Evaluation of the Community Food Initiatives Programme, 2022-2024

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Foreword

The Community Food Initiatives (CFI) is a programme funded by Safefood and managed by South East Cork Area Development Partnership (SECAD) CLG on behalf of Safefood.

Through a community development approach, the CFI programme aims to:

- Improve the eating habits of families in low-income areas

- Increase access to healthy and safe food in these communities

From 2022 to 2024, the programme funded 13 CFIs in low-income communities across the island of Ireland. This report summarises the evaluation of the 3-year programme and will inform the delivery of future CFI programmes.

Table of contents

Executive summary

Aim

This report aims to evaluate the Community Food Initiative (CFI) programme 2022 to 2024.

Method

The CFI programme was evaluated using information gathered from:

- Reports completed by the CFI organisations
- Feedback from CFI leaders, programme participants, steering group members, SECAD and Safefood

Key findings

- Safefood funded 13 organisations to deliver programmes from 2022 to 2024.
- Over 14,500 people took part in a CFI activity, including small projects and community events.
- The programme benefited those taking part by:
  - Improving their knowledge and skills about food and healthy eating
  - Boosting their confidence in cooking and food skills, including meal planning, shopping smartly, budgeting and food safety
  - Supporting participants by linking them to helpful programmes and services outside the CFI programme
  - Providing emotional and social benefits as participants could meet new people and learn new skills as part of a group, fostering a sense of community

- The programme helped the CFIs by enabling them to connect with people who were previously difficult to reach
- The programme was extensively promoted throughout the 3 years, including:
    - Presenting to key stakeholders in the food poverty sector and health professionals
    - Creating a booklet and two videos showcasing the work of the CFI organisations
    - One-to-one targeting, flyers, posters, social media posts, notices on local radio and community news bulletins

Recommendations

- Allow CFI organisations the flexibility to deliver projects and events in ways that best suit their communities.
- Place a greater emphasis on explaining each element of the programme and its benefit to all participating organisations.
- Allow CFI organisations to integrate their CFI work into existing steering groups that they have access to.
- Simplify application and reporting requirements and eliminate unnecessary duplication.
- Allow organisations to buy equipment for participants.
- Explore opportunities for CFI leaders to be trained as tutors in community cooking programmes such as Cook it! and Healthy Food Made Easy.
- Develop a simpler onboarding process, including a suitable onboarding process for leaders who join after the programme starts.
- Explain the CFI programme and address common misunderstandings about funding restrictions.
- Create additional opportunities for less experienced leaders to learn from more experienced leaders on delivering successful programmes.

1 Background

What is food poverty?

Food poverty is the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet because a person cannot afford, or access healthy food.

It is a complex issue that involves the lack of access to a healthy diet and the resulting negative effects on health. It can affect a person's physical, mental and social health, as well as their sense of wellbeing.

People with low incomes tend to eat less well. This can prevent them from getting enough nutrients, resulting in serious health issues such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Food poverty also makes it hard for people to join social activities involving food, which can affect a person's mental health and wellbeing.

Food poverty on the island of Ireland

In 2022, 9% of people in Ireland experienced food poverty, up slightly from 8.9% in 2021 (1). From 2022 to 2023, 6% of households in Northern Ireland showed signs of food poverty, an increase from 4% from 2021 to 2022 (2).

The Community Food Initiatives (CFI) programme

The CFI Programme is one way to address food poverty. CFI organisations work to improve access to healthy and safe food in the community through a community development approach.

Since 2010, Safefood has funded 5 programmes, each lasting 3 years.

- Demonstration Programme of Community Food Initiatives (2010–2012) – 7 projects
- CFI programme (2013–2015) – 10 projects
- CFI programme (2016–2018) – 13 projects
- CFI programme (2019–2021) – 14 projects
- CFI programme (2022–2024) – 13 projects

CFI aims

The CFI programme aims to identify and promote best practices under these 6 themes:

1. Cooking skills
2. Awareness and knowledge about healthy eating
3. Healthy shopping
4. Budgeting and food/meal planning skills
5. Preventing food wastage and promoting food safety and hygiene
6. Improving the availability and access to safe and healthy food in the community

CFI's requirements

Organisations that receive funding under the programme are required to complete a number of activities.

1. Form a steering group to help plan, design and deliver projects and events.
2. Deliver 2 to 3 small projects each year to bring people together regularly and help them to develop valuable skills and knowledge.
3. Hold 2 community events each year, to share the work of the CFI programme with the wider community.
4. Attend 2 networking and training events each year to present their programmes, share experiences, and receive training with other external organisations, focusing on best practices.

The amount of funding

In the 2022–2024 programme, projects were funded up to a maximum of €9,000, or the sterling equivalent, per organisation each year.

CFI at Home

Organisations that are not part of the CFI programme can apply for funding under the CFI at Home programme. This programme supports families in their own homes to develop their food and cooking skills. Projects are delivered online. Each year, up to 26 community organisations can receive funding. Each CFI at Home project received up to €1,500, or the sterling equivalent, per project.

Evaluation of the CFI programme 2022–2024

This document summarises the key findings from the evaluation of the CFI programme.

Programme objectives

The programme objectives were to:

- Fund 13 community-based food projects across the island of Ireland over 3 years (2022–2024)
- Fund up to 26 community organisations each year to deliver CFI at Home projects
- Provide technical support, group training and help with networking
- Promote best practices and proper governance when delivering community projects
- Encourage projects to consider long-term sustainability from the start of the programme
- Promote shared learning between CFI organisations on the island of Ireland

- Identify policy and best practice lessons and share them with key stakeholders

The CFI organisations

The 13 organisations involved in the CFI programme 2022–2024 were:

1. The ARC Healthy Living Centre, Co Fermanagh
2. Ballyhoura Development CLG, Co Cork / Limerick
3. Carlow County Development Partnership, Co Carlow
4. County Armagh Community Development (CACD), Co Armagh
5. County Kildare Leader Partnership, Co Kildare
6. County Sligo LEADER Partnership CLG, Co Sligo
7. Empower Local Development, Co Dublin
8. Galway City Partnership, Co Galway
9. Liffey Partnership, Co Dublin
10. Offaly Local Development Company, Co Offaly
11. The Old Library Trust Healthy Living Centre, Co Derry
12. ReachOut Healthy Living Centre, Co Antrim
13. South Kerry Development Partnership CLG, Co Kerry

The programme manager (SECAD)

Since 2016, SECAD has managed the CFI programmes at a local level. Safefood provides SECAD with funding each year, which SECAD then distributes to the various projects. SECAD communicates with both the CFI projects and Safefood regarding budget change requests.

2   Methodology

The CFI programme was evaluated using information gathered from several sources.

