate and embed the learning and outputs of the project more widely across Scotland. We have already started on this journey and initiated many connections and opportunities across the country. However there is much more to do, to wrap communities' support around individuals and families, to help with knowledge and skills and to give a helping hand in accessing services and strengthening oral health, for everyone.

I therefore commend to you this report and encourage partners to consider how the findings can be utilised in wider communities and sectors across the country.

Tom Ferris

Chief Dental Officer for Scotland



Background

Eat Well for Oral Health (EWOH) is a legacy project from the 2019-2022 Oral Health Community Challenge Fund, in which the Scottish Government invested £2.5 million over a 3 year period to support 20 third sector organisations to deliver oral health improvement projects in areas of multiple deprivation. These projects, all focussed on supporting better early years' oral health, were delivered by communities, for communities. All were unique in their breadth and approach, yet all supported the establishment of life long positive health behaviours to maintain good oral hygiene.

Following the success of the Challenge Fund, Scottish Government awarded a further £360,000 of grant funding to EWOH over 3 years (2022-2025) to deliver a community-based food skills and nutrition project, based on the foundations of the Challenge Fund and designed to drive oral health improvements for those living in vulnerable circumstances and affected by socio-economic and race inequalities in Edinburgh and the Lothians. The project was intended as a proof of concept which could be replicated and scaled across other parts of Scotland.

The project was delivered by the following charities, in partnership with the Oral Health Improvement team in NHS Lothian:

- *Edinburgh Community Food* - a well-established social enterprise and charity focused on ensuring everyone in Edinburgh has access to a healthy, nutritious and affordable diet. The charity has a key focus on tackling health inequalities by targeting lower socio-economic communities.
- *LINKnet Mentoring* – a longstanding charity dedicated to empowering individuals from diverse communities in Scotland, including refugees and asylum seekers. LINKnet supports individuals in education, employment, and personal development to enhance their quality of life.

Weaving their interventions together and consolidating on their particular areas of expertise, Edinburgh Community Food led on the food and nutrition side of the project, while LINKnet focussed on information, awareness raising and advocacy - including supporting people to access an NHS dentist and providing interpretation services. The charities were supported by NHS Lothian to combine these elements and ensure all activities had an overall oral health focus for those communities most in need of support.



Impact Report 2022-25



"I learned so much about how what I eat affects my teeth. The recipes were easy to follow and delicious!" Donny

AIM

"Eat Well for Oral Health" was a community project aimed at improving oral health among vulnerable populations affected by socio-economic and racial inequalities. It focused on enhancing the oral health of children and families by sharing knowledge about nutrition and cooking skills through a community-based approach. Families were supplied with dignified food and offered cash first support.

The longer term goal to:

- Improve infant oral health
- Reduce oral health inequalities amongst people most at risk
- Increase opportunities for people to improve oral health and wellbeing.

3,284 people supported through the project

159 individual supported to access NHS dentists

92% participants improved their understanding of the link between food/drink and oral health

79% eating healthier since taking part

78% families reported an increase in cooking from scratch

68% increased likelihood of accessing a dentist

KEY ACTIVITIES

The project linked with participants through existing community groups, to focus relevant messaging, provide support and strengthen connections within each group. Key delivery components included: Healthy Eating, Information & Oral Health Awareness, Practice, Advocacy, Connections, and Capacity Building, each with a firm emphasis on empowering people to get well and stay well.

Community members participated in a 6-week cooking, nutrition and oral health awareness course, meeting once per week for 2 hours. This provided practical skills to increase their confidence cooking from scratch and increase their knowledge around a healthy balanced diet and the importance of good oral health. Cooking groups took place across Edinburgh and the Lothians.

40% of participants from BME communities

Edinburgh Community Food also offered weaning and fussy eating support as well as nationally certified Royal Environmental Health Institute for Scotland (REHIS)

training courses in Food and Health and Eating Well for Older People. LINKnet provided group-based and individual oral health awareness, advocacy support and training courses.

An Eat Well for Oral Health Toolkit and a Train the Trainer online course for community practitioners was developed to scale and spread across Scotland.



