



Can Community EatWell Initiatives Transform Diet and Health Outcomes?

Exploring the Power of Fruit and Veg on Prescription



Alexandra
Rose
Charity

About Alexandra Rose Charity

Founded in 1912 in honour of Queen Alexandra, Alexandra Rose Charity has a long history of supporting people experiencing poverty in the UK. Our vision is for everyone to have access to healthy and affordable food, and our current mission is to give families access to fresh fruit and veg in their communities.

We are achieving our mission through our Rose Vouchers for Fruit & Veg projects, where vouchers for fruit and veg are provided to those experiencing food poverty, to spend in local markets and greengrocers. Our model has been shown to improve diet quality, alleviate food poverty and create wider social impact by encouraging regular engagement with community services, as well as benefiting the local healthy food economy.

In the last decade, £2.8m worth of fresh fruit and veg has been bought with Rose Vouchers

We have supported 41,670 people, including 10,580 families and 20,068 children, to access fresh fruit and veg and avoid food poverty

With thanks to our funders:

Impact
on **Urban**
Health



With thanks to our partners:



Foreword

It's no secret that fruit and veg are key to a healthy diet. But the amount we eat is at an all-time low. At Alexandra Rose Charity, we hear time and again from families who, despite wanting to, simply cannot afford to put more fruit and veg on the table.

The cost-of-living crisis continues to exacerbate rising levels of food-related ill health and food insecurity. When calories from unhealthy food are two times cheaper than fruit and veg, it makes sense that people will prioritise being full rather than being healthy, but this only stores up problems for the future.

After a decade of experience running our Rose Vouchers for Fruit & Veg project, we knew the power of giving families experiencing food poverty the means to purchase fruit and veg in their local communities. For many years we had been looking for an opportunity to expand this approach to support a wider range of families

and individuals struggling with food poverty and long-term health conditions. So, when we were approached by Tower Hamlets and Lambeth Councils to pilot a Fruit and Veg on Prescription model, I immediately recognised the potential.

I'm delighted to share the results of our first 18 months running these pilots and am very grateful to our funders and local partners who have worked tirelessly to ensure the success of the project.

The results in this report speak for themselves – prescribing vouchers for fruit and veg transforms people's diets and their health outcomes. Now is the time for the government to do the right thing



and progress their commitment to pilot a Community Eatwell Programme and ensure that people suffering with conditions related to poor diet, get the support and means they need to eat more healthily.

Food isn't getting cheaper, healthy food least of all. If we want to see the health of those most in need improve then we need to reorientate the food system to make the healthy choice the easy choice. Innovations like Fruit & Veg on Prescription can play an important role in this much needed change.

