

# THE VALUE OF VEG IN EASTBOURNE

## Recommendations from Eastbourne communities for better food futures



### FOREWORD

Welcome to this timely 'Value of Veg' report by Eastbourne Food Partnership CIC, part of the Veg Cities Eastbourne campaign.

We need to eat and grow more vegetables in the UK. One in three children eat less than one portion of veg a day and only six per cent of teenagers eat the recommended amount of vegetables. There are economic disparities at play, with the wealthiest eating on average one more portion of veg compared to the poorest 20 per cent of the population. An increase in veg intake is key for improving the health of the nation, but it would also have economic and climate benefits. If the population started to consume the recommended 5-a-day it would support British farmers and would increase the value of UK veg production by £261 million as well as decrease greenhouse gas emissions by 8.2 per cent.

At a national level, politicians and producer organisations often concentrate on high-tech solutions, from vertical farming to heated greenhouses.

However, at a local level, community food growing and cooking initiatives, mechanisms for accessing land for food growing, alongside early years and the education sectors, play an important role to develop skills and ensure communities have access to affordable and culturally appropriate veg.

The 'Value of Veg' report outlines the benefits to the well-being and community cohesion that come with opportunities to grow, cook and eat veg. It draws on interviews with leaders from community food projects in Eastbourne and makes important recommendations for ensuring a veg-tastic future for the borough, including action in schools, developing a good food movement, increasing uptake of free school meals and Healthy Start and creating pathways for access to land through the planning system and other means.

This report is an important calling-card for organisations across Eastbourne to get involved in the Veg Cities Eastbourne campaign and work together to ensure everyone across the borough has access to veg.

**Sofia Parente**

Head of Local Action, Sustain

### A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Our 'Value of Veg' document draws on research conducted by Eastbourne Food Partnership CIC as part of our Veg Cities campaign to increase the production and consumption of veg in our town. It also draws on four years of experience of building relationships with community actors that are already growing, cooking, sharing, saving and eating veg with their communities.

These actors are experts in the pathways, opportunities and barriers to building happier, healthier and more resilient communities through the power of veg.

Whilst we draw on national and regional data and best practice, their expertise is at the centre of this document, in the hope that we can amplify their experiences and drive change towards better food futures for Eastbourne communities.

**Nancy Wilson**, Eastbourne Food Partnership Coordinator

**Callum Chapman**, Freelance Researcher

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to volunteers and team members at: Eastbourne Allotments and Gardens Society, Gather Community Garden, Rooted Community Food, Pevensey and Westham Forest Garden, Feel Good Food, Willingdon Trees Community Centre, Made in Hackney, Eastbourne Food Partnership CIC, JCS meats and Provisions, and individual allotmenters

We thank the team at Sustainable Food Places and the Veg Cities campaign without which we wouldn't have been able to complete this work.

Particular thanks to Gather and Rooted community food for growing the veg depicted in this doc. Full details of the featured projects are on our website at [www.eastbournefoodpartnership.org.uk](http://www.eastbournefoodpartnership.org.uk)

NB. All statements based on third-party data have been fact-checked. A fully-referenced e-copy is available on request. Published by Eastbourne Food Partnership, June 2023.

## WHY DOES VEG MATTER?

At the intersection of community health and planetary health, community resilience and planetary resilience, vegetables represent a huge opportunity for Eastbourne.

### VIBRANT LOCAL ECONOMY

Horticultural production represents an important opportunity for sustainable local development, creating rewarding jobs, and generating significant social and economic returns on investment to build community wealth. With significant proportions of UK veg imports coming from "climate vulnerable" geographical regions, Eastbourne could capitalise on the growth of the domestic horticultural sector, creating a resilient local veg-based economy, insulated from the supply chain failures and price spikes of the industrialised global food system.

