

Homegrown success stories



Formerly derelict allotments now have a polytunnel and 18 plots – with the space to grow fruit trees as well as vegetables

Julian Dobson revisits a once neglected housing estate in the northeast to find out how ideas put forward by local people are taking root

The first time Donna Kelly bought a veggie bag, she was flummoxed. 'I only used the potatoes because I didn't know what to do with the rest of them,' she says. 'I had been living off TV dinners.'

Tracey Embleton, too, found the contents of her bag a bit daunting. 'I said I don't want courgettes because I don't know what to do with them. My kids and husband had never had courgettes before,' she says. 'Now we love them.'

For people who live outside Longbenton, North Tyneside, having a bag of vegetables might not seem such a big deal. In Longbenton it's a sign that things are changing.

Despite a £64m regeneration programme that has rebuilt a monolithic council estate as a mixed community of tenants and homeowners,

Longbenton has no local shop selling fresh produce. It's what's known as a 'food desert'. And because few local tenants have a car to take them the three miles to the supermarket, they are left with a choice of a frozen food shop and a couple of takeaways.

It's not surprising that the area has some of the worst health statistics in Tyneside.

Julie Cruddas, a director of community interest company Justice Prince, who has been working with residents, explains the scale of the issue. 'Longbenton has the highest combined rate of lung cancer, bowel cancer and breast cancer in North Tyneside. We have one of the highest obesity rates in the country.'

The veggie bags are an enterprising solution, and are on sale for £3 each and supplied by local growers. Where private enterprise failed to see a market, social enterprise is moving in. Nearly 3,000 bags have now been distributed, and one-third of the takers previously had no fresh fruit or vegetables at all in their diet.

The veggie bags are just one initiative from the Longbenton Community Action Team (LCAT), which is a grass roots organisation that is slowly changing the atmosphere and attitudes in the neighbourhood. It was originally supported by the community action charity Re:generate, it is now independent and, with the help of a £56,000 grant

Tunnel vision

Linda Whitworth sits in a well-tended garden behind the community centre in East Howdon in Tyneside. The garden, created by volunteers from The Good Life, provides stark contrast to the estate beyond, where many homes are boarded up and some have been attacked by arsonists.

East Howdon's 300 homes are cut off from the rest of Tyneside by the regional sewage works and a series of factories on one side, and the Tyne Tunnel approach road on the other. Many houses have been bought by private landlords, and residents say they have been used to house people evicted from homes elsewhere.

Officials know that the estate needs radical action, and a neighbourhood manager has been appointed. A report in 2005 by Mackellar Architecture for the Wallsend regeneration strategy describes the local housing market as 'fragile' and reports that residents were concerned about the area's isolation, lack of facilities, poor transport and crime.

Ms Whitworth was born in nearby Wallsend,

but spent much of her career working in developing countries for international agencies such as Unicef. After returning to Tyneside in 2002 she slipped a disc, had to give up work and ended up in East Howdon.

She was appalled at what she found. 'I think it was worse than some of the countries I have seen for deprivation and community spirit,' she says. So she decided to do something – upsetting some of the more established local residents in the process.

Three years ago she made contact with LCAT, who replicated the process of listening to residents' concerns that had taken place in Longbenton. Out of that came the A Team, a group of local people determined to make a difference.

Top of their agenda was the smell from the sewage works. 'There's something wrong because you can taste it – it's on your tongue in the morning,' Ms Whitworth says. 'All the old people suffer from irritable bowel syndrome and asthma and bowel cancer.'

She claims that the plant and the nearby factories are partly responsible for local people's

health problems, and most of the residents have signed a petition calling for action. Northumbria Water counters that it's following correct environmental practice. North Tyneside Council has set up a sub-committee to look into the issue.

Meanwhile, residents are coming together in an attempt to put some spirit back into the community – organising everything from a revamp of the children's play area to a bus trip to the Flamingo Land theme park. There are plans for community allotments and to train young people in building skills.

