



The Incredible Edible UK in 2017



An independent external report
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Introduction

On May 2nd 2017, I began work on a research and story gathering exercise to uncover the journeys of Incredible Edible groups across the UK, and capture something of the character of the UK-based movement as it exists today. In the past three weeks, I have contacted 128 groups via email or Facebook. I received a response from 76 groups, and gathered information (either via a written exchange, or, more typically, with a phone conversation) from 56 of these. The only group I did not contact was IE Todmorden, because their story is largely known already. It is the reason why I am sat here writing about these other Incredible stories right now.

The stories I have heard have been unique and richly diverse, which is hardly surprising given spontaneous and grassroots-led quality of the Incredible Edible movement. I feel privileged to have spoken to so many committed individuals, working with others to make positive change in their communities. Because each group's journey has been so different, and because I have collected and presented this research within a limited four-week time frame, my method, while it has been consistent, has not been rigorously scientific. I have taken a fluid and open approach to questioning, to encourage individuals to speak to me about whatever is most important to them, or difficult about the work that they do. It has been difficult to put groups into categories (they are too individual), and impossible to collect reliable statistics about how many volunteers each group has; they carry out their work in so many different ways, numbers are not useful metrics to measure them by.

However, I feel reasonably confident in saying that of the 129 UK groups listed in the IE database, around 80 are still active. I have inferred this from communications I have had, and my own online research, which has typically involved presuming whether a Facebook or web page is 'dead' or not. Of this figure, by far the largest fraction of active groups can be found in the North West of England (there are around 25), and the smallest in the East Midlands and Northern Ireland (only 1 in each area). There are at least 2 active groups in Scotland but, unfortunately, due to time constraints and a bereavement, I was not able to speak with any groups outside of England and Wales.

The question of what makes the North West of England so special, that so many groups are thriving there, deserves its own separate study, so I have not focused on that here. Instead I have looked for common themes and typical sticking points. Enticing more people to join in has probably been the most talked about issue. There have also been grievances around knowledge gaps (horticultural, technological and administrative), as well as funding and resource limitations, and the inevitable problem of having too much to do and never enough time. Underpinning this, there has also been a great yearning for a need for more contact and greater connectivity between groups.

In the compiling of this report, I have tried to represent the successes, difficulties and needs of different groups, and make comparisons between them to show a more holistic picture of the movement. Group representatives have been remarkably generous with their time, and in sharing their ideas and their group's history with me. There have been too many Incredible stories to share in this report. The examples, and appendaged 'stories', that have been included are here because they illustrate certain points, not because they were the only stories to tell.



Chapter 1: Inspiring Action

So. You've caught the Incredible bug, and you're inspired. Now what? You know the idea is to just get on with it, but how do you get that first Community Plate spinning? Among the groups I spoke to, were a handful that are still at the very beginning of their Incredible journey. I found myself being asked questions like, 'how do I get my group started' [Ellie, in Hoxton], and 'how do patches get a name for themselves?' [Emma, from Sheffield]. I offered some suggestions, but in truth the origins of different groups are as specific and varied as the towns and cities they are grown from. Step one isn't always as straightforward as turning up somewhere and planting some veg.

Sharing the Idea

Founders have used a whole variety of tactics to get the message of what they are doing out to the rest of the community. A common method is to start with a Facebook group, and then organise an event to bring like-minded people together. Cate Barlemoor, for instance, who is the driving force behind a brand new group in Cranbrook, told me delightedly that the group's Facebook page had gone from 0 to 50 in less than two weeks and her two pot luck events have each been attended by over 30 people. This activity has led to donations of seeds, manure, hosepipes (etc.) and the group seem well on their way to taking off.

Other groups may not use Facebook, either because of time, scepticism or because they don't have the skills to know how use it. In these cases, other techniques are used to provoke curiosity and inspire the unconverted: Simon Johnson from The Heart of Pitsea group in Essex, took to the streets to hand out foraged apples to passers-by. He would bag the apples in groups of six, like you might find them in a supermarket, because he knew he would be more likely to engage his community this way. People found this funny, and were happy to stop and have a chat about the idea when they got a free bag of apples. Simon can't say if this stunt had a direct impact, but residents in Pitsea now harvest food from the public beds, and Simon has 8 volunteers to help him.

I was also ticked by Edible Knighton's story of a publicity stunt involving a four-meter-wide, paper-mache apple (with an accompanying wooden grub on a stick), which was smuggled into the centre of town at midnight, and left there to provoke conversation. People did talk, and the stunt made a splash in the local paper, but unfortunately the group's next planned work party coincided with a day of torrential rain, and so anyone whose curiosity had been provoked by the apple and grub, never turned up to find out more. Edible Knighton are one of the few active groups that have no online presence at all. Anne Davies, who I spoke to from the group, said she didn't do Facebook but conceded that this could be something for the group to try.

But while Facebook and other online platforms are useful tools, they are not a self-contained solution for engaging the rest of the community. Many groups with a healthy number of Facebook followers, have expressed frustration at how willing people can seem on social media, but often this willingness doesn't translate to





practical action. It's a lot easier to click 'like', then it is to join in with planting. "You need Facetime," Andy Austerfield from IE Wakefield told me, making the point that Facebook and Twitter are all well and good, but nothing beats being visible and speaking to people in the community.

The groups that have fingers in as many pies as possible, are the ones that have the community plate spinning most comfortably. Groups have come up with ingenious ways of making Incredible Edible relevant to anything happening in their community. For example: in Ramsbottom there is an annual chocolate festival, so IE Ramsbottom will be there with a stall, selling handmade wild garlic and peppermint chocolates; in Ilfracombe, there is an annual Victorian Week, so the IE group have arranged a talk on The Victorian Kitchen Garden and provided catering - rosemary sponge cake, decorated with sugar coated pansies! The other option is to start the community craze yourself and embed the IE philosophy into it (for an extraordinary example of how this has worked, please see 'Story 1: HarFest in Rossendale'). This tactic is considerably more effort, but well worth it if you can think of something that will get people excited.

From what I have found, flourishing groups typically employ a whole range of tactics to get the message out to the rest of the community. No one way works, but a combination of many do. Many groups recognise this, and have told me they feel they could be supported by having more tools at their disposal. In the past, many have made use of the IE TED talk from 2012 at events and in their online activity, but now they need more recent IE media to share - perhaps something that tells a story from somewhere else in the UK. Others have suggested digital assets, such as poster, flyer and website templates, would make helpful resources, because this will either save them time, or enable them to market their activity in a way they aren't able to right now because they lack IT and design skills.