### VEG FOR THE PLANET

There are diverse environmental benefits of growing and eating more veg on a local level. From the carbon-capture potential of horticultural soils (when compared with grasslands), to simplifying complex, energy intensive supply chains, to cutting down on food waste by bypassing wasteful supermarket standards. Veg production is also less land-intensive than other foodstuffs and so eating more veg can boost biodiversity by freeing up land for renaturing

## VEG FOR COMMUNITIES - OUR RESEARCH

The community benefits of engaging with veg, beyond the physiological health benefits, are less well-documented but of equal importance. Our research seeks to reflect the benefits of well-being and community cohesion that come with opportunities to grow, cook and eat veg.

### METHODOLOGY

We conducted a series of short individual and group interviews, both in situ at 'Good to Grow' garden open days and separately via videocall. The local actors operate in different food spaces, from allotments to community gardens to retailers specialising in local veg, and we aimed to find out the value of vegetables to them. We were specifically interested in their motives for engaging in growing, the impacts of their involvement, how they have been able to access and utilise vegetables and whether their engagement in their project or growing has influenced their access to vegetables and how it has impacted them and their community. In total, we spoke to 17 people individually and ran 2 group sessions with 4-6 people in each.



### BETTER HEALTH

Packed with micronutrients, macronutrients, phytochemicals and fibre, vegetables in all their diversity are key to good health. In 2019 in Eastbourne, 35% of adults weren't getting the recommended 5-a-day portions of fruits and veg. With five of the six top causes of premature death in East Sussex related to diet, increasing access to veg and engagement with veg in Eastbourne must be a public health priority for longer, healthier lives for its residents.

### FOOD EQUALITY

Access to veg is unequal, with veg being 3x more expensive than foodstuffs high in fat & sugar. Food Foundation's food insecurity tracker has shown that 42% of households experiencing food insecurity have back on their veg purchases (Feb 2023). According to the Trussell Trust over 31,000 parcels of emergency food were delivered in Eastbourne between April 2022 and March 2023. This highlights the extent of food insecurity and subsequently widening health inequalities in the town. Making Veg more accessible is key to tackling food insecurity and inequality in Eastbourne.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Demand for local veg and the space to grow it

Many of those interviewed were motivated to participate in food projects by a desire to access locally grown veg for themselves and their communities. This was also the case for participants of Made in Hackney's 'Plant Futures' workshops, including hospital caterers, community kitchens and HAF providers, who according to coordinator Roshni wanted to encourage people to eat more local veg

John, the proprietor of JCS Meats and Provisions, prides himself on his range of veg sourced as locally as possible via a specialist wholesaler, which he believes is a key draw for his customers. However, John was frustrated by the overwhelming prevalence of supermarkets, a sentiment reflected amongst other interviewees who expressed difficulties in finding outlets selling locally-grown vegetables.

Access to land was equally discussed as a barrier to growing more veg locally. John pointed out the prohibitive cost of land for small-scale farming for a local market. Louise, the manager of Eastbourne Allotments and Gardens Society, indicated the 2-3 year waiting list on the allotments as evidence for the need for more land for individual and community growing. Andy, the director at PAW Forest Garden, shared that many attendees were desperate for a space to grow and that the forest garden provided them with a space to experiment with growing different types of vegetables.



## Diverse & sharing communities

Community gardens provide inclusive spaces that open up growing to people with limited resources (land, time and mobility) to grow food alone. This leads to thriving and diverse communities, mixing generations, languages and backgrounds.

*"People with limited time can come and go with as much commitment as they want but still be part of the community"* - Liz, Volunteer at Rooted

There was a common understanding that everyone on the plot has something to contribute, and learning and sharing new skills was a key draw for many involved, from improving English skills to sharing different growing methods.

Furthermore, many participants are motivated to grow to share with friends, family, neighbours and the community. A Willingdon Trees Gardening Club member expressed delight in being able to leave bags of freshly grown produce on their neighbours doorsteps, "it's so nice for the connections, being able to share what's grown". Another member of the Gardening Club saw their involvement as a way to contribute as a regular user of the centre's Community Fridge.

