



Building fairer food systems

Supporting community-led change in England's most disadvantaged areas

Poor diet is one of the leading causes of preventable death in the UK. People in areas of high disadvantage are most at risk of diet-related disease and poor health and wellbeing. Through the Food Systems Equality (FoodSEqual) project, University of Reading researchers worked with communities to reshape local food systems in support of healthy diets. We aimed to understand the context of people's lives, their dietary aspirations, and their ideas for local solutions. Communities had direct input into developing city food policies, shaped culturally appropriate dietary guidance, co-developed novel and sustainable food products with enhanced nutrition, and demonstrated that physical and economic access drives healthier food choices.

Policy Recommendations

- **National and local government should reshape food environments** to make healthy food choices the default. This must include strengthening regulation of food advertising (promoting healthy foods and restricting high fat, salt, sugar (HFSS) food advertising in all public places) and extending planning controls on fast-food outlets around schools and hospitals.
- **The Department of Education should strengthen School Food Standards** to ensure school meals are both healthy and sustainable. This should mandate non-HFSS options, require environmentally sustainable and locally or seasonally sourced foods, and ensure all menu choices meet these standards by default.
- **Local authorities should co-develop food policies and programmes with priority communities.** Embedding lived experience in the design process will increase uptake and peer-led behaviour change.
- **Local authorities should invest in community centres to co-locate food, health and social support.** This should ensure safe, affordable spaces are available in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, to offer a safe, non-judgemental space for people to socialise and access health and social care services, good food and physical activity.
- **Local authorities should provide stable funding and infrastructure to enable the key contribution of the voluntary sector.** Voluntary organisations deliver essential food and support services, foster social connection, and reduce pressure on public services. Councils should ensure affordable spaces, up-to-date referral services and volunteer support. The voluntary sector should be coordinated through local authority food action plans to enable collaboration, including joint purchasing of food.



Case Study Highlight: Fresh Street Community

Community partnerships and vouchers for fruit and vegetables

For over a year, we worked with 300 households from disadvantaged communities in Reading and Plymouth. Fruit and vegetables were made available at community centres, from a pop-up stall in Reading, and bag collection and monthly markets in Plymouth. We worked with residents to co-develop other activities, such as cooking classes, recipe-sharing and food art with children. We invited all households to access fruit and vegetables and join other activities. For half of the households, fruit and vegetables were subsidised through a voucher scheme. Our study measured people's consumption of fruit and vegetables, their wellbeing, and food security. We also captured people's lived experiences using qualitative research methods.

Improving affordability and enabling choice are vital

Over twelve months, average fruit and vegetable intake increased by more than one serving per day. People also reported improved wellbeing, weight loss and preparing more food from scratch. Without the vouchers, engagement was low in both locations. This indicates affordability is a key barrier to people eating fruit and vegetables. People much preferred market stalls, where they could choose what they wanted, to the pre-selected bags. We recorded an 11% reduction in levels of obesity, and a 1% drop in blood sugar levels. When we followed up a year after the programme ended, fruit and vegetable consumption had fallen again.

"I have got health issues which were spotted through the community centre and extra health checks ... it's made me realise I need to change a little bit health-wise and this [vouchers and stall] is helping me because I'm getting a more varied diet than what I did before". (Reading)

"I am eating much healthier and lost 4.5 stones since I started using Fresh Street. I like that I am doing more for the community and getting out. Before I used to buy £1 ready meals from value supermarkets which were not making me feel good, but now with Fresh Street, I cook meals from scratch regularly using the fresh fruit and veg." (Plymouth)

Councils are sustaining and scaling our approach

The monthly market stall is continuing with support from Plymouth City Council. Reading Borough Council is using available funds (such as the Crisis and Resilience Fund) to continue subsidising neighbourhood provision of fruit and vegetables at food pantries and local shops. This will run alongside health and social care activities at family hubs.

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This work was supported by UK Research and Innovation through the Transforming UK Food Systems Strategic Priorities Fund (Award reference BB/V004905/1.)