

DTA Scotland

GRASS-ROUTES

COMMUNITY PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABILITY

Case studies:

1. Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust
2. Garmony Hydro, Mull & Iona Community Trust
3. Greener Kirkcaldy
4. Newlands Community Development Trust

GREENER KIRKCALDY



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Greener Kirkcaldy was established in 2009 as an offshoot of Fife Friends of the Earth. An explicitly environmental trust from its conception, community growing was among its earliest core activities. Greener Kirkcaldy takes a 'zero-waste' approach and applies this across all of its activities: community growing and fresh produce are used to tackle not only climate change, but local food insecurity, poor health, unemployment and isolation, among others.

LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS & ENVIRONMENTALLY-CONSCIOUS GROWING

Current globalised supply-chains and large-scale agricultural production generate vast quantities of greenhouse gases, with wasteful and inefficient 'cross-hauling' (whereby the same goods are traded between countries rather than consumed within them). Our globalised, industrial food systems are responsible for a third of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions,¹ and the damaging use of nitrogen-based fertilisers has increased by 800% since the 1960s.²

Food security is already and increasingly threatened by rising temperatures and extreme weather patterns,

¹ (Vermeulen, Campbell, & Ingram, 2012)

² (IPCC, 2019)

with the price of some basic foodstuffs expected to rise by up to 29% by the middle of the 21st century.³

Local food systems (LFS) are therefore gaining traction and interest from consumers, academics and policymakers as both preventative and reactive solutions.⁴ A food system describes the processes of production, processing, packaging, distribution, purchasing, consumption and waste of food;⁵ a *local* food system is one that minimises the distance and stages between producers and consumers.

The impact of air miles in food-production is often exaggerated, though can be significant in certain cases; for instance, air-freighted asparagus is six times as pollutant as that produced in the UK.⁶ More important from a carbon-perspective, however, are agricultural methods and processes. Local food systems are seen to “differ fundamentally from the global conventional food system in both structure and culture” with their short supply chains making them the most sustainable sources of food in western countries.⁷ Typically, LFS also demonstrate significant cultural and attitudinal differences, including more sustainable agricultural practices⁸ and production processes. Packaging and processing are key contributors to agriculture’s carbon footprint, but such processes are largely eschewed by local food systems.⁹

In addition to the ecological imperative of switching to more local food systems, there is also an appetite for local produce from consumers: 67% of UK shoppers express a preference for buying local

produce, though only half of UK supermarket stock is British produce, let alone local;¹⁰ and previous research has found a perception of local, seasonal produce as both more sustainable¹¹ and better quality.¹²

Greener Kirkcaldy’s community growing project clearly embodies this ethos of local, seasonal and sustainable produce. Through its training garden and orchard, Greener Kirkcaldy offers a community space where people can learn about and grow seasonal produce using sustainable and organic methods. The Trust shares a seven-acre walled garden with the local allotment group - community land, used for the common good, with a wildflower section set aside to support biodiversity. Volunteers who work in the garden take home a share of the produce they cultivate, with the rest going towards Greener Kirkcaldy’s wider food-projects.

The garden follows fully organic gardening processes and works to minimise the carbon impact of their work; for instance, only peat-free compost is used, and is ordered in bulk and delivered by truck to avoid single-use plastics. The classroom building in the garden is powered by solar panels to minimise its carbon impact.

In addition to its own community growing work, Greener Kirkcaldy offers instruction, advice and training on home-growing, including climate-friendly gardening practices and seasonality. They make sure to constantly and explicitly tie this back to the climate

³ (IPCC, 2019)

⁴ (Fanzo, Bellows, Spiker, Thorne-Lyman, & Bloem, 2020)

⁵ (HLPE, 2017)

⁶ (Carbon Brief, 2020)

⁷ (Shindelar, 2015)

⁸ (Lotter, 2003)

⁹ (Canning, Charles, Huang, Polenske, & Waters, 2010)

¹⁰ (Sterling Choice, 2017)

¹¹ (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011)

¹² (Chambers, Lobb, Butler, Harvey, & Traill, 2007)

crisis, and stress the ecological benefits of these activities to build awareness and engagement.

