This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in *Voluntary Sector Review*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version of 'Serving the community: the sustainability of lunch clubs in North East Wales and West Cheshire', VSR Vol 5 (3) 381-390, is available online at:

<https://doi.org/10.1332/204080514X14042918502677>

**Practice paper**

*Serving the community: the sustainability of lunch clubs in North East Wales and**West Cheshire; Voluntary Sector Review Vol 5 (3); p381-390, November 2014*

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**Abstract**

Support for community dwelling older people is frequently provided by the voluntary sector through small community groups, but little is known about their sustainability. This research in North East Wales and West Cheshire focuses on lunch clubs and explores the factors that affect their sustainability, from the perspective of the coordinators. The paper aims to share these experiences with voluntary organisations, commissioners, planners and policy makers who support small community groups within their provider network.

https://r3.res.outlook.com/owa/14.16.239.0/themes/resources/clear1x1.gifhttps://r3.res.outlook.com/owa/14.16.239.0/themes/resources/clear1x1.gif**Introduction**

A small community group can be defined as *‘more than two people coming together on a regular basis to do activities in and around (public and third sector) space for not–for–profit purpose’ (Soteri-Proctor 2011:6).* Small community groups are generally organised, institutionally separate from government, non-profit making, and self-governing (Anheier 2000). Models of delivery are diverse and emerge from the definition of goals, from an understanding of the needs of the target group and the provider, from establishing partnerships, and from gaining access to available resources (Erdelyan and Young, 2009).

Lunch clubs are small community groups run by volunteers, providing regular opportunities for older people to enjoy activity and companionship, and a hot meal at a price affordable for the membership. Although the concept of the ‘lunch club’ is not new, the perceived value of the resource is reflected in the diverse models of service delivery that are now emerging in different settings. In a fairly recent Scottish study, six models of lunch club were identified based on the organisation type and the membership:

* local authority
* voluntary sector
* community run
* community cafes
* private sector
* communities of interest (Community Food and Health (Scotland), 2011)

Lunch cubs are also diverse in the partnerships that they forge to deliver the service, the scope and reach of their activities, and their financial strategies and funding. They are popular with older people, and can facilitate independence while having a positive impact on nutritional status (Burke et al, 2011).

The close social and spatial proximity of lunch clubs to the communities they serve makes them a valuable resource, but their sustainability can be fragile (McCabe et al, 2010). This paper offers the findings from a research study funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation (Main Fund), which set out to gain a better understanding of sustainability from the perspective of lunch club coordinators.

**The sustainability of small community groups**

Research conducted with local food projects has identified that factors influencing sustainability include:

* funding
* community involvement
* professional support
* the ability to reconcile different agendas
* shared ownership
* credibility
* the presence of dynamic workers
* the project’s capacity to respond to stakeholder needs (McGlone et al, 1999)

For our research, we considered sustainability in the context of the operation of a small community group, as well as the ability to achieve financial sustainability. Hauser et al (2008:1) describe not-for-profit groups as *‘living, breathing entities that need intentional care and feeding’,* whose operational sustainability depends on their ability to *‘think long term as well as manage day to day operations’.* The National Council for Voluntary Organisations defines a financially sustainable organisation of any size as *‘one that can consistently support and deliver its mission, making the most of changing markets and funding environments’* (NCVO,2009:1).

**Geographical area**

Our research involved lunch clubs in North East Wales (Wrexham and Flintshire) and West Cheshire in the North of England. This geographical context provided the potential to identify and include a range of delivery models, to study sustainability in different settings and to share learning with stakeholders in England and Wales.

**Methods and Approach**

We carried out a mapping exercise to identify lunch clubs in North East Wales and West Cheshire and then we conducted a survey to obtain information about their operation and funding. The survey was distributed to 67 lunch clubs and 28 responded. We identified 10 different models of delivery and selected lunch clubs that were representative of these. The 10 lunch clubs selected represented different settings, methods of meal provision, scope of activities and funding mechanisms, which were the main differentiating factors in service delivery. They also represented a cross-section of different locations, and levels of maturity (time in operation) (see Table 1 on p 11).

The ‘Sustainable Sun Tool’ – a generic self-assessment tool developed by the NCVO in 2009 to support voluntary and community organisations to achieve sustainability, provided a useful framework to underpin the research, in identifying factors that are important in securing operational and financial sustainability for community groups:

* organizational identity, values and purpose
* recruitment, retention and development of a delivery team
* engagement in marketing and promotion
* evaluation of activities
* engagement in forward planning
* expansion and development
* prudent financial management, the security of existing funding streams and an ability to attract external funding

We conducted semi structured face to face interviews with the 10 lunch club coordinators, asking them to comment on these factors. Drawing on their experience, they also contributed their own perspectives on the sustainability of their clubs.

