

# streams in the desert



**making a difference where it matters most**














*I shivered in those solitudes when I heard the voice of the salt in the desert*  
Pablo Neruda





# A MANIFESTO FOR FOOD DESERTS

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## Introduction

Nearly ten years ago we began our Incredible Edible journey with the inclusive call, 'if you eat, you're in!'

Ten years on, we have become more acutely aware, in listening to the voices of the communities we serve, that not everyone eats and not everyone is in.

Food is a universal language - of love, of identity and of cohesion. From family recipes to the Soul Food movement, people have gathered around food not only to meet their daily survival needs but to express their identity, their togetherness, and to pass these from one generation to another.

Being able to access the food you need to survive, no...more than that, to thrive, is a basic human right. We know that the barriers to access exist at personal, local, national and structural levels.

We understand that there are multiple barriers to people accessing the food they need and we aren't naive to the complexity of those barriers. Through this project we wanted to mount the barricades, as activists have done in every generation. We believe in the power of small actions to deliver incredible change. **Streams in the Desert** is about that barrier-challenging activism.

This document is our Manifesto, our thinking and reflections on the challenge of food deserts and food access. The Incredible Edible model may prove once more to be the collection of small actions that create the change we want to see in the world.

In Bristol and Ilfracombe, Sara and Lindsey have become our pioneers to see how, in two very different ways, our Incredible model can inspire change and action.

I commend this manifesto and the work they are doing and we look forward to reporting on the fruits of those actions, in two communities, offering our learning to anyone who would like to share this journey with us.

Pam Warhurst CBE





We quickly realised that it doesn't take big things to create big changes. It takes small things that capture the imagination - a vegetable plot with a revolutionary sign "Help Yourself" or runner beans planted secretly outside a disused health centre. People talked about those beans. They helped themselves to vegetables. It worked because it started with the small things, but soon other people stated getting involved, volunteering, and doing things themselves. Having started with small herb gardens and community plots, IE has captured people's imagination and there are now over 80 IE groups in the UK. Each group is different, large and small, but all are inspired by the inclusive message of "If you eat, you are in".

IF YOU EAT  YOU'RE IN

Led by volunteers, IE has since gone on to back campaigns, support local businesses and develop learning opportunities including the Incredible Aquagarden and the Incredible Farm in Todmorden, urban food trails and community allotments providing advice, learning and volunteering opportunities. We have developed a model that helps articulate our achievements and aspirations and that supports our diverse member groups to develop, a model which is distinctive and impactful.

Incredible Edible now has over 80 groups in the UK and 800 worldwide which comprise of three elements: community, learning and business.





Supported by the Board, Incredible Edible UK's role is to create a network to;

- ✿ inspire groups and individuals to start community food projects and adopt the IE ethos
- ✿ sustain IE members and support the Network as a voice for the movement
- ✿ influence local, regional and national policy, practice and decision-making to prioritise sustainable local food production and consumption
- ✿ promote the IE model as a tool for community integration & redefine the meaning of prosperity

## The Three Plates





Using a focus on local food, the Incredible Edible model was created to reflect the shared elements of peoples everyday lives and is delivered through a focus on three areas of activity, called 'plates'. It was designed to allow everyone, irrespective of age, income, culture or ability, to engage in community activities at some level that over time could help redefine what we mean by prosperity.





## Community

-  Inspiring and empowering communities through growing and celebrating local food
-  Promoting the use of public space to grow food for local benefit

## Learning

-  Sharing the 'lost arts' of growing and using local food.
-  Developing and sharing innovative approaches to sustainable food production and investing in the urban farmers of the future

## Business

-  Supporting local food economies by encouraging the production and consumption of local food.
-  Changing public purchasing policies to focus more on the benefits of locally produced food.

These are the building blocks of the Incredible Edible model. They are not meant to be its only expression. That is for each and every community to decide on themselves. But it isn't Incredible Edible if the groups don't incorporate or aspire to the three plates.

