

## **Food and Our Future in the West Midlands**

### ***Food Poverty, Access and Health***

The Food and our Future event on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2014 kicked off a much needed policy- and action-orientated debate on the impact of developments in the production, distribution and consumption of food on the lives of all of us in the West Midlands. Organised by a partnership between the Lunar Society, Localise West Midlands, the Birmingham Leadership Foundation, Midland Heart and the Nishkam Centre, this meeting focussed on food poverty and health asking:

- Why are we seeing a growth in the number of food banks and the numbers who depend upon them across the West Midlands region at the same time as we face a growing obesity epidemic, much of it within our younger population?
- What do we actually know about the extent of these issues and their causes?
- What can we do locally to mitigate negative consequences and what local, national and international trends do we have to consider in the short, medium and long term?

The first speaker was Chris Mould, Executive Chairman of the Trussell Trust that, over the last 10 years, has been providing emergency food through a network of over 420 food banks across the UK. It is currently opening 2 new food banks each week and the number of people assisted each year has risen from 61,000 to just short of one million people in the four years from April 2010 to March 2014. He explained that this has been in response to a food poverty crisis: estimates suggest that there are over 13 million people living below the poverty level and that one in five mothers skip meals to ensure their children are fed. One in five employees is paid less than the Living Wage.

Chris explained that according to their statistics, the main reasons that people were turning towards food banks were delays or reductions in benefits and low incomes based on low paid part-time work or zero hour contracts. Two thirds of users reported these reasons in 2013-2014, with almost half citing benefits. More people do not have enough money to afford essentials as the cost of living has increased over the last 5 years, particularly food costs, while incomes have not risen to keep pace. A recent study revealed that people are spending more of their income on food, and taking home less food and food with a lower nutritional value.

Chris described the “simple, effective and replicable model” the Trust operates. Donations of non-perishable food are received from the public and these are sorted by volunteers at the food banks. A locally-established network of professionals such as doctors and social workers, provide vouchers to people in crisis who can then exchange them for three days of food at a distribution centre. These centres provide more than food: equally importantly, volunteers offer emotional support and signpost people who are in difficulty to other agencies. Long-term dependency is avoided as 65% of people who go to Trussell Trust food banks only need one three-day voucher within a 6 month period.

To give a human face to these statistics, Chris played a video of the story of a food bank user, 19 years old Charlotte. She had been in foster care and had not had three meals a day for a period of three months. She had feared being stigmatised if seen leaving with bags marked ‘from a food bank’ but was relieved to find that they were just ordinary bags. Chris concluded by saying that Trussell Trust food banks have thousands of people who have similar stories; Charlotte “tells it as it is.”

Adrian Phillips, Director of Public Health for Birmingham followed with a presentation provocatively entitled: ‘Food and our future: or the latest battleground for macroeconomics, profit and poverty’. He focussed on the evidence of food-related health problems and their causes and on possible policy responses. Obesity is a national scandal: one in five is classified as obese. “We are a big nation; you can recognise us on holiday” commented Adrian. Yet the situation in Birmingham is worse with one

in four classified as obese, including Year 6 school pupils, and even worse in the more deprived areas of the city. Obesity also increases with age with one in three aged 65 to 75 being obese.

Obesity and the quantity and quality of food we eat are related to a series of health problems in the city including coronary heart disease, diabetes, osteoarthritis and breast and bowel cancer. They are also related to Birmingham's children's poorer dental health. Again, these health issues are worse in more deprived areas of the city.

What are the causes of these problems? Adrian said that evidence suggested that it wasn't because on average we were eating more calories: the average intake had changed little since the Second World War. It was because we were engaged in far less physical activity, encouraged by increased use of gadgets and the wider spread of technology that reduced the need to expend energy such as escalators and lifts. It was also because we were eating poorer quality food, encouraged by the marketing efforts of many food businesses in search of profits.