Reports completed by CFI organisations

Each CFI organisation submits 2 reports each year. The reports collect a range of information about the programme, including:

- The total number of steering group meetings held
- The total number of steering group member organisations
- The total number of individuals who engaged in CFI activities
- The total number of small projects and community events held
- The total number of organisations involved in community events
- The main learnings from the process
- The main challenges of the process

Feedback from the CFI leaders, programme participants, steering group members, SECAD and Safefood

Safefood engaged Ipsos B&A, a market research company, to gather feedback on the programme. The research consisted of 2 parts.

- Part 1 involved formative research conducted in May 2024 to help shape the programme for 2025–2028.
- Part 2 took place from October 2024 to February 2025 and evaluated the 2022–2024 programme.

Part 1 – Formative research

Planning for the next round of the CFI programme begins before the current programme ends. To help with the planning, Safefood with the help of Ipsos B&A, held 2 workshops to gather feedback and shape the 2025–2028 programme.

The first workshop included representatives from these key food poverty stakeholders:

- Health Service Executive, Ireland
- Department for Communities, Northern Ireland
- Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland
- Healthy Living Centre Alliance, Northern Ireland

The second workshop involved:

- CFI leaders from the 2022–2024 CFI programme
- Community food and nutrition workers

Further details about this research can be found in Appendix 1.

Part 2 – Evaluation

Ipsos B&A conducted interviews and focus groups to collect feedback on the 2022–2024 CFI programme. Interviews were held with:

- CFI leaders
- Programme participants
- Steering group members
- SECAD
- Safefood

CFI leaders, programme participants and steering group members were chosen from across the 13 organisations to ensure a wide range of opinions was gathered.

The following interviews were conducted:

- CFI leaders – 3 interviews (2 in Ireland and one in Northern Ireland)
- CFI at Home leaders – 2 interviews (one in Ireland and one in Northern Ireland)
- Programme participants – 2 group discussions (one in Ireland and one in Northern Ireland)

- Steering group members – 2 interviews (one in Ireland and one in Northern Ireland)
- SECAD – one interview with the programme manager
- Safefood – one interview with 2 Safefood representatives responsible for managing the programme

Research objectives

The objectives of this research included:

CFI and CFI at Home leaders

- To understand their experiences in several areas including:
  - The application process
  - How they engaged, managed and developed the local CFI steering groups
  - How they devised and delivered projects
- To examine their experience in terms of:
  - What worked well
  - Key challenges
  - How sustainable the programme is
  - Areas for improvement
- To explore their satisfaction with:
  - Safefood and SECAD's support
  - The administrative structures that were in place
  - The resources provided to support the programme
- To examine areas for further exploration and shared learning

Programme participants

- To find out how satisfied they were with the programme
- To examine the impact that the programme has made on them and their families in terms of:
  - Buying food
  - Preparing food
  - Their eating habits

- Their knowledge, understanding and outlook towards food and healthy eating
- Changes to their:
  - Food choices and behaviours
  - Physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Areas for improving future initiatives and projects

Steering group members
- To assess their view of the programme
- To examine their involvement in the programme and the benefits of their participation
- To find out how the programme can be improved for everyone taking part

SECAD – programme manager
- To assess how satisfied they were with:
  - How the programme ran
  - The support they received from Safefood
- To assess what worked well and identify areas for improvement

Safefood
- To assess how satisfied they were with the programme management in terms of:
  - Outcomes
  - Value for money
- To identify areas where the programme:
  - Worked well
  - Did not work well
  - Can be improved for future programmes

3 Results

The CFIs work

The main types of activities that CFIs engaged in with the public included:

1. **Cooking courses and demonstrations**

   These sessions covered food preparation, cooking skills, food safety, and hygiene.

2. **Healthy eating initiatives**

   These initiatives provided guidance on various topics, including dietary guidelines, food labelling, nutrition for children, and healthy eating for sports and play.

3. **Community cooking and nutrition programmes**

   These included Healthy Food Made Easy and Cook It!.

4. **Budgeting advice**

   CFIs delivered food budgeting programmes such as 'Food Values', offering advice for managing food expenses.

5. **Practical guidance**

   CFIs helped with meal planning, preventing food waste, and smart food shopping.

The total number of people that took part in a CFI activity

Over the 3-year programme, more than 14,500 people took part in a CFI activity. The number of people taking part in small projects, community events and CFI at Home projects were:

- 982 people took part in small projects (Figure 1).

- 11,717 people took part in a community event (Figure 2).

- 1,956 people took part in a CFI at Home project (Figure 3).

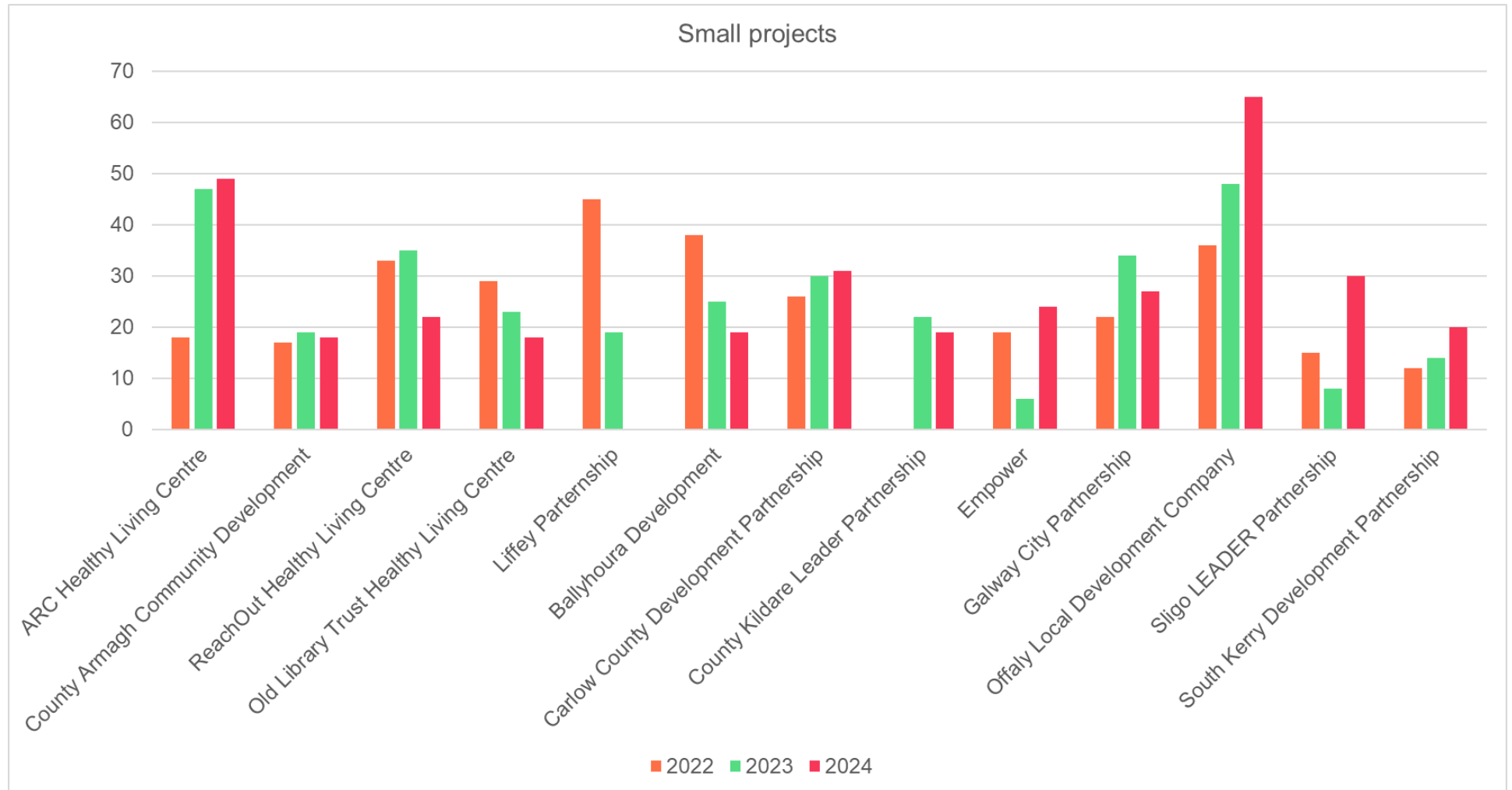**Figure 1: Number of people participating in small projects in 2022, 2023 and 2024**