## The Now

In 2017 Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Central Lancashire undertook an evaluation of the work of Incredible Edible in Todmorden (Morley et al, 2017).


Building on this work, we contacted and mapped all our groups across the UK. We then asked them a series of questions to understand the strengths of our Network and some of the areas we could build on. This report (Kirkbride, 2017) taught us the following things;

What are we good at?



-  Awareness raising
-  Community cohesion and capacity building
-  Enabling a local food culture
-  Increasing the local tourist economy






## What makes it work?

-  Growing great leaders (Individual Personalities)
-  A passion to get things done (Culture of Proactivity)
-  Our unique model (Three Spinning Plates Model)

## What impact do we have (in addition to what we are good at)?

-  A key finding was that over half of Todmorden respondents (54%) stated that they purchase local food at least once a week (compared with 41% of UK consumers)
-  We return the money to the local economy. For every £1 invested, largely through volunteer time and small financial contributions, £5.51 was returned to the Todmorden community as a whole during 2016.

## What do we need to work on?

-  Welcoming and including low income communities
-  Creating more cross generation and cross community strength
-  IE Ltd, Incredible North and the IE Network are primarily concerned with spreading the IE model outward beyond Todmorden

*And  
so the  
adventure  
begins*





## The Context

In the UK, a growth of out of town retail parks contributed to a decrease in food stores in rural villages and town centres. With the growth of hypermarkets, markets and independent specialist stores became smaller and less busy or disappeared altogether. The popularity of out of town shopping, with free parking and gigantic warehouse-style stores with their seemingly endless choice, took local shops out of communities and, with that, communities out of local areas. This shift in geographic layout of food retail outlets has led, in some areas, to an uneven distribution of food supply. The term 'food deserts' has been adopted to refer to the areas lacking in food retail outlets.

Despite the term '*food deserts*' originally being used in Scotland, most research into food deserts has been undertaken in North America. The term '*food desert*' is a spatial metaphor used by the US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2017) to mean a '*Low-income census tracts where a significant number (at least 500 people) or share (at least 33 percent) of the population is greater than 1.0 mile from the nearest supermarket, supercentre, or large grocery store for an urban area or greater than 10 miles for a rural area*'. A secondary concept, '*food swamps*' has been developed to reflect areas that have adequate access to food but an inadequate access to healthy and unprocessed foods. Rose et al (2009) introduced the term '*food swamp*' to characterize areas with an abundance of less healthy food options in contrast to '*food deserts*' that lack healthy food options. Food outlets in swamps often consist of hot take away premises, convenience stores that do not stock fresh produce, and petrol stations. To distinguish between types of food outlets, Bertrand et al (2008) suggest that only retail stores with upwards of 75 square feet floor space dedicated to fruit and vegetables count as a food retail outlet providing adequate supply of healthy foods.

The definition of food desert in the UK is contested, with no one definition agreed (Adams et al, 2016). As in the United States, food deserts have typically been defined as a measurement of geographic distance between households and retail stores. The concept of food desert thus represents the spatial constraints limiting food access (Warde, 1999). Attempts to measure food deserts by this definition have proven to be challenging: measuring access to affordable and nutritious food is an enormous data collection task that requires information on all the food retailers in a neighbourhood or



within the reach of the consumer, the types and prices of food sold in these stores, and a measure of the quality of the food (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009).

Whilst the concept of a food desert is an attractive one for the simplicity it allows in thinking about this problem, issues around food access are far more nuanced and complex than geographical proximity alone. McEntee (2009) argues that it is the very concept of food desert that is a source of concern and proposes to replace it with the more general notion of food access that accepts that whilst food may be available to buy, including healthy food, some consumers may face additional barriers to buying the foods that they want or need (Cooksey-Stowers et al, 2017). This approach has been supported by evidence from the US showing that increasing access to supermarkets retailing healthy foods did not ultimately change a community's diet: studies evaluating the impact of opening new grocery stores have shown that while perceived access to healthy food improves with the opening of a new supermarket in a food desert, diet quality and body mass index (BMI) do not (McEntee, 2009).

