

Improving Food Access: Growing a sustainable food policy in the West Midlands

Workshop Presenters:

Veronica Barry and Anthony Ashfield (Ideal for All)

Nicole Webster and Corrine White (Sandwell Primary Care Trust)

Sandwell is a metropolitan borough north west of Birmingham. A former centre for industry such as steel and glass Sandwell now has a population mainly on low income, in poor health with high unemployment right across the borough.

However, food and food access is high on the agenda in Sandwell partly due to a borough wide approach encouraged by the area's Director of Public Health, among others. Good lessons have been learned and shared at all levels with effective progress being made in the way local people are changing ways and making healthier food choices.

Veronica Barry and Anthony Ashfield from Ideal for All gave workshop participants an overview of 'Ideal for All' an independent living centre which is led and governed by service users and provides a range of services to support disabled people, carers and disadvantaged groups. The Salop Drive Market Garden is a major community project on a 3.5 acre site in the middle of a housing estate. The garden promotes healthy living and provides increased access to fresh fruit and vegetables. The garden sits within wider food policy work in Sandwell. The garden started off with a derelict site and over the last four years through engagement with user groups and the local community has expanded to what it is today. The garden's produce is grown organically but is not aimed at that market. The garden was originally funded by a range of funds including Community Fund but is now core funded by the local Primary Care Trust.

The garden operates a local delivery scheme providing up to 80 households (mainly elderly and housebound) with fresh produce. The garden also works with local schools by providing cookery sessions and physical activities for the school children. Assistance with healthy, seasonal menus and local procurement is also provided.

Veronica Barry, Nicola Webster and Corrine White described the wider context in Sandwell. This work is very well linked with the Eatwell project in Sandwell, a project funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, Sandwell PCT and other partners. This project funds a wide range of food activities across the borough: **Shopwell** – working with local retailers by encouraging and supporting the sale of fresh fruit and vegetables. This project originally piloted four shops in Sandwell and at present Shopwell are working with 49 shops. In particular, work has developed with a local cash and carry where local shops can get produce at affordable prices, and can have on site training in handling and presentation by a

fresh produce consultant. This has proved very successful and has hoped to improve demand created at grassroots level. However, some shops have had to drop out at times due to issues of competition with local supermarkets.

Slimwell – healthy eating and exercise for weight loss

Cookwell – free six week cookery courses in the local community (Community Food Advisory Training provided to community activists to run cookery sessions). To promote this work food interest groups (FIGS) were facilitated to hold conversations and raise awareness with local communities around food and food issues. This assisted in the drawing up of local food policy and how it was going to be delivered in practice. There has been a particular focus on children and schools work especially with parents and their children for example:

- 'Ready, Steady, Grow': educational and practical sessions at Salop Drive Market Garden
- 'Cook and Taste': 6 week theory and practical sessions including shopping trips and discussions on peer pressure in relation to food choices
- Parents packed lunch programme: balance of good health resources, tips etc.

This focus on parents and children has particularly focussed on the importance of both working together to encourage and partake in healthier food choices. Eatwell also work closely alongside Healthy Schools workers.

Nicole and Corrine gave an example of work that highlights the importance of good joined up activities between various stakeholders:

In an area of Sandwell, two community activists were trained to facilitate cookery sessions. In the same area a local shop owner was keen to work with a local children's centre and local school initiative. Eatwell worked with the shop on its sale of good quality fresh produce and encouraged to supply the local school and children's centre with the produce they needed for cookery sessions facilitated by the community trainers. The school and centre's focus on cooking and healthy eating using fresh produce created a demand for the shops produce. The shop was able to support the local community and its needs for fresh produce. Everyone involved supported and learned from and with each other. This also helped with the schools approach to local procurement. The borough is keen to support local shops and Shopwell have a goal of promoting access within the local community to a shop within 500 metres.

At the moment Sandwell is looking at feasibility of procurement of local food from neighbouring rural areas to the urban borough.

Some Key points

- strong strategic and policy backing/ framework (leadership, local champions , cross disciplinary approach etc) means projects are more likely to succeed. In Sandwell food policy is well supported by the Director of Public Health and other key players.
- Joined up working as outlined in example is very important and beneficial to all.

- Working with local retailers to promote fresh produce sales as well as creating a demand for it from local communities is seen as vital.

Exercise

The group undertook an exercise looking at the following;

- **Each participant was asked to describe their particular project, and group it with other similar projects (e.g. food coops)**
- **The group had to imagine that they were based in Belfast and look at the strategic and working links that could be made between the projects in order to work more effectively**
- **What gaps/ opportunities are available for wider working in order to create a sustainable food economy?**