

Can Chopwell Feed Itself?

Developing a strategy for local food



March 2025

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This report is researched and authored by Than Gunabalasingham.

Front image: A 'word apple' containing the most common words from the survey in response to developing a community food growing project in Chopwell.

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Foreword

by Michael Marston

The North East region has the highest levels of food insecurity in the whole of the UKⁱ. Chopwell, like many other parts of the North East, has been impacted hard by an unjust food system that is hitting the poorest and vulnerable the mostⁱⁱ.

Chopwell Regeneration Group, has since its inception, been operating a food waste café and community larder. It is acknowledged that, they, like many organisations working in community food provision, are moving into more challenging times with growing demand for the food offer both locally and nationally, meaning less choice, inconsistent supply and ultimately more money being spent on food to keep things running. It was felt going forwards, that a more sustainable approach would be needed to provide Good Food for All, including more community food growing to support the food offer. It was timely therefore that Gateshead Food Partnership were offering a grant, which Chopwell Regeneration Group applied to produce a food strategy, *Can Chopwell Feed Itself?* A steering group was established to oversee the work and appoint a consultant.

1. Introduction

The current food system is not working. The overwhelming majority of food consumed in the UK is brought to us through vast nameless supply chains that bear no relation to local soils, livelihoods or communities to which they find their way to.

The food supply chain is increasingly controlled by a handful of national and global playersⁱⁱⁱ. Food is travelling further than it has ever done before, and more often than not, is grown with a cocktail of toxic chemicals that are harmful to our health and the health of the planet^{iv}. Food is also increasingly processed and stripped of its goodness by manufacturers and retailers.

The rise in big supermarket retail over past decades has decimated local independent food retailers around the country, with less than 1.3% of the market share now attributable to independent grocers^v. As big retailers source from big farms, the rural landscape has also

changed beyond recognition. Producers are paid only a tiny fraction of the price paid by consumers^{vi}. There are increasingly few small, local farms remaining as they become swallowed by mega farms^{vii}. All of this has eroded the freshness and quality of the food we eat, and with it, our health and wellbeing.

As we grow less and less of our own food, we have also become increasingly disconnected from nature. With changing work patterns, lifestyles and cultural shifts, the amount of time we spend outdoors in nature has diminished over time, with profound impacts on our physical and mental health.

Although food is cheaper as a proportion of income than any time in the past, and lower than most, if not all of Europe^{viii}, there is growing reliance on food banks and other subsidised community provisions, particularly in the context of inflated housing and energy costs^{ix}. Whilst average UK household spend on food is historically low at 8% of income, for the least affluent 20% of the population the proportion goes up to 15%. At the same time, over a quarter of all the food grown in the UK is never eaten.^x

Food insecurity is a major concern in the North East, with community organisations, like those in Chopwell picking up the pieces of a broken system. This report was in part prompted out of concern that very little of the produce used in community food provision is being sourced or grown locally, and that organisations were very much at the mercy of an insecure, unsustainable and failing food system.

The report seeks to better understand the existing food provision in Chopwell and explore the feasibility of developing a localised, community-centred food system in the village.

The report is informed by:

- A public consultation and launch event held in September 2024
- A survey of 106 local residents (94 of whom live in Chopwell), open for responses between September 2024 and January 2025
- Interviews and conversations with more than 21 local organisations and stakeholders undertaken between September 2024 and January 2025
- Case studies of organisations and projects further afield

2. Headline findings & key recommendations

The headline findings and key recommendations are grouped below under the following themes:

- Developing a local food economy
- Strengthening community food provision
- Tackling food waste together
- Growing more food
- Food growing for well-being
- Food growing for future generations

2.1 Developing a local food economy

The total value of spending on fresh fruit and vegetables by residents of Chopwell could be in the region **£1.7 million a year**.^{xi} However the vast majority of this spending is going to national supermarket and convenience chains, and therefore leaking out of the local economy.

Over half of all respondents surveyed (55%) were travelling outside of Chopwell to buy most of their fresh fruit and vegetables at supermarkets further afield. Given the location of these supermarkets, it is likely that many are having to drive to do their shopping. **This is neither a secure nor resilient model of food retail provision, particularly for older people, those less mobile and without access to private transport, as highlighted during the regional bus strikes of 2023.**

Only 11% of respondents get their fresh fruit and vegetables from local shops in Chopwell. Of the three stores in Chopwell serving fresh fruit and vegetables, all are owned by national supermarket and convenience chains. **As such there is no independent retail provision of fresh fruit and vegetables in the village. None of the local stores in Chopwell stock any locally grown produce** (with the exception of one item that was regionally grown). This reflects the current food retail system UK wide.

There is some evidence to suggest **support for the sale of local produce through local outlets**. Over half of respondents surveyed stated that if a community food growing project was to be established at least some of the produce should be sold through local outlets. Some of the national convenience franchises in Chopwell do have the flexibility to sell local produce but don't presently do so due to cost.

The vast majority of respondents surveyed (93%) regularly eat fresh fruit and vegetables, although two-thirds cited at least one barrier to eating more. **Cost was the most commonly cited barrier. However, taste and quality, was considered the most important factor influencing why respondents shop where they do.** As local chemical-free produce is more likely to be fresher and superior in taste and quality, **there are opportunities for local retail if its virtues can be marketed and issues around affordability can be addressed.**

There is plenty of empty and under-utilised retail space in Chopwell, some of which can be converted to independent retail of fresh fruit and vegetables as a trial if local demand can be encouraged. Independent retail must be able to offer a genuine alternative and differentiate their offer from what is already available, such as locally grown and chemical-free produce.

Chopwell has a rich independent food retail history, having boasted at least 15 independent food retail stores and cooperatives in its heyday. Many older residents are proud of this heritage. **This should be explored and celebrated to help reimagine and build support for a different vision of a local food economy in the village for the future.**

Only a small fraction of respondents (9%) were using local veg box schemes or farm shops. **There are a very small handful of local producers and delivery services supplying local chemical-free produce directly to Chopwell and or surrounding areas.** These include Gibside Community Farm, The Paddock and North East Organic Growers. Some of these organisations benefit from a small customer base in Chopwell.

These organisations do not benefit from the marketing power or visibility of national chains, and are also typically costlier. However they reflect a fairer price of food production and are far more wide-reaching in the benefits they provide to the local economy, in that they are more likely to be working with and using other local businesses themselves.

