

## UKRI/ The Young Foundation - Community Knowledge Fund - Open Category Devon Community Foundation. North Devon Food Partnership Project – Phase 1 Report

**Partner organisations:** Devon Community Foundation • OneNorthern Devon • SPACE Youth Service • Lizzie’s Larder & Blackberry Farm Shop • Edds Veg localfarmbox.co.uk • Barnstaple Town Council • Barnstaple Foodbank • OneBarnstaple • OneAtlantic TTVS

*Working with residents in North Devon, we explored innovative ways to engage people and partners in questions about food insecurity, access to local food and cooking with local ingredients.*

### [Project Film – please click here](#)

#### Introduction

The challenges faced by many vulnerable North Devon residents is how to access good quality, affordable food on a regular basis: 24% of households in North Devon face high levels of food insecurity. Yet North Devon is predominantly agricultural with a wide range of food producers and farmers producing high quality, local produce. Our project looked at two specific communities – young people (YP) in rural areas and foodbank users in a small market town. We brought these residents together to engage in dialogue with community researchers, food producers and farmers. By enabling local residents to voice their ideas, interests, concerns and challenges around accessing local food, we have collectively started to investigate, through these community research conversations, how to build bridges between local food producers and local people. We have also had fun making pasties and eating strawberries, as well as hearing some heart-felt stories.

#### What we did

YP from rural areas around Bideford visited a farm twice. On their first farm visit, the YP met the farmer and farm shop owner, and had a tour of the farm. Over lunch, they had prepared a number of questions for the staff. This visit, the lunch and their new knowledge led the YP to request weekly cookery sessions at the youth club using local produce. In response, they had seven youth night sessions focused on local food and developing cooking skills. As their confidence and learning grew, the YP experimented with new tastes: they developed a new flavour of pasty, a ‘Barbie quiche’ (beetroot and bacon) and a blackcurrant turnover, all using local ingredients. The farmer tasted these items and gave feedback. Their enthusiasm spilled over to youth service staff and families – for instance, the YP talked to their family members about sourcing and eating local food, and they started to cook meals at home.

In partnership with the Town Council and foodbank, local residents facing food insecurity were invited to two events in Barnstaple where locally-produced food and recipe cards were made freely available. These allowed the project partners to engage in conversations with residents of all ages from a wide range of backgrounds. Discussions covered growing your own food, the difference in pricing between food-box schemes and own-brand supermarket options, the taste of locally-produced food, the challenges faced by people around access to food and the impact of poverty and inflation on households.

Both projects were carefully recorded using appropriate, engaging methods to ensure everyone had a voice.



## What impact has your project had?

For the young people:

- Many opportunities to interact in meaningful ways with farm settings, especially animals, which brought about a sense of connection, contentment and calm:

*"I loved the farm, doing in a way which was comfortable, not pressured, not rushed. I could soak it up."* Young Person

*"I loved holding a chicken, brushing the horse, fussing over the sheep, stroking a rabbit, cuddling a donkey, feeling the hot breath of a cow and its slimy nose. I got a head-butt from a goat".*  
Young Person

*"Observing people's behaviour and body language when around animals, seeing eyes lighting up or shoulders relaxing and a sense that they felt connected, was really rewarding. It was good to see people feeling the benefits of being involved in this project, to have these opportunities to experience these moments".* Community Researcher

- An engaging learning experience based on the interests of YP:

*"The project has been a great catalyst for starting discussions among the young people around sourcing local produce and cooking. Cooking together at SPACE and then at home was a master-stroke because, having seen the session modelled, they seemed much more confident to go and replicate communal cooking with their families."* Community Researcher

At the foodbank:

- We held two sessions at the foodbank. The second time, many people returned and spoke about the produce which had given them joy, has flavour, exceeds expectations and brings back memories:

*"The strawberries tasted amazing - so much flavour, so much better than the supermarket"*  
Local resident

*"It kept so much longer because it was so much fresher, it tasted of something and had a different texture"* Local resident

- Feelings of shame at not buying local, with a sense of sadness at life being so challenging in terms of time and capacity to shop locally, and therefore being able to choose what they want:

*"I wish I shopped better. I want to buy local produce and support local farming, but I just don't have the time anymore, and I'm from a farming family. I have a large family and am working. I'll try and do better, I really will"* Local resident

*"Local produce tastes better but I can't always get everything in one place which means it's easier to go to a supermarket."* Local resident

*"The farm shops are too expensive and not always easy to get to. They close by the time some people finish work."* Local resident

*"[One woman] said she rarely accessed local produce or fresh fruit and veg. She spoke about the cost, and difficulties cooking and preparing fresh fruit and vegetables meant that she used tinned vegetables. She was very pleased to have some fresh vegetables. She was more reluctant to speak than others initially but then spoke more freely".* Community Researcher

- Feelings of shame and confusion around food insecurity, using the foodbank and who should help who:

*"[One woman] talked about how she was having to go without because of raising costs but was reluctant to access the foodbank. She had grown-up children who were also reluctant for her to use the foodbank but they wanted to support her but she felt they shouldn't be supporting her".*