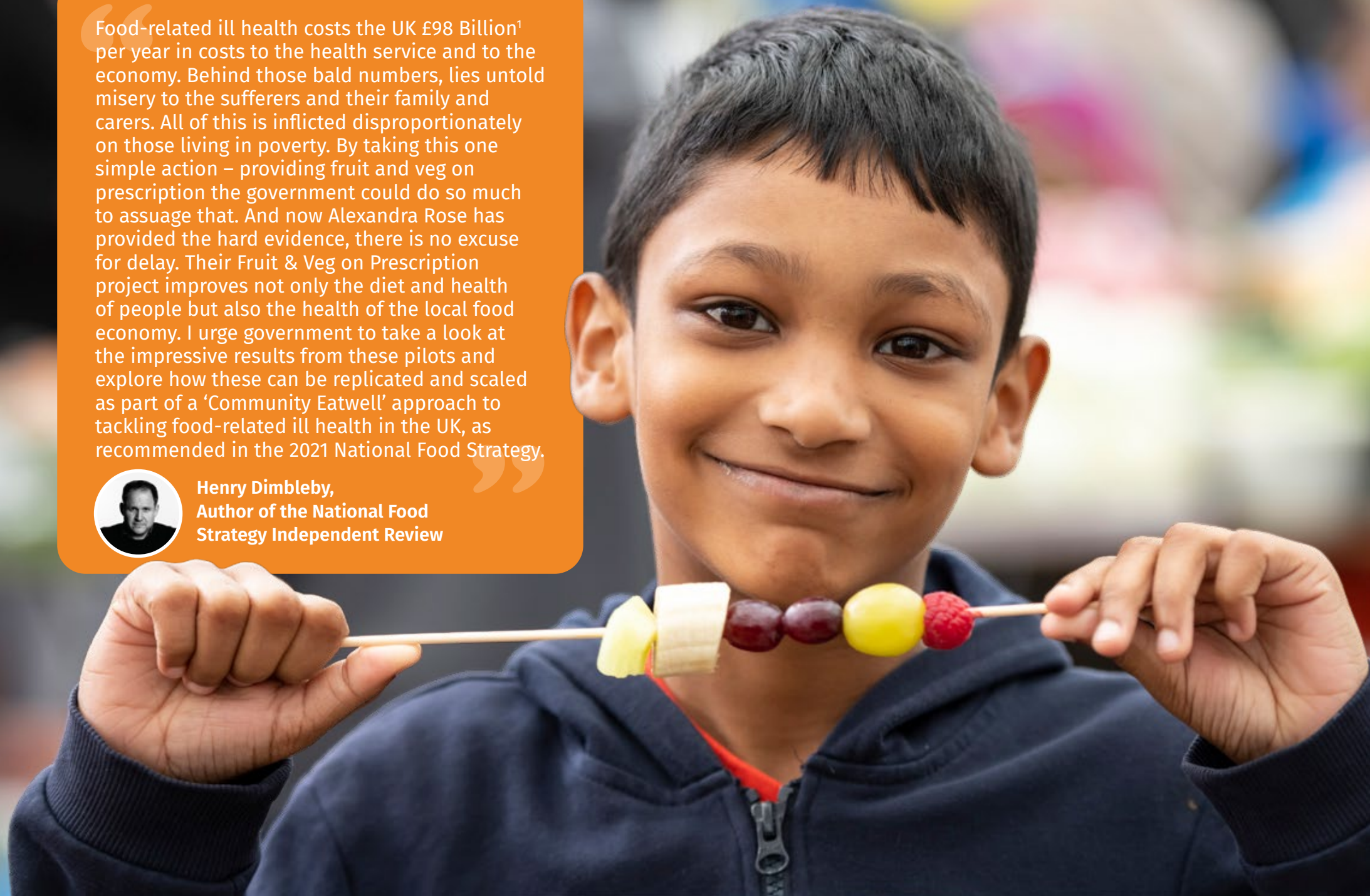
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Pauling'.

Jonathan Pauling
Chief Executive, Alexandra Rose Charity

Food-related ill health costs the UK £98 Billion¹ per year in costs to the health service and to the economy. Behind those bald numbers, lies untold misery to the sufferers and their family and carers. All of this is inflicted disproportionately on those living in poverty. By taking this one simple action – providing fruit and veg on prescription the government could do so much to assuage that. And now Alexandra Rose has provided the hard evidence, there is no excuse for delay. Their Fruit & Veg on Prescription project improves not only the diet and health of people but also the health of the local food economy. I urge government to take a look at the impressive results from these pilots and explore how these can be replicated and scaled as part of a ‘Community Eatwell’ approach to tackling food-related ill health in the UK, as recommended in the 2021 National Food Strategy.



Henry Dimbleby,
Author of the National Food
Strategy Independent Review



Introduction

The food we eat plays a vital role in our health. But what we eat and the options available to us to be healthy are shaped by where we live and what we earn. Rising costs of living, low-paid, unstable jobs, and a food environment flooded with junk food means more and more people are struggling with food poverty and food-related ill health.

Our diet is the leading cause of avoidable harm to our health.² Food-related ill health such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer, is impacting our economy, the NHS, our educational achievement, our labour force and our environment. Fixing our broken food system to ensure the food that nourishes us is accessible and affordable will require bold action, Government commitment and local innovation.

The 2021 National Food Strategy provided a suite of evidence-based, ambitious recommendations on which we could re-orientate our food system. One such recommendation was that the Government trial a “Community Eatwell” programme to provide targeted healthy eating support for people on low incomes.

The pilot programme, as proposed in Recommendation 7 of The Plan, would

give GPs the option to prescribe fruit and vegetables, along with food-related education and social support, to patients suffering the effects of poor diet or food poverty. The Plan suggested that the Government should invite the seven Primary Care Networks taking part in the Government funded ‘Green Social Prescribing’ trial to bid for the chance to design their own pilot programmes, tailored to local needs and building on existing neighbourhood initiatives.