Research has found that there are multiple complex barriers to consuming higher quantities of healthy foods, such as fruit and vegetables (FV), besides physical proximity to retail stores which are a result of structural and individual influences (Caraher, 2005). For example, cost / affordability (Haynes-Maslow et al. 2013; Shankar & Klassen 2001; Hendrickson et al. 2006; Bihan et al. 2010; Mook et al. 2016; Konttinen et al. 2013; Dijkstra et al. 2015; Cox et al. 1996), convenience (Lucan et al, 2010; Blitstein et al, 2012), limited availability / choice (Lucan et al, 2010; Hendrickson et al, 2006; Blitstein et al, 2012; Fish et al, 2013), inadequate transportation (Haynes-Maslow et al, 2013; Fish et al, 2013), low quality foods (Haynes-Maslow et al, 2013; Hendrickson et al, 2006; Blitstein et al, 2012), lack of variety (Haynes-Maslow et al, 2013), a lack of social support (Shankar & Klassen, 2001), and worry about spoilage (Fish et al, 2013; Chen & Gazmararian, 2014). Perceived barriers to purchasing or consuming FV that are considered internal are a lack of knowledge around preparation (Shankar & Klassen, 2001), taste preferences (Mook et al, 2016; Dijkstra et al, 2015) and childhood eating patterns (Chen & Gazmararian, 2014; Shankar & Klassen, 2001). A lack of motivation has been shown to be a barrier for men in particular (Herbert et al, 2010).



Furthermore, a study by Pearson et al (2005) conducted in the Barnsley area of South Yorkshire, shows that the three key features of food deserts (namely, the cost of fruits and vegetables, socio-economic deprivation, and distance from the nearest supermarket) are not the primary factors influencing fruit and vegetable consumption. Instead, cultural influences including gender and age are more influential in determining consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Low income individuals are more likely to perceive barriers to FV purchasing and consumption than high income individuals (Dijkstra et al, 2015). Perceiving more barriers has been linked to a reduced likelihood to consume FV and, overall, a less healthy diet (Ross & Melzer, 2015; Graham et al, 2013). Little research shows any systematic evidence between poverty and poor geographic access to food (Gould et al, 2012), although food deserts are a term that have been applied more liberally to areas of high deprivation on account of the assumption that more affluent individuals and families can access private transport or food delivery services more easily. However, recent research from Scotland has shown that low income residents can be subjected to a 'poverty premium' when accessing food. For example, poorer, rural communities are paying more for household essentials than other areas. Citizens Advice compared a basket of eleven essentials (choosing the cheapest option available). In one area of Scotland, this cost £8.79. An equal basket in another area cost £24.70 (BBC, 2017). This research highlights how poverty can affect food access, but equally, how challenges around food access can exacerbate poverty. In its most severe form, these challenges can amount to experiences of food insecurity or poverty for individuals and families.

Similarly, prices can also be higher in city and town centres. The large multiples have made a swift re-entry into communities, opening C-stores under the brands '*Locals*' and '*Metros*' and '*Little's*' in urban centres. However, these often have limited supply of fresh foods, catering to an on-the-go consumer base. Moreover, Which? Research found that convenience supermarkets charge up to 7% more than their full-size equivalents for the same products, or do not stock the lower price products at all (Which?, 2017).



## The IE Understanding

Developments to the UK's agricultural sector and food retail sector have changed local food systems beyond recognition. The high majority of people now buy most of their food from supermarkets (Food Standards Agency, 2014) and therefore have little need to produce food themselves or support a local food supply chain. As a result, physical food environments have become dominated by national food retailers. Small farms, producers and independent suppliers have decreased and, with them, so has visibility of and access to a local food system built around the needs and desires of a community. Where residents would have once been exposed on a daily basis to food growing and production, farmers and suppliers, and engaged with an informal network of trade, most people in the UK are now cut off from their food supply chain beyond the point of purchase.