BEHAVIOURAL AND EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

However, it has been suggested that the potential positive impact of local food systems is likely to be circumscribed by consumer choices and preferences; namely, that “current modern life-styles, expressed by the demand for highly processed convenience products, functional food, and products out of season, hardly fit to an LFS.”¹³ Changes to food choices themselves, rather than just their provenance, will therefore be necessary in order for our food systems to accord with planetary limits.¹⁴

Such dietary changes will likely include reducing red meat consumption, reducing food-waste and eating seasonal local produce.¹⁵ However, there remain numerous practical impediments to the realisation of such changes: from a financial perspective, for instance, consumers face an average ‘organic premium’ of 89% in the UK,¹⁶ and healthy, sustainable and/or plant-based diets have a reputation for being more expensive compared to processed foods.¹⁷ There is also uncertainty over what constitutes a sustainable diet,¹⁸ what produce is in season at any given time, and how to cook it,¹⁹ and previous research has suggested that only dietary changes that

can be “accommodated within [...] existing culinary competencies” are likely to be fully adopted.²⁰

There is therefore a central role for educational and behavioural interventions to facilitate the transition towards more sustainable diets and livelihoods. In addition to its community growing activities, Greener Kirkcaldy also runs a number of educational and behavioural programmes that encourage and facilitate sustainable dietary choices and practices in a practical, impactful and enjoyable way.

Greener Kirkcaldy’s community training kitchen, the Lang Spoon Kitchen, offers courses in food production, planning and preparation. These courses are underpinned by an ecological concern, teaching individuals how to reduce their meat and dairy consumption, how to cook seasonal food, and how to reduce food waste. They support families on low incomes to budget, plan and eat appropriately, healthily and sustainably, and provide volunteering and training opportunities for individuals seeking to gain professional skills and/or experience in food-preparation and catering. They also publish seasonal recipes and tips on using up leftover foodstuffs.

Other educational and behavioural initiatives include encouraging active travel through guided bike rides and lessons to build locals’ confidence using such modes of transport.

REDUCING WASTE

¹³ (Schönhart, Penker, & Schmid, 2009)

¹⁴ (Carbon Brief, 2018)

¹⁵ (O’Keefe, McLachlan, Gough, Mander, & Bows-Larkin, 2016)

¹⁶ (Economics Help, 2019)

¹⁷ (Dixon & Isaacs, 2013; Monsivais, et al., 2015)

¹⁸ (Macdiarmid, Douglas, & Campbell, 2016)

¹⁹ (O’Keefe, McLachlan, Gough, Mander, & Bows-Larkin, 2016)

²⁰ (O’Keefe, McLachlan, Gough, Mander, & Bows-Larkin, 2016)

Given Kirkcaldy's high rates of deprivation, Greener Kirkcaldy works closely with a number of individuals and households struggling with food bills and for whom a wholesale shift to organic, local or seasonal produce is not realistic. For these groups, reducing food waste is a key priority, with the dual-benefits of tackling food insecurity and reducing food-related greenhouse gas emissions.

Greener Kirkcaldy's community fridge takes food from local businesses, shops and households that would otherwise go to waste, and redistributes it to those in need. Operating on a free and open basis - with no referrals and no stigma – this initiative minimises food-waste and tackles local hunger. In 2019-20, the community fridge successfully saved 10.7 tonnes of food from going to waste and fed over 3,000 individuals.²¹ A new community pantry – the Lang Toun Larder – similarly collects surplus food from local businesses which residents can then 'shop' for £2 per week. This serves to reduce waste and build local resilience as a vital preventative complement to emergency food provision from food banks.

CONCLUSION

The fragility of our food systems has been exposed by Covid-19 and Brexit, and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns make such disruptions much more

likely into the future. Local food systems are effective as both preventative measures – given their more sustainable agricultural methods – and responses to this – providing greater stability and security through local, short supply-chains less susceptible to delays or exogenous shocks.

There is also a recognition within Greener Kirkcaldy's work that while disadvantaged communities and groups are likely to have more limited access to green space and environmental assets, they will be disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis and hardest hit by rising fuel prices and food scarcity.

Community growing programmes also appear to be a highly effective 'hook' by which to engage individuals in the wider climate agenda. As familiar, trusted local organisations, trusts like Greener Kirkcaldy appear to be uniquely well-placed to facilitate and drive behavioural change at the local and individual level through educational initiatives.

It has been previously observed that framing climate change in grand political terms might prove inaccessible or irrelevant when compared with – often more pressing – quotidian concerns around budgeting, feeding a family or paying for heating.²² In tackling the latter in ways that address the former, trusts like Greener Kirkcaldy are especially well-placed to engage vulnerable or 'hard to reach' groups that may be otherwise unlikely to partake in the climate agenda. This joined-up approach shows effective and practical ways of addressing local socioeconomic challenges, all the while strengthening the natural environment and reducing food-related emissions.

²¹ (Greener Kirkcaldy, 2020)

²² (Duxbury, 2017)

