# Local food in deprived areas: from ideas to reality

Getting residents from deprived neighbourhoods involved about local food requires specific work to embed food in the community.

Even with a careful design phase that allows for a prototype to be tested, and then reworked upon, a good idea on paper may not work.

Be ready to be flexible as the project evolves once residents can express their needs.
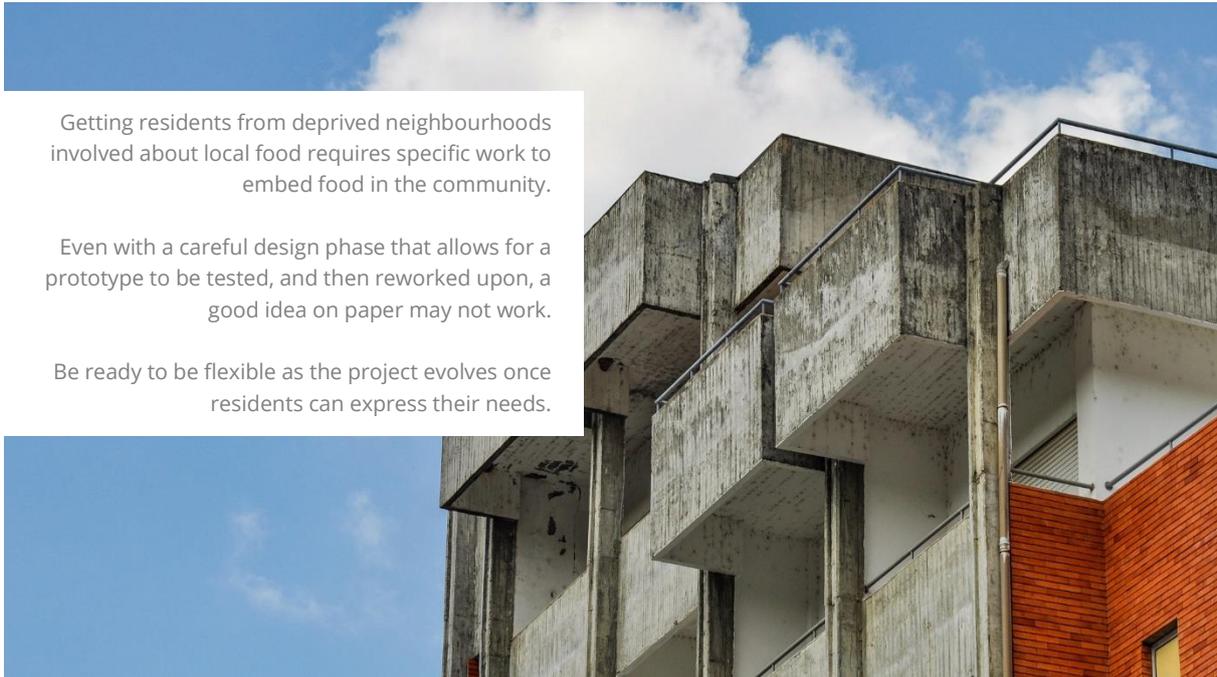
Local food is often criticized for being only accessible to well-off people. So, what does it take to engage people living in more deprived areas? In an article published in *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, researchers from Newcastle, Sheffield and Northumbria universities tell the story of the attempt to develop a food hub in a Newcastle estate. Their account for what worked, but also, what did not, casts a new light on how local food can take root in communities.

From selling food to customers…

Researchers were approached by **a local entrepreneur eager to sell its products to people who are normally not be able to access them**. They then contacted the community centre of a Newcastle (UK) estate and other potential suppliers. They set up their profiles on an online, open-source platform that connects suppliers and customers. The local food hub was born.

However, the community centre staff had reservations regarding it, as they knew there could be a mismatch between the food sold and the local people. For that reason, **a prototype of the food hub was launched in late 2017, with specific attention given to making it possible for people in the neighbourhood to access it.** For instance:

- Orders could be placed by phone or paper if people did not have the Internet, cash payments were possible if they did not have a credit card.
- **Price was cut down as much as possible**. Suppliers accepted to sell their products as wholesale price or with a discount. Indeed, food of equal or similar quality (e.g. organic carrots) was 20% cheaper in the food hub than in the nearby supermarket. However, compared with the cheapest alternative (e.g. non-organic carrots

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from the supermarket's own brand) the food hub was 75% more expensive.
- Special attention was given to make products culturally acceptable. For instance, in meal boxes, recipes were healthier versions of British comfort food. Furthermore, meat and fish were fully integrated into the products range.

The prototype run for a few months, and then the team hit pause to think and reflect about what had happened and where to go next.

… **to developing a food community?**

The first few months had not proven overly successful. The food hub only had 20 unique customers. This prompted researchers and the community centre staff to organise a series of workshops to think of new ways to develop it.

The workshops enabled insights and ideas to emerge, that were later implemented when the hub was relaunched. These were:

- **The need to create stronger connections with the community**. The centre started integrating food hub ingredients in its cooking classes. The centre café created a "food hub special" menu. And the training garden started selling its production through the food hub.
- **The need for a clearer identity**, especially on social media. During the initial phase, communication had been very similar to that of regular supermarkets, with posts focusing on special offers. With the relaunch, the conversation shifted to emphasise what made the food hub specific, i.e. its ethical values. For instance, communication highlighted the way it was supporting local businesses or reviving the local fish industry.
- **The need to move away from seeing people as consumers accessing a service to community members having a conversation about food**, with the food hub being a support to that conversation. Many ideas emerged from the workshops, such as the development of a supper club or a food competition. Anything to make food part of social events to connect people rather than a topic for education.

These new features allowed the food hub to develop a small but loyal customer base. However, the project ended in March 2020 when the Centre had to close because of the covid-19 pandemic.

New roots

Even if the experience was short-lived, Sebastian Prost, the PhD student who was leading this participatory research, highlights that it has an interesting legacy. Indeed, **the original seed of the food hub enabled the community to start a reflexion about food, and to develop its own projects around it.**

First, it put healthy food back on the agenda for the community centre. Whereas at the beginning staff were unsure the food hub would work, they gradually became more and more convinced that healthy food was something they could help bring to the community. Their new café contractor now offers healthier options.

But, **even more importantly, the food hub process made possible exchanges with residents about food**. What emerged was that people
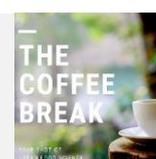
wanted to grow their own food on the Estate rather than buy local food. It gave the community garden renewed attention.

Sowing the seeds of food democracy

There are two key lessons that other cities can take away from this experience:

- **First, technical solutions rarely work by themselves**. At the beginning, the idea was that setting up the online platform would bring food to local people. What the process showed, however, is that for it to be successful, it needs to be embedded into the social fabric, and this in itself requires special efforts. What was seen at the beginning as a very technical endeavour turned out to be more of a social one.
- **Second, be ready to be surprised about where the process leads you.** Even with a careful design phase that allows for a prototype to be tested, and then reworked upon, a good idea on paper (bringing local food to a deprived area through an online platform and a community centre) may not work. But it may not be a problem either. Indeed, in Newcastle, the process proved very valuable to start empowering the local people about food.

In a way, the food hub did not offer so much of a service to local people, but an opportunity to engage with food and think by themselves about what they wanted to do. At a local scale, it sowed the seeds of food democracy.