

Midlothian Community Food Initiative and Food Train Workshop

Presenters

Jen Richards

Arthur Robertson

Jen Richards, Development Manager for Midlothian Community Food Initiative (MCFI), began the workshop with an introduction to the Community Health Improvement & Regeneration Project (CHIRP) and an overview of its structure and its different strands of activity. Arthur Robertson, Development Worker and Volunteer Coordinator for the Midlothian Food Train, went on to provide an insight into the activity of the Food Train and some background to its development.

Background to the Food Train

Arthur provided a brief introduction to the geography, population, composition and recent history of Midlothian region. This helped to explain the emergence of The Food Train and the need for community food activity that would address the needs of an ageing population. Midlothian is situated immediately south of the city of Edinburgh. Its main towns are concentrated in the North, with the Southern half still predominately rural (villages and farm settlements).

Traditional industry was coal mining and to a lesser extent paper & textile milling and farming. Midlothian's largest employment sector is now the public sector and Midlothian Council is the largest employer in the region. Midlothian has a population of just fewer than 80,000, which is predicted to increase by over 5,000 by 2018 i.e. a rise of 6.25%. The population of over 75's is predicted to rise by **30%** over the same period. In the 75 and over age group, women make up 63% and this may have implications for pensioner poverty as women historically have smaller retirement pensions.

How The Food Train works

The Midlothian Food Train was inspired by the Food Train in Dumfries and Galloway, which launched approximately 13 years ago as a result of a regional Elderly Forum Survey that highlighted the need for regular help with shopping as a top priority for elderly people.

Volunteers in Midlothian picked up on the Dumfries and Galloway idea following a news item on Scottish television and decided to try and replicate this model in their own area. The Midlothian Food Train was thus set up 3 years ago. It is run by volunteers under the direction of the development worker/volunteer coordinator. It runs every week over 2 days and comprises 30 members. Members are individuals from the local community, mainly elderly, who have

difficulty accessing good quality fresh fruit and vegetables, and food retailers in general.

The principle is simple: members fill in a weekly order form which is collected by volunteers or they phone in their orders. Volunteers shop in one store on Thursday and Friday mornings, packing the items into boxes and cool bags. The store runs the shopping items through the till and produces individual receipts but debits the Food Train's account and invoices them later. The Food Train then delivers the boxes by transit van to a range of members and collects the money from them as it delivers. This method also allows a degree of social interaction with the members, which is one way that the Food Train seeks to address issues of social isolation in addition to facilitating access to fresh food.

Midlothian Community Food Initiative

Jen went on to describe the wider activities of Midlothian Community Food Initiative and invited questions from workshop participants. She explained that the initiative was essentially targeted at semi-rural and rural areas and aimed, as far as possible, to source produce locally in order to invest money into the local economy.

The initiative's 'Toot for Fruit' van, funded by the Big Lottery, goes out into the community and offers a range of fresh fruit and vegetables, along with store cupboard items and other produce. Mixed fruit and vegetables boxes are made up on Monday mornings and soup bags and vegetables bags (that never exceed £1) are made available to customers in the community. The Christmas vegetable box has proved very popular in recent years. With 60% of customers accessing the van being elderly, Jen highlighted the significant social role that the fruit and vegetables van played in the community. She stressed the importance of listening to customers and tailoring the facility to their needs. Within the context of the day's event, Jen mentioned the successful intergenerational project run at Midlothian Community Food Initiative and passed around photos of the children from the breakfast club and the elderly people from the day centre cooking and enjoying food together.

The workshop concluded with a discussion based on questions from workshop participants - some of the issues raised concerned funding, social enterprise and sustainability, as well as what works well, what doesn't work so well with elderly customers (e.g. exotic fruit and vegetables) and how to engage people around learning new food skills.