Responding to Culture and Environment

Whatever techniques groups use to speak to people, the role an IE group plays in its community will inevitably be influenced by the specific character and environment of the town or city itself. The way an IE project functions in a small town of 10,000 people will almost certainly look different to a group in a much larger town of 100,000, or a city. In Newtown, for example (a small town in Wales of about 11,000 people), a social enterprise called Cultivate were already championing local food production, consumption and education across the whole town, and so an IE inspired edible food trail was an easy thing to slip into the mix. In a much larger town like Eastbourne, however, where there is a broader variety of demographics, the whole concept of Incredible Edible can be a more complicated thing to communicate. Sara Latimer from IE Eastbourne explained to me that reaching the whole town had been a huge challenge; there is a huge disparity in wealth across the town and each section of the community requires its own approach, which is something the group is unable to deliver right now.

Another particularly interesting illustration of how groups are shaped by their environment is IE Lambeth. The London borough has a population of around 330,000 and over 200 individual food projects. I spoke to Sue Sheehan, who told me that the group had needed to spend a long time thinking very carefully about what their Incredible Edible role should be within this community. It didn't make sense to start a new food project when there were so many others in existence



already; a new group could potentially have had the adverse effect of competing with other projects. IE Lambeth therefore decided to act as a network, or umbrella organisation. They provide a digital platform to promote other projects in the borough, and partner with larger organisations to apply for funding for new food programmes and initiatives. This structure made complete sense in the context of London, where brand and strategy is everything, but it was hard to see how this structure could be applied elsewhere in the UK.

But interestingly, I did come across a few other IEs that see themselves more like networks or umbrella groups. Feed Leeds, which is affiliated with Incredible Edible, appeared to be the most like IE Lambeth in its positioning as a platform to promote other groups, and I expect it is no coincidence that a group like this has emerge in a city. Though, unfortunately, I was unable to speak with Tom Bliss, the project lead, to really gain an understanding of how the two groups compared. There was also IE Somerset, who are now largely just responsible for hosting a website which offers a digital platform for local projects to network, share skills and showcase their work. Caroline Lewis from the group believes around 20 projects across Somerset have registered on the site, but said she was unsure about levels of engagement. She said there were only a small number of posts on the site, but it still received a great many visits and people browsing.

There is something brilliant about the variety of group roles that have evolved out of the IE idea. It demonstrates the explorative character that defines the whole movement. However, another characteristic that defines the whole movement is the idea of action-led change. When some IEs become network-focused as opposed to tangible-action-focused, a gap emerges. While this is not necessarily a problem, and the two ideas are not mutually exclusive, unless the full variety of IE group forms are acknowledged I can see how this could cause confusion.

A handful of groups also articulated a desire for Incredible Edible as a movement to be more joined up with other 'big players,' in local food and health (The Food Assembly, for instance). Not because they felt IE should replicate them in any way, but because other networks may have resources that could prove useful to groups without IE having to duplicate them. Collaboration between organisations that champion local food systems could also help raise the issue in the agendas of the statutory sector. Alexander Clark (AI), of IE Manchester, expressed a point which, though similar to this, was based more around what tips the Network could offer IEs to help them lobby for more concrete support from city institutions. Is there a way of somehow weaving these grassroots projects into the structural fabric of a town or city, so that they don't vanish when group leaders move on or council contacts leave?

Reaching the Whole Community

'If you eat, you're in,' is the mantra of the Incredible Edible movement, and the research I have collected suggests that IE groups are doing an extraordinary job of inviting as many people as possible to be part of the IE idea. It has not been feasible for me to collect the kind of data that puts people into quantifiable boxes, but I have learned that IEs work with: probation groups, young offenders, recovering drug addicts, mental health service users, nursery groups, and nursing home residents (to name just a few). A particularly brilliant partnership can be found between the IE group Veg Out in Barney and Deerbolt prison in Barnard





Castle: Veg Out drop seeds off at Deerbolt and the inmates cultivate these into young plants which are then panted in edible community gardens. The group's name was even invented by the inmates as part of a competition.

While this activity is all admirable, I am conscious that I only managed to find a few examples of groups working with the many cultures and ethnic groups living in our towns and cities. This was not a topic I directly brought up with every group, as it did not always feel like a productive line of questioning, or appropriate given the town or area. But it is something I have inferred from open questions about who are volunteers are, and what other community groups IEs collaborate with.

Groups that acknowledged they hadn't engaged the whole community explained that this was not for want of trying. Derick Knight from IE Leamington Spa, for instance, told me he was making tentative steps towards working with the town's Asian community. He hasn't managed to get anyone growing vegetables with him yet, but he has teamed up with the Chair of the Sikh Temple committee to host three community suppers with some of the 'elders' in the community centre.

I also asked Sara Venn if attempts had been made to engage the rich diversity of Bristol's ethnic groups. Sara told me that IE Bristol (IEB) have done workshops with a Somali women's group in the past, but so far have done little else besides this. "It's a long journey," Sara explained to me. "You have to go in as an interested party [...] not turn up and start preaching." The way Sara sees it, if you, as an outsider, become too obsessed with trying to find ways to get other groups growing, you will inevitably create something 'top-down', and not truly community-led. The best you can do is start the conversation with as many different people as possible, and let them do the rest.



Chapter 2: Working with the Local Council

While it is by no means necessary to ask anything of the local council, at least some degree of endorsement can be very helpful. At least half the groups I spoke with said that their council had either given them some form of value in kind support, or steered them towards plots of land or relevant funding streams. Paul Scott-Bates, who was Chair of IE Rossendale for seven years, has known what it is like to operate both with and without an ally in the council, and he told me that as soon as their contact was lost, everything got harder. This chapter shows some of ways IE groups are working with or without support from local councils, and what opportunities are beginning to emerge through cooperation.

When Authority Says No

Groups can still blossom without direct support from the council, and even an initial block needn't be the end of a relationship. The origins of High Grow Darlo deserve special mention here: the group initially approached Darlington Borough Council to ask if they could plant veg in the planters in town. To their disappointment, the council said, 'no'. However, the group were undeterred, and one night armed themselves with lettuces and radishes and went ahead with it anyway. As they were planting they were caught in the act by the head of the council, but fortunately he agreed this was a brilliant idea. After some back and forth during the next few days, which involved the uprooting of a few unfortunate plants, the eventual outcome was that the council would fully back the project, and have done so ever since. They have given the group access to their heated and irrigated green house, and continue to offer support wherever they can, despite budget cuts.

For other groups, while IE projects have still been possible, things haven't worked out so easily. For example, Derrick in Leamington Spa, told me that relations between residents and local authority officers in his area have been uncooperative for several years. In the past, he has had to fight hard to stop community gardens from being taken away, rallying support through a petition to save one of them. According to Derrick, there is an assumption from the authorities that the residents are either not interested, or too stupid to understand what the vegetable beds are for. This is matched by a general feeling of fear and suspicion from residents about provoking trouble or doing anything different. Derrick is persisting with the project, but it does seem to be something of an uphill struggle.

