

## **Building Healthy Communities: Nutritious food at local food projects**

**Facilitator:** Clare Frewin: Suffolk County Council - Healthy Start

**Panel:**

- Emma Healey, Halesworth Community Larder
- Garath Jones, Castle Hill Community Centre
- Holly Wright, Food Cycle
- Susannah Robirosa, ActivGardens

### **Introductions**

Clare, the Health Improvement Lead for Suffolk County Council, introduced the session by outlining her role leading the Children's Healthy Weight Strategy. Traditionally this has focused on the Eat Well plate, however her experience has showed her that healthy eating is about much more than just the food on the table. The world we live in does not make it easy to make healthy choices. We need to take a whole-systems approach to health and wellbeing in order to make a difference.

The strategy looks at Eat Well, Move Well but also Sleep Well and most importantly, the World Around Us. It recognises that the world we live in makes it hard for people to make healthy choices, and that the food that we have access to, the street that we live on and our environments make all the difference in terms of a child's health outcomes, health opportunities, and therefore the journey they take through life.

#### **Emma, Halesworth Community Larder**

Their larder started because all the Foodbank volunteers had to shield during Covid and there was a need to redistribute 'Boris Boxes' that many recipients in the area had no need for. People also began to donate gluts of vegetables that they were growing. This developed into a Community Table and then the Community Larder.

The Larder is open to everyone. No questions are asked and they don't collect lots of information, but they do take postcodes so they know the area their customers are from. Around two thirds of the users are families and they also see a lot of older people. The larder is a caring, sharing place, they signpost and have an emphasis on fresh fruit and vegetables.

*"We work quite closely with our school, and we are working currently to establish a small kitchen where we will be hosting classes such as batch cooking, and trialing a 'warm kitchen' pilot so families can come in and batch cook their own meals."*

They established in June 2020 and the need continues to rise. They are part of the FareShare network, but are experiencing tensions and changes in how it is providing food and supplies. They work with a lot of local businesses, the COOP and the Suffolk Community Foundation.

*"The biggest dream I have is that Halesworth Community Larder should not need to exist."*

## **Holly, Food Cycle**

Food Cycle put on weekly community meals in lots of different communities across England and Wales, using food that would otherwise have gone to waste. Anyone is welcome at the meals. Their aim is to tackle food poverty and food waste at the same time, but a big part of it is bringing people together and creating a community experience, tackling isolation and improving wellbeing. Holly looks after the East of England region, from East Anglia over to Bedfordshire. They have recently hosted their first meal in Suffolk at the Burlington Baptist Church. So they are getting a sense of what the landscape is in Suffolk.

## **Garath, Castle Hill Community Centre**

Garath manages Castle Hill Community Centre and they run a top up shop. This started during Covid as a foodbank, serving around 150—190 people per week, with food parcel deliveries and collections. Over time they developed into a top up shop, and started working with FareShare. The top up shop started by charging £2 for a bag of food worth around £25, but as costs have increased this has risen to £4 per bag for about £35 worth of food.

For the last two years they have worked in partnership with Ipswich & Colchester hospitals and support with cold & flu and young people's school vaccine clinics, and have also branched out into money and debt advice, working with Citizens Advice, Christians Against Poverty and Anglia Care Trust.

They are finding that their project is becoming bigger than just food. People use the service in times of need and they signpost them to support, often as part of crisis intervention. It has been a natural progression of the service. They find the most important thing is to listen and not tell people what to do.

## **Susannah, ActivGardens**

Susannah is the development manager for the ActivGardens project at ActivLives. They are based in Ipswich but work in East Suffolk and West Suffolk as well. Their main community garden, which started 16 years ago, is a food growing hub at Maidenhall allotments and our other garden is Chantry walled garden. Both are in South West Ipswich which is one of the most disadvantaged areas in the entire country. We also have a parks project in Sudbury at Bellevue Park.

The charity's main focuses are health and wellbeing, skills and learning, and creating and building community.

## **How do you balance the need to address food insecurity with promoting nutritious food choices? *Affordability versus nutrition***

Clare acknowledged that the subject of food and food systems is incredibly emotive for many people. This is about looking at new opportunities which makes the current system obsolete. It is about affordability vs nutrition for the individual. It is recognising the language we use when talking about food insecurity can sound very technical.

Garath acknowledged that the donations they receive are often Ultra Processed Foods (UPF) as they are cheap and convenient, and feed people. They did some work with the hospital's catering department, who ran a slow cooker workshop at Castle Hill, making use of food bank donations as ingredients to show people what they can do with a slow cooker at low cost. They explored batch cooking so food would last throughout the week and people have a supply of nutritious ready meals instead of reaching for quick and easy UPF. This led them to look at other offerings

in the food bank. The foodbank now spends about £600 per month on fresh fruit and veg. They offer this every week, and make use of seasonal produce. It has been challenging as people lack skills.