More can be done in the community to support and build relationships with these producers and businesses, who are part of a fairer, healthier and more sustainable food system. It is worth exploring possibilities to work in partnership to apply for bridge funding to make prices more affordable those who cannot otherwise local produce, develop cooperative purchasing models and facilitate local events that provide a platform for these producers and raise the profile of issues facing the food system.

2.2 Strengthening community food provision

Chopwell is fairly well served in terms of its community meals provision particularly for older people and those at risk of isolation, with at least four different organisations providing meals (Chopwell Regeneration Group, Community Centre, Methodist Homes Association and Boltons Bungalows).

Three organisations are providing some kind of community market or delivery in or to the village (Chopwell Regeneration Group, Boltons Bungalows and Pickle Palace), providing food at subsidised prices to residents who would not otherwise be able to afford it. These services are all well received by residents and make use of produce that has been donated or would have gone to waste. Fiver per cent of respondents surveyed stated using community markets and food banks.

Collectively, more than 250 households are benefitting each month from community meals and food provided by the various organisations in the village.

Organisations involved in community food provision should be working together more closely to build on each other's strengths, share resources and improve delivery of their services even further. **The development of community food working group with representation from all of these organisations is therefore encouraged in the village.**

Whilst organisations are helping to save a lot of food from being wasted, much more can be done to support the use of fresh, chemical-free local produce in meals and make it available in community markets. Some organisations such as Boltons Bungalows are leading the way in this regard, giving emphasis to allotment produce.

Most organisations are relying heavily on produce that is purchased from supermarkets and cash and carries to make community meals work in the context of the difficult constraints they were operating within. Reasons for doing so included cost and convenience.

Local chemical-free produce is more expensive and not as readily available. **Organisations should consider working together to form a buyers' cooperative** to reduce costs and be able to buy better quality produce. Many of the meals served in the village are similar and use a lot of traditional produce that is relatively easy to grow in local conditions. This is an advantage in terms of collective purchasing. **Some produce from local organic wholesalers are comparable to, or cheaper than supermarkets when in season.** There are examples of small buyers cooperatives set up informally by residents in the village to access fresh organic produce more cheaply. Organisations can follow suit, or join residents to support a market for local produce.

Organisations should **consider joining the Gateshead Food Hub** recently set up by through the Gateshead Food Partnership. The hub aims to help local organisations benefit from cost savings and access better quality produce through collective purchasing. A delivery service is also offered.

If local produce cannot be supported regularly, **organisations can do more to provide seasonal meals and organise celebrations with emphasis on fresh local produce.** This can help raise profile and help residents appreciate the taste, heritage and other benefits. **If relationships can be built with small local producers by purchasing from them time to time, or through other forms of exchange, then it is more likely that those producers will also donate surplus produce in future.**

2.3 Tackling food waste together

Food waste is a symptom of a broken food system. Food that goes to waste from supermarket shelves and at household level are well known, but just one part of a far bigger issue. A vast amount of produce is wasted at the farm gate, even before it reaches the shelves as a result of the purchasing policies and control of the food system by large retailers. The most effective way to address these root causes of food waste is to support a

local community-centred food system that produces far less waste in the first place. It is therefore important that:

- As many people as possible are supported to grow food for themselves
- As much food as possible is grown in the community
- As much food as possible is purchased from small scale local producers

Good relationships appear to exist already between community organisations and the local supermarkets in the village. There is opportunity to build relationships with other small local businesses to redistribute potential surplus. Examples include the River View Bakery in Blackhall Mill.

There may be local producers who are open to gleaning some surplus from fields or orchards in return for some kind of exchange. Gibside Community Farm and other examples are mentioned in this report. **There is scope to identify and build relationships with these local producers based on fair exchange.** Consultations with REfUSE, a food waste charity and café based in Chester-le-Street, highlighted that local producers are more likely to distribute surplus if community organisations also play their part in supporting them by buying their produce. This does not need to be regularly if the costs of doing so are prohibitive, but at least as part of the procurement process for special meals and events.

If surplus food cannot be distributed to residents straight away or turned into community meals, it can often be preserved to use it at later date. **There is plenty of scope to build more capacity for preservation of surplus foods and their distribution.** This can be particularly helpful when there is a seasonal glut of specific produce from allotments, producers or retailers ordering too much at certain times of the year. Methods of preservation include pickling, fermentation and dehydration. There is considerable scope to preserve more food in the village, much like it would have been done in generations past, and help revive these skills. Bensham Bites have developed projects elsewhere in Gateshead, around the dehydration of food to make meals for residents who would not otherwise have access to kitchen facilities.

Some organisations such as Chopwell Regeneration Group through the Bank, and Pickle Palace have been offering cookery classes in the village with a focus on using food surplus. **Increasing provision of cookery classes is one way of using more surplus directly and**

in encouraging residents to do so. Other social activities such as Men's Pie Club at the Bank also offer a way to use surplus. As well as developing cooking skills and creative ways to use new food and leftovers, these activities help build confidence and address social isolation. The village benefits from at least three community kitchens – The Bank, the Community Centre and Boltons Bungalows, which could be hired for such purposes. However, only 10% of the respondents surveyed indicated that they would be interested in more training in the village on how to cook fresh fruit and vegetables, with a further 35% open to the possibility. **Better understanding is therefore needed on the kinds of support residents are interested in.**

There is presently no official community composting facility in Chopwell. The village will benefit greatly from having one. Composting food waste from households and surplus foods that cannot be salvaged helps return nutrients to the soil and generate compost that can be used to grow more food locally. There are existing examples of facilities set up in Chopwell and surrounding villages, learnings from which can be drawn upon. The Hop Garden in High Spen has been working with school children to compost kitchen waste from the school at their new community composting system. **Better networks can also be established between allotment holders and community organisations through which food waste that cannot be salvaged from community food provision is taken to private allotment plots to be turned into compost.** Existing arrangements appear to be somewhat ad hoc and unreliable.

2.4 Growing more food

Chopwell benefits from a huge amount of public space in and around the village as well as proximity to larger private land holdings. **There is somewhere around 43 acres of public, Council-owned land in the village.** The vast majority of this is open space managed as amenity grassland at much expense to the Council.

If even 10% of this land was to be cultivated for community food growing, the village could be producing between 38 and 62 tonnes of fruit and vegetables annually^{xii}. This produce can be used to supply community organisations with fresh high quality produce, be sold through local outlets or distributed to volunteers.

2.4.1 Public support for community food growing

There is **strong public support for community food growing projects. 87% of respondents support the idea of a food project run by the community** that could supply affordable, locally grown food to residents.