**Findings from the interviews with the ten lunch club coordinators**

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| **Box 1 : Supporting mechanisms for sustainability**   * having a strong sense of identity and values within the club * the club becoming a catalyst for wider social connections * support from volunteers * prudent financial management * a welcoming atmosphere for members and volunteers |

All 10 lunch clubs had a strong sense of identity, values and purpose, perceiving their main role as providing opportunities for older people to enjoy a nutritionally balanced hot meal and to stay active, and opportunities to meet their emotional need for companionship, friendship and support. Many coordinators recognised that their lunch club was acting as a catalyst for wider social connections and some had developed into information hubs, and into *‘more than just a social club’*. Coordinators felt a sense of ownership of their club, especially those who had seen the lunch club develop from the beginning to meet a community need.

Most coordinators were relying on support from volunteers, and volunteer workforces were drawn from the local community, church congregations, voluntary associations and charities. In some clubs volunteers worked alongside paid staff and undertook similar roles. The majority of lunch clubs recruited new volunteers by word of mouth to friends and family. Individual face-to-face requests for volunteers were considered to be more effective than mass advertising, recruitment through charities, or direct appeals to larger audiences.

Most volunteers were regular and long term, with a smaller number ‘passing through’ for shorter periods. Some lunch clubs that had the capacity and administrative support were working with the probation service or with mental health and learning disability charities to offer volunteering opportunities. In some instances, short term volunteer placements had developed into longer term volunteering activity, and coordinators had experienced few problems with retaining volunteers.

Prudent financial management was exercised by shopping around for good-value produce, or buying food wholesale. One lunch club had access to an allotment run by a volunteer who sold low-priced vegetables to the club and reinvested the funds back into the allotment to maintain supply. Waste reduction was achieved by taking bookings for each meal and catering for that number. Some lunch clubs meeting in restaurants had negotiated a lower-than-menu price of a meal in exchange for the regular custom. Others were receiving subsidies from a parent charity to cover venue hire, heating, lighting and marketing costs, and some were sharing kitchen equipment with other clubs, and receiving regular community donations or small grants.

All the coordinators agreed that making people feel welcome and included was important in retaining members and securing sustainability. Small gestures such as speaking a few words to each member at each meeting, accompanying new members on their first visit, and telephoning members in-between meetings made all the difference. Lunch club coordinators were skilled in managing and sustaining inter-personal relationships with members and volunteers and many were engaged in successful operational and financial partnerships without which the lunch club could not survive.

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| **Box 2 : Threats to sustainability**   * illness in the volunteer workforce * difficulties in matching volunteers to specific roles * coordinators working alone without support or advice * the impact of external decisions * difficulties in planning ahead for the long term * barriers to expansion and development * difficulties in generating income * rising costs and charges * lack of support to apply for external funding * declining membership * ‘falling out’ between members * transport problems |

Sustainability could be threatened by illness in the volunteer workforce, or difficulties in matching a volunteer to a specific role. In two cases where lunch clubs had external caterers, they relied totally on one volunteer coordinator. These lone volunteers worked extremely hard and reported coping very well on their own, but they were less likely to be networked into advice or support.

Sustainability could also be threatened by external decisions such as the imminent closure of a venue, uncertainty about the renewal of funding, or the withdrawal of community transport. Rising food prices were also considered by many coordinators as an external threat to sustainability. The coordinators recognised the need to plan ahead in order for the lunch club to survive, although typically they were subject to an unpredictable external environment and only able to engage in short-term planning. Many were reacting to operational and financial problems as they arose.

Some lunch clubs wanted to, or had been asked to expand and develop to meet the growing demand within their community. Others wanted to introduce different activities that would add value to the existing provision. There were, however, several barriers to expansion. In some cases the venue was too small for a larger club, or was in high demand by other groups, but the lunch club would stay due to affordability, accessibility, and good catering facilities. Coordinators were also concerned that expansion would place additional demands on hard working volunteers, or require the recruitment of a whole new volunteer team.

In the majority of cases, lunch clubs were self-supporting and their only source of income was from meal charges. Some self-catering lunch clubs earned additional income by using the same facilities to cater for other groups or events, while others held raffles or separate fundraising events. Income generation could be difficult and three coordinators emphasised that their principal aim was to break even, while keeping meal prices affordable for members. Others were setting surplus margins realistically, taking into account what members could afford to pay for a meal and to retain a high level of social inclusion.