'People knock on my door now and tell me things, which they never did before,' Ms Whitworth says. 'People would never say anything before for fear of grassing.' Crime is going down 'because everybody knows everybody'.

What makes her proud, she says, is that East Howdon is no longer a forgotten area of Tyneside. 'They said I was wasting my time – and that I would never bring regeneration to the area. Now people tell me that I have put East Howdon back on the map.'

from the Tudor Trust, hopes soon to be able to recruit its first full-time worker.

Tyneside revisited

New Start visited Longbenton three years ago to see how a process of listening to local people's hopes, concerns and ideas was generating ideas to improve the community. One of those ideas was The Good Life, a plan to take over neglected allotments near the local Metro station and use them to grow produce and train residents in horticultural skills.

LCAT admits it made a lot of mistakes in trying to get The Good Life project to take root. The turning point came when Stan Timmins, horticultural expert and Tyneside's gardening guru, got involved. With the help of his advice and 25 tons of mulch donated by the council, The Good Life now grows leeks, potatoes, spring cabbages, and flowers which it hopes to sell to local people and commuters at the Metro station.

By July this year a site that was once strewn with rubble and bits of cars was proudly showing off five 'test beds', as examples of what could be done, as well as a polytunnel bursting with seedlings. There are now 18 plots on the site, with room to grow fruit trees as well as vegetables.

Dozens of locals are volunteering to help with the allotment. Ms Embleton explains: 'There are people you would never expect to be there. We didn't know shit from clay, but we're all like Charlie Dimmock now.'

Growing confidence

The Good Life and the veggie bags are just two examples of LCAT's expanding success. It also supports Socialise, a group for local teenagers that started three years ago. Many of its founder members are now working, but continue to support its activities – which include Longbenton's own version of the TV show *The Apprentice*, which will involve six 'challenge days' and a three-day residential course to identify budding local entrepreneurs.

Then there's Women Matter, a new group for women designed to boost confidence and self-esteem. They're compiling their own healthy cookbook, and hope to arrange an exchange visit to South Africa to see the work of Wecan, a women's organisation that supports people with HIV.

In response to popular demand LCAT has also organised camping trips to the Lake District for local residents, some of whom had never been further than Whitley Bay for a break.

Other resident groups are feeling the impact. Campaigners in East Howdon, a neglected estate at the northern end of the Tyne Tunnel, have benefited from LCAT's help and advice (see panel).

LCAT has attracted praise from local MP Stephen Byers and North Tyneside elected mayor John Harrison, who grew up in Longbenton. But when it comes to shifting the attitudes of council officials, residents claim it's been a different story.

'We've had some fights on our hands,' Ms Embleton says. 'We had massive support from Stephen Byers and the mayor, but there seems to have been a power struggle from middle management who don't want to hand anything over.'

'We had to tell them they needed to be accountable to us – they were getting paid and we weren't. After six months they knew we weren't going to go away. We stood our ground and said we weren't going to be performing monkeys and come out when they said.'

Ms Cruddas thinks the culture of local government needs to change. She says: 'Professionals see the community as hard to reach and apathetic, and some of that is true, but some of

it is about the professionals and service providers who don't have the skills to engage.'

With a mission 'to identify and support the most disenfranchised, vulnerable and poorest people living in the Longbenton ward and encourage them to tackle the barriers they face in fully engaging in public life and to tackle concerns through action' LCAT appears to tick all the right boxes in empowering residents, promoting healthy living and combating exclusion. More than 2,000 people have been involved in its volunteer-run listening sessions.

But Karen Clark, co-director of Justice Prince, says: 'Where's the money? Everyone is excited and makes all the right noises. But where are the resources that support all of these schemes?'

'It's like there's a blocked pipe in the system. All the work we're doing links into the local strategic partnership, but getting money to fund it is the big question. Even the people who are brilliant and support us can't actually seem to bring any resources.'

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Volunteers grow fresh produce for the local community and to sell at the Metro station