SUMMARY OF KEY ACTIVITIES

Direct Community Engagement

- 35 Eat Well for Oral Health 6-week Cooking Classes
- 118 Weaning and Fussy Eating Sessions
- 23 Oral health awareness workshops
- 159 individuals supported through advocacy and registered to dental practices

Accredited Training Courses

- 247 individuals trained in REHIS Food and Health and Eating Well for Older People

Training and Capacity Building

- Online Train the Trainer Toolkit resource designed for community workers
- 7 Train the Trainer Workshops delivered to 53 community and health professionals across Scotland
- NHS Education Scotland collaboration to produce 3 digital open badges

Key achievements

- Winner of Best Outreach/Charity Initiative category - Dental Awards 2025.
- Podcast produced with the Oral Health Foundation.
- Voluntary Health Sector Conference poster finalists 2023
- Visit from the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health

Outreach/Partnership Building

- Outreach to multiple ethnic minority and community food organisations across Scotland.
- True partnership working between third sector organisations, NHS and community professionals.
- Supported NHS professionals with language and accessibility to increase a deeper understanding of community outreach.
- Support to Discover! Edinburgh School Holiday Programme with toothpaste and brushes, oral health guidance and low sugar recipes for over 400 families.

Communications and Promotion

- With a social media reach of over 45,000 monthly views we amplified nutrition and oral health messages by tapping into national social media campaigns: National Smiles Month; Healthy Eating Week; Breastfeeding Awareness Week; National Brush Your Teeth Day; Sugar Awareness Week; Fizz Free February; National Toothache Day
- Linking in with national news articles
- Debunking false information
- Featured in local newsletters, NHS and Public Health Scotland publications, increasing reach to community networks.



PROJECT OUTCOMES

Participants and families reported that since using the project they were: more aware of the importance of eating healthily; have better understanding of the link between food/drink and are more aware of the importance of oral health care.

All training workshop participants reported that they have increased knowledge and appreciation of good oral health and nutrition and are more confident to support their community in issues around diet and oral health.



STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE

One participant, N, described her diet as “mostly oven or ready meals, high in refined carbs and limited fruit and veg”. From the very first session, she was enthusiastic about learning to cook and trying new foods. As she gained knowledge about nutrition and oral health – and picked up practical tips and recipes – she began making small, meaningful changes at home.

Each week, she returned eager to share her progress. Some of the changes she made included:

- Reduced intake of smoothies and fizzy drinks
- Checking labels for sugar content
- A “drastic” increase in vegetable consumption
- Switched to wholemeal carbohydrates
- Brushing her teeth more often
- Visiting the dentist after years of disconnection.

ANALYSIS OF PROGRESS

Our cooking groups successfully engaged participants from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. To ensure sessions were inclusive and culturally relevant, we provided choice for culturally relevant recipes—then adapted these with healthier ingredients and preparation methods. This culturally sensitive approach helped build trust and sparked strong engagement across diverse communities.

At the start of the project, oral health awareness was delivered one-to-one. However, in response to growing demand and to increase our impact, we transitioned to group sessions of 10 or more. This shift significantly boosted our reach and effectiveness.

As part of our advocacy work, we supported individuals in registering with a dentist through multiple channels: workshops, cooking groups, drop-ins at the LINKnet office, social media outreach, and collaboration with third sector partners.

Toward the end of the project, we ran a targeted outreach session at Pieries Hotel for asylum seekers. This not only improved their access to dental care but also connected them with wider LINKnet services, including employment support, English classes, and opportunities for social integration.

“I have learned so much. I don’t drink as many fizzy drinks and I add more vegetables to my cooking now. I’ve never been to the dentist for a long time. I’ve now managed to get an appointment at the dentist for my son and I. Thank you for your support”.

‘N’



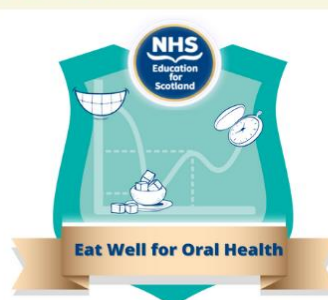
LEARNINGS

This project reinforced that collaboration isn’t just beneficial – it’s essential for delivering integrated, person-centred services. The partnership between Edinburgh Community Food, LINKnet Mentoring, NHS Lothian, and NHS Education for Scotland (NES) played a key role in bridging service gaps and reducing health inequalities. Our collaboration added value to each organisation, learning new skills and opening up further support.

Working closely with NHS Lothian’s Oral Health Service (OHS) highlighted the value of cross-sector knowledge exchange: the OHS dental team provided oral health training and signposting support to both charities. In return, they gained practical nutrition insights from Edinburgh Community Food and increased confidence in engaging with ethnically diverse communities, thanks to LINKnet’s expertise.

We normalised talking about oral health and healthy lifestyles, vaccinations and screening helping to reduce chronic illness

Developing the Eat Well for Oral Health Open Badges with NES demonstrated the power of co-design in creating accessible, engaging resources: these badges reached a wider audience through social media and community outreach.