Another example can be found in Wokingham. Here, the IE group have had considerable difficulty finding sites to grow on, because the town is undergoing a great deal of regeneration and the council have not been forthcoming about what land is available. Two of the group's gardens have had to be removed for building work, and another site that was applied to was eventually denied for the same reason. The borough council also wanted the town council to pay a fee every time the group obtained a new piece of land to grow on, which perhaps compounded the problem. All of this has meant that many of the group's volunteers have now lost interest, because seeing hard work erased like this is very dispiriting. Those in the group that remain, however, have shown resilience by redirecting their energy towards spinning the Learning Plate instead: they run gardening club in a local school and last year the school won an RHS Level 5 gardening award. The group





are now exploring other ways they can work with schools to grow food in the community and educate.

Working in Partnership

Now that Incredible Edible is almost a decade old, councils across the UK are waking up to the idea, and the potential of what might be possible if communities are encouraged to take a lead in driving change. At the University of Manchester, when the Uni estates team blocked the IE group from developing an edible campus, Manchester City Council stepped forward to support the group with finding land, both for community and student growing projects. In Usk, Monmouth County Council employees were so keen on the idea of Incredible Edible, they started a project themselves. Paid and unpaid staff hours, and Welsh Government nature funding was invested to transform a piece of unloved council land, and the council remain partly responsible for coordinating volunteers and actively partnering with community groups. The project is still relatively new, so it will be interesting to see to what extent the wider community take ownership of the garden in the coming years.

Elsewhere, councils are making even larger interventions: Bristol City Council has partnered with IEB and others to transform an inner-City crime-hotspot into safer, more welcoming environment for all (see Story 2: The Bear Pit Food Forest'); in York, the City Council are backing IE affiliates, Red Tower York, by match-funding the restoration and renovation of a historic building for the benefit of the community. Possibly the most extraordinary partnership of all, however, is that which has developed between Incredible Edible and the council in Wigan.

Driven by Chief Executive, Donna Hall, Wigan Council have subsumed IE's ethos to help reconfigure the Council's role within the borough. Alongside Incredible Edible Wigan, is a broader associated initiative that has been branded 'The Deal'. The Deal aims to nurture a cultural shift among residents that will strengthen communities and make them more resilient to local authority budgets cuts forecast for the coming years. The Council's side of The Deal is to keep council tax as low as possible and continue running services that keep the borough functioning, while also 'cutting red tape' and handing leadership of societal activities and pursuits over to communities (supported by an adequate slice of the local authority budget). Wigan residents' part in The Deal is to become more active citizens by getting involved in their community, supporting each other, recycling responsibly and living healthily. Or, in IE speak: putting an end to passing-the-buck, and just getting on with it.

I spoke over the phone with IE co-founder, Pam Warhurst, about the evolving IE Wigan project, which she has had some influence on. Pam explained to me that the grassroots movement of Incredible Edible was always about a beginning, not an end. While communities can be change-drivers and demonstrate extraordinary resourcefulness, real long-term, social transformation is not going to be possible without the central operators on side. She told me that in Wigan, the council had been brave enough to believe in communities and hand them a slice of the budget to start making their own change. For IE inspired food and growing projects, this has so far led to a clusters of different community projects blossoming throughout the borough, and some other interesting experiments





which include a 'buy something local day,' where all council employees are encouraged to buy something with local origins and post a picture on Twitter.

IE Wigan has only been going for just over a year, so it's still too early to know what kind of effect this will have on the borough. But from Pam's perspective, it is another experiment in discovering new models for cultivating healthier, more sustainable and resilient communities. Some ideas may not work, but others might, and perhaps these could be applied to other places. In Chapter 1, I raised IE Manchester's question of how IE groups might be able to gain more concrete support from key institutions in their towns and cities. Perhaps experiments like Wigan will eventually offer some ideas.



Chapter 3: Working as Volunteers

Swelling volunteer numbers has been the most frequently raised topic in my conversation with groups: how to find people, how to keep them motivated, how to recruit more of them - and not just people willing to get their hands in the soil. There is of course a need for more people like this too, but many groups are after the kind of volunteers who might be inclined to go beyond gardening: individuals who will take on a committee role, take responsibility for a garden, or approach a business or school on behalf of the group. These people are like gold dust.

Group Roles

The problem is, you can't 'recruit' an Incredible Edible Chair or project leader as you would a paid employee. People have to want to be part of this movement for themselves, and they will choose what kind of involvement they have in it. In many instances, 'volunteer' can feel like the wrong word to use, and some groups prefer names like 'group member' or 'community gardener', because this somehow feels more representative of how people are working. This could be because more traditionally structured, 'top down' organisations often work with volunteers in a very prescribed way: fixed roles are presented which a volunteer might take on in exchange for the opportunity to learn new skills, make new friends, or feel like they are contributing to something important and worthwhile. While all these incentives are there for IE volunteers, roles are often not prescribed in the same way. Group structures, projects and working methods differ wildly from one another, and have evolved entirely from scratch. This is complicated to explain to someone you are trying to 'recruit'.

It is already known that most Incredible Edible groups are sustained by two or three people, or very often just one key individual who is the driving force behind all activity. These core people are typically supported by a foundation of committed volunteers, whose role it is to just turn up for work parties. These volunteers are a vital part of sustaining groups and helping them grow, but the problem is, once a group reaches a certain size and is committed to several projects, there is suddenly a lot of administrative work to do. Sara Latimer, from IE Eastbourne, described to me the struggle of sustaining the Facebook page and keeping opportunities alive, while also turning up to lead work sessions on the group's various gardens. She is not a confident gardener so this too has caused a great deal of anxiety for her. "It [IE Eastbourne] has started to feel like a full-time job," she told me.

IE Eastbourne are a group who have recently lost some key committee members (including the group's Chair) due to bereavement and illnesses. Sara now feels that a lot of the work required for sustaining the group, and all its projects, has fallen to her. She has tried hard to find other people to come on board as active committee members but so far this hasn't happened. As a result, Sara is now focusing on scaling back the group's projects and focusing on something closer to her area. This feels more achievable. However, she has become concerned about rumours flying around that suggest the group is in decline (something she doesn't feel to be the case), and the impact this may have on the partnerships she has worked so hard to sustain.





Possibly a more sustainable model is that of a group like Incredible Edible Prestwich and District (IEPAD) who have a large 'Board' of eight people, many of whom lead on different IE gardens or projects. The whole Board will always be aware of what others in the group are doing, but separate individuals are responsible for tasks associated with their respective projects: coordination of gardening volunteers, partnership building, fundraising, etc. When work and responsibility is more evenly distributed like this, there is less risk of group leaders burning out and leaving the group without anyone standing by to take their place (as has happened in Rossendale very recently - see Story 1). The catch is that group structures like this are only made possible when there is a large group of like-minded people willing to make that happen.