In the 2022 Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities accepted this recommendation, committing to running a three-year pilot, match funded by the Department for Health and Social Care. However, this commitment has yet to be implemented.

In November 2022, Alexandra Rose Charity launched the UK’s first large-scale pilots of ‘Fruit & Veg on Prescription’, working with social prescribers at the Bromley by Bow Centre in Tower Hamlets and community health practitioners at the AT Beacon Project in Lambeth. This report details the impact of the pilot’s first year on participant’s diet and health and the local food economy.

FOOD RELATED ILL-HEALTH

**Costs the UK
£98 billion a year**

**Reduces GDP
by 4%**

**...and costs the
NHS £19 billion
a year**



Why Fruit and Veg on Prescription?

Fruit and veg are the cornerstone of a balanced, nutritious diet.

They are high in fibre and water and low in energy density, which means they can help us feel fuller for longer and support healthy weight maintenance or weight loss.^{3 4} They are rich in a range of vitamins and minerals which are essential for healthy growth and development, immunity and in the prevention of various diseases. Unsurprisingly, diets rich in a variety of fruit and veg have consistently been found to reduce the risk of food-related ill health such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancer.^{5 6}

But we are not eating enough fruit and veg, and the amounts we do eat have barely changed in over a decade.

Only 1 in 4 adults eat the recommended five portions of fruit and veg a day.⁷ Consequently, in 2019 diets low in fruit and veg accounted for 16,000 premature deaths and 308,000 disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) in the UK.⁸

Only 1 in 4 adults eat the recommended five portions of fruit and veg a day



One of the biggest barriers to meeting the Government's '5 a day' recommendation is affordability.

Fruit and veg are the most expensive food group of the Eatwell Guide, costing twice as much per 1000kcal than foods high in fat and/or sugar.⁹ Individuals living on the lowest incomes would need to spend as much as 52% of their weekly food budget to eat their '5-a day'.¹⁰

The consumption of fruit and veg is where the widest dietary inequalities are seen, and the cost-of-living crisis is making the situation worse.

The most deprived fifth of adults eat 37% less fruit and veg than the least deprived fifth.¹¹ What's more, new analysis has found that 60% of households experiencing food insecurity reported buying less fruit and 44% less veg due to the ongoing cost of living crisis.¹²



The international evidence on produce prescription programmes is compelling.

The USA has over a decade of experience in fruit and veg on prescription programmes. These programmes have been found to reduce body mass index (BMI) in both adults and children, hypertension and diabetes in adults.^{13 14 15 16} These programmes are also highly cost-effective - a recent study concluded that over 25 years, providing fruit and veg on prescription to the 6.5 million US adults experiencing both diabetes and food insecurity would prevent 292,000 cardiovascular disease events and save \$39.6 billion in health care costs and \$4.8 billion in productivity costs.¹⁷ This evidence was so compelling that the U.S Department of Agriculture's 2018 Farm Bill committed \$56 million over five years to pilot and expand fruit and veg on prescription programmes across the country.¹⁸



What is social prescribing?



Almost one in five GP appointments are spent on non-medical issues. Social prescribing recognises that people's health is determined by a range of social, economic and environmental factors. It seeks to address people's needs in a holistic way by enabling GPs, nurses and other health and care professionals to refer people to a range of local non-medical community activities, groups and services.

People who typically benefit from social prescribing have complex needs, experiencing social isolation, multiple long-term health conditions and mental health problems and are high users of primary and/or secondary health care. There is a growing body of evidence that social prescribing can reduce pressure on the NHS including reduced GP appointments, hospital admissions and A&E visits, delivering between £2.14 - £8.56 return for every £1 invested.¹⁹

Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is one of the country's most deprived boroughs in England, with 4,767 households, including 3,283 children living in food insecurity.^{20 21} Only 25% of adults.

The Bromley by Bow Centre in Tower Hamlets provides integrated health and wellbeing services built around community-centred approaches, including social prescribing. Individuals who have multiple long term health issues that could be improved with better nutrition are eligible for Rose Vouchers. Eligibility is determined by social prescribing link workers who refer participants for Rose Vouchers.

“We are delighted to be collaborating with the Alexandra Rose Charity. This project not only increases access to fruit and veg but also supports local businesses and improves the health and well-being of residents.”