Small projects
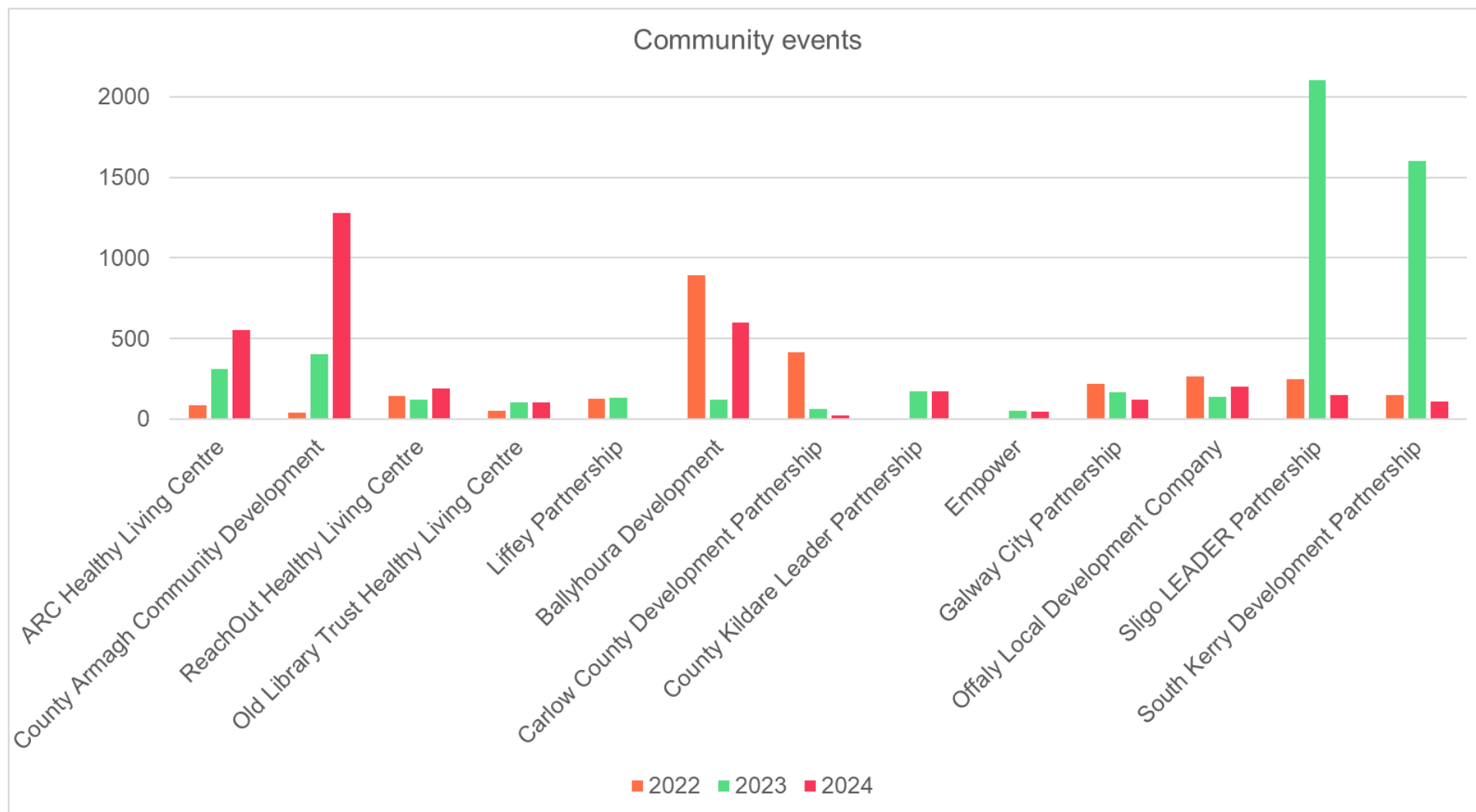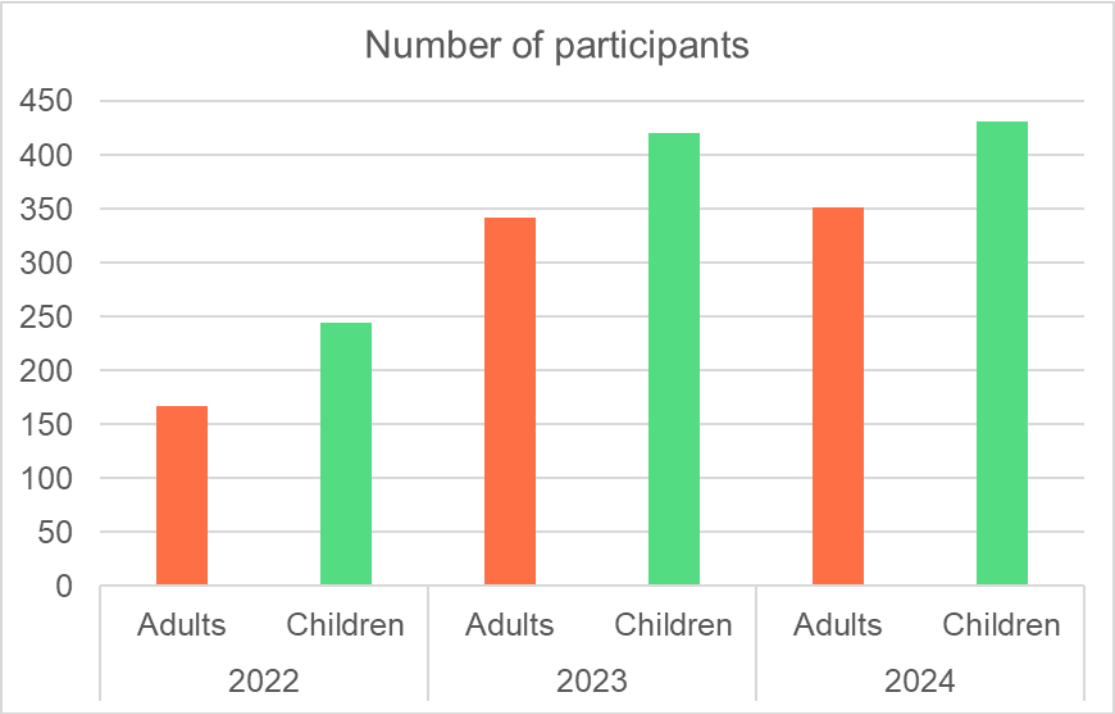