Emma stated that we all eat bad food and we don't judge people for it. They spend a lot of time helping people make healthier choices. 50% of their delivery from FareShare is fresh veg, but often includes things like celeriac or squash that people didn't know how to cook. They also have organic farms such as Wakelyns donating really fresh, organic produce like fresh tomatoes, and it's the volunteer's job to share information and support people to eat it.

Garath said that people are time poor and don't have time to do what our parents and grandparents would do, spending 2 hours making a meal from scratch every day. An example of this is that Sunday roasts are dying out because people prefer to go to places like Toby Carvery. Changes needed are around education, listening and developing people's skills. They do provide information sheets in front of things like celeriac and suede, about how to prepare and use them, and suggest recipes.

Susannah said they developed a partnership with our local foodbank which was really successful and found there was a real appetite for fresh ingredients. It was mainly older people taking fresh items as they remembered how to cook them or have the time to experiment with them. The big challenge is engaging younger families and parents as they have much more time pressure and perhaps don't have examples or skills from their parents, or can't afford the fuel bills to run their cookers. There is more work to be done in this area.

Clare brought up that the cost of fuel to power ovens is high. People are flooded with food choices such as UPF, but it is about finding your personal balance of healthy food. Clare personally aims for an 80/20% split but it is about the need to find your own balance for you and your family. The concern is that many families have a very difference percentage balance and can be 100% UPF.

A member of the audience, Donna Higgins - family and communities portfolio holder for West Suffolk Council – explained she was a teacher for 37 years, and was in charge of the food economics department. She feels that we need to stop saying that UPF is cheaper. It is much cheaper to use things that are in your fridge and get creative with them. You can go to Aldi and buy a bag of carrots for 38p that can be used in a variety of ways: blended for soup, chopped up for a stew.

There is lots of talk about fresh food. One of the key things is having the white goods that support being able to make the most of the food that is around, such as a freezer. If you grow your own produce you can freeze it, and one of the cheapest frozen food products in supermarkets is chopped mixed veg, which is unprocessed food that's been frozen immediately after picking.

We need to make food a community event. There is a lot to be learnt from the Muslim community who are very good at intergenerational cooking and community eating. Intergenerational community eating binds communities together.

**What are the biggest challenges in making healthy, nutritious food accessible to everyone in your community, and how do you work to overcome them?**

Holly answered saying, food choices are not always about cost but can be about convenience. They can be affected by their accommodation which has inadequate cooking facilities. Buying something that's pre-made is the easiest options, especially with issues around skills and awareness of how to do things with certain food. There is also a lot of stigma and shame

associated with using food projects or going to a community meal. We can be quite an individualistic society, so promoting a free meal that anyone can access without any pressure can help to break down those barriers of access to fresh and nutritious food. And if they then want to learn more about food and making meals, then FoodCycle is the first step.

If you are enjoying that food and are able to understand a bit more about how it was made in a community setting then you're breaking down the first wall. It is important to have patience that not everyone is going to have the same relationship with food. They create an environment where people can try out food without it costing them anything.

An audience member asked, *are the meals at Food Cycle cooked by volunteers of the guests?*

Holly answered that group of volunteers sign up weekly to cook the meal, anyone can join. They encourage guests to become volunteers, and this transition shows the impact of what they do. If there is food or ingredients left over the guests can then take it away and make the meal for themselves. They have been giving out booklets with tips and advice on things like food planning, shopping, budgeting, freezer use and food waste. They use food to attract people in and then offer them more than just food.

Garath added that they bag up ingredients for the slow cooker project so people can make the meals at home. And Clare also agreed that the try before you buy approach give people confidence to make things.

An audience member from Burlington Church who host FoodCycle, commented that there is so much more that FC does that they don't realise. There is a hosting team and a cooking team. The hosting team will often be people who are in need of community. They come as a host sometimes but will still come even if there isn't a hosting spot. Attending for the first time with a job to do makes that access a bit easier, and once they have met the friendly group of attendees they often find those individuals will keep returning. The FoodCycle meal creates a family feel and gives them the opportunity to signpost people to other services. It gives people access to a place that feels like home.

**How do you see your project contributing to reducing social isolation and building stronger community bonds? Why is this important for community health?**

Susannah commented that most of their volunteers and people who access their courses find that the biggest factor for them in is being with other people. In fact one of the attendees the other day said they didn't really like gardening at all! One of their biggest aspirations at ActivGardens is to bring people together to develop a sense of community around growing food and gardening, which allows people to contribute ideas and knowledge and feel they have somewhere to belong.

Over 60% of people involved in their project are long term unemployed. They might be living isolated lives. They have a very high proportion of people with mental health issues which is another thing to consider in the 'making your own food conundrum', people don't have the mental capacity to cook for themselves.