Dr Somen Banerjee,
Director of Public
Health, Tower Hamlets

Lambeth

Lambeth is the fourth most deprived borough in England, with a third of people living in poverty after accounting for housing costs. Over a third (36%) of children live in food poverty and 1 in 4 children are living with obesity in year 6. Half of adults are overweight and/or living with obesity issues.²²

The AT Beacon Project in Lambeth work alongside communities, organisations and faith leaders to establish Beacon Hubs in safe spaces embedded within local neighbourhoods, such as churches, community shops and a high street barber. The work is led by local GPs and incorporates community nurses who work with individuals who have or are at risk of high blood pressure. Participants receive weekly blood pressure tests alongside picking up their Rose Vouchers.

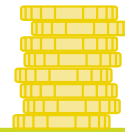
“The Public Health team from Lambeth Council has worked with local providers Alexandra Rose Charity and A.T Beacon to develop and deliver this innovative project. The findings from the pilot are very positive and encouraging. Most importantly, Lambeth residents who have engaged with the project say that the support provided and the opportunity to add fruit and vegetables on prescription to their diet has helped them lead healthier and happier lives.”



Cllr Jim Dickson, Cabinet Member for Healthier Communities



£8 per
week



+ £2
per person in
household



What value in Rose Vouchers do participants receive?

Each person prescribed fruit and veg receives up to £8 per week in Rose Vouchers, plus £2 per week for each household member. The amount per person is based on what a healthy and culturally appropriate shopping basket of fresh fruit and veg would cost from the markets.



WHO IS REFERRED FOR FRUIT & VEG ON PRESCRIPTION?

91% have multiple health conditions including obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, chronic pain, depression and anxiety

85% are unemployed due to ill health

82% are food insecure

82% identify as an ethnic background other than White British

WHAT HAVE WE ACHIEVED IN OUR FIRST YEAR?

194 households have avoided food poverty

672 people have accessed a healthier diet

95% of Rose Vouchers have been redeemed at local markets

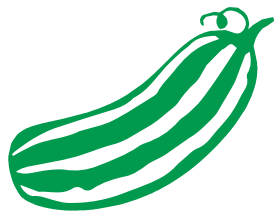
£72k worth of fresh fruit and veg have been bought with Rose Vouchers

What impact has Fruit & Veg on Prescription had?

The following findings are based upon surveys with 60 participants in Tower Hamlets and 31 participants in Lambeth who received Rose Vouchers on prescription. The surveys aimed to capture how Rose Vouchers had impacted the food habits and health of the participants. We also held interviews and focus group discussions with participants, project staff and market traders to understand the wider benefits of the project.

3.2 more portions of fruit and veg a day

80% met 5 a day target



30% tried new fruit and veg



1 People eat more fruit and veg...

On average, participants eat 3.2 more portions of fruit and veg a day and are more likely to meet the government's '5 a day' recommendations as a result of Rose Vouchers. Before the project, 28% of participants ate five portions of fruit and veg a day. This increased to 80% after 8 months of receiving Rose Vouchers, demonstrating how the quality of people's diet improves when support to reduce financial barriers is provided.

“ Before the Rose Voucher I didn't even eat fruit because it takes so much out of my money... but now it [Rose Vouchers] makes a difference, I don't have to spend my cash and I can try different fruit and vegetables.

Zahra, participant in Lambeth ”

“ I used to like snacking on chocolate and sensations crisps, but I now just grab an apple because it's healthier.

Kishar, participant in Lambeth ”

The impact of Rose Vouchers also reaches family members – 45% of household members ate five portions of fruit and veg a day before Rose Vouchers, rising to 80% after 8 months on the project.

By removing the financial risk, participants tell us that they are more likely to experiment with different types of fruit and veg, diversifying their and their household's palates and plates.

...Creating a better balanced plate

Increasing portions of fruit and veg balances the plate more broadly. One in two regular snackers cut down on unhealthy snacks such as crisps and chocolate in favour of snacking on fruit. Veg is also used to bulk up meals, reducing meat consumption.

2 People are more food secure...

Participants reported that Rose Vouchers cover most or all of their fruit and veg costs. The money saved on these items is used on other areas of the household food budget, significantly reducing food insecurity. At the start of the project 82% of participants said they reduced their portion sizes due to worries about food cost. This reduced to 32% of participants after 8 months of receiving Rose Vouchers.