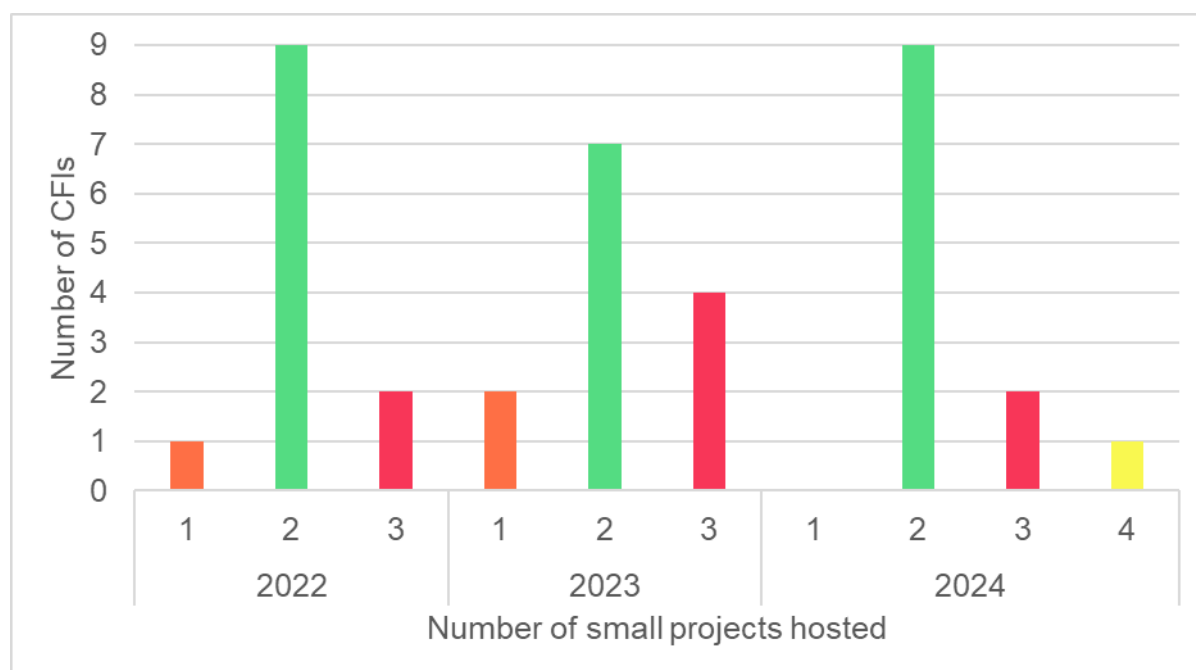Figure 2: Number of people attending community events in 2022, 2023 and 2024

