

‘But the curry house is cheaper...’: Food and Health Inequalities within Communities in Bradford

Charles Watson, Royds Community Association

Interactive workshop looking at the difficulties facing people living in deprived areas who are trying to live on low incomes. The workshop focused on the work of the Royds Alive! Healthy Living Program in Bradford, and touched on themes from food poverty and unhealthy diets, through to health inequalities and government policy.

Background to the project:

Royds Alive is a social enterprise in its fourth year as part of a Healthy Living Programme. There are eight healthy living centres in Bradford, and the Bradford PCT is considering mainstreaming the funding for Royds Alive, such has been its success. Royds works in a community with a high level of social housing, low educational attainment, and a culture where being ‘fit and healthy’ is frowned upon. (Charles commented that those who are seen to be ‘doing good’ tend to leave the community; the only people thriving who stay in the community are the drug dealers!). This culture affects how people react to changing their diets and lifestyles in general, and their willingness to be seen to take an interest in a more healthy approach.

One of the issues that Royds is up against in their community, are the ready availability of cheap takeaways such as ‘burgers, chips and a coke for £1.99’. Many small and independent entrepreneurs are setting up business in places such as church halls. The food, often cooked in hydrogenated fat, fills up tummies and is particularly attractive to younger people. Royds runs ‘Cook and Eat’ classes, and one of the projects has been developing healthy alternatives to the cheap take-away, such as a stir-fry, using garlic, honey and ginger, which can be sold for 99p.

A major obstacle to the long-term sustainability of the Royds Alive! project has been short-term funding from the PCT, as well as an ineffectual approach to partnership working. ‘Health trainers’ were given as a case in point – duplication of voluntary sector work, with little or no consultation with those organisations embedded in the community, such as Royds Alive. Six months will be spent getting to know the voluntary sector and then the funding for the post is cut, and much time and energy has been wasted.

Other issues related to food access that Royds Alive engage with are:

- Mens health (men die 8 years younger in Bradford than in Harrogate 8 miles away).
- Low income
- Oral health
- Infant mortality
- Smoking (especially amongst teenage girls)

- Alcohol use
- Teenage pregnancy
- Obesity
- Mental health

Charles described some of the challenges and opportunities of working with the community on healthy eating projects:

1. Challenges of running healthy eating projects such as ‘Cook and Eat’, food coops etc.

- Perception of food coops being ‘for poor people’
- Chinese whispers such as “bananas are poisonous!”
- A bad batch of fresh fruit one week can put people off coming again.
- Conservative attitudes towards food, particularly amongst men.

2. Positive ways of working:

- Getting on board influential and respected community members to work in partnership with
- Pay attention to the best times to run sessions, such as when people get paid etc.
- Pay attention to the venue
- Get leverage out of times when fruit and vegetables are eaten as part of a festivity or seasonal event, such as Christmas (satsumas), and Halloween (pumpkin), and develop activities that encourage people to eat them all year round (or seasonal produce that’s available at different times of the year)
- Providing training for volunteers in aspects such as health and safety, so that they have a sound understanding of the food they are selling and the regulations around fresh food
- Effective funding strategies
- Reward schemes for volunteers
- Listening to community views
- Giving leadership roles to volunteers and community members, so that shared or sole ownership develops over time.
- Ensuring a high quality of fruit and vegetables at all times.