

Headlines from Energy Plus Academy Think Tank

**Food Matters:
How growing, sharing and preparing food can help communities
and the planet**

31st March and 1st April 2022 | Trafford Hall, Chester

Introduction

On the 31st March and 1st April, the Energy Plus Academy organised a 24-hour Think Tank at Trafford Hall to explore the link between food and climate change, and how communities can eat more sustainably whilst supporting people in food poverty. Participants discussed ideas for setting up community growing projects, running redistribution schemes, reducing waste, and eating more sustainably in their own homes. The event was attended by representatives from housing associations, councils, gardening groups and organisations working to tackle food poverty. This headline report presents the main findings and key points from the event.

Key Findings

1. **The way we eat has a major impact on the planet**, from the energy used to grow and make the food, the miles it travels, the packaging used, and the amount of food we waste and throw away. To help tackle climate change we need to transform the way we eat to include more seasonal and locally produced food, with less reliance on meat and animal products. It is also crucial we cut down on plastic packaging and reduce the amount of food that ends up in the bin.
2. **More and more people are struggling to access healthy, sustainable and affordable food**. It is calculated that 9% of the population experience food poverty, and the Trussel Trust has seen foodbank use rise 123% in the last 5 years¹. Community projects that involve both growing food and redistributing food can help people eat more sustainably while also providing food for people in need.
3. **Many people in food poverty are living in “food deserts”**: areas with little access to affordable supermarkets stocking healthy, sustainable food. In many places people have to take an expensive bus ride in order to access a proper supermarket. Community food distribution schemes can help by bringing healthy food to these areas. One group has a cargo bike that they use to deliver affordable fruit and veg where these aren't available affordably.
4. **To encourage more sustainable eating, people need the know-how and to cook alternative, low-cost, sustainable meals**. We heard examples of people being given vegetables by food schemes but not knowing how to use them in a meal. Bolton at Home has a volunteer who works with a community garden to cook meals for the community using the produce; they provide recipe cards so that people can cook the

¹ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/whatisfoodpoverty/>

meals themselves at home. Cracking Good Food, a charity helping people to access and cook healthy, sustainable food, provide workshops for children, using surplus food from the local area, to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence around cooking and preparing food.

5. **People also need advice to help them grow their own food, either at home or in a community garden.** Garden Organic run a Master Gardening scheme which empowers people to share their knowledge of gardening with other members of the community through a peer-learning scheme.
6. **There are many barriers to people being able to prepare healthy sustainable food beyond just being able to afford, or get hold of it.** People often think it is more time consuming to cook “from scratch”, particularly for those working long hours and with busy lives. Furthermore, even when people do have the know-how, they may not have the necessary equipment to prepare or store food. Cracking Good Food runs a low-cost food delivery scheme which includes easy to cook, energy efficient recipe ideas that require only the most basic equipment.

Another concern for those on low incomes is the worry that preparing healthier, more sustainable foods could lead to wasted time, effort, and money, for example if children do not like the new food. It can feel much safer to buy something that you know they will eat, and avoid wasting money.

7. **Reducing food waste is key to tackling climate change.** Currently we waste around 1/3 of the food we grow and buy nationally. There are a number of different ways this huge waste can be reduced, both at home and on a wider scale.
 - Some groups work with local farmers to carry out “gleaning”, going into farmers’ fields and picking surplus crops that would otherwise be left to rot. This food is then distributed to people in need and used in community cooking projects
 - Many community food projects collect surplus food from supermarkets that would otherwise be thrown away. They then redistribute it to people in need. One group ran a scheme that delivered a 15kg bag of surplus vegetables to 100 households each week, all of which are in the 15% most deprived areas or “food deserts”
 - There are lots of cooking tips that can reduce waste, for example using vegetable peelings to make soups or stocks, using stale bread to make breadcrumbs which can be used as a topping, etc.
 - Batch cooking and freezing food can ensure that food is preserved before it goes off. The frozen portions can also save time in the future when a quick meal is needed
 - Only buying what you need will minimise food waste. People should buy loose fruit and vegetables where possible, to get the right amount (and avoid unnecessary packaging). If this is not available, buying big bags of produce can be economic and can be shared with neighbours
 - It is important for people to understand food labels. Just because something is past its “best before” or “display by” date, does not mean that it cannot be

eaten. If it is past the “best before” or “display by” dates, but looks, feels, and smells OK – it is usually fine to eat or cook with

8. **Community food growing projects bring clear benefits to both people and the planet.** They bring people together, which reduces social isolation, and can increase pride in the local community by improving the appearance of unused space. Gardening also has many benefits for physical and mental health. A community organiser for the “Men in Sheds” project, which offers a community space for men to come together for activities such as gardening, woodworking and crafting, received feedback that the project had transformed the life of someone who had suffered with serious mental health problems for many years, by allowing him to meet other people and build a support network.

Community gardens benefit the planet by protecting green spaces and increasing biodiversity. Planting can also improve air quality and soil when crops are grown organically, which increases the fertility of soil. By growing food locally, you also reduce reliance on food that has travelled hundreds, or even thousands of miles, reducing ‘air mile’ pollution. Community growing projects can also increase awareness of nature and provide a platform for wider conversations about how we can tackle climate change.

9. **Sharing food can be a powerful tool in bringing communities together,** by improving community cohesion and linking together groups that might not otherwise mix. The Chopping Club in Bootle runs regular events where people can come together in the library to communally prepare and eat a meal together.
10. **Larger organisations** such as housing associations, can be crucial in giving communities the skills training, funding and expertise necessary to set up a food project. However, projects become more embedded if they are community-led and if there is an aim of becoming self-sufficient and self-sustaining to continue running more or less independently in the long-term.
11. **The COVID-19 pandemic** and lockdowns have had a big impact on community food groups. The pandemic highlighted the increased need for food support in low income communities and encouraged community food groups to connect with people for the first time. For example, Cracking Good Food delivered 90,000 meals in the first year of the pandemic, engaging with people they had never previously had contact with. However, the restrictions also made it more difficult for people to come together physically in community spaces. Groups worked hard to keep community projects running in the pandemic, setting up strict “bubbles” and rules around who should be allowed on site at what times. Even though restrictions have lifted, many people are still nervous about COVID-19, and it important that groups work closely with anxious participants to make them feel safe and ensure that they are not excluded.
12. **Giving people access to healthy, sustainable food can only partly solve the much wider problem of poverty.** We need to address the wider reasons why people are

struggling, or are experiencing food poverty. Bolton at Home run *Urban Care and Neighbourhood Centres* (UCANS), which are one-stop shops offering a wide range of support. When people come into the centre to access the food pantry, they are encouraged to set up an appointment with the Money Advice and Energy Advice teams. This provides a more holistic approach to tackling food poverty in the context of wider financial exclusion, and can help people access valuable support that they did not know existed.

Conclusion

Food insecurity is a growing problem, and we cannot be completely reliant on third sector organisations to provide people with food. There is a need for more support schemes, such as free school meals and school holiday meal projects, to ensure that everyone has access to healthy, affordable food. It is important that these support schemes have long-term, sustainable funding. The government needs to find ways to counter rising food prices and create a more cohesive, more sustainable, national food policy. The government also needs to ensure that all communities have access to healthy, affordable food, and to the opportunity to food growing projects.