Small projects

The programme delivered 79 small projects over the 3 years, reaching 982 people.

Small project targets

Each year the CFIs must deliver at least 2 small projects. The breakdown of the number of small projects hosted by each CFI each year can be found in Figure 4.

16

2022

In 2022, 2 CFI organisations did not meet the target. The reasons for this included staff changes during the year. One CFI organisation did not deliver any activities in 2022.

2023

In 2023, 2 CFI organisations did not meet the target, hosting only one small project.

- One CFI organisation could not find a tutor to deliver the second project.
- One had staffing changes and could not deliver the second project.

2024

In 2024, one CFI organisation did not deliver any small projects due to staffing vacancies and the need to prioritise other areas of work.

How CFIs delivered their small projects

In-person

Most CFIs chose to deliver their small projects in person.

Online

In 2022, 4 projects were delivered online because:

- Although COVID-19 restrictions had ended, many venues were still unavailable.
- The target audience for some projects was referred from services addressing social isolation and anxiety. It was felt that an online programme would be more welcoming and accessible for this audience.

Hybrid

Seven hybrid projects were delivered, using a combination of in-person and online delivery.

CFI organisations with a large geographical reach often used this approach, as it removed barriers to participation, such as transport and childcare issues.

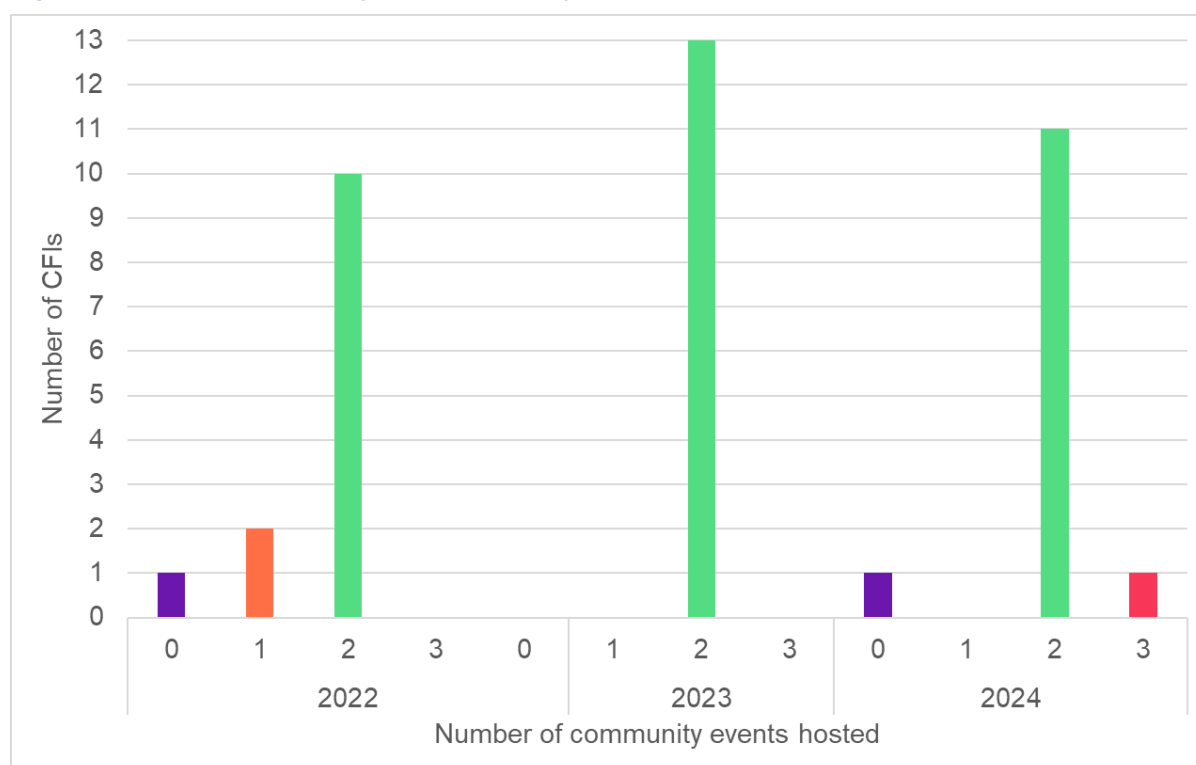## Community events

In total, 74 community events were held, reaching 11,717 people.

Some CFI organisations integrated their community events into existing events or festivals, resulting in a larger number of people attending.

CFI targets

Each CFI should deliver 2 community events each year. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of the number of community events hosted by each CFI from 2022 to 2024.

Figure 5: Number of community events hosted by the CFIs in 2022, 2023 and 2024

2022

In 2022, 3 CFIs did not meet the target.

- One organisation could not deliver any community events because of staff changes during the year.
- 2 organisations delivered one event
  - One organisation was unable to deliver an event due to staff changes.
  - One organisations organised an event, advertised it through social media and locally with posters, but no-one attended.

2023

All organisations met their target in 2023.

2024

In 2024, one organisation did not deliver any activities because of staffing vacancies and the need to prioritise other areas of work.

How CFIs delivered their community events

In-person

Community events are delivered in person.

Planning activities to coordinate with existing events

Often, organisations align their events with existing events. Organisations that do this can:

- Reach more people by connecting with an already established audience
- Reduce the costs and workload associated with organising an event

Arranging events around public holidays

Other organisations scheduled their events to coincide with holidays such as Halloween or Christmas. This allowed them to use seasonal themes to attract an audience.

Livestreaming events

One organisation livestreamed a cooking demonstration at their community event, which was very successful.

Working with other organisations

CFIs worked with other organisations to deliver their community events.

More than 300 organisations supported the CFI community events throughout the 3 years of the programme. They participated in the events as exhibitors and/or speakers. A sample of the organisations that took part:

- The Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland had a stand at a community event, providing resources including leaflets on healthy eating.
- MABS, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, provided budgeting advice at an event.
- A local Grow It Yourself (GIY) group provided locally grown fruit and vegetables, information on growing your own food and interactive activities for children.
- Croi Galway provided free blood-pressure checks and lifestyle advice.
- Sports groups provided coaches for fitness activities.

CFI at Home

Over the 3 years, 52 CFI at Home projects were delivered. See Appendix 2 for a list of the organisations that delivered CFI at Home.

861 adults and 1,095 children took part in CFI at Home.

How CFI at Home was delivered

Online

Most projects were delivered online to people in their homes. Participants received ingredients and followed along with the online cooking demonstrations.

In-person

If participants lived in a family hub, other family accommodation centre or a migrant centre, the project was delivered in person. This allowed these vulnerable groups to participate in the project.

Steering groups

CFI organisations are required to form a local steering group. Each steering group supports the CFI organisations to design and deliver their activities.

The steering group's role is to:

- Represent the wider interest of the community

- Provide resources such as venues and tutors

- Address logistical details such as transport

- Promote best practices under the CFI themes

- Promote long-term sustainability for similar activities into the future

Steering group membership

Steering group membership covers a range of organisations and is individual to each area. Common membership included:

- Public health bodies
- Local authorities
- Money and budgeting services

- Family services
- Youth services

Steering group membership targets

Each CFI organisation should have a minimum of 8 bodies involved in their local steering group.

2022

In 2022, 5 organisations did not meet the target. The reasons for this included:

- People were still reassigned to other positions due to COVID-19.
- Difficulty getting organisations to commit to meetings.

2023

In 2023, 8 organisations failed to meet the target. The reasons for this included:

- Tutors leaving, resulting in the CFI leaders facilitating courses. This reduced the time they had to spend on other duties such as organising steering group meetings.
- Another organisation had a change of staff and was unable to find the steering group records.

2024

In 2024, 7 organisations did not reach the target. The reasons for this included:

- Difficulty getting organisations to commit to meetings.
- People changing roles and no longer being able to attend meetings.

Steering group meeting targets

Each organisation must hold a minimum of 4 steering group meetings each year.

2022

In 2022, 7 organisations did not meet the target.

- One organisation did not deliver any activities in 2022 and did not arrange a steering group meeting.

- Another organisation did not have a CFI leader in place until mid-year and was therefore unable to host the required number of meetings in the time available.

2023

In 2023, one organisation did not hold the minimum of 4 meetings.

This organisation lost tutors and had to facilitate small projects themselves, reducing the time available to organise other activities and arrange steering group meetings.

2024

In 2024, 4 organisations did not meet the requirement. Reasons for this included difficulty in finding a time that suited all members.

Where organisations could not hold steering group meetings, they kept members involved by email and phone calls.

The steering groups' contributions

The CFI organisations reported both financial and non-financial contributions from steering groups members. Some of the contributions provided by steering group members were:

- Prizes for a community event competition

- Free tutoring

- Small kitchen equipment, such as slow cookers for participants

- Tutor training in community cooking programmes such as Cook it!

- Free venues

The impact on participants

Participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experience, reporting changes in food skills and behaviours, as well as improvements in their overall health.