Community Researcher

- Families are moving towards partial self-sufficiency (where they can) to ease food bills:

*"I spoke to a local lady with six children who lived in a terraced house close to Barnstaple town centre. She said her weekly food bills had increased by £50 - £60. She was now growing a lot of veg in her back garden in repurposed containers including tomatoes, potatoes, sweetcorn and salad. She had also kept chickens in the past and was considering getting some again as the cost of eggs had risen. She likened the rise in home growing to the war effort and was concerned about families in new builds who did not have gardens to grow produce in. She was very happy to receive the produce and had in mind what she was going to make with it and we shared some recipes – including layering veg in the bottom of Macaroni Cheese which was something I hadn't tried before".* Community Researcher

- People appreciated the chance to share their story, to share their knowledge, be of help, offer ideas, to explain their experiences, and to feel heard and be accepted, without judgement. This unlocks local knowledge:

*"When the Farmers Market was happening, you could at least get fresh local grown fruit and veg, meat and fish. The weekly pannier market didn't always have local produce but there were veg stalls and it did usually have eggs from a local farm and sometimes they had veg. COVID and the closure of the Pannier Market has put pay to all of that now – we need a Farmers Market back again."*

Local resident

## What we learned

- It was important to let the conversations evolve naturally around the interest of community participants, hearing people say out loud the things we hoped would come through their experiences but without prompt, from a genuine place of discovery and realisation. This method was described as 'fluid' and 'a nebulous method' by some members of the team, which was very different to tight briefs they had previously been familiar with. However, this approach led to team members to become more alert to the local knowledge of the community members involved, as well as their staff and volunteers:

*"When we are passionate and interested in something we are motivated, inspired and invested in it. I've felt driven, energised, and happy working on this project, to have an opportunity to use my skills and knowledge in the hope it will be of benefit of others whilst myself feeling supported and guided in developing and learning through the project."* Community Researcher

*"Through the community research process it's been possible to gain understanding of the strengths and skills within the team, the groups and the organisations involved. We have been able to build and strengthen relationships between individuals, and as a group experiencing something together. It's been interesting seeing people understand and know each other better by the end of the project; to feel comfortable, accepted and held, in a safe space with each other."*

Staff member, partner organisation

*"As food is intertwined into every aspect of our lives, conversations around food often linked into other areas – work, careers, the impact of losing a wife, friendships, travel, family dynamics, disabilities, caring responsibilities - and we possibly veered off at a tangent. However, I felt that it was important to build a rapport and relationship and allow people to tell their own stories in their own words. Food is central to life so it makes sense that life is central to conversations about food".*

Community Researcher

- At times, it has been challenging to balance everyone's needs, expectations and behaviours. Having the resources, scope and capacity to follow the project where it needs to go and do what's needed to help it evolve has taken more time and energy than initially anticipated but has been a hugely welcome way of working:

*"You need time to do this well. You need flexibility to go where the community takes you, for it to be led by them. This all requires capacity and resource, access, and flexible opportunities."*

Community Researcher

*"Having opportunities to shape the project, be hands on with practical experiences, receive information, feedback and knowledge from others, to ask questions, share skills and demonstrate talents, all built confidence, provided learning, motivated us, and inspired people to be involved."*

Community Researcher

*"Working in a way where the community leads the direction and evolution of a project requires loose reins, agility and responsiveness which can be uncomfortable for some who are used to working with more guidelines and targets, or with detailed plans and briefs, or being more directed and managed".* Community Researcher

- The project engaged with YP who were keen to learn about local produce and using local ingredients: in the next phase, we will look to work with a more diverse range of YP, with a focus more on those who might not ordinarily think about their food choices or those who may not feel empowered/curious enough to explore this area. The first group of YP could be 'local produce champions' to encourage others.
- The conversations provided chance for reflection, for people to take a moment and consider their choices, and perhaps what they could do differently in the future, why they choose to do what they do, shop/eat what they do, where the power is held and how they can shape the local food systems.
- The project has demonstrated that crossing geographical boundaries and working in a flexible way brings benefit to a project. This approach also brings in multiple skills, strengths and support through creative and collaborative working with new partners.

*"By being 'allowed' to experiment, to be involved, the first steps towards change in how we engage with communities have been taken."* Senior Manager, partner organisation

- Doing research in this way with creative and dynamic ways of reporting, has been an opportunity for community members to experience the benefits of community research processes.

*"When you're present, listen with compassion and accept people where they are, they tell their stories, feel heard, valued, and engage in a way which provides benefit to them and the project."*

Community Researcher

*"You don't have to be an academic to be involved in research – everyone has something to bring, to contribute, of value".* Young Person

- The initial outcomes of the project, although currently small-scale, shows how community research can be central to reaching target audiences to improve the health and wellbeing of our communities.
- Through the relationships made during the project there is potential to connect with other partners and research projects, for example exploring mental health and food in young people. This linking can provide more opportunities and therefore additional benefits across the county and especially with residents.

