

BELGIUM

Local development

Location

Torhout

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Social inclusion & local development

Measure

M16 - Cooperation

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 156 000

EAFRD 50 700

National/Regional 50 700

Private 44 600

Other 10 000

Project duration

2021

Project promoter

Openbaar Centrum voor
Maatschappelijk Welzijn van
Torhout

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Setting up a 'mobile social grocery' where users will pay a low price for products, and may also choose free products, improving accessibility, reducing isolation and giving families a more 'human' experience.

Summary

The municipality of Torhout, located in the Belgian province of West Flanders, (population 20 149 in 2012) have historically distributed food to families facing financial difficulties through a food bank. The food bank could only serve a limited number of people, offered only a small range of products, and did not offer a solution for using food surpluses from local traders. As the food bank was not 'geared to the users' or accessible to people with mobility problems, it was decided to set up a 'mobile social grocery'.



This 'mobile social grocery' offers a full range of basic products (food and hygiene) to the people in need in the municipality. The grocery makes use of food surpluses from local merchants, amongst others, allowing users to pay a lower than market value price for products and also choose a number of free products. The 'mobile social grocery', based in a truck, makes it possible to reach the suburbs of the town, where there was previously no help or services. Apart from offering food, this is an opportunity for customers to interact with a social worker from the Sociaal Huis (social house).

Results

When fully operational the mobile social grocery will be able to support approx 500 people instead of about 150 as before.

The distributed food will be a lot healthier and of better quality.

New jobs will be created.

There will be about 10 local merchants involved in the project, making much better use of their food surpluses.

About eight volunteers (from the same target group) that participate, are being offered a meaningful daytime activity.

About three suburbs will be reached through the new project that wouldn't otherwise be reached.

Context

The municipality of Torhout, located in the Belgian province of West Flanders, (population 20 149 in 2012) provided support for families facing financial difficulties through a food bank.

The food bank provided a monthly pre-prepared and standardised food parcel, for a maximum period of 6 months, to families who had been approved by the official welfare centres of OCMW Torhout or CAW Noord-West-Vlaanderen.

Every year about a hundred families were being reached this way, and some 540 food parcels were being distributed. However, this operational model has become obsolete due to:

- The lack of fresh products, or variations in food parcel content;
- The parcels not being adapted to the needs or wishes of the recipients;
- The number of available parcels was very limited and the waiting list to use the food bank for a second time was growing;
- Local merchants wished to distribute their food surpluses in a useful and local way in the area; and
- The food bank could not reach people with mobility issues..

Objectives

The project's objectives were to enable people to have spending power combined with budgeting skills. A new service was needed to offer a mix of free and paid for products to support people with financial issues to cope better. The project also strived to improve integration by offering an informal place where clients can meeting up with social workers, whilst at the same time offering healthy food that can be used to cook healthy meals.

Activities

1. Operation

The project started being implemented in phases in January 2021. This allowed the project team to manage the transition from food bank to mobile social grocery and make adjustments where needed (e.g. software problems, handing out store passes, logistic challenges, keeping the

input manageable).

The food was originally distributed from the centrally located Bourgondisch hof building in Torhout. However, in October 2020 it relocated for practical reasons to the former ACV building, as the new location will be ideal for the mobile social grocery in terms of holding stock, distribution, preparing the parcels, etc.

One of the most positive and biggest changes, is that the social grocery has longer opening hours, in comparison to the former food bank. With the food bank, users could only pass by once a month. The social grocery has more flexible opening hours so that users (with a shop pass) can come by whenever they want within these hours and, there are no more waiting lists as there were for the food bank.

Most importantly, the project team wants to give people with financial issues a more 'human' approach. Now instead of a pre-prepared pack, they can go shopping themselves. By involving a lot of volunteers (also from the target group), the project hopes to offer a meaningful and structured daytime occupation which gives a valuable sense of social purpose and empowerment. By offering extended opening hours, the service becomes more approachable and customised to its users.

With the mobile store it will be possible to go to visit different neighbourhoods, which encourages the local development in the more rurally situated areas and makes the social grocery accessible to everyone, even those who can't go to the town centre.

Changes happened rapidly over a few short months:

January 2021: The operation of the social grocery started but was limited to existing users. Opening hours Friday 1 to 4pm.

February 2021: The social grocery extended its opening hours, for existing users, to Tuesday from 3 to 6pm and Friday 1 to 4pm

March 2021: A communications campaign was launched to promote the mobile social grocery.

April 2021: The social grocery operated with extended opening hours and without user limitations (everyone who has a shopping pass can use the service). Launch of the 'crisis passes' scheme for frontline care workers.

June 2021: All operations switched to mobile truck service - going out into neighbourhoods.

2. Purchase of the truck

The purchase of the truck was delayed due to the COVID19 crisis. This time was used to ensure a responsive and phased start to the project.

A lot of research was done ahead of purchasing the truck into the needs, possibilities, technical specifications and the second-hand vehicles market. Once all advice and guidance had been taken into consideration - especially that of the safety advisor – it was decided to purchase a new truck which met the technical specifications.

To start the social grocery the Torhout Public Centre for Social Welfare, worked in cooperation with the vzw Tordale (an institution for disabled people), a lot of volunteers and several local government bodies.

The project has been done in collaboration with many different stakeholders and the current users have been consulted, and their remarks have been taken into account in developing the new concept.

Main results

The waiting lists system has been eliminated, so more users are able to use the social grocery. When fully operational the social grocery will be able to support about 500 users instead of about 150.

The food that is distributed will be a lot healthier and of better quality.

Jobs will be created.

There will be about 10 local merchants involved in the project, making much better use of their food surpluses.

About eight volunteers (from the same target group) that participate, are being offered a meaningful daytime activity.

About three suburbs will be reached through the new project, that wouldn't be reached otherwise.

“By taking the financially vulnerable out of their isolation and showing understanding for their problems, the mobile social grocer fulfills a social role” says Paul Dieryckx, alderman for social affairs

Additional sources of information

n/a