Just under half of all respondents surveyed wanted to be involved in a local community food growing project, and a further 37% were unsure.

Residents want to support community food growing in different ways. **Three-quarters of those who wanted to be involved stated that they would volunteer to grow food, over a half said they would volunteer to distribute food and over a fifth said they would support financially.**

2.4.2 Current community food growing provision

At the moment there are only three small sites in the village expressly growing to produce at least some food or herbs for the community:

- Allotment plot supplying produce for Boltons Bungalows and Chopwell in Bloom
- Trinity Methodist Church – fruit trees, soft fruit bushes, and planters with a small amount of herbs and annuals
- The Kitchen Garden community allotment plot – small site in the process of being developed to support volunteers to grow food and supply community organisations,

A community allotment, successfully initiated and managed by the Chopwell Regeneration Group on private land at the Officials' Club will be ceasing as of July 2025, following a change of tenure. A further site at Whittonstall that was being developed as a community food forest on Council land has not been permitted.

The Boltons Bungalows allotment is the only site focussing primarily on growing food for community projects. Others have mixed objectives, including serving as spaces for gathering and well-being.

The Trinity Methodist Church is the only institution in the village to develop at least some community food growing capacity on its own land; all of the other active projects mentioned above are on public allotment land. There is opportunity for other institutions or organisations that benefit from access to land to follow suit.

2.4.3 Possible sites for community food growing

Organisations, through a food working group, should support the development of larger community farm or growing project.

Chopwell Park appears to be the most suitable location for a larger community food growing site owing to the good access paths it benefits from; security around some enclosed areas; how central it is; and given that it is under-utilised. Community food growing can help transform the park by meeting different needs of the village, and fit within a diverse mix of activities offered.

The enclosed areas within the park, in particular the cricket pitch, is most desirable for purposes of security, storage and access to water. If existing structures can be restored and repurposed rather than demolished it could save on initial capital outlay.

It may be possible to grow as much as 7.7 tonnes of food for the community on an area the size of the cricket pitch.

Other marginal areas of the park can also be used for some planting on a smaller scale. Planting of fruit trees should be encouraged as it requires the least maintenance and is an easy way to build local food sufficiency.

There is opportunity to draw on examples in surroundings areas where residents and local groups have successfully transformed under-used park and public land into community food growing space with support from the Council. These include Blackhill Community Garden in Consett which was converted from derelict park space, and the recently established Greenside Community Orchard which stands on the site of a former bowling green.

2.4.4 Community planters

There is potential to incorporate hardy herbs and perennial food plants into community planting around the village, working closely with Chopwell in Bloom and Brightening up Chopwell projects. Consultations raised concerns over possible damage, theft, and lack of upkeep. These could be addressed by:

- Educational signage that weaves stories of plants, their uses and benefits, with the history of Chopwell.
- Making the planters taller to raise them up from 'danger zones'
- Considering new locations where they are more likely to be looked after
- Better management plans with shared responsibilities

2.4.5 Allotments

Allotment holders are an important source of donations for community organisations particularly during seasonal gluts. However these arrangements are informal and ad hoc, rather than systematic, leading to a lack of continuity. **Organisations could work more closely with allotment holders, encouraging them to plant extra of produce regularly used in community meals, and better plan for their catering needs.**

The development of an allotment group or association should be supported, to help share advice, particularly with new growers and provide support to those having difficulties with access to and cultivating from their plots. **Allotment holders, particularly newer growers, could also be supported through more training provision on food growing and allotment tours to inspire and share learnings.**

The level of allotment provision in the village is considered to be inadequate in the context of a growing population, new housing developments and a high proportion of the housing stock with lack of private garden access. The Council should consider different approaches to bring neglected and underutilised allotments back into use, and increase allotment provision overall:

- Allocating them to community projects
- Dividing allotments into smaller plots
- Extending out on public land around the margins of existing sites

2.4.6 Growing on private land

Three quarters of respondents surveyed felt that a focus of community food growing projects should be to support people to grow food. There are many older people and people with disabilities or illness in the village, who are forced to give up their allotment or are no longer able to enjoy fresh produce from their own gardens. **The right to grow food is a fundamental right that everyone should be able to exercise regardless of age or physical ability. There is opportunity to create projects that support people to grow food in their own gardens or even back yards.** There may also people in the village who want to grow food in their own gardens, but are unable to do so due to time and other constraints such as resources, skills or space. **There is scope to help these people, in exchange for some produce in return for the community.** The Time to Grow project in East London is a successful example of this.

There are significant private landholdings in and around the village that are mostly being used for either hobby or commercial grazing of animals. The economic value and profitability of using land in this way is likely to be nominal even for the landowners themselves. The majority of small and medium-sized farmers often find themselves undercut in terms of the prices they receive through the industrialised food system, with retailers, processors and manufacturers, wielding the most power. Also limited is the benefit this form of land use brings to the community.

Community organisations could therefore work together to build closer relationships with these landowners and ask to lease suitable and accessible marginal fields for a larger community food growing project focussing on field scale cultivation.

Farmers could even be recruited to cultivate grain for direct human consumption rather than livestock feed. However this idea is restricted by the absence of small scale milling infrastructure locally. Unless significant local demand can be created, for unprocessed

heritage grains such as naked oats, spelt, barley and wheat grain, there would little feasibility in local grain production.

2.5 Food growing for well-being

Chopwell has a high proportion of single person households. There are many older and vulnerable people at risk of social isolation. There are also high levels unemployment as well as drug alcohol abuse, which lead to poor physical and mental health outcomes.

Community food growing spaces have the potential to improve well-being by helping bring people together, tackling social isolation, building confidence, increasing access to nature, providing opportunities for outdoor physical activity, as well as providing direct access to fresh produce and high quality nutrition. There are many examples of community food growing projects in surrounding areas and further afield which are of important social value to their users. These include Blackhill Community Garden; Hop Garden, High Spen; Herb Hub, Bensham; and Community Orchard Greenside.

Herb Hub has created simple herb growing spaces attached to residential institutions including a sheltered housing scheme, probation centre and youth centre. Further afield the Lambeth GP Food Co-op in South London provides a thriving example of a community food growing project for patients and service users connected to health practices and hospitals.

There is opportunity to create similar spaces in and around the village if there is enthusiasm from local health and care-based institutions in future.

Organisations in the village working with older people and those facing social isolation indicated that they would very much welcome a community food growing space in the village where they can bring or refer their service users to. These include local social prescribing services, with whom better links can be formed. Almost three-fifths of respondents surveyed also felt that a focus of community food projects in the village should be to serve as outdoor wellness space.