But not all groups are as formally organised as this. The group behind Incredible Town Square Garden in Crediton, for instance, only meet once a month at the edible community garden to keep it tidy. While it's just the three of them that come together, they will occasionally notice that plants (usually flowers) have mysteriously appeared in their absence, which is heartening evidence that others are contributing. Other groups are organised, but have deliberately not constituted, preferring to keep everything as informal as possible. This can eliminate the need for any extra bureaucratic work, and has worked out very well for some (for an example of this, see Story 3: Incredible Edible Penryn and St Gluvias Community Hall). However, it can also limit what the group can do and dampen their ambitions. Penrith Community Gardeners, for instance, are one of a few groups who said that a challenge was to, 'not to go beyond our ability to sustain what we can do.'

Paying People

A different tactic used by groups to manage an unwieldy workload, is to pay people to do the jobs that feel too burdensome, or require skills that group members don't explicitly have. IEPAD, for instance, are presently paying someone to develop their website for them, and Veg Out In Barney are among many groups who pay horticulturalists to lead organised work parties. Some groups have gone so far as to create part-time jobs for co-ordinators, either so that other IE volunteers don't have to, or so that the time required for organising stuff is protected, and one or two individuals aren't doing a disproportionately large amount of unpaid work compared to everyone else in the group.

IEB are one group that have recently recruited a regular, paid, part-time 'Volunteer Coordinator'. I asked Sara Venn what she felt this had done for her as leader of the group. She told me it had freed her up to spend more time and energy developing partnerships with organisations and institutions in the City and get the ball rolling on new projects. There is also something liberating about working with someone in a more professional context: "because it is that person's job, they are a step removed from it, and it doesn't take up [their] entire soul," Sara said. There is also reassurance to be found in the idea that if the co-ordinator decided to move on for whatever reason, a defined role would still exist that someone else could easily step into; a degree of support for the group Chair has now been formally embedded into the structure of this group.

There is of course a definite downside to taking on a paid member of staff which is that resources are then required to keep them employed. I spoke about this at



length with Katie Hastings of Edible Mach Maethlon (Edible Mach). Edible Mach are a not-for-profit limited company and the IE strand of their work grew out of projects they were running already (a market garden veg-box scheme and a community land share). The problem, Katie explained to me, is that no extra cash is generated by the other two projects to pay for the additional workload of coordinating the IE inspired activity. At the beginning, they were very successful at getting small pots of public funding, which plugged the budget gaps and kept the two part-time coordinators employed. However, these grants are now drying up and none of their volunteers are interested in taking on coordination of the project unpaid. Katie told me she feels that starting out with paid staff has been both a blessing and a curse: on the one hand, it has meant they have been able to do a huge amount very fast; on the other, it now seems impossible to make the IE strand of the project completely voluntary.

Supporting Groups

The issue of not having enough volunteers is not something that can straightforwardly be resolved, or is even necessarily a problem in the first place: with IE projects, as is the way with gardening (ironically), the more you do, the more you find there is to do, and so the workload increases as opposed to the other way around. However, there does appear to be great need for a support facility, particularly for IE group leads. In answer to the question, 'how could the IE Network better support you?' Sahira of IE Dunstable wrote simply: 'phone occasionally to see how we are.' I found that almost all the IE Groups I spoke with seemed genuinely delighted to hear from me, and for the groups that have struggled (either in the past or very recently), I got the impression that speaking to someone who both understood some of what they were going through, but also wasn't part of their community, was a liberating and cathartic experience.

Some group members had ideas about what this support facility could look like. A 'buddy scheme' was suggested, where younger and more developed groups - or just any two groups - could be paired together for the purposes of mentorship and mutual support. Paul, who recently resigned as Chair of IE Rossendale (see Story 1), expressed a need for an IE scheme that might help develop new leaders among IE groups, to alleviate the risk of groups collapsing when IE leaders choose to move on. Several of the groups I interviewed, that are now either defunct or are struggling, have suffered either because key individuals have moved on or group motivation is dwindling. Pastoral support of some kind, in whatever form it takes, could help support a group through these difficult patches.





Chapter 4: Spinning Plates

IE groups really begin to thrive when they get their Learning and Business plates spinning alongside their Community plate. Among all the groups I spoke with, there were only a handful that had never got all three plates spinning in some capacity, and generally this was because they were not yet established. This chapter looks at themes and examples of how IE Groups are working with education establishments (generally schools), and businesses, to teach and champion local food production in their communities.

The Learning Plate

IE groups across the UK are initiating learning opportunities through the entire education system, from nurseries, right the way through to university level. Learning also happens beyond this, in nursing homes, for adult learning groups, and for children with special educational needs. Primary and secondary school projects are the most common, and at least half of the groups I spoke to have either collaborated with schools already, or are in the middle of developing new schemes.

Some interesting insights have been offered about how school projects can work. Firstly, there is a big difference between collaborating *with* schools to build an edible garden, and delivering a garden *for* them. If it's the latter scenario, then there is a greater risk of the garden becoming neglected when interest starts to wane. As Mike Hall from High Grow Darlo pointed out: what can typically happen is that an enthusiastic member of staff will sustain something for a while, but if they leave then the gardening project will simply fall apart. To get around this problem, High Grow Darlo devised a different kind of schools project, which instead involved several classes in different schools for fixed amount of time (see Story 4: High Grow Darlo's potato challenge).

In the former scenario, it's important that both the group and school have a shared understanding of how the edible garden project will work. I received a somewhat heart-breaking email from a contact that used to run an IE project at Ysgol G.G. Castellau school in Wales. Unfortunately, a major fallout appears to have occurred between the group and the head teacher, who understood the activity to be a school owned project and not a collaboration with the community. In the end, after hundreds of voluntary hours were invested by the community, the project fell apart. The orchard was pulled out, the fish pond filled in, and the herb garden levelled. Sadly, bitter feelings are all that now remains.

But there are a great many other examples where IE groups and schools have worked together successfully, with collaborations evolving that suit both parties. Sometimes, almost no collaboration is required at all: Simon from Heart of Pitsea, for instance, recognised that schools in his area had so many other priorities to contend with that developing a community growing project would be impossible. Instead, he put together hundreds of 'magic lettuce' packs, which contained come-and-cut-again lettuce seeds, pots, compost and an instruction booklet. He handed these out to 1,100 children who attended primary school in Pitsea. While he is unsure how many of them successfully grew, and ate, lettuce, this idea





demonstrates a different kind of model that could be useful for working with schools unable to co-deliver projects.

When schools can commit to delivering, or co-delivering, projects a great deal more is possible. IE groups have helped schools build edible gardens, run education programmes, and provided schools with regular and one-off workshops. These endeavours are also typically well resourced, as schools often have pots of money available, or access to additional funding streams, to pay for materials and the group's time. Ventures like this have therefore acted as a valuable source of income for some groups.

