

Can Farmers' Markets Improve Access to Fresh Local Produce for Families on Low Incomes?

*A Report of a Participatory Investigation
held in conjunction with pilot farmers' markets
in Lewes, East Sussex*

by
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Summary

This small-scale investigation has shown that potential clearly exists for developing ways of improving the access of families on low incomes in the Lewes area. The motivation to provide a healthy diet for their families on a limited budget, and the skills deployed to do so were demonstrated in the first session. There is an awareness that fresh produce though perceived as a relatively expensive component of such a diet, is essential. Interest in finding ways of accessing more of it at affordable prices was high amongst this group of mothers. It is to be hoped that the potential demonstrated here can be built on and put into practice through the appropriate promotion of farmers' markets and the development of some of the range of other schemes outlined below.

Introduction

In several towns where farmers' markets are held it has been found that they tend to appeal to the better off sections of society and have not proved particularly successful in making locally grown fresh produce more accessible to lower income groups. The piloting of the farmers' markets in Lewes in October and November 1998 coincided with the publication of a report by Donald Acheson for the government which highlighted the links between poverty, ill health and diet. The report emphasised the need to improve the access to fresh produce and healthy food generally for mothers and young children in particular. In the light of these findings, we were keen to use the opportunity offered by the Lewes markets to carry out a small-scale investigation locally into reactions to the markets amongst families on low incomes. We were also interested to know their views on other possible ways of making fresh and local produce more accessible. A range of initiatives targeting people on low incomes are under consideration locally.

Consultation Sessions with Local Mothers

Having procured funding we were able at very short notice and with the help of a local infant school to contact five mothers on low incomes (on means-tested state benefits or near this level) who were willing to come to two hour and a half long discussion sessions and to visit the farmers' market. The first session was held before visiting the market and the second a week later. The consultations took the form of discussions based on participatory exercises such as drawing up lists, matrices and spidergrams. In exchange for their participation, and to enable the participants to take full advantage of the market, each was given a £10 token which could be used to buy fresh produce there.

First Consultation Session

Current Diet

The participants were asked to write on a 'timeline' everything they and their family had consumed the day before. All the school age children had cereal for breakfast and school dinners (free to families on low incomes). They also all had some fresh fruit (the school they attend has a policy of allowing only fruit to be eaten at break time). Some children had no fresh vegetables (though the content of the school dinner was not known). The children seemed to fare better than the mothers who generally had eaten very little fresh produce on that day. Pasta, toast and sandwiches provided the staple ingredients of most meals. However, generalisations are difficult to draw from such a small sample and even this snap shot indicated the importance of not jumping to conclusions. One mother, whose own diet consisted mainly of toast and fizzy drinks, nevertheless provided an evening meal of chicken and three different kinds of vegetables for her four children in the evening.

Food Outlets

As a group, the participants drew up a matrix of where they bought their food and what features of each outlet influenced their choice. The three local supermarkets (Tesco's, Safeways and Iceland) were included, as well as the nearest corner shop, and a greengrocer. One person mentioned a 'health food' shop and another an abattoir and a local farmer. The discussion of what determined their choice of supermarket revealed the importance of 'special offers' which they were able to keep up to date with by following TV adverts and by reading the supermarkets' own free magazines (especially Iceland's). Iceland also offers free home delivery for purchases over a certain amount, a significant factor for those without a car. The greengrocer was used because it was cheaper than the supermarkets. One person bought cheap cuts of meat direct from an abattoir and a local farmer. Another family had occasional supplies of Cypriot food provide by family members living in Haringey, London.

Last week's shopping

Participants were asked to draw up a communal list of all the food items they had bought in the previous week. These were then used to form part of a matrix indicating the reasons for buying each item. The fresh produce items listed included potatoes, carrots, mushrooms, onions, peppers, aubergines, tomatoes, cucumber, apples, bananas and clementines. A number of items were bought because the children like them, a smaller

number because the parents do, but by far the most significant factor mentioned was price. Of the 47 items listed, nearly half were from the supermarkets' own brand 'value' range. These included a wide range of basic foodstuffs such as bread, butter and cereals, tinned foods such as spaghetti, fruit cocktail, baked beans and rice pudding, frozen foods such as chips, and only one item of fresh produce - potatoes. Supermarkets have been criticised by the National Food Alliance for not including more fresh foodstuffs in their 'value' ranges. A number of other items were bought because they were on special offer. These included some fresh produce - apples, aubergines and clementines.

Fresh Produce

The participants drew up a list of all the fresh produce they knew of, whether or not they bought it. They then indicated where appropriate their reasons for not buying it. One of the reasons for doing this was to discover whether people were put off buying things because they were not sure about how to cook them. This did not appear to be the case however. Though a number of the 42 items listed, such as okra, fennel and aubergine were unknown or untried by some members of the group, by far the most significant reason for not buying many of the items was that they were considered expensive. Most of the fruits and a number of the vegetables came into this category. In the discussion it was clear that fresh produce generally is considered expensive and that the only reliably cheap source was Brighton Open Market (though none of the women use it regularly).