Some lunch clubs reported having to reluctantly increase their charges for meals in recent months. Reasons for this included insecurity about diminishing levels of community subsidies or local authority funding. The rising cost of food due to the economic recession was also a major concern for clubs of every model. In each case the coordinator was concerned about how the membership of the club would be affected by increasing the price of meals. Grants and donations were more likely to come from local sources than from large external funding bodies. A small number of lunch clubs had applied for grants but these were mainly clubs that had support with the application process from a parent charity.

Some lunch club coordinators had experienced a sudden decline in membership due to illness, deaths, or transport problems. This could be a critical threat to survival, especially for clubs needing to justify the renewal of community funding, or clubs that had salaried staff. Others had experienced ‘falling out’ between members, which if left unresolved could escalate and present a serious threat to the welcoming atmosphere and sustainability of the club. In every case the priority for the coordinators was to facilitate the continued engagement of both parties with the lunch club and to accommodate their needs wherever possible.

Some lunch clubs were well served by affordable community transport, and a small number were connected to churches and charities that had their own subsidised transport, but other lunch clubs had been seriously affected by transport problems. For one lunch club, the sudden withdrawal of a transport provider had caused disruption and the loss of members, in particular the less able. In another area community transport was only available for hospital appointments and not for wider social activities, and rural bus services were generally limited. One lunch club was supporting their members to find their own transport solutions, and another had a private transport provider who they approached when their community transport became over-subscribed, but they could only afford to use it occasionally. Lack of affordable and regular community transport was also a barrier to widening access to neighbouring villages, to expanding the number of sessions offered, and enabling members to stay on for additional activities.

**Further considerations**

There are two further threats to sustainability that are important to note from this research. Firstly, very few lunch clubs were engaging with marketing or promotion, largely because they were operating at full capacity or with waiting lists, and were concerned about stimulating demand that they could not meet. Second, very few lunch clubs were collecting evidence of their activities and achievements to attract external funders or donors. Most coordinators were only collecting verbal feedback at the end of their sessions, focusing on satisfaction with the food and menu.

**Discussion**

The majority of clubs identified in this study did not have a specific target group other than older people, and they were community run. The 10 models of lunch club indicated diversity in their operation and in the challenges that they were facing.

A strong sense of identity, values and purpose, is an important factor in securing sustainability. These characteristics were strongly evident in the lunch clubs taking part in this study. Different models of delivery had emerged from understanding the needs of the community and from working with available resources.

Lunch clubs demonstrated the capacity to generate resources from within the group, while many were also networking and reaching out to their communities for support and giving out their own resources to support the wider community. There are many examples of strong and successful working partnerships between lunch clubs and voluntary or public organisations. However, some lunch club coordinators were not fully engaging with the sources of advice and support available to them and this was particularly evident for coordinators who ran their club alone.

The commitment of volunteers was extremely important to the survival of the majority of these lunch clubs. The value of a skilled and committed volunteer workforce in securing sustainability has been highlighted in other research (McGlone et al 1999, Hibbert et al 2003, Ockenden and Hutin 2008), and there are many examples in the present study of the recruitment of successful volunteering teams with a range of skills to offer, and of coordinators providing them with support. The difficulties that some small community groups can have with attracting sufficient numbers of volunteers has been noted by Dodd et al (2008). These difficulties were not as evident in the present research, although some coordinators had difficulties with role matching and others had to react quickly to gaps in capacity. Their informal friendship and family networks featured strongly in providing solutions to volunteer gaps, but in some lunch clubs solutions to role matching were less readily available.

Making a club known to the wider community is considered to be important in securing sustainability, but the majority of coordinators in this study were not actively engaged in formally marketing or promoting their club. While withholding publicity may be a means of controlling demand, in sustainability terms publicity can also be important in raising community awareness, attracting volunteers and drawing in donations. Waiting lists would also have contained valuable information on the demand for lunch clubs, but this information was not being shared with other lunch clubs, or with public and voluntary organisations that might have been able to apply it to stimulate and target further development.

In general lunch clubs were not undertaking evaluations of their activities, or routinely collecting written evidence of their achievements that they could show to potential funders or donors. An over-reliance on verbal feedback and a lack of formal recording of achievements could present a threat to sustainability. Dodd et al (2008) have already highlighted the tendency for small community groups to be overlooked by funders, and the need for them to produce evidence of the quality of their provision in order to compete for grants and donations.