*"I have the opportunity to grow fresh produce that can be placed in the fridge for others to use which is fantastic to be able to give something back to the community and help others in need"* - Willindon Trees Gardening club member

## Veg as education

Education was found to be a foundation of engagement with veg across the interviewees and projects. The lack of food skills taught in schools was brought up by many different interviewees, as well as decreasing food skills transmission in families, meaning that children didn't know where their food came from. However, projects such as the childrens' allotments at Rooted Community Food and Willingdon Trees created environments for children to engage with food in new ways.

*"Children aren't aware of where food comes from, but they delight in growing cooking and enjoying food... this increases their want to try new foods"* - Liz, Rooted Volunteer and former Forest School lead

Feel Good Food shared their experiences as a nutrition lead in HAF programmes in Eastbourne. They work to make vegetables and other healthy foods fun and accessible for children by capitalising on the natural diversity of fruit and veg. Feel Good Food creates an environment where children can explore their curiosity and actively engage with the food provision, reflecting on their favourite veg and trying new foods. .

*"Kids don't want to eat more vegetables at home but are more open to trying them at the workshops"* - Lucie, Nutritional therapist, Feel Good Food

## Joined-up approaches

An appetite for coordination, evidenced in multi-partner events and projects steered by Eastbourne Food Partnership such as the Seedy Stall at the Towner Gallery, Grow a Row and Good to Grow weekend, was also expressed by several projects wanting to develop frameworks of best practice for community gardens to encourage new projects to start up. Rooted Community Food has already developed a relationship with Signature Nursing Home to develop their community garden.

*"Working together is powerful for Eastbourne... it should be central to community building and improving the diet of the town"* - Sally, Rooted Community Food coordinator

Three of the community gardens we interviewed produce fruit and veg to supply community fridges or kitchens that work to increase access to fresh produce and freshly prepared food, creating links between different projects. This has become a key driving force of Rooted Community Food, which has pledged to grow 1 tonne of cost-free produce for community fridges in Eastbourne from just one plot. There is still work to be done to connect growers and eaters of veg in this network of sharing, to increase familiarity of freshly grown produce.

*"People who used the community fridges were choosing prepared food over our fresh produce... we need to properly understand the challenges preventing people using the food to overcome them"*  
Sally, Rooted Community Food coordinator

## Community well-being

The improved well-being and enjoyment of food that comes from engaging with veg from 'plot to plate' were almost universally cited.

*"It's a mindful activity which ties yourself to the land"*  
Fran Gather Volunteer

For those with long-term mental and physical health conditions, community gardens offer flexible participation and a support network that can be adapted to specific needs. One Gather volunteer, who was referred to the project by Community Connectors to support them with their mental health recovery, found a supportive community both for themselves and their spouse. Alongside the informal community growing sessions, Gather is also host to bereavement counselling in their quiet garden, which is also a popular space for families with autistic children.

*"pulling weeds out of a bed with someone will tell you a lot about their life and provides an excellent opportunity to chat"* - Dave Gather Coordinator



## OUTCOMES

### ACTION AREA 1 - Veg from an early age

Our research has highlighted the benefits of creating safe spaces for children to explore, try, taste, smell and grow veg. Schools and HAF programmes can create spaces that encourage engagement with veg that young people can take home with them.

#### **We recommend:**

🥕 **A Select Committee inquiry into school food**, including: evaluation of universal Free School Meals; a comprehensive review of School Food Standards, including increasing veg portions requirements & school lunch uptake; a review of food education in the curriculum as part of a 'whole school approach'. We equally recommend a parallel inquiry into early years settings.