- **Confidence to cook from scratch**
  The programme gave participants the opportunity to learn and helped them feel more confident cooking meals from scratch.

- **Trying out new recipes**
  Participants reported adding new recipes to their regular meals at home and adapting existing recipes to make healthier choices.

- **Becoming more aware of food waste**
  Some participants reported a greater awareness of the level of food waste in their home after participating in a CFI activity. They learned to use ingredients in different meals to prevent waste and started freezing leftovers.

"I was very wasteful with food. I'd always cook extra in case somebody else turned up in the middle of dinner or something. And now I don't. I found that the brown food bin used to be full going out, but now there's nothing in it because I'm finding something else to do with it or freezing it. If I'd extra potatoes, I make something different with it, before it would just be thrown out."

CFI participant

- **Better shopping behaviours**

Participants improved their meal planning skills and learned how to shop more efficiently.

- **Social benefits**

  The programme boosted participants' social and emotional wellbeing. Participants said they enjoyed meeting new people and felt a sense of community. Food brought people from different backgrounds together, allowing them to share their experiences.

"Really in my mind, it was the day, and it was the time that suited me, because I'd be home for the kids for school, and it was just to get out and have adult conversation with not family. And the first day, I was a bit nervous, because I would be like a people person, but it would take me time. But I have to say, I really looked forward to every week after that. It was like a group of people that I knew forever." CFI participant

- **Sharing knowledge with children**

  Participants spoke about sharing the knowledge and skills gained with their children. Some children took part in projects with their caregivers. Others benefited from information being shared in the home after a course.

- **Trusting the advice of nutrition experts**

  Participants valued advice from qualified nutrition experts such as registered dietitians and nutritionists. They recognised the value of this over unverified information from social media.

Local delivery and management by CFI leaders and steering groups

Themes of the CFI

CFI leaders and steering group members agreed that cooking skills were the main focus across all CFI activities. Respondents believed this theme was important for attracting participants.

Projects generally took the form of a cook-along or a cooking demonstration. Some respondents felt a cooking demonstration was more accessible than a cook-along, which could feel intimidating for some participants.

Cooking demonstrations also provided more flexibility when space was limited.

> "I learned more by watching it really because I wouldn't be confident enough to try something new. I think for me, it would be very disheartening if it didn't come out right the first time." CFI participant

Most activities were centred on cooking skills, but the other 5 themes of the CFI programme were included throughout the sessions. Respondents highlighted the need to prioritise the themes based on local needs.

> "We put on a 'Healthy Food Made Easy' programme, kind of tailoring the programme to focus on what they get in their food parcels and how they can build that into a nutritious meal. Because, from engaging with the staff there, many people had low literacy and minimal

cooking skills and facilities at home,
so they were collecting their parcels
but not really knowing what to do
with the stuff." CFI leader

Barriers to participation

Several factors led to people's inability to participate, including:

- Poor reading skills
- A lack of confidence
- A lack of basic cooking skills

It was suggested that an initial cooking demonstration, followed by a cook-along programme, could help overcome some of these barriers.

"I've been the culinary instructor in
the city. I know people have never
even, for example, used a knife or
chopped. And you've different levels
of skill in a group, and you have to
be very careful as an instructor. So
this way it was kind of, we weren't
going to fall into any of those traps,
because everyone was sitting down
just listening, and you didn't have to
open your mouth for two hours if you
didn't want to." CFI leader

Overview of small projects

Small projects mainly focused on developing cooking and food skills, and they were generally regarded as having a positive impact.

Successes

Leaders identified several benefits in delivering small projects, including:

- **Connecting with hard-to-reach audiences**
  These projects helped to connect migrant families with their local communities. In addition, online options made it easier for families with transport difficulties to take part.

- **Raising awareness of other services available**
  Food served as an effective way to engage participants. Organisations could use this opportunity to let participants know about other initiatives they offered, leading some participants to sign up for different programmes.

- **Building social connections and a sense of community**
  In-person gatherings provided social benefits, fostering connections and a sense of community among participants.

> "You can't really underestimate what [this] could mean to someone to even just turn up at a group and have that social connection and have something to go to each week for a few weeks. It could be a stepping stone that could mean a lot to them ultimately." CFI leader

Overview of community events

Community events received mixed feedback from CFI leaders and steering group members. Experienced CFI leaders found it easier to organise successful events than those with less experience.

Successful events had a few key features:

- **Seasonal themes**

  Events that were seasonally themed worked well. Halloween, mid-term school holidays and summer events were well attended.

- **Joining with existing events**

  Community events that joined in with established events such as a local festival had good engagement.

Challenges

Less experienced CFI leaders expressed a desire for more guidance from experienced CFI leaders on how to run successful events.

Overview of steering groups

CFI leaders had different views on how effective steering groups were. Some leaders found their steering group essential to the success of the programme.

Successes

Steering groups that worked well:

- Helped organisations reach their target audience
- Provided necessary support to deliver the programme
- Helped tackle any challenges that arose

"I think it's because the partners that are there have different resources, but none of us have everything. So [the Leader], comes to me with CFI funding, but she doesn't have the

families. I have the families, the ETB has the venue, and it has the tutors. There have been times that I've got transport for some families because they've been vulnerable, and I got [the travel contact] from another partner. So, I just find that you've people around the table and everyone has a bit of something to bring, but nobody has to do it all."
Steering group member

Challenges

Some CFI leaders had challenges in convening a steering group and organising meetings. Some of the reasons for this were:

- Meeting fatigue made it difficult to motivate and organise the group.
- Working in a rural area made it difficult to bring people together. This increased the administrative workload for the CFI leader, making it difficult to reach the group's requirements.

Resources

There was a high level of satisfaction with the resources provide by Safefood to support the programme.

CFI leaders appreciated the variety of resources available for participants, such as:

- Recipe books
- Leaflets on healthy eating and food safety
- Plates and cups for measuring food portions
- Posters to support their learning

The Safefood website also offered useful digital resources such as food-skills videos.

CFI leaders said participants preferred physical resources to digital resources.

Overview of programme management

The majority of CFIs were satisfied with the management of the programme.

CFI leaders noted the valuable support provided by SECAD and spoke highly of the guidance offered in response to queries.

Some CFI leaders felt:

- There was too much paperwork compared to similar funding from other sources
- The reporting process was too demanding

In addition, some leaders joined midway through the programme or did not finish the application process, which may have caused confusion about how the programme worked.

Funding

Some CFI organisations felt:

- Restricted in how they could use the funds
- A key issue was being unable to buy equipment for participants
  - Not having equipment made it harder for some people to join projects
  - Providing equipment could lead to lasting changes in families' behaviours

The increase in funding from other sources over the 3-year programme was noted. In response to a rise in migrants, organisations had access to additional funding to support these groups.