For Ian Bocock, the former chair and founder of IE Salford, there seemed to be so many opportunities for learning projects with education institutions, he went on to found Incredible Education CIC in 2014. This organisation (distinct from, but associated with, IE Salford) provides learning packages for school classes and children with special education needs, as well as nurseries, adult groups and AgeUK. Ian finds that of CIC's income, approximately 80% comes from school contracts and a small margin of profit from his new community shop, and the other 20% comes from various grants.

Part of Ian's success in spinning the Learning Plate so effectively in Salford can be attributed to the fact that both he, and his partner's, professional backgrounds were in education. Having prior contact with school can be a huge advantage for getting something started. For groups in other parts of the UK who have not got the Learning Plate spinning in schools, not having a contact has been one of the reasons cited. Those in this position have shown an interest in getting tips from other groups that have made schools projects work.

The Business Plate

Curiously, several of the groups I spoke to were not nearly so confident about how their Business Plate was spinning. After a bit of digging, I found that typically this wasn't because these groups were not interacting with their businesses or community. It was because they hadn't succeeded in persuading local shops, producers or market stalls to make use of IE branded boards as Todmorden has done. Three groups told me they had succeeded with this to some degree, but typically IE groups are working with businesses in more varied or nuanced ways.

Many groups engage businesses in the same way they involve the rest of the community: stationary shops, butchers, restaurants and pubs are watering IE gardens up and down the country. Several businesses are also supporting IE groups through small sponsorship deals or one-off donations: Cate Barlemoor from the new IE group in Cranbrook told me delightedly that Taylor Wimpey had approached *her* to ask if the group needed any money. Cate tried her luck and asked for £1000. In the end she got £500, but still - a great result. While these examples are hardly the same as kick-starting the local food economy, they still honour the Incredible Edible ethos.

However, I did also find other examples where groups were concerned that proposed relationships were not endorsing the IE ethos. Derrick, from IE Leamington Spa, for instance, said he turned away local businesses that asked to harvest food from the IE garden. He did this because, in his mind, the whole point





of this edible garden was that the food was free for the community to take, and therefore should not be profited from by businesses. Derrick does have ambitions for a more commercial poly tunnel project which he would like to offer to businesses instead, but this is still some way off.

Another interesting sticking point, presented to me by Al of IE Manchester, is that his group had become wary of falling into the trap of, “just making companies look good.” Al explained to me that the group had been approached in the past by Northern Rail, who wanted to pay the group to deliver an edible garden on their premises. However, it soon became apparent that Northern Rail expected IE Manchester to take on the continued maintenance of the garden, and weren't interested in coordinating their own volunteers or providing resourced opportunities for staff to learn and take ownership of the garden. IE Manchester therefore stepped away from the project. It would have been too much extra work for to sustain, and they felt they needed more commitment from Network Rail.

I did, however, also find examples of IE groups working successfully with businesses to support the local food economy: in Wakefield, local food producers and retailers benefit from free advertising in the IE Wakefield emailed newsletter, and through a detailed, designated directory available on the group's website; in Manchester, the IE group is coordinated by The University of Manchester, and so the University has committed to buying £40,000 worth of local, organic produce every year, via an organisation called Manchester Veg People.

Finally, there is a very different, but equally brilliant, example of a business collaboration to be found in the market town of Ramsbottom. The pub, Eagle and Child, have partnered with IE Ramsbottom to create the Incredible Edible Beer Garden. Previously, the pub found it had almost an acre of unused space out the back, and so it collaborated with IE Ramsbottom to convert this into an orchard and community veg garden (among other things). The site now has a polytunnel, and some of the produce grown there is used in the pub's award-winning kitchen, while much of the rest of the ingredients are sourced from other local producers. As well as this, the pub's social enterprise, Eat Pennines, works with a range of other social partners to recruit and train disadvantaged young people in both hospitality and horticulture, using the pub and beer garden as its base. While this project is led by the pub and Eat Pennines, as opposed to the community, all three IE plates appear to be spinning comfortably alongside each other, and pub and enterprise Director, Glenn Duckett, continues to endorse and support IE Ramsbottom wherever he can.

The Business Plate: Working with Corporate Business

In several instances, groups have told me they are working with businesses by taking advantage of 'corporate social responsibility days'. These, in theory, can be great for completing tasks that require many hands will make light work of something. They are also a fantastic way to work with lots of people that may not otherwise engage with IE due to time restraints (some IE groups hold most of their work parties during the day in the working week). However, aspects to this way of working which can be very challenging for groups.





According to Sara Venn of IEB, while working with corporate employees is brilliant for communicating the Incredible Edible ethos and welcoming big business as part of the community, it can also be impossibly resource-intensive. Large businesses may require work days to be carefully planned, with risk assessments prepared and evidence of insurance provided (etc.); they may not be aware that IE groups have no paid member of staff available to manage all this. Furthermore, the work party itself may require significantly more resources than the group is typically used to. If 30 people are expected to turn up, enough tasks need to be arranged to keep them all busy. Gardening skills and knowledge may vary wildly, so there need to be enough Incredible Edible regulars around to help people, and chip in with guidance like, “no that one’s a herb, no need to pull that up...” The logistical implications of managing days like this have made Sara wary of agreeing to corporate collaborations like this, unless companies are prepared to pay something towards the cost of IEB coordinating and resourcing them. Sometimes this is possible, and sometimes it is not.

Another point worth mentioning here is that a couple of IE groups have set their sights on how larger businesses might be able support them with more substantial sponsorship deals. Hilary Brookes from IE Marple, for instance, was recently inspired by a talk at the Incredible Edible Conference about pitching ideas to businesses. She now wants to approach the bathroom company Victoria Plum (because the brand’s name is superbly appropriate) about providing public toilet facilities for Marple’s flourishing community orchard. However, while she has some ideas about the offer she could pitch, she is unsure about what approach to take, and feels she would benefit from feedback on her ideas from someone with experience.



Chapter 5: Resources and Sustaining Projects Long Term

During this research project, I have made a conscious effort to hear from groups that are no longer active. It has been an important part of trying to answer the question: 'why is it that so many groups stop?' It is not because they do not have enough money or stuff; the reasons are far more complex and varied than that. However, an interesting observation from Katie Hastings of Edible Mach was that, typically, far more volunteers turn out for the building of new gardens or the start of a project, than for continued maintenance days.

The logic behind this makes sense. People are reinvigorated and inspired by things that are new and exciting, and I have certainly noticed a trend that the IE groups that are flourishing are those which grow and try out different ideas and projects. Some projects might not work, but that doesn't matter because others will. This is what keeps the IE idea that supports everything both alive and interesting. But sometimes, to realise ambitions, groups require more resources than some donated plants and the spare hours they can spend gardening. To get new ideas off the ground, sometimes more is required.