As a result of the ambiguity around the term 'food deserts', and limited lens that it offers when considering issues around food access, we will instead use the term 'challenging food environments' to refer to areas in which residents face a higher numbers of barriers to accessing foods that they want and need. Food environments are major driving forces of people's decision making around what to buy and eat (Sustein and Thaler, 2008). Sunstein and Thaler (2008) show how it is possible for a positive food environment to inspire and motivate individuals to make positive food choices. Likewise, a challenging food environment can drive people to make less positive food decisions.

The concept of a challenging food environment is not solely based on the number of or proximity to retail outlets, or fast food outlets, but instead refers to areas in which there are no or limited opportunities to engage with food growing, production and consumption in a positive way. Challenging food environments lack inspiration and identity around food; they refer to areas where communities aren't linked together by producing and sharing food, and where motivation to eat well can be particularly low. This type of environment, combined with issues around access, can lead to a strained relationship with food in which food becomes a representative of social and economic challenges for individuals, families and communities.



Incredible Edible believes that food is *the* solution. Food offers communities a reason to gather together, a mechanism through which they can be self-determining, a way to rebuild an identity and to thrive both in terms of health and in terms of a newfound sense of prosperity.

Therefore, our focus is not on modifying the food retail sector, although we recognise that local food stores play a part in a whole systems strategy to tackle challenging food environments. Our focus is threefold:

-  to create positive food environments in place of challenging food environments, which seek to create moments and spaces of positive engagement.
-  to support individuals in identifying any barriers they may have to engaging positively with food and to help them overcome these.
-  to engage with residents across the socio-demographic spectrum to enable everybody in a community to be positively influenced by the project.

Positive food environments are physical spaces that inspire connection, stories and ambition to eat well. These environments may consist of green spaces such gardens and allotments, orchards and raised beds, markets and stores, information points and education centres, shared kitchens and cafes. All of these physical spaces aim to achieve at least one of the following:

1. Make visible the food supply chain, especially food growing, creating access but also inspiration and talking points
2. Support local people to engage with the local food supply chain, for example, through food growing, community cooking or buying local
3. Capture a vision of the food environment that the community wants and works to make the vision a reality
4. Build and create physical spaces that change the food environment in a positive way for generations to come
5. Create networks and points of information that promote local food supply and food access initiatives that effectively link local people to the food they want and need





## The Future



As part of its project 'Incredible Spreadible', Incredible Edible will implement the two-year Incredible Spreadible initiative to develop a replicable 'greenprint' for tackling food deserts.

Using our knowledge of best practice and harnessing the support of our partners, IE UK will formulate a framework model for creating a robust IE group in a typical food desert – areas where access to healthy edible produce is severely limited, and where the community commonly faces social issues such as high deprivation, social exclusion or high levels of vulnerable social groups.

A dedicated project officer and experienced food inspirer will identify a test case and will work with those on the ground to pilot our framework and launch a bespoke, robust IE group. Crucially, to ensure the sustainability of this work beyond the lifetime of the funding, this group will engage with community groups and agencies already in the area, as well as local residents and businesses.





From the conception to the launch, and subsequent development, this Incredible Edible group will be under constant evaluation. At the end of the pilot year, all findings will be documented, the framework refined, and a proven greenprint drawn up ready for replication across the UK.

We will use this sustainable greenprint to show local authorities the benefits of this pilot scheme and with our partners seek out sponsors of future programmes.

The maturing IE movement now needs to start fulfilling its potential and externally the time is equally ripe for progression. The existence of food deserts, the increase of social issues such as obesity, poor mental health etc. and economic austerity has raised the need for Incredible Edible from desirable to crucial.