2.6 Food growing for future generations

Chopwell suffers from significant levels of food poverty. All of the organisations who were consulted, working with children and young people in the village, receive a significant proportion of children on free school meals and facing food insecurity.

Community food growing spaces have the potential to engage and build links with organisations working with children and young people such as Chopwell Primary School and Chopwell Youth Club. **Chopwell does not at present have any established space through which children can engage in growing food.**

All of the organisations consulted who work with children and young people supported community food growing and were keen to be involved, but due to resource and skills constraints, would need other groups to lead and support this process. Capacity constraints were also restricting provision of Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in Chopwell.

More joint-working is needed between these organisations. There is possibility to share responsibilities between these different local organisations and groups, including those involved in community food growing, to enable provision of more holiday activities for children in the village, particularly during the Summer holidays.

Community food growing projects and other food related activities such as cookery could be part of diverse mix of activities that can be delivered and can help to reduce the pressure on any one organisation.

Chopwell Primary School is looking to introduce more on-site food growing activities for the children, subject to resources. **This can be complemented by wider community food growing projects in the village with which the school could arrange visits and activities.** Organisations can also support the school in other ways through engaging children in the village in festivals and local competitions around the theme of food growing and healthy foods. By working closely with children and young people to grow food, it would be possible over the longer term to identify and develop more effective ways in which their families could also be supported to reduce food insecurity and access better nutrition.

3. Chopwell's food history

Chopwell has a rich food growing tradition and retail history. In the past, the village would have been mainly self-sufficient with most families cultivating extensively from their allotment plots.

Historical images of Chopwell^{xiii} show that much more land in and around the village was dedicated to allotments and food growing than it is today, even before the Second World War.

Most people in the village would join in the potato harvest, many people would have a flock of hens for eggs, and bread was baked fresh almost daily. Rickets amongst children were rare as there were plenty of vegetables from allotment gardens^{xiv}.

Much like the rest of the country, local food production in Chopwell was encouraged further during the Dig for Victory campaign in the Second World War. Horticultural shows were also promoted as part of the campaign, which later became embedded in cultural life.

Alongside this strong backbone of allotment growing, the village was also served by a plentiful number of independent stores which met all manner of day-to-day needs.

Looking back: The political context of food growing from the Medieval Mill to the Miner's Strike

Prior to its industrial heritage, the Manor of Chopwell, or Cheppwell as it was once known, was passed between the Church and Crown Estates as far back as medieval times. The land would have been worked by tenant farmers renting the land, with systems set up to benefit the landlords, such as the case of the local Corn Mill, where local farmers were obliged to grind their corn at the village mill and forfeit a percentage of the grain to do so^{xv}.

The discovery of coal saw the influx of migrants to Chopwell from all around the country, with the village burgeoning as a result. It is likely that the ancestors of many of the miners would themselves have been disenfranchised from the land and their right to produce food, following the Enclosures Acts of earlier times^{xvi}.

Foraging and food growing on local allotment gardens would have played a key role in sustaining the village during the hardships of the miners' strike between June 1925 and December 1926, when the miners were "forced through starvation to return to work on the owner's terms"^{xvii}. The tradition of solidarity, resistance and struggle for workers' rights in Chopwell cannot therefore be told without its food history.

In this centenary year of the 1925 Miners' Strike, shaping the future of local food in Chopwell is more relevant than ever.

4. Chopwell's retail context

4.1 The history

It is understood from long standing residents that in its heyday as late as the 1960s, the village boasted a thriving local economy with at least 15 independent stores and cooperatives:

- 10 general grocery stores, including 3 large cooperative stores
- 2 greengrocers
- 2 butchers
- 1 fishmonger

Residents recall a time when all of the needs of the village were being served by local stores, with virtually no need for locals to shop elsewhere. By the 1990s however, with the rise of big supermarket retail, almost all of these had closed.

4.2 Current retail context

Today, Chopwell is served by one local supermarket and three convenience stores, that offer at least some fresh fruit and vegetables:

- Coop, Derwent Street
- Londis, Tay Street
- Londis, The Green

There are a further three convenience stores in the village although these do not serve any fresh produce:

- Premier, South Road
- Go Local, Derwent Street
- Pennies and Pounds, Derwent Street

Whilst none of these are large supermarkets, except for Pennies and Pounds they are all national chains or franchises of national chains, with the Londis and Premier brands both owned by Tesco following a takeover of the Booker Group in 2018.

The stores meet a wide range of day-to-day grocery needs. Of these, the Coop is the largest, and offers the widest selection of fresh fruit and vegetables.

A survey of the available produce indicated that virtually none was sourced locally. Only one item, leeks from Coop, could be considered regional, having been grown in Northumberland. The Coop appeared to have more UK grown produce than other stores, although for most produce it was unclear which part of the country it was grown in.

Alongside the above, there are a number of other cooked food establishments that have shopfronts in the village. These are all cafes and takeaways:

- Village Café, Derwent Street
- Lotus Express, Derwent Street
- The Bank, Derwent Street
- The Foodfather, Derwent Street
- Tetris Pizza, Blyth Street
- Gary's Fish Bar, The Green

Due to cost and the lack of local supply chains, ingredients used by food businesses in the village tend not to be sourced locally. However there may be opportunities to supply a small amount of produce to supplement some of the ingredients used by these businesses if it can be grown locally and sold at comparable prices, or if a unique selling point such as freshness, flavour and provenance can be marketed, for which customers are willing to pay higher prices. This could provide additional income streams for community food growing projects.

5. Developing a local food economy

The overwhelming majority of respondents surveyed do not rely on the local supermarket or convenience chains in Chopwell for their fresh fruit and vegetables. Only 10% stated that they get their fresh fruit and vegetables from local shops in Chopwell, whereas around two-thirds (65%) shop either directly or online from large supermarkets outside of Chopwell.

Taken together, 75% of the respondents surveyed therefore shop mostly at national supermarket or convenience chains.

Of these, excluding those opting for online supermarket deliveries, 55% were travelling outside of Chopwell to buy most of their fresh fruit and vegetables at supermarkets further afield. Supermarkets in Consett were the most widely frequented (30%), Blaydon (7%) and supermarkets elsewhere (18%).

Given the location of these supermarkets, it is highly likely that many residents are having to take public transport or drive around seven miles or more to do their shopping. This is neither a secure nor resilient model of food retail provision, particularly for older people, those less mobile and without access to private transport, as highlighted during the regional bus strikes of 2023.

