LUNCH CLUBS are small community groups, run by volunteers. They are popular with older people who enjoy the opportunity to meet with friends on a regular basis. Lunch clubs sit close within their communities, providing support, companionship and a nutritious hot meal. They can be held in community venues such as church halls, village halls or community centres, or in ‘adopted’ venues such as independent living or extra care housing units, leisure centres, schools, colleges, or community cafes. Lunch clubs can also meet in local pubs or restaurants. Many provide other activities or outings, and they can also bring in guest speakers to share information on matters that interest older people.

LUNCH CLUBS ARE A PUBLIC HEALTH RESOURCE and their survival is important to local communities. Research has already demonstrated that lunch clubs are popular with older people, they can support independence and well-being and they have a positive impact on nutrition\(^1\)\(^2\).

In March 2012, The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation awarded a research grant to Age Concern North East Wales to explore the factors that affect the survival of lunch clubs in North East Wales and West Cheshire. The WCVA provided advice and support for the research, and we are now ready to share the findings with the wider community.

We hope that the information in this report will be useful to anyone who is interested in nutrition and well-being for older people in the community, and to anyone involved in developing, supporting and sustaining lunch clubs and other small community groups.

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\(^1\) Burke, D; Jennings, M; McClinchy, J; Masey, H; Westwood D; Dickinson A. (2011) ‘Community luncheon clubs benefit the nutritional and social well being of free living older people’, Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, 24, 277-310

What do we know about the survival of small community groups?
We already know from previous research that small community groups can face many challenges. In order to survive they draw on the resources that they have within their group, and they also draw on support from the wider community and the environment\(^3\). Many small community groups have limited financial resources, volunteers, and facilities, and fundraising through grants and other sources can be very competitive\(^4\). We also know that many small community groups are operating in isolation\(^5\), and that the support available varies depending on the locality.

How does our research make a difference?
We wanted to find out more about the factors that affect the survival of lunch clubs. We decided to cover the areas of North East Wales and West Cheshire because we could identify a wide range of different lunch club models and we could share any learning from the study across a wider area.

Our Research Questions

*What different models of lunch club can we identify?*

*What factors affect their survival (their operational and financial sustainability)?*

*How have lunch clubs responded to challenging situations that have threatened their survival?*

*What notable achievements can be shared on a wider platform?*

*What lessons can we learn to inform the future development of lunch clubs?*

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\(^3\) Soteri-Proctor A. (2011) Little big societies: micro mapping of organisations operating below the radar, Working Paper 71, TSRC, [www.tsrc.ac.uk](http://www.tsrc.ac.uk)

\(^4\) Reid K.E; Mordaunt J. (2009) Sustainable funding for the Welsh rural voluntary sector, issues of networks, legitimacy and power, ARNOVA Annual Conference Paper, 19-21 November, Cleveland, Ohio

\(^5\) McCabe A; Phillimore J; Mayblin L. (2010) ‘Below the radar’ activities and organisations in the third sector, Working paper 29, TSRC [www.tsrc.ac.uk](http://www.tsrc.ac.uk)
Carrying out the research

PHASE ONE: A survey of lunch clubs in North East Wales and West Cheshire

1) We approached local councils, voluntary organisations and other community groups, and asked them for information about the location of lunch clubs in their area. We found a total of 67 lunch clubs (35 in Wrexham, 10 in Flintshire and 22 in West Cheshire).

2) We sent out a survey to the lunch club co-ordinators to find out more about what they were providing, how they operated, and their funding arrangements. 28 lunch clubs completed the survey.

3) We identified ten different lunch club models from the survey. There were differences in the choice of venue within the community, and in the catering arrangements (not every lunch club cooked on site, some were eating out, and some had meals cooked and delivered). There were also differences in funding arrangements (some were self supporting, while others also had community funding), and in the range of other activities they offered.

PHASE TWO: Ten lunch club case studies

We selected ten lunch clubs from across Wrexham, Flintshire and West Cheshire to be our case studies (one for each different lunch club model).

These lunch clubs were held in:

A church hall, a community café and a community centre (Wrexham)
A community café, and two restaurant / cafe lunch clubs (Flintshire)
A village hall, a community café, a sheltered housing unit and a church hall (West Cheshire)

We interviewed these lunch club co-ordinators to find out about the factors that affected their survival, how they had responded to challenges, and about their greatest achievements.
FINDINGS
Lunch club co-ordinators told us about a number of different challenges to the survival of their club, and how they had responded.

A SUDDEN DECLINE IN MEMBERSHIP could affect the survival of a lunch club. Co-ordinators had recruited new members through social work teams and other community groups, by advertising in care homes and community centres, by advertising through their own community networks, and by having ‘bring a friend’ sessions. Keeping in contact with members was also important, and following up anyone who had missed a session to find out the reason why and to help them to return. Making members feel at home through friendly gestures and a few words of welcome could make all the difference.