...And worry less about money for food

For many participants, Rose Vouchers make the difference between going hungry or eating enough food. They provide relief from financial pressures with 7 in 10 participants reporting that they worry less about money for food. The 'breathing space' created by having Rose Vouchers helps participants prioritise other needs, supported through other social prescribing activities.

7 in 10 worry less about money for food

1 in 2 people who were regularly skipping meals have not had to whilst receiving Rose Vouchers

This is what a lot of people have been crying out for. I've had a lot of weight loss referrals but have been restricted on what I can do or offer. It's made things a lot more accessible to people, reduced barriers – cost is a huge barrier to eating healthily. It's harder to have a healthy lifestyle when you have all of these other stresses going on.

Alice, a social prescriber in Tower Hamlets



3 Physical and mental health improves...

Increasing the quantity and variety of fruit and veg in the diet, alongside the holistic support provided by the community health hubs resulted in tangible improvements to participants' health and wellbeing. 9 in 10 participants told us that their physical health had improved after eight months of receiving Rose Vouchers for Fruit and Veg. On average, participants reported five improvements to their physical health including increased energy levels, improvements in blood sugar levels, improved digestion and healthy weight loss. In Lambeth, 7 in 10 people with high blood pressure saw an improvement as recorded by doctors and nurses.

Over half (57%) of participants reported that their mental health had improved as a result of the project. The Measure Yourself Concerns and Wellbeing (MYCAW) tool was used in both areas to identify the top problems and concerns of people prescribed fruit and veg, and how severe their worry was about these issues. Over the duration of their time on the project, participants' main concerns decreased from severe to moderate. MYCAW also measures wellbeing on a scale from '0' (as good as it could be) to '6' (as bad as it could be'). The wellbeing of participants across both projects improved significantly from 4.3 to 2.7.^{1 23}

...Reducing pressure on NHS services

Participants are high users of health services, with most living with multiple long-term health conditions, which require regular GP appointments to manage. The physical and mental health benefits achieved by Rose Vouchers resulted in a 40% reduction in GP visits after 8 months of the project. Six in 10 participants revealed that they had reduced their usage of medications needed to control blood sugar levels, iron levels, heartburn and acid reflux, colds and viruses, which may further reduce costs to the NHS.

40% reduction in GP visits within 8 months

71% of participants in Lambeth with high blood pressure have seen this significantly reduced.

3 in 4 who struggled with their weight say they have lost weight or maintained a healthy weight

2 in 3 with fatigue and low energy say their energy levels improve

1 in 2 with fatigue and low energy say their blood sugar levels improve

5 in 6 with digestive issues say their symptoms improve

“ We all know that the food we eat plays a vital role in our health, but sadly we are seeing more and more people struggling with food poverty and food-related ill health. At the Beacon Project we understand the importance of building trust in our community in innovative ways to support those who have fallen through the cracks of healthcare systems as a result of inequalities in accessing health and wellbeing support. We know that change is possible and we see the Fruit & Veg on Prescription project making a significant difference to the health of people in our community. ”



Dr Chi-Chi Ekhaton, General Practitioner and Vice Chair of the Ascension Trust

1 A reduction in one or more points on the MYCAW scale is considered a statistically significant change.



4

People are more inspired to cook...

By giving people the financial means to buy a variety of fruit and veg and reducing their worry about money for food, participants tell us that they've found joy in food and discovered or rekindled their love of cooking. This is further supported by the range of culturally familiar fruit and veg found in local markets and the group cookery sessions offered by community health hubs, which inspire creativity and expression of identity.

...And have greater motivation to take care of themselves

The improvements to physical and mental health provided by Rose Vouchers and the holistic support provided by social prescribers and the community health hubs result in greater motivation from participants to put other healthy lifestyle changes in place, such as exercising.

“ Since I've had Rose Vouchers, I've noticed a difference in how I'm thinking about food. When I'm walking around the supermarket, I have started to look at healthier options. Because I enjoy the veg and fruit, it's like a domino effect - you're doing something good and it's tasty and gives you energy, so it makes you look at other food in a different way. It's like going to the gym, you're not going to pick up a mars bar straight after, because you got a good feeling from it.

