



Resilience not reliance

Middlesbrough Food Power Alliance, May 2021

Building local food resilience in Middlesbrough

The Middlesbrough Food Power Alliance has been putting into practice its aim of developing sustainable, long term solutions to the problems of food insecurity in Middlesbrough. It has promoted and supported proactive partnership working, bringing together a whole range of projects to build resilience within communities and to move away from reliance on free food.

Underpinning this approach is the Eco Shop model, which increases access to affordable food in a dignified manner and reduces stigmas attached to food insecurity through being promoted as an environmental, food waste reduction initiative. Central to this is its financial model of a donation of £2 for 10 items, which has been maintained throughout the pandemic. Not only does this ensure the cost of food deliveries from FareShare Northeast are covered, but it also promotes and advocates budgeting for customers, and has been adopted by Middlesbrough Council as an important part of the COVID-19 recovery model, providing a first step away from emergency and free food, such as foodbanks. The model also links with wider health and financial support services to deliver holistic support to communities, further building resilience.

A Virtual Eco Shop (VES) was established as a direct response to the first lockdown when nearly all Eco Shops temporarily closed, delivering bags of food for a donation of £2. The need for this service became apparent very quickly, and the Virtual Eco Shop exceeded their target of delivering 200 bags a week, reaching an average of 300 over 6 months, delivering 6883 food bags (equivalent to 55,064 meals) over the year. It was imperative this vital service didn't just cease after so many people depended on it, so the team worked with a range of partners to help establish more eco shops in the community, and supported VES customers to access those. There are now eight community Eco Shops operating with a further five in development.



“ The COVID pandemic has sent many more families into crisis but we are working on solutions that go beyond the immediate challenge. These are long-term solutions that will have a really positive and sustainable impact in our communities.”

**Joe Dunne, Food Partnership Coordinator,
Middlesbrough Environment City**

As the Eco Shop model is so strong and has proven to work so effectively, it has provided the structure and evidence base for other projects delivered by partners across the town to follow. This has created a growing unified approach led by the Food Power Alliance away from reliance on free food towards resilience.

This profile has led to the Food Power Alliance (FPA) becoming the group tasked by the Middlesbrough Financial Inclusion Group to address food poverty issues, meaning the FPA is consulted and involved in more food poverty related decisions at the council level.

Our challenges and learning

‘You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink’ – we have found that one of the greatest challenges has been trying to convince other providers to follow an approach that has been developed by a range of knowledgeable and experienced partners that provides food in a dignified and sustainable manner that promotes resilience.

By taking a ‘name and fame (not shame)’ attitude, highlighting great practice by partners, this can only help to encourage them to follow the same approach.

Our next steps

To support all of the work highlighted above, we are working in partnership with FareShare NE to develop a surplus food redistribution hub on Teesside. This will provide greater access to affordable food for more Eco Shops and other groups and organisations.

To strengthen the resilience model that is centred around the Eco Shop model, the Food Power Alliance is building an Eco Shop steering group, consisting of volunteers, groups and organisations running Eco Shops and support organisations. The aim of the group is to represent Eco Shops and guide the development of more. Additional funding has been secured to create an online dashboard that will strengthen and enhance the Eco Shop network, making it easier and simpler for more Eco Shops to set up through ease of access to knowledge and resources and peer to peer mentoring support.

“ There is always help and support available at the end of the phone or email. For a small and new project which is just starting out this type of support is invaluable. They provide training, knowledge and access to resources to try and grow the organisation’s work and reach within the community” Sahida Ditta, Project lead, Amal Project

Our key achievements and impact

- Middlesbrough Financial Inclusion Group has appointed the Food Power Alliance as the group to lead on tackling food poverty
- Virtual Eco Shop delivered 6,883 food bags (equivalent to c.55,064 meals) in 12 months
- 22 Eco Shops are now operating across the town - 13 school based and 8 community based
- 5 more Eco shops are in development
- Having a unified, collective approach delivered by a range of partners all adhering to key principles with a strong and trusted brand, this gives confidence and stability to the people of Middlesbrough in very turbulent and changing times.