The tendency to eat poorer quality food with a greater fat and sugar content than recommended had been further stimulated by the rising cost of food and stagnant or falling incomes, the quality of food purchased being very sensitive to price. This was a major reason for obesity and related problems amongst poorer segments of our society. A further probable reason was that physical activity levels of people on lower incomes had been reduced with the collapse of manufacturing jobs.

What can we do? Adrian suggested a number of possible beneficial local and national policy changes, some of which were being tried and others, unfortunately, which were not. These included:

- Offering free school meals, but not at the expense of quality and ending of free fruit, combined with good school nutritional standards for all.
- Encouraging school sport.
- Enabling safe and cheap physical activity – why are there so many areas with 'no ball games' notices?
- Including health as an objective in planning policy and decisions so that, for example, walking and biking are encouraged and unhealthy fast food outlets are discouraged.
- Tax changes such as taxing sugary drinks and take-out meals and reducing the cost of fruit and unpackaged food. Adrian bemoaned the lack of support from politicians in the major parties for a tax on sugary drinks.
- Fortification of foods.

Following several points and questions from the audience, Liz Dowler, Professor of Food and Social Policy at Warwick University and a trustee of the Food Ethics Council, provided a wide-ranging perspective on the comments that had been made in the first two presentations and by the audience. She prefaced her talk with the observation that while rising food prices were hitting poorer people, food prices were problematically low for many producers such as farmers in poorer countries and low wage employees in the UK food industry. Food prices had increased much faster than prices in general: between Dec 2007-2012, food prices had increased by 28% against overall inflation of 18% -% - but who benefits from this increase?

Liz also emphasised the need to link together the environmental sustainability of food systems and their social sustainability and justice so that sustainable food systems contribute to high levels of wellbeing within healthy, just societies, that live within environmental limits.

The debate on food systems in Britain had shifted from concern about national food security to concern about household food insecurity, a concept which is broadly equivalent to food poverty. According to Professor Dowler, household food security means that people:

- have access, that is, people are able to grow or have enough money to buy food, and are able to reach shops stocking foods needed for health at affordable prices;
- enjoy the choice to be able to buy food that is safe, necessary and appropriate for a healthy life and for the culture they live in;
- are free from anxiety about whether they will be able to eat properly.

Food security was clearly not the situation the poorest people and families in Britain found themselves in today. Four out of five teachers in a national survey reported that they had observed children coming to school hungry. While one definition of food poverty is the need to spend more than 10% of household income on food, government data suggests that the poorest 10% of the UK's population spends almost 24% income on food, while the richest 10% spends 4%. Access was often a problem; Liz quoted from a study of Sandwell that revealed the presence of 'food deserts' – areas where residents were more than 500 metres from 'reasonably priced shops selling eight or more fresh fruit and/or vegetables'.

Designing policy to reduce food poverty means recognising that it is a structural problem, not an individual problem. Individual and household dietary patterns are influenced strongly by factors at a societal level such as: food prices versus income; where shops are, what is in them and what it costs; the quality of school and workplace meals; and food promotion and advertising. Liz argued that work undertaken on Minimum Income Standards for different household sizes should be used nationally and locally, by government and in the public and private sectors, for wage levels, social protection benefits, and other policies (e.g. fines).

Liz also referred to international calls for a Human Right to Food which would oblige nation states to respect, protect and fulfil food rights as well as identifying responsibilities of non-state actors. States should not impede access to adequate food, and should prevent individuals or enterprises (including corporate actors) from depriving people of access to food at the same time as strengthening people's access to resources to ensure their means to a livelihood and food security. She also referred to the report of the Food Ethics Council's Food & Fairness Inquiry which called for an explicit ethical framework for food policy based on the principles of fair shares, fair play and fair say.

Liz finished by suggesting two 'fairness tests' to guide food policy and action:

- People should have enough money to live at a recognised, agreed, minimum decent level, and not have to rely on charity to eat
- People should be supported in building resilience in ecosystems, common knowledge and spirit, in relation to food, whether in a specific locality, or nationally.

