How collaboration can accelerate the pace of change

Food Plymouth - a cross-sector partnership

Overview
This SD story shows how collaboration between public delivery organisations and others can be a powerful driver for positive social, economic and environmental change.

Background
Food Plymouth is a city-wide, cross-sector partnership of organisations and businesses supporting Plymouth’s journey to becoming a ‘Sustainable Food City’. It is led by the three main public sector bodies in the city: Plymouth City Council, NHS Plymouth, and Plymouth University; and is coordinated by the Soil Association.

Results
Identify outcomes that increase the wellbeing of Wales

Evidence
Make decisions using better information

Collaboration
Work with others across boundaries

Long term
Fix the causes rather than the symptoms

Connect
Focus on the economic, social and environmental benefits

Transparency
Measure and report on the difference you make

This is one of a series of SD stories that can be found on the Welsh Government website at http://wales.gov.uk/topics/sustainabledevelopment/
Their shared goal is to create a more sustainable and healthy food provision. A stakeholder group has created the Plymouth Food Charter in order to encourage organisations to commit to sustainable food principles. They have followed this with an action plan based on five key areas: economy, health, community, environment and learning. The Partnership has also engaged various stakeholders through events, marketing materials, a website, and food awards which celebrate best practice.

Why

There were two key drivers that prompted organisations to come together to collaborate on this issue. The first, and most important, was a desire for change. The NHS, Plymouth City Council, and Plymouth University all recognised the existing problem of food poverty and deprivation in Plymouth, and its effects on health, wellbeing, and the local economy. Many were asking the question - why do areas of deprivation and food poverty still exist within a region rich in local food production?

The second was the allure of lottery funding. A Big Lottery funding application provided the catalyst for the partnership as it offered means to make it financially viable and provided an initial focus of activity. Sixty organisations and businesses met, facilitated by local consultants ‘Barefoot Thinking’, to see what was possible in Plymouth, and it revealed that there was a lot of appetite and energy for change.

What they did

Around 30 organisations are now kept informed through regular updates of progress with bi-monthly Steering Group meetings attended by a good representative sample. All stakeholders are given an equal say and the steering group is run in a transparent and open way, assisted by a co-ordinator, Traci Lewis from the Soil Association. This post is funded by the three core public sector partners. A key part of Traci’s role is engagement: “We are trying to keep organisations engaged all the time by asking them for feedback, to let us know what they are doing, to see how it can be a mutually supportive collaboration.”

In order to develop an action plan, to support the delivery of the Food Charter, the stakeholder group split into five sub-groups. Those with energy and expertise for each area met regularly to develop specific goals and actions for 2012-2014. Because people were able to focus on their area of interest, they were more willing to volunteer to do this work in their own time, which really helped to give momentum to the project.

The ‘Sustainable Food City Plymouth’ Action Plan was launched in April 2012. It took two and a half years to get to this point.

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Finding funding has been a challenge for the partnership, as the Big Lottery application was unsuccessful. However the shared vision and initial collective work to develop the business plan was enough to secure commitment from all sides. The three lead public sector partners together found initial core funding for a part-time co-ordinator post. This followed a nine month sustainable supply chain project, around public sector procurement, which was used to develop the core aspects of the Sustainable Food City initiative.

Another challenge has been to get more farmers and food producers engaged with the initiative and to maintain those relationships. As a result the next stage of the project aims to develop more meaningful and practical engagement with the private sector.

The partnership has developed momentum for change and several targets listed in the action plan have already been met:

- The food growing potential within Plymouth has been mapped and documented in a Green Infrastructure report.
- Plymouth University has adopted the Food Charter principles for its own Sustainable Food Policy and have now achieved Bronze Food for Life Catering Mark.
- Plymouth City Council have achieved Gold Food for Life Catering Mark, the first in-house Local Authority Caterer in the country to do this for over 7,000 meals per day.
- Over 20 new food suppliers are now registered on Sell2Plymouth.org web portal.
- A community mobile food hub has been set up with funding secured from the Cooperative.
- Seventeen Plymouth schools are involved in the Food for Life Partnership, with two Flagship schools.
- Over 60 businesses and organisations have now signed up to the Plymouth Food Charter, pledging to deliver new activities which support it.
- There are now over 500 people on the Food Plymouth network and mailing list.

