

FOOD POVERTY

Plymouth City Council

Grow, Share, Cook - Plymouth's response to food poverty in the city

Grow, Share, Cook is a volunteer-based project in Plymouth that addresses food poverty, healthy eating and building social connections. Since 2014, it has:

- Provided 23,360 meals to 1,611 people
- Involved 86 volunteer growers, drivers and cooks with some of the cooks drawn from people who themselves have been receiving food bags
- Resulted in 85% of those who have taken part, saying they now have a healthier diet and 89% saying that Grow, Share, Cook has helped improve their cooking skills

Back in 2012 Plymouth Council held a Fairness Commission consultation, asking residents what it is like living in Plymouth and their views on disparities and inequalities. One of the things that stood out was food poverty. Levels of hunger in a 21st century English city shocked people.

In 2014, Plymouth successfully applied to the Nesta and Cabinet Office proposal to bring the US initiative Cities of Service to the UK. Started by Michael Bloomberg when he was mayor of New York, Cities of Service encourage communities and volunteers to help with priorities for the city. Rather than volunteers doing many different things, Cities of Service focus them on a small number of priority areas in order to have a bigger impact. Being a City of Service allowed the appointment of the Chief Service Officer and Grow, Share, Cook was one of the projects that received funding.

Grow

The question was "How can we use volunteers to help feed the people we know are going hungry?" Using advice from a linked project in Florida which had a similar aim, Plymouth identified land for allotments and encouraged volunteers to start to grow food for others.

Realising they would need scale, they talked with Tamar Grow Local, a social enterprise that involves small local growers and communities to raise awareness of local produce and sustainable production. From the discussions came the idea of a fortnightly 2kg bag of 5 vegetables for £5. Below commercial price, this would contain potatoes, onions, carrots and 2

other seasonal products and would supplement the allotment produce as needed. The Council funded a year's supply of these for 100 households to receive a free fortnightly bag delivered to their door.

Next came the identification of those 100 people. About one third were families who are considered 'troubled families', a third referred by food banks and the other third were put forward by the social housing partner in the project, Plymouth Community Homes.

Share

At this stage they had the 'Grow' and the families identified. The next step was to create the 'Share'. A van was donated by Plymouth Community Homes and deliveries to homes and blocks of flats were made by volunteer drivers. The project really started to take off; the human contact of the drivers going to where people live, meeting them and putting them in touch with others.

Cook

Next was the 'Cook'. Some families had said they did not know how to cook and did not have the equipment. Recipes and ideas for using the contents of the bags were included within them along with peelers and other requested items.

Cooking sessions run by Food is Fun were arranged in neighbourhoods with families having to go to three cooking sessions to continue to get the food bags. At the sessions they filled out a survey on the impact the project was having on their eating habits and lives and so fulfilled a requirement of their enrolment and the Cities of Service funding.

The sessions turned out to be about more than cooking. Connections were made. Food became a language and a common factor. People saw each other again and again. They have formed recipe groups and supportive networks that have endured beyond the end of the project.

Impact and the future

As well as the impact described above there have been other spin offs. At a Pots and Pans Amnesty, 216 pots and pans were donated by Plymouth residents which were then redistributed to Plymouth residents in need. Also, the same supply chain of fruit and vegetables has been used to assist the city's soup run network.

The project has received further Nesta and DCMS funding to deliver Grow Share Cook to 100 households where a member of the family has recently been diagnosed with, or is on the cusp of developing type 2 Diabetes. A pilot project was held during 2017 for 20 households and indications are that Grow Share Cook contributed to a better diet and better management of the condition. In the majority of cases, it showed a marked improvement.

A project that required Council initiative, external funding and a dedicated resource has become sustainable through the involvement of local businesses and communities themselves.

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