The presentations stimulated a lively discussion from the floor. Points raised included:

- The importance of discouraging unhealthy fast food outlets and encouraging healthy ones and health-conscious cafés and restaurants. The latter could be encouraged in empty shops in the city centre rather than the discouragement one contributor said they had faced. Planning policy and practice has a role to play here although a planner in the audience explained that this was being tried in relation to fast food outlets but it was not easy as a poor impact on health was not a reason to refuse a planning application.
- The power of unhealthy food being cheap was discussed. Sandwell's 'food deserts' were also 'fat swamps' where the cheapest way to counter hunger was to buy a bag of chips.
- Reference was made to initiatives to encourage the use of perfectly good 'ugly food' that didn't meet the presentation standards of supermarkets and to use waste food. The 'Taste

the Waste' campaign in Europe was being reproduced in Britain as 'Love the Taste; Hate the Waste'. 'Disco Salad' which uses food that would have been wasted is being marketed and the Harborne Food School uses left-overs from other sources.

- The value of initiatives that encourage you to grow your own food was emphasised. 'Growing Birmingham' brings together organisations and people from across the city.
- The positive role institutions such as schools and hospitals can play was also indicated. At the Queen Elizabeth Hospital there is a fruit and veg stall, a farmers' market is held on the last Wednesday of each month, fruit trees are being planted and honey collected from bee hives.
- The importance of educating children to change cultural attitudes was touched on. This could be helped by inter-generational work showing how fresh food used to be prepared although the fact that one third of 65 to 75 year olds were obese meant that not all grandparents were positive role models. There was a reference to 'Mama's Blessing' which works in schools and with local community groups to show how food can be preserved and cooked.
- We all have an individual duty to adopt responsible diets ourselves, paying as fair prices as we can, eating seasonally and wasting much less.
- However, it was also stressed that individual and local action had to be complemented by national action and measures taken to negate the negative workings of the profit motive. The negative impact of changes in the welfare system could not be ignored and economic measures which steered the search for profit into non-harmful avenues had to be part of the solution to food poverty, obesity and associated health issues. Demands that the state needed to take action was not counter-posed to individual and local action; indeed, they reinforce each other.
- Part of the solution had to be strengthening the local food economy across rural and urban areas to build resilience and to shorten supply chains. This won't mean that all of Birmingham can be fed from a few fields in its hinterland but it will catalyse economic change that will allow for more sustainable development.
- The positive role of food shops run by minority ethnic owners in some of the regions most deprived areas was highlighted. These often were the main local sources of healthy fruit and vegetables.
- The contributions closed with a powerful statement from the Sikh community's Nishkam Centre which praised the work of volunteers and called on all to make a difference. The Gurdwara next to the Centre serves 25,000 free meals each week through donations and volunteers. The third sector often steps into the gap when others are failing and we should all commit to making a difference.

Kate Cooper (incoming Chair of Birmingham Food Council) from the New Optimists who was the evening's chair, asked each speaker to say what main things they had taken from the event. For Adrian Phillips it was the need to tackle low incomes and the role the Council could play through planning and other policies to incentivise green grocers and shops supplying healthy foods, and the importance of local supply lines. Chris Mould had been impressed by the Nishkam Centre's call for voluntary action. People do like to help their neighbours which was incredibly important. But policy and the role of the state were important too and the government did have to re-examine the economic consequences of short-term decisions. Liz Dowler stressed the importance of speaking out about the problem and what needed to be done. There appeared to be a great number of initiatives in Birmingham and she wanted to hear more about them. Growing things locally was important, bringing people together and connecting things up.

The Lunar Society will be organising follow up events on the Food and Our Future theme, tackling related issues of the environment, the local food economy and diversity, global issues which impact the region and food safety/how do we know what we are eating.

The presentation slides from this event are available on this website here. *(This needs to be hyperlinked.)*

*This summary of the event was prepared by Chris Khamis of CSK Strategies and the Birmingham Leadership Foundation with assistance from Mel West of Midland Heart, Dipali Chandra of the Lunar Society, and Karen Leach of Localise West Midlands, whose blog post about the event can be found [here](#).*