While the increased funding from other sources was welcome, it did bring challenges, with some CFI leaders feeling the strain of trying to deliver multiple programmes under different funding streams.

However, this additional funding was not reliable, and CFI funding was seen as essential.

Promotion of the CFI programme

The CFI programme was presented to a wide range of stakeholders including:

- Nutrition professionals
- Health professionals
- Community food and nutrition workers
- Students studying nutrition and dietetics

It covered learnings, challenges and experiences of the CFI organisations.

The promotional materials produced included:

- A booklet
  The booklet – published in March 2025 – showcased the work of the CFI programme. It shows examples of community events and small projects from each CFI. The booklet will be a resource for future CFI leaders and other community organisations that run food and healthy eating projects.

  [Community Food Initiatives 2022-2024. Case studies of projects and events](#)

- Videos
  Safefood created two promotional videos.

  The first video features a small project delivered by Galway City Partnership.

[Supporting Galway communities to make healthy food choices with Safefood funding](#)

The second video features a community event delivered by ReachOut Healthy Living Centre in Belfast.

[Safefood funding supports healthy eating in Belfast communities](#)

In addition, the organisations themselves carried out a range of promotional activities during the 3 years, including:

- One-to-one targeting
- Word of mouth
- Flyers and posters
- Social media posts
- Notices on local radio and community news

4 Discussion

Safefood successfully funded 13 community-based organisations across the island of Ireland to deliver projects from 2022 to 2024. SECAD managed the programme and supported the CFI leaders and organisations.

The programme reached over 14,500 people and taught them about food and healthy eating. The participants gained confidence in cooking and learned about meal planning, shopping, budgeting and food safety.

The programme helped organisations connect with hard-to-reach audiences and offer additional support to participants. It linked them to useful programmes and services beyond the CFI programme.

Participants gained social and emotional benefits by meeting new people and learning new skills in a group setting, which created a sense of community.

Safefood provided valuable resources, including books, leaflets, plates and cups that demonstrated appropriate portion sizes, and posters. Participants preferred physical resources over digital resources.

The CFI programme was widely promoted over its 3 years, including:

- Presentations to key food poverty stakeholders and health professionals
- Producing a booklet and two videos highlighting the CFIs' work
- One-on-one targeting, distributing flyers and posters, posting on social media, and sharing notices on local radio and community news

Key learnings

The programme evaluation highlighted some challenges and areas for improvement.

As formative research took place before the evaluation, many challenges have already been addressed for the 2025–2028 programme. Where this is the case, we have included the action taken below.

1. Funding issues

CFI leaders and steering group members noted that many households do not have basic cooking equipment. The 2022–2024 programme did not allow funds to be used to buy equipment for households.

Recommendation: Allow CFI organisations to buy equipment for participants.

Action taken: CFI organisations can now use the project budget to buy small items of kitchen equipment when the lack of it prevents people from participating.

2. Programme structure

Some CFI leaders experienced less success with community events. Most participants commented on the positive impact of the small projects. There was little mention of the community events.

Recommendations:

- Allow flexibility in the delivery of projects and events. Let organisations decide which approach will best meet the needs of their community.
- Clearly explain each part of the programme and how it benefits all participating organisations.

Actions taken:

- CFI organisations have flexibility in how many small projects they must deliver, which allows them to make the best use of their local resources.

- The requirement to deliver 2 community events each year has been changed to one dissemination activity. The purpose of this activity is to share the work of the CFI with a wider audience. This activity can be a community event or another activity that meets the organisation's needs.

3. Steering groups

Some CFI leaders and steering group members found the steering group vital for the programme's success. However, others struggled to see the benefit, and felt it added more administrative work.

Recommendation: Allow the CFI to integrate into existing steering groups that organisations have access to.

Actions taken:

- CFI organisations can integrate the CFI as a standing item on the agenda of an existing steering group.

- If a CFI organisation does not have access to an existing steering group, they must form one.

- The number of required organisations has been reduced from 8 to 4.

4. Administration and reporting

CFI leaders shared some frustrations about the administrative tasks.

Recommendation: Simplify the reporting requirements and eliminate unnecessary duplication.

Action taken: The application and reporting process has been reviewed and simplified. Where possible, technology is being used to reduce the administrative burden.

5. Building capacity for nutrition education programmes

Some CFIs struggled to find qualified tutors and nutrition experts to deliver programmes.

Recommendation: Look for more opportunities for CFI leaders to be trained as tutors in community cooking programmes such as Cook it! and Healthy Food Made Easy.

6. Communication and onboarding

It appears that some of the challenges highlighted as part of the evaluation are a result of a misunderstanding of the programme requirements.

Recommendations:

- Develop a streamlined onboarding process. This will help people to understand how the CFI programme works and clear up any confusion about funding limitations.
- If a CFI leader is introduced midway through the programme, there should be a specific onboarding process in place for them.

7. Help leaders network and share learnings

Some CFI leaders want to learn from more experienced leaders on delivering successful programmes.

Recommendations:

- Create better ways for CFI leaders to connect, share experiences and discuss best practices.

- Take into account the training needs of CFI leaders when organising events.

- Build a collection of successful project templates and resources for leaders to adapt and use.

5 References

1.   Department of Social Protection. Minister of State Joe O'Brien publishes the Food Poverty Action Plan [Website]. 2024 [Available from: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/30fd9-minister-of-state-joe-obrien-publishes-the-food-poverty-action-plan/.

2.   Department of Health. Health Survey Northern Ireland 2023/24. 2024. [Available from: https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-survey-northern-ireland-first-results-202324]

6 Appendix 1

Formative research with food poverty stakeholders and community food workers

Planning for the next round of the CFI Programme begins before the current programme ends. Safefood held two workshops to gather feedback and inform the design of the next programme. These workshops took place in May 2024.

Learnings from both workshops were combined with learnings from previous evaluations of the CFI programmes. This created the proposal for the 2025–2028 programme.

Methodology

Ipsos B&A held two workshops. The first was held with key food poverty stakeholders and the second with community workers.

The key food poverty stakeholders included representatives from:

- Health Service Executive, Ireland
- Department for Communities, Northern Ireland
- Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland
- Healthy Living Centre Alliance, Northern Ireland

The community workers included:

- CFI leaders from the 2022–2024 CFI programme
- Community food and nutrition workers

The sessions guided attendees through key elements of the programme. It also explored what was working well, and areas for improvement. The areas covered included:

- Target audience for the programme

- Themes covered during projects and events
- How the programme is delivered
- What the programme delivers
- Which organisations can apply
- How the programme is evaluated

Results

The target audience

The target audience was families with children up to the age of 12 years. Attendees were asked if this audience was still relevant or if it should be changed.