“The Sustainable Food City Plymouth initiative provides a holistic vision and framework which has enabled a diverse, city wide and cross sector partnership of people to come together, using food as focus, to try and find solutions to many serious local and global problems.” Traci Lewis

The collaborative partnership approach has been key to the success of this work. It has brought together everything already happening in the city to create a significant collective impact. The goal to become a Sustainable Food City is part of a journey which has a long way to go. The challenge is too large for one organisation to tackle alone and the partnership approach harnesses the energy of multiple stakeholders to solve different parts of the problem at the same time.
The partnership also allows learning to be shared across the city rapidly with each success and failure showing what works and what doesn’t. It speeds up what can be achieved over a few years.

The approach has benefited organisations across Plymouth. Plymouth City Councils Education Catering Service for example provides over 7,000 meals per day to 70 primary and special schools as well as secondary and primary school academies across Plymouth. The service was the first local authority caterer in England to be awarded the Soil Association’s Gold Food for Life Catering Mark in recognition of the sourcing of local, fresh, seasonal and organic produce and ingredients.

“Being part of Food Plymouth has enabled us get involved with a wider range of stakeholders. Simply being able to ask a colleague in a different organisation but similar position how they would approach and tackle an issue or source a product has opened doors to different methods and potential suppliers.” said Brad Pearce Education Catering Manager at Plymouth City Council.

**What they learned**

The partnership project has been a learning experience; there was no pre-existing blueprint for the project. Inspiration came from Toronto, Bristol, London and Brighton but the delivery programme in Plymouth is their own, and is now providing a template and pilot for other regions and cities in the UK. Project Coordinator Traci Lewis identified the following key learning points:

**Tap into existing energy:** the individual work of the various partners has been led by those with a drive and passion for change. Tapping into this existing energy was key to moving the partnership forward quickly.

**Employ a coordinator:** “I don’t think it can be done without a coordinator, and the fact that I’m not sitting within any of the organisations in Plymouth helps. It means I can be less political, more objective and engage other organisations more easily”, said Traci Lewis.

**Engage key decision makers:** It is really important to identify key people, engage them in a practical way, and keep an eye on who the decision makers are. “Getting key people on board has been core to our approach…you have to develop the relationships and get them engaged any way you can.”

“What has been key is getting the steering group and other stakeholders to understand that they are all organisations who represent Food Plymouth. To keep developing the partnership and network is about identifying the key people in all the different organisations and businesses in the city. Knowing who is putting on this community market, or running that allotment, and gaining their support to spread the word is vital in order to engage the wider community”. Traci Lewis
Local Authority buy-in: An early challenge for the project was getting buy-in at a senior level within Plymouth City Council. “I would have preferred to meet with them straight away. We did have a senior manager on board but he was engaged mostly out of his own interest and wanted to take it slowly to try and get support. This approach however, has paid off and we’ve now been able to get senior management and strategic support from the Council Leader. We are really pleased that they have just recently agreed to provide some match funding for our new two year supply chain project, to support delivery of the Action Plan.”

Key decision makers also move on, retire, and get voted out. As Traci Lewis described: “it’s a constantly moving feast, the key people always change...keeping their support and all organisations involved is vital in order to keep a good profile and ensure that everyone feels they are part of the project”. It is very easy for the partnership to become unbalanced and so a good representation of organisations needs to be maintained.

Public profile is also very important to the success of the project, they have maintained this through a diverse public engagement programme which involves a good mix of; social media, press, events and the annual Food Awards.

Contact and Links

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Food Plymouth
Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens
Soil Association
Bristol Food Network
Brighton and Hove Food Partnership
Barefoot Thinking

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