



VOLUNTEERING

Plymouth City Council

Cities of Service - Grow, Share, Cook

What is Cities of Service?

The Cities of Service impact volunteering model builds on the work of former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who pioneered the approach, designating New York as a service city and creating opportunities for thousands of citizens to serve their community.

When Mr Bloomberg became Mayor in 2002, he said the following:

"When I became Mayor, I had a million volunteers in NYC doing a million different things. Imagine the difference they would make if they were directed to one or two things. Imagine the biggest problems you have in your city and what you could do about them if you had the numbers needed to make the difference."

When he ceased his office as Mayor in 2013, he had developed the idea of Cities of Service, a programme that harnesses the power of volunteers to address strategic city issues. It is a clear call to action for a new relationship between Councils and communities where problems are tackled together - residents find their own solutions to a place's biggest issues but are surrounded by support from the local authority.

Many other cities have replicated the approach. Today in the United States and the UK, the Cities of Service coalition includes more than 300 cities, successfully mobilising thousands of volunteers to improve their communities one task at a time. Volunteers give their time on high impact initiatives in the service of others and their local areas, with cities sharing successful strategies to ensure the most effective initiatives are copied by others.

Why did Plymouth do it?

The Plymouth Fairness Commission report published in 2014 spent a year of listening to Plymouth citizens to find out what they thought was unfair about the city. Listening told us that citizens were tired of so-called consultations which were anything but. Many said that decisions affecting their communities were imposed from outside, while their concerns about important aspects of their communities were ignored. The Fairness Commission

agreed that it was time to try a new way of putting communities back in the driving seat. Access to healthy affordable food was one of the things highlighted by the Fairness Commission that citizens said they were concerned about. The Commission found that "many people are not accessing a balanced diet with the majority of convenience food being high in fat and salt" and "There is a need to broaden people's understanding of food, where it comes from and how to cook it". Access to affordable healthy food was becoming a growing challenge for sections of Plymouth's community. Plymouth Foodbank had seen over 8,000 users in a year for the first time and almost 25,000 meals had been given out by the city's soup run with more women and children using the service than ever before. Things were desperate.

What did Plymouth do?

Cities of Service is true democracy in action. It enables local authorities to ask its residents for assistance and it enables those residents to be part of the solution. It promotes the idea that everyone has something to offer no matter how small and creates a team around a problem therefore sharing the load between the public sector and residents. As a result of the community engagement undertaken by the Fairness Commission Plymouth City Council worked with volunteers to co-design Grow, Share, Cook handing the power to local people to find the best solutions to addressing the challenge of the provision of accessible, affordable food.

This volunteer led project has seen volunteers grow food in and around the city on council land and on private land owned by farmers in and around the Plymouth area. This produce is then shared with beneficiaries via volunteer drivers and volunteer cooks then assist the beneficiaries to use the produce via community cooking sessions. Essentially, disadvantaged households receive a free vegetable bag delivered to their doorstep once a fortnight for a year as a kick start to a healthier diet.

Due to the success of the project and at the request of a group of GPs' in the city who heard about it, Plymouth City Council worked with them to develop Diabeaters which is Grow Share Cook for people on the cusp of, or who have just developed Type 2 Diabetes. This is against the background of almost 14,000 people in Plymouth having Diabetes with the number expected to grow by six per cent each year. Finally, Plymouth Community Homes, the city's largest social housing provider has adapted the project to deliver New Home, New You which provides free fruit and vegetables to new social housing tenants.

Who was involved?

Plymouth City Council Integrated Commissioning Team and Nesta currently joint fund Grow Share Cook. They work with Tamar Grow Local/Food is Fun (two local Community Interest Companies) to manage the project, enable a new yearly cohort of 50 families to receive free fruit and vegetables for a year, deliver support and advice to the existing 250 families who have completed the scheme and the 50 families who are the current cohort. They also manage and support the 158 volunteers who work on the scheme. Plymouth City Council also provides a project manager to oversee the scheme and to fundraise as needed. The project was overseen by two steering groups; the Executive Group made up of the Council's Cabinet who made recommendations to the Delivery Group consisting of volunteers and delivery partners. This enabled shared thinking and action by the people who know their place the best. The Delivery Group was independently chaired and made the final decisions

on the project with all members having an equal say in how they want to address the issue and achieve the ultimate goal.

What about the numbers?

At the start of the programme, Plymouth wanted people to eat a healthier diet as a way of kick-starting a healthier lifestyle. They have now worked with 450 Plymouth households and have delivered over 55,000 meals to almost 3,000 individuals which is no mean feat and held well over 300 community cooking sessions over the last five years. The first cohort of 50 Diabeaters started in September 2019 and are showing early promise in terms of improvement to their health and wellbeing (i.e. their diet is improving and they are reducing the number of times they feel they need to visit a health professional).

As part of the Grow Share Cook condition for receiving the free fortnightly food bag, participants are asked to complete a quarterly “interview” with a volunteer asking them a set of questions linked to a number of metrics that measure the impact of the project. To date 274 households have completed a full year’s worth of interviews and we have established that as a result of Grow Share Cook: -

- 99 per cent of the people stayed with the project for the full 12 months
- 85 per cent of households now have a healthier diet
- 86 per cent of the people now regularly use fresh fruit and vegetables when they didn't before.
- 90 per cent of people stated they have visited a health professional less in the last 12 months as a result of the project.