Attendees highlighted the scope to expand the target audience to be more inclusive and based on levels of social and economic needs.

"I think a broader focus is needed...It's tackling the health inequalities is key. Especially during this cost-of-living crisis and the fact that food prices are so high" - Food poverty stakeholder

It was noted that recruiting parents came with its own challenges. Parents are often overstretched and unable to participate. Grandparents and other caregivers were noted as potential target audiences.

Discussions showed there is still a need to support families with children under the age of 12 but that there is scope to widen the audience to other vulnerable groups.

The themes covered during projects and events

- All the themes covered by the CFI programme continue to be relevant. However, it was clear that some were more important than others.
- Cooking skills emerged as a central theme.

Other themes, such as meal planning and budgeting, were interconnected and often covered as part of the same project. The theme of 'Improving availability and access to safe and healthy food' was identified as crucial in light of the cost-of-living crisis.

- Creative solutions were discussed, such as having mobile fruit and vegetable markets.
- The needs of people living in rural communities became apparent, as they often have limited access to supermarkets and transport.

How the programme is delivered

People preferred a mix of in-person and online activities. While most attendees noticed a shift back to mainly in-person events, some organisations continued to provide online options.

Participants wanted more flexibility in how many sessions they could deliver and the duration of these session. It was felt that more sessions would have a bigger impact on participants.

What the programme delivers

Small projects

Participants noted how valuable small projects can be. They suggested maximising their effectiveness by offering 'wraparound' support where possible. Creating links between services, with the participants at the centre, allowed for opportunities for better health outcomes.

Community events

Community events were considered less effective. People found that joining existing events led to better engagement. This approach also saved money, which could then be used for other important activities.

Steering groups

Opinions varied on the effectiveness of steering groups. Some participants saw their benefit in the connections and collaboration within these groups. However,

others questioned their impact and mentioned the extra paperwork and meetings required.

It was suggested that organisations explain how they plan to set up a steering group when they apply. This would help them think about using their current structures or creating new groups based on what they think would work best.

Budget

Workshop attendees suggested that the budget for small projects and events should be more flexible. They were also frustrated that they could not use the budget to buy equipment for project participants.

Who can apply

There was a desire to encourage a wider range of organisations to apply for CFI funding. Many attendees thought the current processes were too complicated and required too much paperwork, which discouraged organisations from applying for the programme. Attendees suggested making the application and reporting processes simpler.

Evaluation

Attendees highlighted the importance of simplifying the process by reducing the number of reports and focusing more on real results. They discussed different tools used to measure similar programmes.

Attendees agreed that it was important to consider corporate governance reporting alongside the measurement of results. Considering these two requirements would help to choose a suitable evaluation model.

Recommendations

The target audience

Expand the target audience whilst acknowledging that the current audience is still relevant.

Themes covered during projects and events

- The 6 themes covered by the programme continue to be relevant.
- A minimum of one small project should focus on the theme 'Improving availability and access to safe and healthy food'.

How the programme is delivered

- The way the programme is delivered should depend on the local community's needs. Let organisations choose whether to run their programmes in-person, online, or a mix of both.
- Be flexible in the number of small projects and community events delivered.
- Consider allowing organisations to buy equipment for participants from programme funds.
- Review whether a new steering group needs to be set up to support the programme or can be integrated into existing steering groups/advisory structures.

What the programme delivers

Small projects

- Consider offering extra (wraparound) support where possible.
- Create links with external services to provide additional opportunities to learn.

Community events

- Encourage and support organisations to join other events to increase engagement.

Steering groups

When organisations apply, ask them how they plan to set up a steering group.

Who can apply

- Support a wider range of organisations to apply for the programme.
- Streamline the application and reporting process.

Evaluation

- Agree on the key performance indicators to be measured and choose the best way to evaluate them.
- Streamline the reporting process and remove duplication.
- Consider technological solutions to ease the process.

7 Appendix 2

CFI at Home projects

CFI at Home funding delivered 11 projects in 2022.

- Ballyboughal Boxing Club, Dublin
- Co Wicklow Partnership, Wicklow
- Curragh Family Resource Centre (FRC), Kildare
- Dublin North West Partnership, Dublin
- Dublin South City Partnership (Project 1), Dublin
- Dublin South City Partnership (Project 2), Dublin
- Focus FRC, Cavan
- Lus Na Gréine FRC, Longford
- Men's Shed Carn, Donegal
- Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum, Derry
- Top of the Rock Healthy Living Centre, Antrim

CFI at Home funding delivered 19 projects in 2023.

- Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum, Derry
- CAP Larne, Antrim
- Crisis Café, Newry
- Marion Centre of Excellence, Antrim
- Athlone Family Resource Centre, Westmeath
- Ballyboughal Boxing Club – Project 1, Dublin
- Ballyboughal Boxing Club – Project 2, Dublin
- Castlemaine Family Resource Centre, Kerry
- Cloyne Diocesan Youth Services YWI (CDYS), Cork
- Co Wicklow Partnership, Wicklow
- Curragh Family Resource Centre, Kildare
- Hollymount-Carramore GAA Healthy Club, Mayo

- Kilkenny Leader Partnership, Kilkenny
- North Leitrim Women's Centre, Leitrim
- Pobail Le Chéile CDP, Donegal
- Rather Gather in collaboration with Nutri.arrt, Dublin
- Rosemount FRC, Dublin
- Sacred Heart Family Resource Centre, Waterford
- Tuath Housing, Dublin

CFI at Home funding delivered 22 projects in 2024.

- Bogside & Brandywell Initiative, Derry
- Crisis Cafe CIC, Newry
- Marion Centre of Excellence – Project 1, Antrim
- Marion Centre of Excellence – Project 2, Antrim
- Athlone FRC, Westmeath
- Ballyboughal Boxing Club – Project 1, Dublin
- Ballyboughal Boxing Club – Project 2, Dublin
- Cairdeas Kilmovee Family Resource Centre, Mayo
- CDYS, Cork
- County Wicklow Partnership, Wicklow
- Curragh Family Resource Centre, Kildare
- Ferns Diocesan Youth Service (FDYS) – Project 1, Wexford
- Ferns Diocesan Youth Service (FDYS) – Project 2, Wexford
- Gaggin Community Centre, Cork
- Knockanrawley Resource Centre, Tipperary
- Mayo North East Leader, Mayo
- North Leitrim Women's Centre, Leitrim
- Pobail Le Chéile CDP, Donegal
- Rather Gather, Dublin
- Respond Clontarf, Dublin
- Respond High Park, Dublin
- Sacred Heart Family Resource Centre, Waterford