The ability to look forward and to plan ahead is essential to achieving sustainability. Hauser et al (2008) contend that operational sustainability depends on the ability of a group to symbiotically think long term as well as manage day-to-day operations, but the lunch club coordinators in this study were more likely to be planning for the short-term, or reacting to operational problems as they arose. Many noted the difficulty in planning ahead when external decisions about venues, transport or future funding could affect their sustainability and determine the future of the club. This reflects the role of external dependencies in the environment in determining the survival of small community groups and the uncertainties that can result from interdependencies, also noted by Ouchi (1980) and Saxon-Harrold (1996). Coordinators identified several barriers to expansion and development of their clubs, which challenges the assumption that small community groups can readily take on more responsibility and provide greater coverage of their activities.

Coordinators were making best possible use of their financial resources but were not fully exploiting funding environments, both of which are important for financial sustainability. Writing funding applications was a challenge for many clubs, a finding that has also emerged in other research (McGlone et al 1999, Dodd et al 2008, Thomson and Caulier-Grice 2008). Most lunch clubs were self-supporting and with the rising cost of food, many coordinators were managing the club’s finances with the aim of breaking even. This achieved an affordable meal for members, but reduced the club’s capacity to reinvest in sustainability.

**CONCLUSION**

Lunch clubs provide a valuable resource that serves people at the heart of their communities, and sustainability can to some extent be supported by the commitment of coordinators to create an identity for the club, to allow the club to become a catalyst for wider social connections, to exercise prudent financial management and to retain members and volunteers (Box 1). However the threats to sustainability highlighted by coordinators (Box 2), whether they occur collectively or individually, can seriously challenge the survival of these small community groups. Through conducting this research, we have begun to provide the voluntary organisations, commissioners, planners and policy makers who support small community groups with an informed account of the challenges to sustainability, from the perspective of club coordinators.

While predictions about the sustainability of any small community group cannot be made from this research, it has uncovered valuable lessons about the factors that can threaten their survival. The findings from this research may be of interest to those who work to support the sustainability of small community groups in the UK and internationally, and further comparative research would be worthwhile. A better understanding of the pathways to sustainability of small community groups such as lunch clubs can provide the knowledge base for societies to prepare for an ageing population, and to set in place sustainable community based support for health, nutrition, activity and engagement.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the research funding received from the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation (Main Fund); the support of the two host organisations Age Concern North East Wales and Wales Council for Voluntary Action, the guidance of the cross-border Project Steering Group and the participation of lunch club coordinators across North East Wales and West Cheshire.

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| WREXHAM | **Table 1 : The 10 participating lunch clubs for the coordinator interviews** | | | | | | | | | |
| **Location Setting Meal Provision Activities Members Staffing Funding Meetings Maturity** | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Rural | Community Cafe | Self Catered | Lunch Plus Activity | 20 | 5 Volunteers | Self funded | Fortnightly | Maturing |
| 2 | Semi-urban | Community Centre | Catered by care home | Lunch Plus Activity | 10 | 1 Volunteer | Self -and Community-  funded | Weekly | New |
| 3 | Town Centre | Church Hall | Self Catered | Lunch Only | 50 | 18 Volunteers | Self funded | Fortnightly | New |
| WEST CHESHIRE | 4 | Town Centre | Disability Centre Cafe | Self Catered | Lunch Plus Activity | 10 | 20 Volunteers  3 Paid Staff | Self funded | Monthly | Established |
| 5 | Rural | Church Hall | Self Catered | Lunch Plus Activity | 20 | 15 Volunteers | Self -and Community- funded | Weekly | Embedded |
| 6 | Rural | Sheltered Housing | Self Catered | Lunch Plus Activity | 15 | 20 Volunteers  1 Paid Staff | Self -and Community- funded | Weekly | Established |
| 7 | Town Centre | Church Hall | Self Catered | Lunch Plus Activity | 30-40 | 35 Volunteers | Self funded | 3 days  per week | Established |
| FLINTSHIRE | 8 | Rural | Restaurant | Catered by the restaurant | Lunch Plus Activity | 22 | 1 Volunteer | Self funded | Monthly | Embedded |
| 9 | Town Centre | Community Cafe | Self Catered | Lunch Plus Activity | 46 | 3 Paid Staff | Self funded | 4 days  per week | Embedded |
| 10 | Semi-urban | FE College Café / Other Restaurant | Catered by the College Café / or visits out to other restaurant | Lunch Plus Activity | 30 | 3 Volunteers | Self funded | Fortnightly | Maturing |

Note : New Club = less than 5 years old, maturing club = 5-9 years old, established club = 10-19 years old, embedded club = 20+ years old.