TRANSPORT ISSUES: While some lunch clubs were well-served by affordable community transport, others had been affected by transport problems. Transport problems could cause disruption to the club and the loss of members, particularly less able members, and those living in rural areas. One co-ordinator was supporting members to find individual solutions to transport problems, by providing information about local transport options, or sharing transport between members.

‘FALLING OUT’: When any group of people meet together there is the potential for disagreements. Although ‘falling out’ didn’t happen very often, when it did, it could make a lunch club less welcoming. Co-ordinators were keen to identify this quickly and to intervene to solve the problem before it affected the happy atmosphere, or attendance at the club.

IMPACT OF EXTERNAL DECISIONS: The future of a lunch club can depend on decisions which lie beyond the control of the co-ordinator. For example, a decision to close a community centre, to make changes to transport services, to increase the hire charge for a venue, to withdraw a funding stream, or to put up the retail cost of food can decide the future of a small community group. In these situations, being part of a support and advice network can be very important in finding solutions and in securing survival.
OTHER FACTORS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO SURVIVAL

Lunch clubs could not stay open without **THE COMMITMENT OF VOLUNTEERS** drawn from local communities, voluntary associations and charities. Most lunch clubs were recruiting new volunteers by word of mouth to friends and family, and some were taking referrals from other organisations and charities. Filling gaps in volunteer cover, or problems in matching a volunteer to a specific role could sometimes be a challenge for co-ordinators, but they were very supportive of their volunteers, and volunteers also supported each other by being generous with their time.

The NCVO (2009)⁶ suggest that **MARKETING, EVALUATION, FORWARD PLANNING, and ATTRACTING EXTERNAL FUNDING** are all important to the survival of community groups. Lunch clubs were only marginally engaged in marketing their lunch clubs to the community and in evaluating their club to provide evidence of achievements. Most lunch clubs were making plans for the short term rather than the long term, and few were making funding applications. This suggests the need to consider developing further training and support for co-ordinators in marketing, evaluation, long-term planning and attracting external funding.

**MOST LUNCH CLUBS WERE SELF SUPPORTING** with their only source of income coming from meal charges. Some earned additional income by having raffles or by catering for other groups and events. Others with the volunteer capacity held regular small fundraising events. Some lunch clubs were receiving subsidies from a parent charity e.g. to cover venue hire, heating and lighting, and marketing costs. Others were sharing kitchen equipment or receiving regular community donations. Grants and donations were more likely to come from local sources than from large external funders.

**KEEPING MEALS AFFORDABLE FOR MEMBERS** was important in order to achieve social inclusion. Lunch clubs were either aiming to break even or making a small profit which could be re-invested in the club. Lunch club co-ordinators and volunteers shopped around for best value produce, and took

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bookings to reduce waste. Lunch clubs who dined out had negotiated a 'lower than menu' price for the meal in exchange for the regular custom that the lunch club provided to the venue.

Lunch clubs had a very strong **SENSE OF IDENTITY, VALUES AND PURPOSE**, which is vital to the survival of small community groups\(^7\) \(^8\). They were providing opportunities to enjoy a hot meal, companionship and activity, and they were also enabling older people to make wider social connections beyond the club itself. Co-ordinators felt a sense of ownership of the lunch club, especially when they had seen the club develop from the beginning to meet a community need. There were many examples of what can be achieved in local communities through **SUCCESSFUL WORKING PARTNERSHIPS** between lunch clubs, the voluntary sector, churches and public sector organisations.

**This research has provided:**
- An insight into the lunch club activity that is happening across North East Wales and West Cheshire, and the different forms that it takes.
- Case study data for different models of lunch club, including the factors that affect their survival.
- An insight into local issues and priorities (in Wrexham, Flintshire and West Cheshire).

**CONCLUSION**

This research contributes to the Welsh Governments objective to improve information on community activities, to recognise the diversity of provision and to target support to improve sustainability\(^9\). In England and Wales, we hope that the findings will be useful to anyone interested in nutrition and well-being for older people in the community, and to anyone involved in developing, supporting and sustaining lunch clubs and other small community groups.

\(^7\) NCVO (2009) The sustainable sun needs-analysis tool for voluntary and community organisations, Triangle Consulting / NCVO.
\(^8\) Richardson L; Sefton T.A.J. (2005) Assessing small community groups, Community Work and Family, 8(1), 69-92
**PROFILES OF LUNCH CLUBS IN NORTH EAST WALES & WEST CHESHIRE**

**St Margaret’s Church in Wrexham** provide a lunch club for 50 older people in their church and community hall. The lunch club meets for two hours twice a month, on the 2\(^{nd}\) and 4\(^{th}\) Tuesdays, and have agreed to alternate their meetings with another church lunch club nearby who offer 1\(^{st}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) Tuesdays. This ensures that there is a lunch club available every week in their locality. Members are drawn from the church congregation, from the local community, and from referrals by the voluntary sector. The club is run by 18 volunteers, working on a rota of three teams, and all the volunteers are offered food hygiene training.