“Some old people cannot shop outside the village so not much choice of what to buy”

Survey respondent

Based on average household spend, the total value of spending on fresh fruit and vegetables by residents of Chopwell could be in the region of £33,000 a week or around **£1.7 million per year**.^{xviii}

However, as the vast majority of this is being spent at national supermarket chains, most of this wealth is leaking out of the local economy.

Although local convenience chains tend to employ local people, they stock virtually no local food produce. In this regard they are the same as larger supermarkets.

Local independent retailers are however far more likely to be using other local businesses and services to run their operations, and in doing so, create a virtuous cycle of prosperity in the community.

Only 25% of respondents are likely to be buying or consuming at least some local produce, either growing their own, subscribing to a box scheme, buying directly from a farm shop, market stall or benefitting occasionally from some local produce that occasionally finds its way into community banks and food banks.

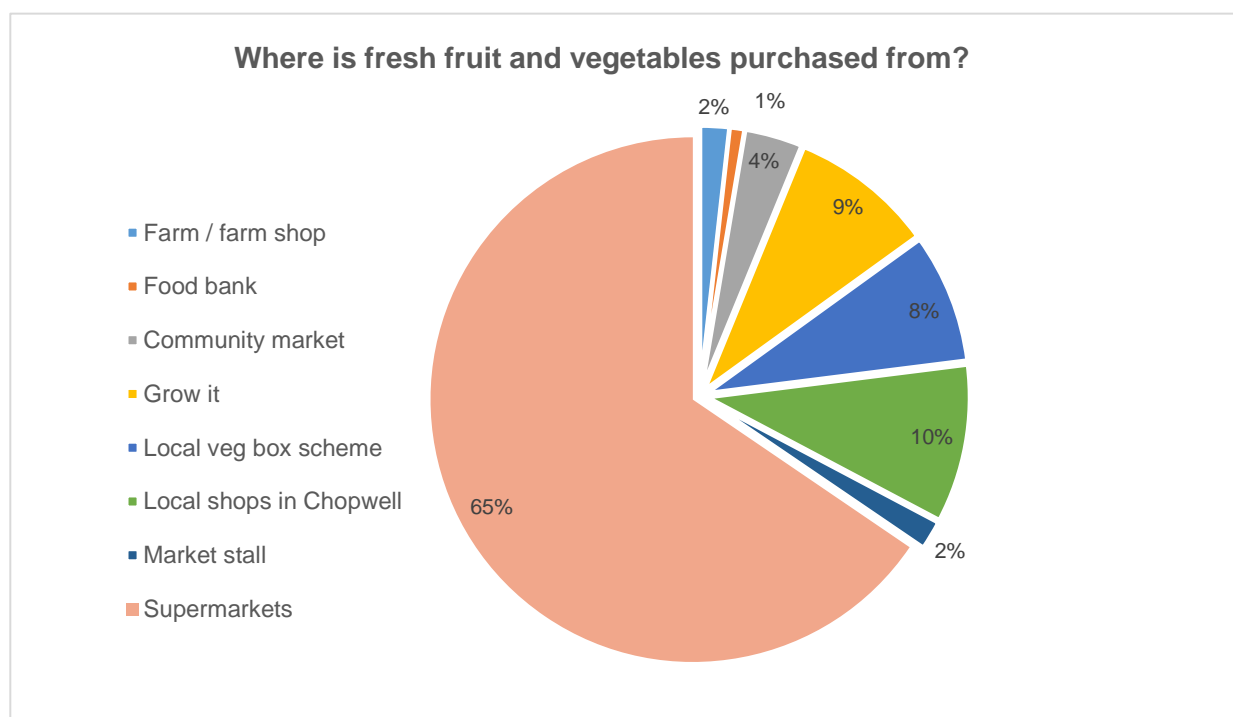


Figure 1: Graph showing where survey respondents currently get their fresh fruit and vegetables from. Source: Local food survey (see Appendix 1)

If a local food economy can be developed through a network of local producers, community food growing projects and independent outlets, in which local people are primarily spending in local shops, which in turn also buy from local producers, it would have the potential to generate far more wealth for the village^{xix}.

93% of respondents surveyed stated that they regularly eat fresh fruit and vegetables. Residents purchase a wide range of fruit and vegetables, including plenty of traditional roots (including potato, carrot, turnip, onion and garlic) and leafy greens (including broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower), as well as salad vegetables (including cucumber, tomato and

lettuce). Fruit was also popular including apples, pears, plums and strawberries. Much of the fruit and vegetables eaten by residents is therefore not particularly exotic in any way, and can be grown in local conditions.

Of the factors influencing why respondents shopped where they do, taste and quality was found to be most important, with over three-fifths of all respondents (61%) valuing it as being very important to them. This was followed by cost, with 55% considering it to be very important to them. Convenience and ethics were the least important factors, respectively with only 38% and 29% of respondents valuing them as very important.