Public Funding

The majority of groups that I have been in contact with have benefitted in some way by applying to public funders or their local authority. They have been awarded money to gain asset like poly tunnels, sheds, IBC's to harvest rainwater, signage and other marketing materials. They have also been awarded project funding to work with schools, people with dementia, older people, and pay for roles including co-ordinators and engagement workers. The most common IE grant providers (besides local councils) include: Big Lottery (typically Awards for All, or as part of a Big Local project); Tesco Bags for Help and other Groundwork schemes; and People's Postcode Lottery funding streams. These grants have enabled groups to develop projects, unlock doors and elevate burdens to keep volunteers engaged and feeling like progress is always possible. Their role in supporting the Incredible Edible UK movement should not be underplayed.

However, the whole topic of grants has raised numerous sticking points among groups. Firstly, the filling out of funding application forms is boring, and doing it properly (from researching appropriate funding streams to submitting the proposal) can take an inordinate amount of time. Very few volunteers enjoy this kind of work and applications that bring no results are hugely dispiriting. Plenty of the individuals I have spoken with have expressed their frustration with failed bids, and several feel they lack the appropriate skills and experience needed to write a successful application. Some have suggested that perhaps some 'how to' guidance, or a list of Incredible Edible friendly funders might be useful tools in combatting this.

Another drawback to funding bids is that to be eligible for various grants, you need to be some form of constituted group with a bank account and committee members etc. Suddenly this makes everything feel very formal and bureaucratic and neither of these words inspire much joy in group members. There is also the





added quandary of what kind of legal structure to adopt that best reflects what the group does, while also keeping the right income options open and incurring minimal fuff. This is a dilemma IEPAD are wrestling with at the moment, and I know it has caused agonised debate for IEB in the past as well.

Finally, there is a conceivable risk that groups could fall into the trap of becoming grant junkies. I raise this in reference to the point made by Katie of Edible Mach about how relying on grants to pay part-time members of staff feels unsustainable. Sue, from IE Lambeth, also stressed a need for 'core funding', as this group too have become reliant on project grants to keep the project growing. But few funders now agree to cover 'core costs', and considering the UK's assumed political trajectory, relying on project grants to sustain groups may not be a resilient long-term option either.

Community Fundraising

There are, of course, income alternatives. Some groups have distanced themselves from grants altogether, and opted for a community fundraising approach. IE Penryn sustain themselves through community events (see Story 3), and IE Ramsbottom have held several well-attended ceilidhs in the past. IE Marple funded the planting of a new community orchard through a sponsor-a-tree initiative, and Edible Mach put together a brilliant fundraiser called 'Raise the Roof', which was a dinner night to raise money for – you've guessed it – a new shed roof. To pull this off the whole community had to come together: a well-known local chief volunteered to cook the main course, other volunteers did the starter and desert, the local Co-operative store donated all the wine, and a band stepped in to give diners a free gig. Dinner tickets were £18 per head.

To my surprise, only two groups I spoke with said they had made use of crowdfunding platforms, and one other mentioned it as an option they were considering. I don't have an answer as to why this, only a hunch that running a crowdfunding campaign is not always fun, and perhaps to some it feels like 'going with a begging bowl' to ask for money – a sentiment iterated to me on several occasions.

Earned Income

Finally, some groups are experimenting with earned income options. These can take many forms, including donations in exchange for goods: Penrith Community Gardeners, for instance, make bags out of recycled clothes rags; IE Ramsbottom cook together and make chutneys and cordials which they exchange for donations at community events. Groups will also give talks, host workshops or (as previously mentioned) build edible gardens for an agreed fee.

Another earned revenue stream which may become available to one IE group in the near future, is space hire. Red Tower York is a project which grew out of The Incredible Movement (TIM) in York, and the group behind it are now in the process of acquiring match funding to renovate a historic, council-owned building. The project is being heartily backed by City of York council who have put forward half the funding and given the group an extremely low 30-year-lease on the condition that the building is used to serve the community.





The idea is to turn the building into a hub, which welcomes community groups, community food growing, history and re-enactment societies, and initiatives that explore alternative economy ideas (like repair cafes), to name just a few examples. The hub will be run largely by volunteers but there will also be at least one paid member of staff in place to oversee things and keep the hire facility of the building professional. Red Tower York is exciting because it is a project that is potentially equipped to sustain itself on its own terms.

Imelda Havers, who I spoke to from the project, explained to me that the intention was to attract local businesses, universities and other organisations to the building who may wish to rent the space. The proceeds of this will then be used to cover staff wages, rent, and fund other community-focused projects. Imelda told me she was aware of the need to, “balance fun stuff with profit stuff,” but she is confident that hiring the space will finance the project while also keeping it community-serving. Once the building opens (hopefully by the autumn), it may make for an interesting case study of a community-led regeneration project that is also self-sustained. It will certainly be one to watch.



Conclusion

I hope that this report, with its many illustrations and voices, paints a picture of what the Incredible Edible movement looks like right now across the UK. It has been a pleasure to compile, and I have felt inspired by the stories I have heard and moved by the dedication with which individuals are pursuing their various projects. There may now, in 2017, be fewer groups compared to previous years, but many of those that remain are developing, and are ambitious about what they feel they can achieve.

This concluding section focus on the underlying question of my investigation which has been: what do groups feel they want from the IE Network over the coming years? To gather this information, I asked questions around what tools (if any) might be useful to groups in their work, and how the IE Network could better support them. A few of the answers I received were quite detailed and specific, and many of these points have been woven into the main body of this report already. Most of the feedback I collected, however, has given rise to some very clear themes.

The first of these was a yearning for more effective resource and information sharing among the IE network. Many groups expected that other IEs might have been through similar struggles to them in the past, or have specialist skills that they could learn from. Some felt that they had gained knowledge and developed project, that could be useful to other groups and were eager to share: “like most groups, I guess, we are proud of what we have achieved. I am happy to visit and give a presentation,” wrote Joan Robinson from Penrith Community Gardeners.

There was also a supposition that groups across the country might be duplication time-consuming work. Printable signage, for example, that communicates what different herbs look like and how they can be used, is a resource many groups feel they need but don't have the time or horticultural knowledge to make. Groups felt that a resource like this must exist somewhere among the network and were eager to make use of it if it could be shared.

Another theme was a desire for greater contact and connectivity among groups. Many wanted to feel a stronger sense that they belonged to a network, and wished to personally get to know other groups near them in the UK. Many told me that they had benefitted from attending one the Incredible Edible conferences in the past, and hoped that these would continue. Some groups, particularly those in the South East and in Wales, expressed a need for more local gatherings because they felt disconnected from others in their region, and even more isolated from the buzz of activity in the North near to Todmorden. Increased contact and connectivity among the network could also help to build a UK-wide IE community, which might benefit group leaders in need of encouragement or general support.

Suggestions were also made for more specific 'tools', which included marketing assets, such as branded poster and website templates, as well and digital media and articles sharing the stories of other IE groups that could be used to inspire





people. One group member felt that the IE Network might benefit from a more developed social media strategy, or using a tool like Storify to gather stories and updates from other UK groups. There were also a few calls for IE Starter Kits and 'How To' guides on subject like governance structures and setting up a bank account. In other groups, where there is a shortage of horticultural knowledge, some basic tips on veg growing would be appreciated, and a list of deadlines for what seeds need to be planted when to avoid missing out on a crop.

