



Footing the bill or thinking ahead?

Constructive food and health policy and practice in the face of austerity

A roundtable discussion organised by Community Food and Health (Scotland) held in Norton Park Centre, Edinburgh on 31 July 2012

CFHS invited key individuals with a wide range of roles in relation to food, health, anti-poverty and policy development to share their thinking on constructive approaches to address increasing food poverty. Visits to two community food initiatives before the discussion allowed participants to hear direct experience from those working at the front line.

The discussion started from a shared concern about reports of increasing food poverty and demand for emergency food assistance. Equally, there was a concern to craft policy and practice responses that are progressive and empowering rather than regressive and potentially fostering dependence.

Definition

The group explored the range of different approaches to defining and understanding food poverty. The 4 A's of access, affordability, availability and awareness in the Scottish Diet Action Plan were thought to be useful, but perhaps not contextualising the issue particularly in the light of the scale of recent change. A rights based approach may move thinking from food as a gift to food as a basic human right for all. There was also a concern to engage with the trickier issues of personal responsibility, skills and aptitude and where this fits with wider structural approaches. While it was recognised that food can be a key component of everything from environmental justice to economic growth, the consensus around the table was that we are dealing with an issue of social justice.

There was also recognition that food is complex and it can be difficult to create a simple narrative to inform policy and practice. The range of different concerns around food poverty, food security, obesity, food waste, carbon reduction and food miles, generate a wealth of stakeholders and interest groups with often competing interests. Food from a social justice, or food poverty, perspective has had a weaker voice in recent years within an overarching policy framework which contains louder voices and/ or more attractive asks. This is not only in the area of food policy, but also in relation to the anti-poverty framework and health inequalities.

'Let's see food embedded in holistic services rather than people just taking away a bag of groceries.'

'We have a responsibility to work together to create services we can be proud of.'

'The time has come to restate social justice in relation to food.'

'The challenge is to build a clear narrative around a complex picture.'

Data

Understanding the scale of the need for food assistance and the wider experience of food poverty in Scotland was a key concern. There were questions about whether the increase in food banks is a reliable indicator of increased need and also whether we are in danger of exaggerating need and fermenting concern. There are generic definitions of food poverty and food security and established models for collecting data that can be adapted and adopted to build the evidence. It may also be possible to draw on existing Scottish and UK data.

'Let's get the facts behind this...is the problem real, is it immediate, is it chronic?'

Supporting assets

Food can be transformational. We know this from the impact of food work across communities. There are examples of food being a crucial way into work around alternative economic models and building food systems that are equitable, accessible and inclusive. There were numerous examples around the table of food as a medium to build skills, self esteem and social interaction. It was suggested that change will be built from these 'little things' and that too often these interventions are not regarded as important or strategic. These are the community assets that will ensure sustainability and require long term investment.

'We need to build in the DNA for the future.'

Shared vision and values

Building a shared vision was seen to be core to moving forward. This would provide a direction of travel for policy and practice and a benchmark against which to measure progress. The nine year vision that was established for homelessness policy and practice in Scotland in 2003 may be a useful model here.

'We can then talk about stepping change and not step change.'

Building from a shared vision, it was agreed that it would be important for practitioners to explore the values underpinning their work and develop a shared ethical framework to inform practice. This could work to build and reinforce good practice across the sector.

'Guidance for those delivering, developed by those who have genuine practical experience.'

Voice

There is a high level of activity across Scotland and interest in grassroots approaches, but this has not to date translated into influence. A challenge for many around the table was how best to achieve this and strengthen the sector's voice. It was agreed that this required further exploration but will be an important element in the Scottish Government's commitment to food advocacy.

'It's about informing and inspiring.'

Moving forward

In the final part of the session, participants reflected on what they could do within their organisation and context to address the issues. Action by individual organisations and in new partnerships were seen to be key to building responses that relieve immediate need while at the same time building solutions for the longer term.

'The sector must have the capacity and confidence to reflect and respond.'

'We need to translate interest into influence.'

Appendix

Attendance list

Peter Couchman, Chief Executive, Plunkett Foundation

Martyn Evans, Chief Executive, Carnegie UK Trust

Bill Gray, National Officer, Community Food and Health (Scotland)

Isabel Grigor, Chief Executive, The Calman Trust

Peter Kelly, Director, The Poverty Alliance

Ann Kerr, Head of Healthy Living, NHS Health Scotland

Hannah Lambie-Mumford, Phd Researcher, University of Sheffield

Anne Lee, Health Improvement Programme Manager, NHS Health Scotland

Lesley McCranor, Manager, Healthy Valleys

Sue Rawcliffe, Development Officer, Community Food and Health (Scotland)

Geraldine O'Riordan, Development Officer, Community Food and Health (Scotland)

Judith Robertson, Head, Oxfam Scotland

Des Ryan, Chief Executive, Edinburgh Cyrenians

Ian Shankland, Director, Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership

David Thomson, Head of Food, Drink and Rural Communities Division, Scottish Government

Apologies were received from

Ewan Gurr, Development Officer, The Trussell Trust

Leigh Edwardson, Public Health Department, Scottish Government