They have had some great partnerships, such as with Suffolk Refugee Support where a large group of about 50 women came to the gardens and demonstrated how to process and cook the vegetables. They got the fire going and made Kosovan pancakes, they had Iraqi flatbreads on the clay oven, and with all the chard leaves that nobody ever touches they were making dolmades. It was a fantastic display of cultural sharing and showed how food binds us and brings us together.

“There can’t be too many community food projects! I think it’s fantastic that there are so many different groups and organisations fulfilling different elements that our societies are facing.”

Clare commented that community cohesion is often the foundation for food projects.

An audience member, Mike Barrett from FareShare, commented that there are lots of kitchens and other resources not being used. They (FareShare) have tonnes of local veg in stock. They have onions in at the moment from Suffolk, and crops in tonnage from all over the country. Mike asked everyone to please get in touch with him if you need any produce for events and cooking courses. The challenge is that the market place has changed and supermarkets are cutting back on waste by reducing stock. FareShare now work with manufacturers who often have surplus raw ingredients, but in such big quantities. These big quantities pose a big issue for redistribution. One of the challenges is around having fridges and freezers at food projects to store and distribute produce.

Emma said that there is only so much food projects can do with a bulk load of vegetables. Supermarkets are moving the issue of food waste further down the line.

Garath highlighted the importance of networks, knowing who is around and what is going on locally. Using networks to share surplus stock between projects.

### **What role does education play in your projects in encouraging long-term healthy eating habits in the community?**

Garath answered that education is key but don’t tell people what to do. It’s a natural process. Listening to people is important to find out what the gaps and needs are. Waitrose have donated a large amount of recipe cards to them.

Learning by doing is important as well. Castle Hill are working with local slow cooker projects. If they notice a gap with their clients then they find out who is there locally who can teach and upskill.

Clare commented that education is also about having an intuitive or softer approach, for example having a variety of tools in your back pocket to be able to help someone.

Garath said they looked at the top 15-20 things typically found at a food bank and created recipe cards and step by step guides for what to cook with them.

An audience member, Amanda from St Mary le Tower Top Up Shop, said she worked teaching physical education at a local high school for years and highlighted the importance of grassroots education, and that schools are where we need to teach young people about budgeting and nutrition. There is a lack of teachers at the event today – possibly due to a lack of money/resource to give them time off to attend these types of events.

Emma agreed and said children can be food activists. The trouble is that teachers are now dealing with more than education e.g. potty training. There are lots of pressures on schools and resources are lacking, so food may not be a priority.

Susannah said they often host school trips at their gardens for the children to engage with gardening activities. It’s wonderful to see how well they engage and how excited they get. Some go on to become young activists in their family who insist on salad in their sandwiches. The older age group are harder to engage with. They have had children refuse to eat potatoes as they came out of the ground and had mud on them. There’s still work to be done.

An audience member commented that packaged food has become normal for young people. We have just been through a pandemic with a heavy focus on cleanliness and sterilisation so this is understandable.

An audience member added that behaviour change is important but when you look at somebody's health, behaviour change is only 20% of this. The world we live in is the biggest driving influence to health. Teaching someone to cook is lovely but if they are working 3 jobs or living poverty then they are not going to do any of this. East Suffolk County are doing some amazing projects, looking at community but also having those conversations around housing and finances.

Clare said this comes back to Maslow's hierarchy of need.

There are foodbanks who don't have time to do referrals to move people on as they're too busy feeding people. But if foodbanks are too busy feeding people and are not able to address the underlying issues we are not doing well.

A teacher from the audience highlighted whilst they can do what they can in the classroom around cooking and budgeting skills, if the school lunches remain so shockingly bad then that is not setting the right standard and is having a massive impact.

#### **What support could authorities/funders/policymakers give to community food initiatives to enable a focus on health?**

Garath answered that Councils need to work with community groups and listen to their needs. This will make it easier to develop a framework going forward.

Clare said there is an opportunity to have a shift on outcomes. We are so focused on high level outcomes such as GDP, we need a shift where health is prioritised. So from the very start of setting up a project, health is its key aim, and the successes in terms of health can be monitored throughout the project.

Emma said it's important to recognise that there is no food strategy and we are driven by corporates. Charities have to rely on funding.

An audience member said the elephant in the room is that community food projects are dependent on volunteers, which is great as it brings in people from the community, but projects need trained people to lead.

An audience member highlighted that they haven't touched on the health benefits that you get from food. Although food may be fresh, it's nutritional value may be low because the land it was grown on is poor. The strategy should be around supporting local producers who can then support local communities. The land needs to support us and we need to be connected with it. Better connection to our food is needed, which would then reduce food waste and negate the need for a middle man.

#### **What works well in your community to support access to healthy food?**

Ran out of time for this question, but comments were submitted via QR code.