However, an important point, made by Gary Mitchell of Cultivate, is that all manner of guides and support documents already exist to support people with basic veg growing and the setting up a community groups. It doesn't make senses to invest lots of resources in doing all of that again. The problem is that if you don't know exactly what you're looking for, accessible information can be difficult to find. Simon from Heart of Pitsea, for instance, told me that before starting his IE group he had never grown a vegetable in his life. He watched the IE TED talk online and was inspired, but his first year of growing was a huge struggle. He went to the RHS for help, because that was an organisation he had heard of, but didn't find many vegetable growing tips there. Whatever the answer, there is clearly a need for some accessible information that easy to find.

I final point I must emphasise, is that while I received several suggestions about how groups could be supported, I also repeatedly heard that groups are attracted to Incredible Edible because of the autonomy it has allowed them. There is no single 'right way' to build an IE project. Groups are encouraged to apply the idea in whatever way is relevant to their community. As Chris Lodge of IE Fylde and Wyre put it: 'the freedom of the IE movement is inspiring, and [this] lets us develop organically...'scuse the pun!' While some groups may benefit from having more tools at their disposal, it is important that modes of support are not prescriptive. Anything which feels too prescriptive could risk stunting the abundant creativity that I have found among groups, and which has delighted and astonished me during the past four weeks.

The unique power of the IE movement comes from the *idea* of it. It is the idea and story which holds the power, and allowing communities room to carve out their own identity within it is of fundamental importance.





Stories

Story 1: HarFest in Rossendale

In 2013, partly inspired by Todmorden's Incredible Edible Harvest Festivals, Paul and Joanna Scott-Bates of IE Rossendale decided they wanted to hold an event. They called it HarFest, and the intention behind it was share the Incredible Edible ethos of community and local food production with more people and perhaps inspire some more volunteers while they were at it. Little did they know then that this event would snowball into a fully fledged, annual festival.

The very first HarFest in September 2013 was made possible through collaboration with The Whitaker Museum and Art Gallery. IE Rossendale had already established a relationship with The Whitaker; the group's first ever edible community garden was in the surrounding grounds (Whitaker Park), and the group had recently run a successful crowdfunding campaign to take on the Museum's adjacent wildlife area. The Museum supported Paul's festival idea and so he began planning.

The first ever HarFest had 12 stalls from local businesses and food producers, and a singer-songwriter who entertained visitors who moseyed around the site. Everything somehow went as planned and The Whitaker estimated around 500 people attended the event throughout the day – the greatest influx the park had seen for a very long time. HarFest was deemed a huge success and Paul promised to do it all again the following year.

By 2016, HarFest had become a much anticipated event in Rossendale's annual calendar. Paul booked in over 20 stalls for HarFest 2016, from cake stalls, to organic cheese makers, to near-by honey producers, and even found himself having to turn stall holders away due to lack of space and the festival ballooning beyond what he could manage. The music side of the festival had also grown: Paul was booking five live acts and applying for small pots of local funding to pay for acclaimed headliners. In 2015 he booked Martin Stephenson, and around 1500 people turned out for HarFest. "2015 was the best one," Paul told me. "The weather was glorious. People brought their pick nick rugs. Everyone had a wonderful time."

I asked Paul if he had considered charging stall holders a pitch fee as a way of bringing the group some income. He told me they had decided not to do this. Stall holders that did particularly well some years made donations to IE Rossendale or their own volition, and the group invited visitors to donate to the tombola for a prize draw, but that was it. The event wasn't really about fundraising for Paul. The only aim was to break-even and bring people together to enjoy a community event with good music and local food. In that sense, Paul feels he has shared the Incredible Edible message, even if the festival hasn't directly translated into a larger group of IE Rossendale volunteers.

This year, Paul resigned his position as IE Rossendale Chair after holding it for 7 years. While HarFest, and the rest of the group's activities have been rewarding, and Paul feels they have improved his confidence and general wellbeing, the projects had become a huge amount of work. Paul had started planning HarFest nine months in advance: the bigger musical acts needed to be contracted in





January, and the stalls had to be arranged around Easter time. While the festival day itself always seemed to go swimmingly, the months of stress leading up to it had become a great burden to bear.

As no other members of IE Rossendale came forward to take on the role of Chair, Paul is nervous about what will become of the group this year. It doesn't necessarily mean that IE Rossendale is finished, but the way forward is certainly unclear. However, advertising for HarFest 2017 has already been spotted: the festival has become so popular among the community that it looks as though The Whitaker Museum will find a way to make it live on, even if IE Rossendale no longer organise it.

Story 2: The Journey of The Bearpit Food Forest

In the heart of Bristol, between the high-street shopping district and the self-proclaimed people's republic and party zone, Stokes Croft, is an underpass known as The Bearpit. It is a prime juncture between two very different sides of the inner city, below one of Bristol's busiest roundabouts. Before 2011, it had the single highest crime rate of anywhere in the city.

But now this has all changed. Instead of an area to be avoided at all costs, and not just at night, the Bearpit is a thriving hub of local business and plant life where people now come and take their lunchbreaks.

This transformation has been the result of years of hard work and collaboration between several different grass-roots organisations and Bristol City Council. Incredible Edible Bristol (IEB) joined this collective in 2014, when Miriam Delogu, Director of The Bearpit Improvement Group, asked Sara Venn to come to a meeting about greening and redesigning the space. Sara drew up a design for an Incredible Edible 'Food Forest' and after some to-ing and fro-ing (some trees could not be accepted because their fruits might be used as projectiles), Bristol City Council agreed to come on board and help fund and build the community garden.

Speaking to Sara Venn, the first few months of early construction sound more stressful than they should have been. The council initially misread the design, and then delivered a huge quantity of shockingly poor quality soil with the expectation that the group would begin work in September. Sara explained that unfortunately this timing wasn't conducive to planting, and even if it was, even the most tenacious herbs were unlikely to survive the poor soil quality. Fortunately, the council were cooperative, and even though they couldn't rebuild the design, the soil was replaced in time for the growing season the following year.

Since then, the garden has grown incrementally over the past two years thanks to the hard work of IEB volunteers and volunteers supported by St Mungo's homelessness charity. The journey has not been without its own snags and hitches: during the garden's first year, there was an uncomfortable amount social media trolling from sceptics who believed the whole endeavour wouldn't work and was a waste of resources. But these voices have since been replaced by positive comments and endless Instagram pictures of the artichokes blossoming.

Now, in 2017, the Bearpit is unrecognisable from how it looked before. The beds that climb up the edge of The Bearpit in steps are awash with green and lavender



plants hum with bees and insects. Sara has also somehow managed to smuggle in some quince and meddler trees, which she insists have all been signed off, though I wonder if she neglected to mention the rock-hard density of a quince fruit to the council.