St Margaret’s Church lunch club was established three years ago by Reverend Richard Hainsworth, and a dedicated volunteer co-ordinator and members of the congregation, as part of an outreach project. The lunch club was awarded a single start-up grant from Wrexham County Borough Council and St Margaret’s church provided the venue and communal pieces of kitchen equipment. Advice on start up was available from the local council, from a voluntary sector lunch club development worker and from Wrexham Lunch Club Forum.

The lunch club is now self supporting and members pay a small nominal amount for their meal. Meals are freshly cooked on site by the volunteers, and they also provide occasional catering for other events in the Diocese to raise funds. Lunch club members provide verbal feedback at each session, and a survey of members is carried out twice a year for the lunch club committee. The lunch club does not provide transport but if members have transport problems the co-ordinator works with them to find a solution.

St Margaret’s Lunch Club values the commitment of their volunteers who all give their time to create a happy and welcoming atmosphere for the members. Regular contact is maintained with members and the lunch club has a very clear sense of purpose within the community, ‘...the lunch club gets people out of the house to meet other people and to have a hot meal. The members enjoy the social side, meeting old and new friends, the camaraderie and sharing their news’ (Co-ordinator).
**Dial House Chester** is a centre for disability services which includes a Community Cafe Lunch Club. Dial House is located in Chester City centre, and the lunch club provides opportunities for up to 12 cafe customers, volunteers and clients to get together for lunch every 5-6 weeks. The lunch club has been open for eleven years and each lunch club session is run by three or four volunteers and a catering manager. Some volunteers have had the opportunity to undertake catering training in the community cafe.

Members of the lunch club are drawn mainly from visitors to the disability centre and members also bring friends. The lunch club has also on occasions provided a special ‘lunch out’ for residents from a local residential home. It offers popular themed menu days to coincide with special events in the calendar, for example a special afternoon tea was recently provided for the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations, with music from the 1950’s.

Members pay a small nominal amount for their two course meal and the lunch club is financially self supporting. Profit margins are set realistically, taking into account what members can afford to pay and the need to keep the service socially inclusive. Any surpluses are reinvested in the Community Cafe. Some financial support has been given to the disability centre from the local primary care trust for improvements to the kitchen, and these improvements have also been beneficial to the lunch club.

As a small organisation it is important to take meal bookings and payment in advance to reduce food waste, ‘... we can use the food in the cafe if someone doesn’t turn up...(and) we carry their meal payment on to the next lunch club, so they don’t lose out’ (Co-ordinator). Some food preparation takes place the day before the lunch club to avoid worrying about gaps in volunteer cover on the day. One Dial House volunteer runs an allotment, and in the summer this becomes a regular supplier of low cost produce for the lunch club. Surplus vegetables are sold for donations and any income is reinvested in the community cafe.

The volunteers and staff work hard to deliver the lunch club which provides home cooked food in a friendly atmosphere, ‘...the ethos of our cafe is ‘home made’...it’s about meeting with old friends and it’s a healthy nutritious meal...we
don’t assume that everyone likes boring traditional meals’ (Co-ordinator). Some volunteers have been with the lunch club for over 10 years, and the lunch club has a clear sense of purpose in serving the local community and welcomes disabled people, ‘...we are socially inclusive for our customers and our volunteers.....the volunteers like the sense of achievement, and it raises the profile of the disability service and makes it better known to the community’ (Co-ordinator).

The Welcome Lunch Club in Flintshire provides 30 members with the opportunity to meet together and ‘eat out’ once a fortnight. The lunch club has been meeting for seven years and is run by 3 volunteer co-ordinators with the support of Age Concern North East Wales and Flintshire Local Voluntary Council. The club meets to enjoy a varied and interesting programme of lunches at different venues, including at the local further education college, and at hotels and restaurants. They also arrange a programme of activities for members, including a popular monthly cabaret club, trips to the theatre and days out to places of interest.

The Welcome Lunch Club makes every member feel included, and regular contact is maintained with the members. The lunch club advertises in local community venues, at local events and at 50+ clubs, and takes referrals from social services and from voluntary organisations. The co-ordinators accompany new members on their first visit to help them make friends, and a membership of 30-35 people allows the group to get to know each other.

The cost of the meal for the members varies according to the venue, and is negotiated with each restaurant in exchange for the regular custom, and the aim is to keep meals affordable. The co-ordinators offer members a suggestion box to collect feedback on their dining experience at each venue. Community transport is very important to the members and to the success of the lunch club. The club receives occasional community funding and donations, and raises additional funds through raffles and applying for external grants.
The club takes an inclusive approach and decisions about the running of the club are always taken by the members, ‘.....it’s everybody’s club....the members make the decisions and give us feedback....they have a say, and they run it, and the co-ordinators just make it happen’ (Co-ordinator). The club recognises that the members are its’ greatest asset, and the key to the success and sustainability of the club.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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