Key Deliverables

The most lasting impact of the EWOH has been to confirm proof of concept, relating to both food and nutrition and to the effectiveness of third sector reach into key communities - achieved through community engagement, advocacy and outreach. This methodology is now available for replicating within vulnerable communities across Scotland.

The project has also delivered two key tangible resources to support the scale and spread, which will enable oral health improvements to continue to be implemented across various sectors and communities:

- an online toolkit which provides a complete guide to delivering a Eat Well for Oral Health cooking group. This is free to access and can be utilised by community groups and charities across the UK and beyond.
- a suite of 6 NHS Education for Scotland 'Open Badge' training modules, available on the 'Turas' learning platform. These are free to undertake and will benefit anyone with an interest in healthy eating and improving oral health in children and families - such as NHS workers, parents/teachers, community volunteers and more. The training modules will cover:
 - Early Childhood Decay and The Impact of Sugar
 - Introduction to Weaning
 - Fussy Eating
 - Reducing Inequalities
 - Eat Well Guide – pre-5s
 - Introduction to Breastfeeding

These resources can be accessed via the link in the 'Contacts and Resources' page of this report.



Conclusions and Legacy Actions

EWOH has been a 3 year proof of concept intended to showcase how the third sector is placed to engage with communities, families and individuals to influence knowledge about food and nutrition, oral health promoting behaviours and to have a lasting influence, empowerment and support within each community for overcoming recognised barriers.

EWOH is built firmly on - and has further developed - the learning from the Challenge Fund style of co-production across vulnerable communities, including the following approaches:

Ways of Communicating:

- Engaging with people and communities;
- Building dialogue through community access points and trusted anchors;

Boosting Practical Knowledge and Myth-Busting:

- Sharing knowledge around diet and tooth brushing;
- Influencing lifelong positive oral health behaviours.

Understanding Issues Affecting Communities and Addressing Barriers:

- Demystifying and reducing anxiety about going to the dentist;
- Removing barriers that prevent participation;

Offering Advocacy and Support:

- Listening and supporting people's overall wellbeing recognising the raft of challenges they are facing;
- Facilitating access to dentists for assessment and care.

As the project comes to the end of its grant period, the focus now shifts to how the learning and outputs of the project are used influence of other public and third sector organisations across Scotland, and to support wider public health policies.

For the future, the partnership charities will each build the products and approach into their ongoing initiatives, as part of business as usual, and where possible will encourage this approach in other localities. The successful partnership between Edinburgh Community Food and LINKnet Mentoring are looking at more opportunities to work together in the future.

The outputs from EWOH will support ongoing scale and spread across NHS Boards, through key stakeholders including local Oral Health Improvement teams, existing partnerships and new community-based developments.

At the same time, careful consideration is being given to optimal policy opportunities, including those which lean into third sector and community support mechanisms in some of our most vulnerable communities. In addition, food and nutrition interventions across the country are used as a fundamental pathway for optimising health (including oral health) and influencing ongoing developments in population health (e.g. via the Population Health Framework) and food policy (e.g. via the Good Food Nation Plan).



In summary, project partners will continuously build connections with relevant stakeholders to embed the learning of the project in to business as usual practices and policies, both in the dental sector and more widely.



Contacts

Eat Well for Oral Health

- Website: <https://www.edinburghcommunityfood.org.uk/eat-well-for-oral-health>
- Edinburgh Community Food Contact: jo.howie@edinburghcommunityfood.org.uk
- LINKNet Contact: admin@linknetmentoring.com
- NHS Lothian Oral Health Improvement Contact: fiona.rodger@nhs.scot
- Scottish Government Contact: NHSdentistry@gov.scot

Edinburgh Community Food

- Website: <https://www.edinburghcommunityfood.org.uk/>
- Contact: admin@edinburghcommunityfood.org.uk

LINKNet Mentoring

- Website: <https://www.linknetmentoring.com/>
- Contact: admin@linknetmentoring.com

Resources

- Eat Well for Oral Health – NHS Education for Scotland Digital Open Badge Training Modules: <https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/58339>
- Eat Well for Oral Health – Cooking Group Online Toolkit: <https://sway.cloud.microsoft/LfncwEuTboQ5EAqK?ref=Link&loc=play>
- Community Challenge Fund (2019-2022) - End of Fund Findings Report: <https://www.scottishdental.nhs.scot/community-challenge-fund-end-of-fund-findings-report/>
- Population Health Framework 2025-2035: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-population-health-framework/documents/>.
- Proposed National Good Food Nation Plan: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/proposed-national-good-food-nation-plan/pages/1/>
- Scottish Dental – Scotland's national website for NHS dental information <https://www.scottishdental.nhs.scot/>