There has also been a notable decrease in ‘tagging’ of the space. Instead The Bearpit walls are covered either by planted climbers, or boards of street art which are redesigned by graffiti artists every few months. The result of this change has led to further funding from Bristol City Council’s Neighbourhoods team for IEB to explore how edible planting could discourage tagging and vandalism in other parts of the city.

But the point isn’t really about how it looks. The space feels completely different. Crime levels have fallen dramatically. Now The Bearpit doesn’t even feature in the top 20 crime hotspots across the city, and the IEB group have yet to find a needle in the banks of the Food Forrest. Sara admits that she has found a couple in the compost heap, but this, while it is a danger for volunteers to be mindful of, is still oddly gratifying. It suggests that the garden itself has earned enough respect to be left free of litter. “It is the garden I am most proud of ever,” Sara told me. The Bearpit is still not devoid of all its problems, but the social change that has occurred because the local community and grass-roots organisations came together to make a change, has been phenomenal. It shows a kind of change only community-driven action can achieve.

Story 3: Incredible Edible Penryn and St Gluvias Community Hall

About 5 years ago, Pete Shields, who had not long moved to Penryn, started asking around if he, and a few others, could use the land around St Gluvias Hall to build a community garden. The answer back from the Hall Management Group was ‘yes’, and so Pete and the group hacked away at the brambles and began work on what was to become the focal hub Incredible Edible Penryn.

This IE group’s origins came about when Pete’s fledgling group joined forces with another IE group that was just starting in the area. With a proactive group of around 15 individuals in a small, community-minded, Cornish town of around 6,800 people, they’ve come up with a whole range of ideas, from growing tubs outside homes to free plant giveaway events, to get people in their community growing. But, for Pete, the group’s greatest achievement has been what the edible garden has done for the Hall.

This is because when the garden first started, the Management Group were making plans to sell off the Hall. It wasn’t being used a great deal by the community, and the expense of running and maintaining it far outweighed the income it received from groups and individuals hiring it. Once IE Penryn’s garden began to flourish, however, things started to change.

At first people came to the hall because of the garden. IE Penryn’s volunteer pool at one time was 80 people strong, and while not everyone turned up for gardening days, suddenly, people found themselves going to the Hall for the first time in ages, if not ever. The Management Group liked what they saw and decided to put off sale for another year to see if things continued to develop.



Now IE Penryn run a community café in the Hall every Monday, and there is another 'pay as you feel' café that uses some of the garden's produce and surplus foods from businesses that would otherwise end up in landfill. IE Penryn hold frequent fundraising events, from seed swaps, to an 'Edible Open Gardens' day, where residents in the community create a public trail from their vegetable gardens and the IE potting shed is converted into a pop-up café. The exposure this has given the Hall has seeped into the entire community, and now the Hall frequently finds itself fully booked – there's a yoga class, cheerleading group and a tango dance club, to name just a few.

The Management Group then have since completely scrapped the idea of selling the Hall. Instead they have raised some funds to redevelop it: the kitchen is being refurbished, step-free access installed, and solar panels have been fitted to the newly insulated roof to reduce energy costs. In short, the Hall is now a thriving community hub and continues to grow from strength to strength.

But it has also played a key role in developing the IE Penryn group. Activities and events that the group run in the Hall are covered by the Public Liability Insurance of the building. This has enabled them to remain very informal. The group have also actively distanced themselves from grants and public funding bids, preferring instead to sustain themselves through community fundraising via donations made at events or in exchange for plants or food at the community café. Having a building and a proper garden as a base from which to do this has clearly been vital in making it possible.

I asked Pete about the group's reasoning behind keeping the group so unofficial (they do not have a constitution, and for a very long time the bank was just a biscuit tin). Pete told me it was to keep away from bureaucracy as much as possible. No one in the group is interested in structures or admin, and Pete feels that bringing these elements into play could be potentially stifling. The most important thing is to keep it fun. Volunteers use the gardening as a post-work "stress-buster." This is fundamentally important. Nevertheless, as is the case with so many IE groups I have spoken with, "time is a problem," Pete told me. "Because things could easily mushroom..."

Story 4: High Grow Darlo's Potato Challenge

In 2015, Incredible Edible group, High Grow Darlo, devised a growing project to capture the imagination of children in six different primary schools across Darlington. The project needed to be a competition, because competitions are engaging and fun, and it would need to be relatively straight forward so that it didn't become a logistical nightmare. The group's vegetable of choice was the humble potato - partly because potatoes are very easy to grow, and partly because unearthing potatoes feels a little bit like finding treasure. The competition was this: whichever child who grows the most potatoes (by weight) between May and September, will be declared winner.

It sounded like a brilliant idea, but I was confused by how the group had managed to organise and resource a project of this scale so easily without any funding. Mike Hall, who I spoke with, explained to me that every year a whole load of disposable plastic buckets are thrown away by shops and supermarkets that haven't managed to sell all their Mothers' Day flower stock. The group realised this, and





successfully managed to intercept 400 sizable plastic buckets to grow out of that would otherwise have ended up in landfill. The group already had access to cheap compost and seed potatoes, so all that was needed were black-and-white print-outs of a simple instruction booklet and the project was ready to go.

The whole thing appears to have been immaculately timed: head teachers of all the participating schools had already been contacted about the competition and had responded to the idea with enthusiasm. Teaching staff were nominated to oversee the project, and once the buckets were sourced, lesson time was allocated so that pupils could plant their potatoes.

There were a few important details to consider: it made sense to exclude year 6 classes, because these pupils would have left by the time the potatoes were ready to be harvested in September. Instead High Grow Darlo worked with children aged between 4 and 10, and those that managed to keep their bucket through holidays were invited to submit their buckets for weighing in September.

However, an outcome that the group did not expect, was that many parents, not knowing much about how to grow potatoes themselves, threw their children's plants away once the vines had begun to die off. They hadn't realised that this was a sign that the potatoes were ready to be harvest. Either this important detail that had been omitted from the instruction booklet, or the booklet had been lost or not read carefully enough. Either way. Mike suspects that this contributed to the large number of drop outs from the competition. He admits that he was a little disappointed that only 170 kids returned their bucket for weighing when the new school year began.

Those that did hang on to their buckets, however, were delighted when the potatoes emerged. The weight of the winning crop was just over 1.18kg, which Mike feels was an impressive result for such a modest container. The winner and runners up were given awards at a special ceremony at the Town Hall hosted by the deputy Mayor of Darlington and a couple of Councillors. It concluded a project that Mike concedes was fairly neat from start to finish. Apart from the confusion around dying back vines, the feedback was that participants had hugely enjoyed the project and, in general, it was a great success. It is a project that Mike feels could easily be adapted and tried out in other places. It's a very simple, but one that's easy to shared.

