

## Creating Healthy Food Environments at Community Service Organisations

If you work in a Community Service Organisation and want to support your clients to eat better, but aren't sure where to start, this resource is for you. We'll take you through the key steps and suggest practical strategies to help build a more supportive food environment at your service. Use this as a guide and choose to apply what is most appropriate to your organisation and the clients you work with.

### Step 1: Reflect on the current situation: how well are clients currently eating and how is food used within your organisation

Do you have a good understanding of the foods and drinks that your clients usually consume, what factors influence this, and if these dietary habits are having any impact on their mental and physical health? It's also important to consider how food is used in your organisation; this is going to vary for each service. Do you provide food relief packages, give away food as prizes or incentives, or are you running cooking or nutrition education classes for clients?

### Step 2: Decide what nutrition issue(s) you will address

Work with key stakeholders (e.g. clients, management, food service staff, and staff that engage with clients) to identify the areas of concern that you'd like to focus on. For example, are clients having too many sugary drinks or take-away foods, or not enough fruit, vegetables, and wholegrains? Do clients know how to choose, shop, prepare, and cook healthy foods or understand how healthy eating can support mental and physical health?

### Step 3: Determine your strategies

Decide how your organisation might address the nutrition issue(s) by deciding on specific strategies you'd like to implement, whether big or small. This could involve making changes to the food you provide to clients, such as swapping the morning tea biscuit tray for a fruit bowl, replacing refined grain products with [wholegrain options](#), providing [healthy snacks](#), or adapting recipes to [include more vegetables](#). A brief outline of foods that have been shown to promote better mental health can be found [here](#).

Developing a nutrition and catering policy is best practice as this formalises the expectations for staff around food provision. You may also want to consider providing nutrition education to staff and consumers to make sure everyone is on board with changes.

Use the 'Strategies to Create Healthy Food Environments' tool on the next page to guide your strategy development.

### Step 4: Make a plan for implementing strategies

Consider how your organisation will go about implementing changes. This step is as important as deciding on the changes you want to make. Seeking support from management and engaging with staff and clients throughout the process will make it more likely that strategies will be successfully implemented and achieve the outcome you're looking for.

## Strategies to Create Healthy Food Environments

Using a combination of these strategies is the most effective approach.

**Nutrition policy** – Developing a nutrition and catering policy demonstrates your organisation’s commitment to promoting healthy eating and will help ensure sustainable, long-lasting changes are implemented. A template nutrition policy for community service organisations is [available here](#) (this can be adapted as needed).

**Organisation engagement** – Educating staff and clients on the reasons for implementing the strategies can help build support for change. Present the project plan to clients and staff for feedback. Provide regular updates and ongoing consultation opportunities during implementation of the project. Celebrate achievements through internal newsletters, staff meetings and the intranet.

**Organisation process and procedures** – Implement processes that make promoting healthy eating a standard part of the way that your organisation operates. Update staff induction process to include information about the nutrition and catering policy. A statement that the service promotes healthy eating and encourages a healthy environment could be included on new job advertisements. Develop guidelines around what type of food will be accepted if your organisation accepts food donations, and the use of food as prizes or in fundraising. A list of healthy ideas for prizes and fundraising can be found [here](#). Depending on the type of service you provide, case work can include a prompt to discuss nutrition and physical activity as part of the client’s recovery goals. For clients with nutrition-related health conditions, linking in with a dietitian may also be useful.

**Physical environment** – The physical environment can either support or present a barrier for clients to be healthy. Examples of healthy food environmental changes include: [conducting menu assessments](#) and making changes where necessary, displaying [signage](#) that encourages healthy eating, encouraging [moving more](#) by introducing a regular walking group, facilitating group shopping trips where ways to fill your shopping cart with [healthy budget-friendly foods](#) are discussed, and implementing regular social groups with a food component (e.g. planting and maintaining a [vegetable garden](#)).



**Staff learning and development** – To encourage a consistent approach to nutrition across the service, provide staff with information on the nutrition and catering policy and expectations of staff when it comes to food provision. Providing staff with education on the links between nutrition and mental and physical health, what a healthy diet looks like, and practical strategies to eat well, can be useful. You can find a brief outline on the link between food and mental health [here](#). You may also wish to seek out extra training from a nutritionist or dietitian.

**Client education** – Introduce ongoing cooking groups and nutrition education for clients. The aim is to improve clients understanding of the link between diet and their mental and physical health while also developing food knowledge, cooking, budgeting and shopping skills.

**Monitoring, evaluation, and learning** – Consider capturing information on clients' height and weight and nutrition-related health markers (e.g. HbA1c) at entry and exit to the service if this is appropriate. The service can report on the amount of support provided to clients over the year in internal newsletters or the intranet. Conduct regular meal surveys with clients to gauge satisfaction with and provide feedback and suggestions on the menu.

## **Making a Difference**

We know that priority groups face many barriers to eating well, including limited time and budget to prepare healthy meals, high levels of stress, and medication related effects on hunger and fullness cues. Service-level changes can help create an environment in which clients are able to eat well with less effort. By overcoming some of the barriers that people face to having a healthy diet, Community Service Organisations can support clients to lead healthier lives.