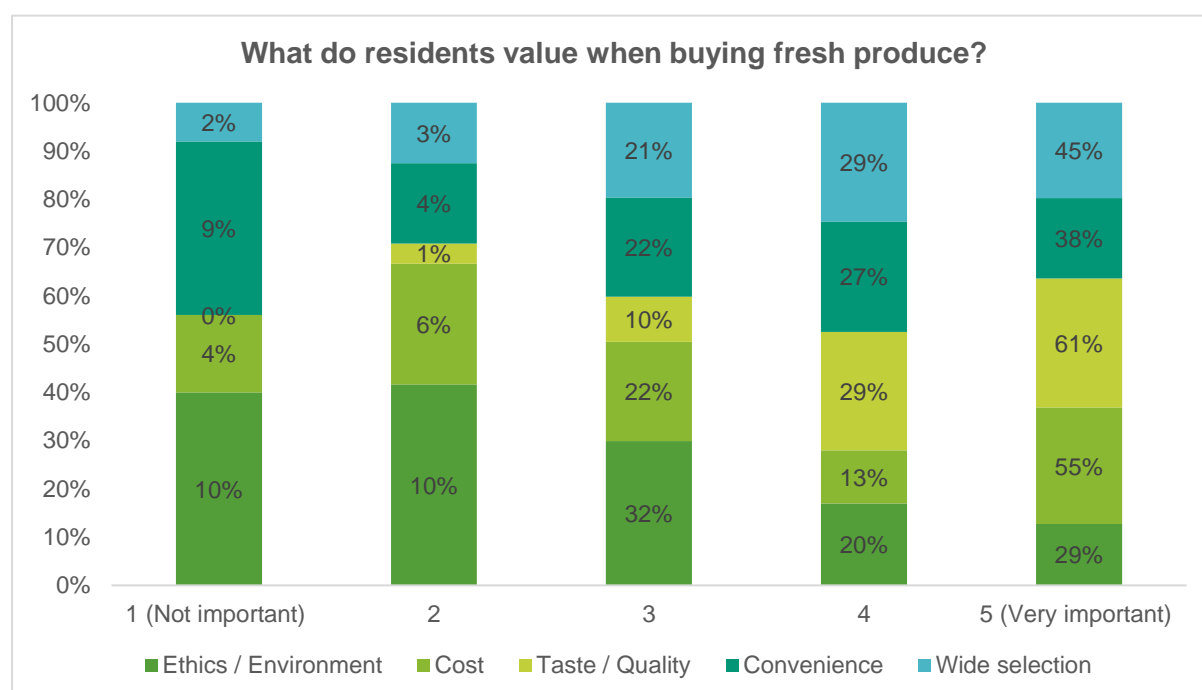


Figure 2: Graph showing reasons influencing why respondents shop where they do. Source: Local food survey (see Appendix 1)

It is possible that residents are choosing to buy their fresh fruit and vegetables from larger supermarkets due to the wider selection and lower prices offered at these stores. A comparative analysis suggests that the price of a basket of typical fruit and vegetables from the local supermarket in Chopwell is around 20% higher than the same products purchased online from the largest and cheapest supermarkets. The price of a similar basket at the smaller convenience stores in the village, are unsurprisingly, even higher, somewhere

between 28% more at the cheapest of the convenience stores and as much as 70% higher at the most expensive.^{xx}

Other than being conveniently located, local stores may not be offering enough to customers to pay the added premium for fresh fruit and vegetables. Notwithstanding this, over half of all respondents surveyed still believed that if more fruit and vegetables were to be grown in Chopwell and other local areas, at least some of it should be sold through local outlets.

“I would like to be able to shop in Chopwell (affordably). I would like to have the option to be able to eat food grown in my own village”

Survey respondent

This suggests that there are opportunities for local stores to capitalise on support for more locally grown produce. Given that respondents appear to value to taste and quality very highly there are opportunities to promote local chemical-free produce which can often be superior in taste and quality, provided the cost is not too prohibitive.

5.1 Existing small scale producers and direct farm retail

There are a very small number of small local producers and delivery services supplying fresh fruit and vegetables to Chopwell and surroundings areas. Although they do not operate through conventional retail outlets, they can be considered direct farm retailers and make an important contribution to the local food economy. These include:

- Gibside Community Farm
- The Paddock
- North East Organic Growers (NEOG)

One of the advantages of this model of direct farm retail is that it avoids the overheads of having physical shop presence and therefore enables producers to take the full share of the price paid by consumers. All of these businesses and organisations support small scale land-based livelihoods and are committed to the supply of high quality seasonal produce. Most are either certified organic or are committed to organic methods of growing without the use of chemicals.

The survey highlighted that 8% of respondents buy their fruit and vegetables from box schemes such as these, and a further 2% who buy directly from a farm or farm shop.

The Paddock

The Paddock is a small family business delivering organic fruit and vegetables, and ethical produce door to door throughout Gateshead, including to Chopwell and surrounding villages, as well as most of the North East.

The business ran its own shop in High Spen selling ethical wholefoods and fresh produce, including from their own 6.5 acre small holding. Unfortunately the Paddock Farm Shop closed in 2024. With its closure, there are no longer any independent shops selling local produce in West Gateshead. Nonetheless the Paddock's delivery service continues to run. The business enjoys a small customer base in Chopwell who value their organic produce and convenience of home deliveries.

The business works in partnership with The Organic Pantry, a family run organic farm and wholesaler based in North Yorkshire, which although not locally-based, supports and relies on small organic businesses in the North East. Alongside being committed to organic produce, their supply chains are considerably shorter than those of national chains and their produce is associated with far less packaging.

North East Organic Growers (NEOG)

NEOG is an organic worker's co-operative based near Bedlington that has been running since 1995. The cooperative is certified organic and runs a fruit and vegetable box scheme, which it supplies to customers throughout the North-East of England. Fruit and vegetables are grown at their 12-acre site and supplemented with produce from other small organic farms in the region and further afield.

NEOG does not offer door to door deliveries but operate through a growing network of collection points around the North East. At present the nearest collection points to Chopwell are in Ryton and Winlaton.

Case Study: Supporting Local Producers and Direct Farm Sales

Gibside Community Farm, Burnopfield

Gibside Community Farm is a Community Interest Company and the only organic producer in Gateshead supplying fruit and vegetables directly to customers that are grown exclusively on their own site. They offer these for sale to members in Gateshead and the Derwent Valley, including Chopwell and surrounding villages. The farm is committed to growing seasonal organic produce at its large 14 acre field near Burnopfield, and is run mostly by volunteers. All of the produce sold is grown at their site with nothing brought in from elsewhere to supplement the harvests even during the difficult 'hungry gap'. The farm is therefore even more seasonal and ultra-local than other small scale suppliers.

The produce is sold almost entirely through a veg bag scheme, although there is a small farm stall at the Gibside National Trust property. There are a small number of residents in Chopwell who purchase the veg bags. Customers at present pick up their bags from the nearest collection point in Blackhall Mill. However, plans are in place to set up a collection point in Chopwell at the Bank. It is hoped that this will enable more residents in the village to enjoy the ultra-local organic produce.

Although the farm grows a diverse range of produce, including heritage and more unusual varieties of vegetables that cannot be purchased at shops, at present, only three crops are grown at any large scale to generate surplus: potatoes, onions and garlic. The focus of the farm is to supply more veg bags to local customers rather than to wholesale buyers.

With the new collection point coming soon to Chopwell, there are opportunities to increase the visibility of the farm locally and build closer links to community organisations providing meals in the village. Whilst the farm is not in an economic position to supply community organisations with produce at wholesale rates that could compete in any way with supermarket prices, there is scope to distribute seconds and occasional surplus freely, if better connections can be forged with the village. At the moment, seconds are either sold at reduced prices to customers, shared between members of the farm, or fed to livestock at neighbouring farms, with no formal system in place to distribute to community organisations.