IE expertise, best practice, beacon groups, strategic relationships and the greenprints for food deserts bridge the void between need and demand. Moreover, with its proven track-record, thousands of passionate volunteers across the UK and ability to bring together business, community and learning, the way is paved for the Incredible Spreadable initiative.

## The Locations

**Avonmouth** is the area of Bristol closest to the dock area of the city. It is very much an area that is forgotten in the city, and yet boasts some great green spaces and parks, alongside the M5 and the ever present docks.

Local issues include poor air quality, plagues of flies from local flour storage areas, strong smells emanating from the docks, lack of fresh affordable food provision and a population that feels as if they are living in “*the arse end of the city*”. When Avon was disbanded, Avonmouth was in an area that was supposed to go to South Gloucestershire Council. However, they refused to take it. Part of its population is transient, which adds to the existing community challenges.

Avonmouth Village, the area in which we are supporting this work, is in the top 10% of deprived areas in the UK. It is an area that still has a lot of post-war temporary housing alongside local authority housing and private accommodation. The house prices are lower than most areas of the city,



although have increased over the last 10 years, meaning many from the area are struggling to financially afford to continue living there.

**Ilfracombe** was once a thriving Victorian Holiday destination and market town set within North Devon with stunning surrounding countryside and beaches. With an active rural farming community in the outlying towns and villages, Ilfracombe is a coastal town and port situated along Devon's north coast. The town has grown up the hillsides around the harbour and town beaches and covers a natural amphitheatre facing the Bristol Channel. Ilfracombe has a large number of historic buildings, especially around the harbour. The town expanded rapidly through the 19<sup>th</sup> century as tourism became a major economic sector and much of the town's heritage is Victorian. The South West Coast Path passes through the town and the North Devon Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty orders the town to the east and west.



## The Pilots

### Pilot one: The Square Foot Garden Project

Twenty-five households, inspired and being supported by Incredible Edible Bristol and Avonmouth Community Centre, will receive a raised wooden bed, 1m squared, with compost and plants to grow. The households will have a choice of plants from a variety of plug plants supplied by IEB. Throughout the growing seasons we will support a series of events with the Community Centre, that will support these households to ensure they get maximum cropping from their beds. Finally, at the end of the project, we will hold an event that will support the households to cook, use and or store the produce.

We are working with Avonmouth Community Centre, who are already deeply embedded in the local community, to improve their gardens and give a geographic focus to the project. We are working with corporate volunteers from Network Rail and the Port Authority as well as local people. We intend to create more seating to encourage the community to use the garden, construct 1m x 1m beds that can demonstrate how to grow in small spaces, plant fruit trees and bushes and add necessary infrastructure such as a composting area and water butts. All the above will take place through a series of workshops run by specialists with the intention of teaching and upskilling the twenty-five participating households as well as volunteers.

We intend to engage twenty-five households, with new skills around growing, who will support a growth in the project moving forwards. This project links with the work we are supporting with Severnside Rail partnership to turn Avonmouth Railway station into a community garden, working with the local Brownies and Rainbows as well as supporting local volunteers who want to see change in their area but are lacking in growing and volunteer retention skills.

We intend for this project to act as a catalyst for further growing projects in the area. We will be working with Network Rail and a community payback team, as well as local schools, to create a community orchard on some disused Network Rail land at the Station. The orchard and the growing of fruit at the Community Centre will create a fruit growing project across the area and support local producers with crops.



This is a project that would be transferable to other parts of the city and to other Incredible Edible groups across the country and is, almost, within the boundaries of an Awards for All grant from the National Lottery.

### **Pilot two: Big Feast Network, Ilfracombe – Community Surplus Food/ Network Project**

Ilfracombe Central is ranked the most deprived ward in Devon County and is within the bottom quartile nationally for most indicators. Across Ilfracombe, there is above average deprivation in respect of: employment, the living environment, crime, health deprivation and disability and skills and training. Youth offending crimes are statistically higher than average for Devon. Key stage 4, GCSE results are low, with just 37.3% achieving five or more Grades A-C. With statistically higher teen conception rates compared to Devon as whole alongside residential/nursing care for those aged 65+ at a peak for the county in Ilfracombe. Mental Health, drug/alcohol crime and domestic violence is also an issue significantly higher to Ilfracombe.