The relative expensiveness of fresh produce compared with other produce was also emphasised in a brief final discussion of how the participants would spend an extra £5 a week on food. One woman said she would spend it on fruit and vegetables because "When you shop, you buy the basics, then the special offers, then the more expensive things like fruit and veg. They're optional, depending on how much money you've got".

Another said she'd buy more of the 'more expensive fruit and veg', while a third said she'd buy more of the 'buy one get one free' special offers.

Conclusions

In general the first session highlighted:

- the resourcefulness of the participants in their detailed knowledge of the food outlets available and their ability to make use of that knowledge to manage their food buying on a small budget
- the extent to which the choice of individual food items is determined by what's on special offer or forms part of the supermarkets' "value" ranges
- the concern that their children should have a good diet, which was reflected in the tendency of the children to consume more fresh produce than they did (though this is difficult to be certain about from such a small sample)
- the difficulty in accessing sufficient amounts of fresh produce at affordable prices - though they are recognised as desirable, because of their relative costliness, many fresh produce items are considered a luxury

Second Consultation Session

Five days after visiting the market and using their tokens to buy fresh produce, the group of women came together again for a second discussion session.

What was bought and how it was prepared

As well as apples (there were a number of local varieties available at the market) and cobnuts (bought by one person), the participants bought a wide range of vegetables including mushrooms, carrots, potatoes, swede, spinach, chard, peppers, parsnips, broccoli, cabbage, sprouts, pumpkin and squash. Though most of these were vegetables they would normally buy, they did use the opportunity of the market and the vouchers to buy some items less familiar to them (spinach, pumpkin, chard and squash). However the last three of these items, together with Jerusalem artichokes and a 'lettuce type vegetable', were also listed as items not bought by some participants because they didn't know how to cook them. One person who had tried cooking spinach for the first time, burnt it, but she remained undaunted. In fact, of the whole group, she was perhaps the most enthusiastic about the experience of the market, saying "It's got to be fresh from now on for me - I'm converted" and later asked for details of a local organic vegetable box scheme.

The vegetables had been roasted, mashed (all the root vegetables together in two cases for the children and adults alike), curried, stir fried, baked whole (a pumpkin), made into a quiche, boiled or used in a salad.

Participants were asked if they had bought any other items at the market not covered by the tokens. Only one person had bought something (jam). However there was some indication that there were things which they might have bought if they had known what was available and had access to sufficient money on the day of the market (see next section).

The Farmers' Market - likes and dislikes

Participants were asked to discuss and note on two group 'spidergrams' everything they had liked or disliked about the market. This succeeded in eliciting a wide variety of comments both negative and positive.

Criticisms focused on the inconvenience and stress of negotiating the market stalls with a pushchair and toddlers - not enough space and too many queues - and the disappointment at the size of the market - some had imagined it would be bigger with a larger number of fresh produce stalls.

The high price of some of the fresh produce (which was nearly all organic) was also mentioned and one person noted that her child did not like the sight of the meat carcasses (an indication of how rare a sight these are today).

The favourable comments were mainly related to the "busy, lively atmosphere" generated by the market, the "community feel" due to the fact that the produce was local and sold direct by the producers and the fact that it was good to be supporting local producers.

The nature of the food was also mentioned: “the apples were nicer”, “I like the fact that it’s dirty because then you know that it’s fresh, not all prepacked”. They also noted that though some foods were beyond their reach financially others were affordable including the apples, mushrooms, carrots, spinach and potatoes.

Participants were then asked whether or not, given all the aspects of the markets they had just discussed, they would be likely to use a farmers’ market regularly and why. This question was intended to encourage the participants to focus on those aspects which were most significant for them, rather than the whole range of their reactions.

All the participants said they would use the markets but some set conditions. Three said that they would use the market because:

- it supported local people
- it offered ‘real food’ - not standard size or colour
- it was nice to see veg muddy and natural.

The others said they would use the market if:

- it happened on a day when money and time was available (on a Tuesday or Wednesday)
- it didn’t threaten local shops
- it was cheaper

Even though price is clearly a prime consideration amongst people on low incomes, the participants also highlighted the fact that other issues such as the impact of the market on the local economy (rural and urban) and the perceived healthiness of the nature of the food are key factors in deciding whether or not to use the market.

Other ways of making fresh and other local produce more accessible

The rest of the discussion was devoted to other ways of improving access to local and fresh produce in particular. The participants were asked if there was any aspect of their diet, shopping or cooking skills they would like to change and if so how this could be achieved. Some said they would like themselves and their children to have a diet which included more fruit and vegetables. One said that she wanted her five-month old baby to have a healthy diet with plenty of vitamins and goodness. Another said that she would like to know more about how to cook a greater range of vegetables and one other that she would like to know more about spices and how to cook pulses. As for shopping, one person was keen to use supermarkets less and support local traders and producers more.