Liese, participant in Tower Hamlets ”

5 Rose Vouchers bring people to the community health hubs...

The weekly collection of Rose Vouchers incentivises participants to regularly visit the community health hubs. This enables hub staff to consistently interact with participants beyond their individual social prescribing sessions and in Lambeth, take regular blood pressure readings. Regular, positive interactions with hub staff and other participants reduces social isolation and withdrawal and builds social confidence.

1 in 2 people with low moods and anxiety feel less isolated

On average hub staff refer participants to 5 additional services

...Where they benefit from holistic support

On average, participants benefit from 23 meetings with health hub staff whilst collecting their Rose Vouchers. Both staff and participants feel that this regular contact helps participants build trust and deeper relationships with multiple community centre workers. Over time, hub staff are able to unpick additional challenges that participants might be facing and support with referrals to other groups or services to improve their circumstances and resilience. Participants receiving Rose Vouchers are more likely to engage with another service at the community health hubs compared to those who are not benefitting from the programme.

“If my daughter asks, ‘what have you done today?’ I can say I went to this, and it was great [...] I’ve got something different to talk about. It’s lovely you feel like you’ve achieved something different [...] I felt boring and now I don’t, I’ve got something to offer.”

Abeer, participant in Tower Hamlets



IN TOWER HAMLETS:

50% have attended health and exercise groups

39% have attended nutrition and healthy eating courses

89% have received training, employment or money management advice



£1 in every £5 cashed by local traders is a Rose Voucher

1 in 2 people receiving Rose Vouchers is a new, regular shopper at the local market

£222K has been invested in the local economy since the project began

6

Local food markets deepen community ties...

People with food-related ill health can face additional difficulties navigating public spaces due to limited accessibility and feelings of being overlooked or judged. When asked about their experience shopping at the markets, participants reported that they did not feel judged or stigmatised using Rose Vouchers, as a financial benefit or as a person with a health condition.

Participants told us that they feel valued and visible by local traders who treat them with respect and kindness, often prioritising those with mobility concerns over other customers. Over time, participants build a rapport with the local traders, asking them about unfamiliar fruits and veg and how to prepare and cook them. This deepens community connection, fosters pride in place and reinforces healthy eating behaviours.

...And the community invests in the healthy local food economy

An economic impact assessment of the Fruit & Veg on Prescription Project has found that for every £1 Rose Voucher spent, a further £2.12 is invested into the local economy. This additional investment is channelled back into the local economy via trader spend at local food suppliers, additional cash spent by participants receiving Rose Vouchers at other market stalls and savings to the state via income from markets and avoided unemployment.

Rose Vouchers make up a significant proportion of local market traders' revenue and are crucial in creating demand for a healthy food economy as well as the regeneration and survival of market stalls.



What did we learn?

Our main learnings in the first year of delivering Fruit & Veg on prescription projects in Tower Hamlets and Lambeth are:

1. Skilled, connected and well-resourced **local partners** are essential to deliver the project.
2. **The model is flexible** and works with different types of partnerships and in different settings, and with different groups of people.
3. Regardless of the reason for referral, the **health and wellbeing outcomes are consistent**.
4. The project benefits from a **learning package** that includes food and financial health workshops for the longer-term benefits of participants.
5. It is important to **set clear expectations** about the aims of the project and the duration of time a person is able to receive the vouchers, as well as expectations about engaging with the learning package.
6. It is important to **partner with community health hubs** where services and groups are ongoing beyond the project, so participants leave the project with services and support still available.

Recommendations

Our findings show that Fruit & Veg on Prescription projects are an effective local intervention which have the potential to:

1. **Transform diets, improve physical and mental health and reduce pressure on the NHS.**
2. **Reduce financial stress and food insecurity, whilst narrowing the gap in dietary inequalities.**
3. **Facilitate trust and connection with community health hub teams, improving engagement with services.**
4. **Invest in and create demand for a healthy local food environment.**
5. **Ensuring dignity and choice for those facing food poverty.**

Local authorities should look to develop similar approaches to tackling food poverty that prioritise a cash-first approach, promote dignity and support the local healthy food economy.

We urge the Government to press forward with their existing commitment to pilot a three-year 'Community Eatwell' Programme based upon our Fruit & Veg on Prescription model. To ensure the greatest possible impact, the funding model should enable these programmes to be designed locally, to take advantage of existing facilities and initiatives, and to ensure the programmes respond to local needs.

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Giving families access to fresh fruit and veg in their communities.

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