With many people choosing to retire to the countryside Ilfracombe has been left with an increasing aging population, combined with a low life expectancy rate of 80.2 years. Seasonal tourist employment contributes to the level of deprivation in the town, making Ilfracombe the most deprived town in the county of Devon with an IMD score of 27.1 compared to the closest thriving town of Barnstaple at 20.1 and the city of Exeter at 18.6. Birth rates for the town are high. North Devon is ranked 146<sup>th</sup> from 326 Local Authorities in the English Indices of Deprivation (2010). At a local level North Devon is the second most deprived district area in Devon.

Median household income in North Devon of £24,970 (2008) is the second lowest for any district in Devon and £1,142 (7.5%) below the Devon average. Ilfracombe central ward has the lowest average household income in North Devon (£20,587). Unemployment in Ilfracombe's East and West wards is higher than the District and County averages. High unemployment level in the town will be affected by a relatively high dependency of seasonal employment within the tourism industry.

Sources: <http://www.ilfracombetowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Ilfracombe-Strategic-Plan-2010-2020.pdf>



<http://consult.torridge.gov.uk/portal/planning/localplan/publication?pointId=1397562601969>

Working together with the local branch of the Trussell Trust Foodbank, Ilfracombe Town Council, local independent and national supermarkets & cafes plus the local hospitality businesses, we shall intervene surplus stock – be it damaged goods, split packets, ambient Best Before Date (Not Use-By) alongside our existing Incredible Edible Ilfracombe garden produce. We will bring a social community café to the town on a monthly basis where locals can get involved in hands-on supervised cookery in an informal welcoming environment or alternatively join us for a hot meal with donations encouraged by time, skills, or lastly a financial contribution no matter how large or small. The remaining weeks in the month we will continue to intervene food waste within our town and offer on a drop-in basis with the same donation criteria. We will work with Belle’s Place Youth & Community Café CIC and Greener Ilfracombe CIC to offer an open to all facility, with the emphasis on social activity. A ‘kids corner’ will operate monthly enabling pre-school & school aged children the opportunity to create their own lunches and share with their lunch.

## The Experience

We will seek to understand the experience of living in a challenging food environment by capturing local resident’s thoughts and opinions via a short interview. We will replicate this activity in order to evaluate the impact of the project when it completes.

## The Questions

1. Do you feel that you can buy the food you want and need in your community?
2. If you aren’t able to buy the food you want and need, what do you do instead?
3. What is the best thing about food where you live?
4. What is the most challenging thing about food where you live?
5. What would be the biggest improvement to your local food environment?
6. What is your biggest priority for changing your local community for the better?



## The Impact

Incredible Edible Ltd. Intends to use its understanding of the issues of food deserts to generate three key outcomes that can be adopted by IE groups all over the UK, and the world, to tackle areas in which food access is a challenge.

- ✓ An IE framework to tackle food deserts
- ✓ The launch of a bespoke IE group with a particular focus on activities and solutions supporting the community in a 'challenging food environment'.
- ✓ The creation of a sustainable, replicable greenprint for food deserts

The Incredible Spreadible initiative will be rooted in robust research and evaluation with each theme well documented, including assessment tool results, the identification of best practice, and the greenprint for food deserts. Constant practical reviews will put in place and annual reports submitted. All work will be shared through IE's online platforms, news bulletins and events.

The greenprint for food deserts will lead to real positive change to the lives of people in those areas. As Incredible Spreadible will be entrenched in across the UK and in the realms of commerce, civic society, and decision making, its legacy will live beyond the funding, and its successes will continue to be replicated.





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