As no ideas were initially forthcoming about how these changes could be achieved, we put some ideas to the group which had been suggested by other people.

a) Fresh Produce Tokens

Currently, families on Income Support or Family Credit receive Milk Tokens for each child under 5 which are exchangeable for fresh milk or baby milk powder. It has been suggested (in a debate at the TUC Conference in 1998 and elsewhere) that tokens exchangeable for fresh produce might be more effective in improving the diets of children in families on low incomes. This idea was met with general enthusiasm and some scepticism:

- absolutely brilliant
- fresh produce might be more use than milk after the first year
- where could you use them?
- they should be for as long as you get Child Benefit
- they wouldn't give us fresh stuff, just left over tins of beef, but nice idea.

One participant pointed out that tokens might have a dramatic effect - her husband had hardly eaten fruit and vegetables as a child except at Christmas and had become anaemic as a result. She was now "retraining" him.

This particular group felt there was no stigma attached to tokens though they acknowledged that some people might not share their views. Fresh produce tokens have been used in conjunction with farmers' markets in New York and it would be useful to know more about how they operate in practice in an American context.

b) Cookery Clubs

The Health Promotion Unit of Brighton and Hove Health Authority, in conjunction with Community Development Workers have set up a number of cookery clubs, where people are encouraged to extend their basic cooking skills and share the food they make in an informal setting. The comments on this idea included:

- it would have to be in the daytime
- there would have to be a free crèche for babies and kids would have to come too
- it's a nice idea, especially if local people with special skills could come along and share them with us (examples were given of a local Asian shopkeeper who has helped out her customers with Asian cooking ideas and of the husband of one of the participants who is a Greek Cypriot and a keen cook)
- it would be nice if you could bring along veggies you didn't know what to do with

c) Mobile Shop selling fresh and other local produce

Since the farmers' market itself might be inconvenient for some mothers accompanied by young children (a point borne out by the remarks on the stress of managing buggies and queues), the suggestion was put to the women that a mobile shop selling local produce, which could tour the estates in and around Lewes might provide a preferable alternative/addition to the market. This was an idea that met with a good deal of enthusiasm and was already familiar. We discovered from the participants that a fishmonger already sells from a van in some parts of Lewes. Comments included:

- it would be a lot easier than the market if you've got kids
- it would be a good idea, but not just veg - it should have everything
- this would be good in the little villages around us too.

d) Weekly Fresh Produce Stall at Landport

On the Moulsecomb estate in Brighton, Community Development Workers in collaboration with local people, have recently set up a weekly fresh produce stall near the local primary school on Friday afternoons. Fresh produce is bought at wholesale prices from the Open Market in Brighton and sold at low prices by a rota of volunteers (checks are made to ensure they are lower than Asda can offer). A similar idea was proposed for Landport, which is the area of Lewes where most of the participants in our discussion group live. Some or all of the produce could be locally grown. Running the stall would require the participation of residents. This proposal generated discussion of where the stall could be positioned, and how it would operate. Comments included:

- it could be in the playground or in the carpark of the Boys' Club (it can't be in the Residents' Association - selling isn't allowed)
- a good idea - lots of low income people buy mainly frozen
- I'd come from Western Road to Landport for a stall
- now I've tried the market once, I'm hooked - I want more fresh veg- I'd use it

e) Food Co-op

Food co-ops operate in many places. In Lewes there is already one in operation that offers a range of non-perishable foods (many organically produced) and other household goods. The idea has been extended in some areas to include fresh produce, bought direct from local farmers in bulk and distributed locally. This idea could work in conjunction

with a stall i.e. goods not pre-ordered could be sold at a weekly stall. In some areas (e.g. Tower Hamlets) it has been found that as well as improving the access of those on low

incomes to fresh produce at affordable prices, there are other spin-offs including greater community cohesion, and the opportunity for useful work experience for the unemployed leading to paid employment.

This idea too met with general enthusiasm. It was felt that there would be enough people likely to be interested locally for the scheme to work, though more details would be needed.

Future Participation

Finally, participants were asked whether they would be interested in getting involved in the development of any of these schemes. Two of the five women present expressed a definite and keen interest in doing so.

Conclusions

The discussions during the second consultation session indicated:

- that distribution mechanisms such as farmers' markets, by allowing producers to sell direct to consumers, can render some locally grown fresh produce, including organic produce, affordable for families on low incomes (suggesting that other mechanisms, such as food coops or community run stalls, could, by buying in bulk, extend still further the range of produce made accessible)

- the strong appeal of locally grown fresh produce, the perception that it is fresher, more natural and therefore healthier, and an interest in supporting local producers - all findings which reflect those in the general market evaluation (see full report on Lewes Farmers' Markets)
- the aspects of the farmers' market which may make it inconvenient for parents in sole charge of babies and young children (the queues and the difficulty of manoeuvring pushchairs around the stalls)
- the challenge of finding ways of making fresh produce available to those who generally are limited to doing the bulk of their shopping on days when money is available (Saturday may not be the best day)
- the interest in using a range of other, and possibly more convenient, ways of accessing fresh local produce such as mobile shops, and in extending cooking and preparation skills
- the readiness of some participants to become further involved in setting up and running schemes such as food co-ops and local fresh produce stalls
- the significant effect that the discussions and activities themselves, as well as the visit to the market and the fresh produce vouchers, had on stimulating interest and enthusiasm in food issues, as well as a shared sense of the participants' own current skills and management abilities.