Do people like it?

The reason why Grow Share Cook has been successful is because the people taking part (both beneficiaries and volunteers) have been the key developers of the project and Plymouth City Council have been the facilitators. The cohort has decided what vegetables should be grown, what recipes would be demonstrated at the community cooking sessions and what other extras are needed for the ongoing success of the project e.g. volunteers advised that a lack of pots and pans were a real issue for some of the households taking part. So Plymouth City Council held its first pots and pans amnesty where the citizens of Plymouth provided over 200 pots and pans to distribute to people on the project. This level of trust where power is handed over and the project takes the course as decided by those people either directly delivering it or directly receiving it has been a key change of mind-set and a key reason why the project is agile and continues to be impactful.

The project gives people the kick start they need to improve their diet and subsequently, their health and wellbeing. When Plymouth completed the evaluation of the project, they asked people what they most liked about the project and the overwhelming response was that it was delivered by “people like them”. It didn’t judge or stigmatise or label. It simply addressed an issue working with people and not working at people.

The local findings were also backed up by a very positive independent evaluation completed by Plymouth University that called Grow Share Cook “an exemplary and inspirational project that magnifies the power of people”. It found that of the 25 random sample households they asked who completed the full year, 21 were now buying fresh fruit and vegetables as part of their weekly shop where they hadn’t before, and 23 of them were cooking from

scratch at least five times a week where they hadn't before. In addition, 18 of the regular Grow Share Cook volunteers have been on the scheme themselves as a beneficiary and two residential cooking groups have started from families/households that have completed the scheme who live together in the same blocks of flats.

What about the volunteers?

Grow Share Cook currently has 158 regular volunteers (defined as volunteering at least one day a month). 134 are growers growing fresh produce on sites in Plymouth and the Tamar Valley, eight are sharers driving around the city delivering the produce and 16 are cooks working with people in communities on gaining skills around cooking, food knowledge and food preparation although many of the volunteers do more than one volunteering activity. There are slightly more men than women volunteering, and eight per cent of the volunteers are over 50 years old.

Isn't it just another growing project?

Grow Share Cook is unique in that it delivers the three linked elements of the project to a consistent cohort of people. There are other volunteer led growing schemes in the country and other volunteer led cooking schemes in the country (and indeed, many of the volunteers do this type of volunteering as well), but Grow Share Cook is the only project that delivers to an end goal – a volunteer growing a potato, which is then delivered by a volunteer to the plate of a beneficiary who has been shown how to cook that potato by a volunteer. As far as Diabaters is concerned, it is, we believe unique in that it is a healthy eating programme that addresses the social reasons why a healthy diet is difficult for some families. This in turn then looks at the positive effect a project like this that addresses disadvantage can have on a specific medical condition i.e. Type 2 Diabetes. It is also the flagship healthy eating project for Plymouth City Council and has enormous support from both the executive team and elected members across all parties.

So what next?

Grow Share Cook has a waiting list of 62 people who would like to get involved as volunteers who are waiting to be trained and 42 households who would benefit from being beneficiaries. This is with very little advertising. There are also two GP's consortia representing 15 individual GP's who want to link into the Diabaters project. In addition, Tamar Grow Local (who look after the volunteer growers and sharers) operate an on-line service for people who want to buy the fruit and vegetable bags direct. When they do this, an on-line customer has the opportunity to buy a suspended bag for a Grow Share Cook beneficiary. Plymouth is looking at expanding this even further to include opportunities for businesses to contribute through their corporate social responsibility commitments. To date, 55 suspended bags have been bought which has enabled the project to include a further two families for the year.

To sum up, this is Pat's story

Patricia (Pat) is 75 and lives alone in a low rise block of flats in Plymouth's City Centre. She has family, but none of them live in Plymouth. Pat's day consists of walking to the city market to buy what she needs for the day. This takes her around 30 minutes each way as Pat has arthritis and cannot walk quickly. Also, Pat makes this journey every day because she cannot carry much in one visit due to her condition. Apart from this journey, Pat does not leave her flat and spends the vast majority of the day on her own. Pat was approached by a

member of staff from Plymouth Community Homes to take part in Grow, Share, Cook as she knew that Pat had a passion for cooking. Pat attended the first cooking session with 10 others from the block of flats. This was the first time she had attended anything based at where she lives. She signed up for the food bags and agreed to attend the cooking sessions. 18 months later, Pat is eating more fresh fruit and veg because they are delivered to her door. Pat still walks daily, but this is to visit others in the block of flats where she lives and she still walks to the market when she has to, but she does this with her friends and not on her own anymore. Pat is also a member of a newly formed cooking group based in the block of flats sharing recipes, cooking for each other and swapping contents of the food bags. She also is on the rota to tend to the rooftop garden that residents have developed. She has formed real lasting friendships and she tells us that her arthritis is not “playing her up” as much as it used to. She no longer feels lonely.

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