



What is a Community Café event?

Community meals are a great way to provide wholesome grub and a social get-together for people in your local area, while also using up surplus food and reducing waste. Meals are usually organized by volunteers at community venues such as church halls, where there are kitchen facilities and plenty of space available, but you might also consider a ‘pop-up’ community meal using portable stoves. Food is prepared using ingredients donated by individuals, grown by community garden schemes or offered spare from local food suppliers. Whatever type of food you offer, make sure you have a couple of options so there is something for everyone and try to invite a range of people, including those who would most benefit from a free or heavily subsidised meal. People could be asked to book in so quantities and portions can be planned in advance, although this isn’t essential; you don’t want to turn people away.

Why run a community meal event?

Humans have always enjoyed cooking and eating together, but recent changes mean some people no longer eat well or with others. Lack of time often makes us reliant on fast food and ready meals that don’t provide a balanced diet. For some people, mealtimes can be one of the loneliest moments in their day. What’s more food waste is a real problem for the UK. Community Cafes not only provide an opportunity for people to donate their unwanted food to the cause, but also a fantastic opportunity to get together and share food waste reducing tips over a good meal.

Many people can also struggle to afford food. Although Britain is one of the richest countries in the world, rising food prices and difficult economic conditions have contributed to a huge increase in food banks supporting those in need. It’s estimated that over 500,000 people in the UK are now reliant on food parcels, and 1 in 6 parents admit to going without food themselves, in order to afford to feed their families [Source: Oxfam, 2015]. Running a community meal event directly tackles these challenges, by bringing local people together to prepare and eat good quality food. The event is also an opportunity to advertise your local food bank.

This event should take no longer than 2-3 hours.

Top Tip

Try out recipes with your kitchen volunteers in advance, to make sure everything goes smoothly and with a tasty result. Remember that cooking for a crowd takes longer than cooking for the family!

Get local youth groups helping with preparing, cooking or serving the food – this will give them valuable experience of how a kitchen operates.

Combine the event with **entertainment** such as live music or a film.



What things do I need?

- A clear plan for your event - running a community meal is a bigger challenge than cooking a family dinner at home!
- A good-sized venue, with adequate kitchen facilities and space for people to eat
- Equipment and utensils for putting on a large meal (surfaces, chopping boards, sharp knives, large cooking pots, crockery and utensils, serving spoons and labels for food)
- Table cloths, washing up liquid, tea towels and cloths.
- A team of enthusiastic volunteers, at least one with food hygiene and first aid skills
- Basic funding and/or food donations, as meals are usually offered free or not-for-profit

Running the session

Before the event:

Managing risk

You need to ensure the food is safely prepared and cooked and proper hygiene procedures are followed in the kitchen. At least one person should be trained in first aid and food hygiene.

Undertake a risk assessment on the activity and ensure you implement the actions needed to reduce any risks. This should include checking any cooking equipment is fit for purpose and providing safety advice where needed – see *Resource A for an example risk assessment*.

But remember this will not absolve you of responsibility if you have not taken adequate steps to prevent incidents.

Making decisions

Gather your volunteers and agree ideas for the menu, which could range from a simple bowl of soup (as in our example below) or a salad to a more elaborate 3-course meal. The key factors to consider are your budget, facilities available at your venue, the numbers and capabilities of your volunteers, and those likely to come along to eat. Although community meals are often free to encourage anyone to attend, a polite request for donations from those who can afford it can help you to cover costs.

Then work out a **list of ingredients** required, the costs, and what you might be able to get from donations. Ask local supermarkets, restaurants or community garden projects for possible help by supplying free or subsidised ingredients, particularly local seasonal produce that reduces food miles and helps the environment. Involve the community and ask for donations unwanted food from peoples households. Avoid meat or anything that can't be left out for up to a couple of hours.

When **choosing a venue**, allow for preparation and clean-up time and check that you can make full use of their kitchen facilities and utensils. Check the facilities – do you have enough hobs, ovens and refrigerator space? Extra items can usually be borrowed or sourced from Freecycle or suchlike.

On the day

1) Getting organised

Arrive at the venue early to organize volunteers and set up tables, put up signs and begin the food preparation.

Refer to your **risk assessment** and make sure your volunteers know what to do if something goes wrong. Make sure you check important safety points for the kitchen, such as fire exits are clear, fire extinguishers on hand, and a first aid kit available. On the day prominently display notices about any **ingredients** that could possibly cause an allergic reaction, such as nuts, gluten or eggs. Anyone with concerns about ingredients being used for the menu should check with kitchen staff.

Set out tables attractively and get some music going, as though you're running a café, to attract customers. Remember it's a social occasion for your community, so large tables will encourage people to sit and chat with others they don't know.

2) Get cooking

One person should act as head chef in order to prevent possible chaos; too many cooks really can spoil the broth! One of the simplest options is a basic vegetable soup – it's versatile too, as you can add virtually any vegetables.

To make a basic soup:

- Chop the raw vegetables into small pieces
- Fry them in a little oil in the bottom of a pan until they're softened
- Cover the vegetables with stock and simmer for 15 minutes
- Use a blender (if you have one) or cook for longer
- Serve up with a roll

3) Encourage a community atmosphere and a take away challenge

Hopefully, people will have got chatting naturally as they sit around tables together. Music or even a quiz might help further. At a suitable point after everyone has eaten, take a minute to thank people for coming, those who donated food and also your volunteers.

Let's talk about waste...

Leave some Love Food Hate Waste leaflets around the tables for people to read as they are waiting for their meal. You could even have some icebreaker questions for people to discuss while eating. For example...

1. What's your favourite meal using leftovers?
2. What's your best tip get the most out of your food?
3. What food do throw away the most? What could you do to reduce it?
4. Have you any food storage tips to share to make your food last longer?

Provide details of your nearest food bank. Food banks are often looking for more volunteers to help drive vans or sort donated goods. Challenge your group to see if they can spare time to help out on a regular basis, or consider clearing out their cupboards and donating goods every month.

4) Packing away

Thoroughly clean the full kitchen area including all cooking pots and other utensils and return any items you may have borrowed.

Hopefully your community meal has gone well, in which case it's well worth discussing whether this could become a regular event. For the future you could vary the time and date by arranging a breakfast, lunch or dinner, and at different times of the year make use of local seasonal ingredients.

Mini case studies / testimonials from communities who have arranged similar sessions

Our annual Stone Soup Day in Penrith is a community meal open to all, offering a wide range of delicious homemade soups and breads, accompanied by telling the folk story about a stranger using stone soup to bring a community together."

Further information and support

Fair Meals Direct is a 'Meals on Wheels' service in Carlisle, Penrith and surrounding areas. Fresh, locally sourced food is used to make healthy meals, delivered to those who may struggle to make meals for themselves:

www.fairfoodcarlisle.org/fair-meals-direct

FoodCycle runs volunteer-led community projects across the UK to reduce food poverty and social isolation. Their website provides more details of their projects, including a short video to explain how the scheme works: www.foodcycle.org.uk

Slow Food is a global grassroots movement with thousands of members, linking people's enjoyment of food with a commitment to their community and the environment. They run various events such as social meals and farm visits, campaigns and educational projects to engage different age groups on food issues: www.slowfood.org.uk