Organic produce grown using methods that nourish people, the soil and the environment, invariably costs more than food produced in a way that neither honours the health of the community, the planet, nor the livelihoods of producers. Unfortunately, the higher prices mean that the produce is not affordable to many people in the village facing hardships. The right to nutritionally dense, chemical free, sustainable food should be the right of all, regardless of income. It is important that the community works together to find solutions to this problem. Alongside more community food growing, there may be scope for organisations to work with existing local organic cooperatives and community farms to apply for bridge funding to subsidise and make organic food more accessible to all.

Direct farm retail further afield

There are a number of other small producers further afield who do not supply directly to Chopwell but nonetheless offer the option of collection from their sites. Given that over half of the respondents surveyed purchased fruit and vegetables from supermarkets some distance away from Chopwell, it is possible that distance is not a prohibitive factor for many residents in the village.

Go Local is a local food co-op, based in Ovingham, Northumberland. The cooperative grows a wide range of vegetables year round across two sites, which it sells to members through its veg box scheme. Produce is grown on 4.5 acres of land and under protected cropping in 3 large and 2 smaller polytunnels, and supplemented from farms further afield.

Abundant Earth is a veg box scheme based in Durham, growing fresh chemical-free produce from their one acre garden. Currently they supply around 60 households in the Durham area and supplement with produce from other local growers.

All of the small scale growers noted above are deserving of more support from the local communities they serve, as they represent an alternative, fairer, more sustainable model of food production and retail.

However, small-scale local organic producers / direct farm retailers face a number of barriers to increasing their reach into areas such as Chopwell, including but not restricted to cost

On average the retail price of local organic produce is significantly higher than conventional supermarket produce. Nationally, average household spend on food is much lower as a proportion of income than any time in the past, 8% in 2017 compared to around 33% in 1957.^{xxi} This is also much lower than in other European countries. However, for the poorest 20% of the population, average household spend rises to 15% of income. This makes local organic produce inaccessible to many residents in Chopwell.

However the cost of local organic produce becomes more comparable at wholesale prices. Whilst even wholesale prices for organic vegetables were found to be around 58% more expensive than the cheapest supermarket for a typical basket of fresh fruit and vegetables, it was still more affordable than the most expensive convenience chain in Chopwell. Moreover wholesale prices were even cheaper than larger supermarkets for some items in season.^{xxii}

Other barriers faced by local producers also put them at a disadvantage to supermarkets:

- Limited range of products (e.g. due to seasonality or limited offer of dried food/ non-food items)

- Limited opening hours, affecting those who are at work during the day
- Poor visibility and barriers to marketing (e.g. due to lack of shop front presence)
- Lack of support for workers such as long hours and burnout despite strong interest and passion

These barriers are identified and explored in some depth in research undertaken by Sustain.^{xxiii} They are not all insurmountable and are discussed in the recommendations below.

5.2 Recommendations: Developing a local food economy

- There is plenty of empty and under-utilised retail space in Chopwell with around a third of shops on the main street board up. It is worth exploring the possibility of converting some of this space **for short-term trials to see if there is enough demand to support retail of local produce**. A significant barrier to small retail shops is the cost of rent. **There are real opportunities in Chopwell as business rents are somewhat cheaper than other parts of West Gateshead**. This can be reduced even further by co-sharing premises between micro-businesses. With the closure of the Paddock Farm Shop in High Spen, there are no independent food shops left in West Gateshead selling local produce. Independent retail must be able to offer a genuine alternative and differentiate their offer from what is already widely available, such as locally grown and chemical-free produce.
- **Buyers' cooperatives or collective purchasing from groups of local residents and/or community organisations can help reap the benefit of wholesale prices**. There is local interest in buyers' cooperatives with **56% of those surveyed stating that they would be interested in a local food cooperative for the village**.
- **Community organisations should work with local chemical-free producers to explore bridge funding to subsidise local chemical-free produce to those communities who could not otherwise afford it**. The Soil Association has been exploring these options through its Bridge the Gap programme.
- **Local producers could consider additional services such as home deliveries, and grocery add-ons, or at the very least provide more collection points to make their offer more convenient**. The popularity of the Paddock's delivery scheme is a good example.
- Many residents are not well informed about the issues around the food system and its direct impacts on rural livelihoods and the landscape. In ex-mining villages there is a lot of solidarity and shared pride in self-sufficiency and localism. However the obvious links are not made with local producers who also share the same values. **More can be done by community organisations to raise the profile of these issues, inviting local producers to speak at community events, organise visits, or special meals that use local produce to build these links**. These efforts can all contribute to increasing demand for local produce in the long run, and increase the viability of local food retail.
- There is some flexibility for the convenience franchises in Chopwell to supply local produce if it can be accessed and purchased at comparable prices or if strong local demand can be demonstrated. The same is also true of food service businesses who may make use of local produce in their food preparations if it was affordable to source. **Community food growing projects could explore part supplying these businesses as a source of income to be reinvested back into the projects**.
- Chopwell has a rich independent food retail history, having boasted at least 15 independent food retail stores and cooperatives in its heyday. Many older residents are proud of this heritage. This should be explored and celebrated to help reimagine and build support for a different vision of a local food economy in the village for the future.

6. Community food provision

There are a number of organisations offering subsidised food provision in Chopwell in the form of:

- Community meals
- Community market
- Grocery delivery

The community meals provision in the village focusses mostly on older residents and those facing social isolation or food insecurity, whereas the market is for all. In this regard, Chopwell is considered to be well-served.

The following organisations are involved in community food provision:

- Boltons Bungalows
- Chopwell Community Centre
- Methodist Homes Association
- Pickle Palace
- Chopwell Regeneration Group

Together these organisations serve upwards of 250 households a month with groceries and meals.

These services are hugely valued by the residents who use them and are an important lifeline and hub of activity in the village.

Boltons Bungalows

Boltons Bungalows comprise 26 bungalows providing social retirement housing in Chopwell. The Bungalows benefit from a community building where social activities and meals are provided to residents.

The food provision at the Bungalows has slowly increased over time, starting initially with snacks and beverages but now also beginning to serve warm meals. The kitchen facility at the Bungalows has recently been refurbished, allowing meals to be prepared on site. The hope is to serve warm meals at least once a week or more.

A significant proportion of the ingredients for the meals are grown by the organiser in their allotment plot. The allotment also provides flowers and vegetables for the Chopwell in Bloom initiative and a community market at the Bungalows.

Boltons Bungalows are therefore the least reliant on supermarkets and large retailers of all the organisations in the village offering community meals.