🥕 **A county-wide review of HAF programme delivery** to produce guidelines for nutritional & procurement best practice and food education to maximise the benefit of the programme to young people and the local economy

#### **Eastbourne Food Partnership's Veg Pledge:**

🥬 To work with schools to create spaces for engagement with families around veg through our *School Food Beyond the Canteen* project

### ACTION AREA 2 - Making connections

Our research highlighted the need for connections between different food projects to share best practice and learnings, and ensure the link between growing, cooking and eating food to increase food-based skills in the community.

#### **We recommend:**

🥕 Longterm funding for food partnerships across the country as part of a **Good Food Bill for England**

#### **Eastbourne Food Partnership's Veg Pledge:**

🥬 To celebrate best practice and develop shared resources that support community food groups to improve their engagement with veg through out Good Food Movement project 🥬 To roll out our 'Grow a Row' scheme to facilitate community sharing of locally grown veg

### ACTION AREA 3 - Investing in local veg

To satisfy the identified demand for local veg, local producers and retailers of veg should be at the heart of local economic development in Eastbourne.

#### **We recommend:**

🥕 **Support for local veg farmers, retailers, and other entrepreneurs** (e.g. vocational training, access to land and premises through special loan/lease options and business rates reductions/ holidays, key infrastructure investment)

🥕 **Procurement policies that set strong standards for inclusion of locally grown veg** e.g. school food contract

#### **Eastbourne Food Partnership's Veg Pledge:**

🥬 To promote and support local businesses that are championing better access to veg 🥬 To research and champion innovative approaches like dynamic procurement to support better veg policies

### ACTION AREA 4 - Plan for veg futures

Our research has highlighted difficulties in accessing locally grown veg and the space to grow it through community farms, gardens and allotments.

By converting just 10% of ~70ha of green spaces included for development in the EBC 2023 Growth Strategy into allotments/ community supported growing spaces, an extra 70 tonnes of veg could be grown in Eastbourne every year, almost 700,000 portions

#### **We recommend:**

🥕 **A comprehensive food growing policy in the upcoming Local Plan, including:** mapping suitable land for growing (inc. meanwhile use, council-owned land & roof space), developing clear pathways to access land for growing; inclusion of horticultural potential of land in development decisions; incorporating standards for growing spaces in new developments; recognition of the potential employment growth of horticulture

🥕 **Co-production of an allotment strategy** to respond to demand and maximise community benefit

🥕 **Inclusion of food security and access to veg in the upcoming Infrastructure Delivery Plan**, in order to: prevent food deserts, increase the allotment/community growing provision in line with town growth, evaluate the impact of new development on existing horticultural/growing spaces such as allotments (e.g. increased run off)

#### **Eastbourne Food Partnership's Veg Pledge:**

🥬 To support growers to develop resilience through our community research on 'Growing in a Changing Climate' 🥬 to support both tier local authorities to engage with Sustain's 'Planning for the Planet' campaign

### ACTION AREA 3. Equal veg access

Many participants were motivated by the unequal access to veg in Eastbourne to share produce with the wider community. These efforts must be reinforced by strategic action to fight veg inequality.

#### **We recommend:**

🥕 **Reinforcing nutritional safety nets** by increasing Free School Meal and HAF eligibility to all families in receipt of universal credit, increasing the impact of Healthy Start scheme by supporting the Healthy Start (Take-Up) bill

🥕 **Borough council endorsement for development of a food security strategy for Eastbourne** that incorporates equal access to fresh produce.

🥕 **Rebalance the cost of unhealthy and healthy foods at all retailers**, including vegetables, so the cheapest options are the healthiest.

#### **Eastbourne Food Partnership's Veg Pledge:**

🥬 To work as part of a local coalition to increase Healthy Start uptake locally. 🥬 To continue our strategic work to coordinate town-wide responses to food insecurity. 🥬 To work with community food support projects to ensure the quality and quantity of veg on offer at an accessible price.

**Business? Community organiser? Policy maker? Public organisation? Individual? You can make your own veg pledge at [www.eastbournefoodpartnership.org.uk/charter](http://www.eastbournefoodpartnership.org.uk/charter)**