The community market supplies fruit and vegetables at affordable prices to residents or members of the public, with produce obtained from a local greengrocer and wholesale contacts. This is supplemented during the growing season from produce grown from the allotment and with donations from other allotment holders. The produce is sold at a guide price, although anyone is free to pay less if they cannot afford. All proceeds are reinvested back to the Bungalows.

Boltons Bungalows are very much committed to using fresh, local produce as far as possible. A lot of effort has been put in to grow this from allotments or source from local businesses. They are also passionate about making better use of public green space by growing more food for the community, particularly on Council owned land around the Bungalows, and have tried to obtain permission from the Council to do so. These attempts have not been successful, with the Council citing concerns over potential impacts on biodiversity and the need for an ecological assessment.

Other exciting ideas such as a community composting scheme for residents have also been touted in the past, as the bungalows do not have access to private gardens and so do not benefit from municipal green waste collections. This was not permitted on grounds that it may attract rodents and become easily contaminated with plastics and problematic materials if not used properly.

Chopwell Community Centre

Chopwell Community Centre has been at the heart of the community since it opened in 1975. The centre is a focal point for many different activities and services, including indoor bowls, a mother and baby group, Citizens Advice Bureau, a gym and room hire for local groups.

The food offer includes weekly coffee mornings and fortnightly lunch club.

Coffee mornings are held every Tuesday and regularly serve around 40 people, most of whom are older residents of the village, providing an important social opportunity. There is a fixed price menu serving toasties, sweet and savoury snacks, as well as tea and coffee.

Every fortnight on a Monday, the Community Centre runs a lunch club. The Monday lunch club serves free meals for 18-24 people, although donations are gratefully received. The option of a takeaway is also offered. The meals are reserved for those referred by their GP or other agency due to loneliness, social issues and isolation, providing a vital service for such residents.

The lunch club offers freshly cooked, traditional meals with meat and vegetables. Most of the vegetables consumed are ones traditionally eaten and seasonally available, with plenty of roots and cooked greens. The vegetables commonly used include potatoes, carrots, turnip, swede, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, leeks, onions and brussel sprouts. A homemade dessert is also provided often made with fruit that is donated or foraged, such as apples, rhubarb and blackberries.

The produce is bought from supermarkets and cash and carries, although donations are sometimes received from allotment holders or individuals distributing surplus foods that would otherwise have gone to waste.

There is another lunch club held at the Community Centre every fortnight on Thursdays, arranged separately by the Methodist Homes Association (MHA).

The Citizens Advice Bureau operate from the Community Centre on most weekdays and manage food bank related enquiries. The Community Centre does not itself offer a food pantry where residents can do food their food shopping. A Community Market used to be offered by Pickle Palace who operated from Community Centre, but this ceased in 2023.

Methodist Homes Association (MHA)

MHA offer accommodation and social support for elderly people. The communities arm of MHA focus on the social aspect, providing wellbeing activities. There is a West Gateshead branch which covers Chopwell.

Their primary activity in Chopwell is a fortnightly lunch club held at the Community Centre every Thursday. The club is open to anyone over 55 and serves between 16-25 people.

Lunch club users pay a fixed weekly amount to access this service.

The meals are prepared freshly by a volunteer and typically involve a traditional lunch with meat and vegetables. Due to cost, ingredients are currently purchased from supermarkets and so are not locally sourced.

Pickle Palace

Pickle Palace is a Community Interest Company based in Greenside that has been running since 2016. They originally started off selling pickles and preserves made from surplus and donated produce. The organisation is managed by three part-time paid members of staff with the support of between 16-17 volunteers.

Currently Pickle Palace distribute surplus and donated groceries in West Gateshead, through weekly mini-markets and home deliveries. This included a mini-market in Chopwell held at the Community Centre, before it ceased in 2023. There are a number of reasons why the market in Chopwell closed, including demand for ready meals with less cooking requirements which Pickle Palace's market was not focussed on, as well as the establishment of the Community Market at The Bank.

The markets allow people to buy donated foods that would otherwise have gone to waste, at cheaper costs. Some customers enjoy trying new foods that they would otherwise find too expensive to buy at retail price. There is also a strong social element to the markets as customers get to meet other people.

The survey highlighted that 4% of respondents buy most of their fresh fruit and vegetables from a community market such as this.

There is no eligibility criteria for users of Pickle Palace. The markets charge customers a flat rate of £3 per bag and allows them to choose any of the items offered. The Greenside mini-market is currently the closest one to Chopwell, and receives up to 45 customers on a weekly basis, including some who travel from further afield such as Chopwell.

The home delivery service is distributed on Fridays. The 'Happy Bags' which they distribute are packed for customers based what is available. The bags aim to offer a range of items, although customers do not choose what they get. There is the option of a large bag (£8 a week) and small bag (£5 a week). There is a waiting list for this service, with a current capacity of 45 deliveries including some in Chopwell, Ryton, Crawcrook and Newburn.

Donations are typically picked up by volunteers from an established network of sources, mostly supermarkets in the area, occasionally through food waste apps such as Neighbourly, and a FareShare subscription delivered twice weekly.

Not all these sources are reliable and they face different challenges throughout the year. The amount of donated items has reduced from two tonnes at its peak, to around one or one and half tonnes at present, which has meant that they cannot serve as many customers. The quality and quantity of FareShare deliveries has also declined. Fairshare offer water, tinned foods, and fruit and vegetables, though supplies of these fresh items dwindle over the winter months.

Alongside food redistribution, Pickle Palace also lead cookery and waste prevention lessons at schools, including with parents. There is a regular programme of activities in Chopwell Primary School for different age groups. They have also delivered adult cookery lessons once or twice before in Chopwell. There are plans to train up or recruit more people who can deliver similar sessions in Chopwell and elsewhere.

The Bank

The Bank is a multi-functional space serving many different needs in the community, managed by the Chopwell Regeneration Group. It provides a warm space for people to meet, take part in activities and events, and use the café and community market. There are also rentable rooms for small businesses and artists, fulfilling a local need for office spaces. In addition, the kitchen and the front of house provide volunteering, work experience and training opportunities.

Around 450 people use its services each week including customers of the café, community market and participants attending crafts and other activities that run there.

The café is open 4 days a week from 9am to 3pm on Wednesdays – Fridays, and 10am – 3pm on Saturdays, and offers freshly prepared meals made mostly from surplus food. The café runs on a ‘pay as you feel’ basis with guide prices and the option to ‘pay it forward’ by donating extra to sponsor meals and drinks for those who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Over 500 meals and hot drinks were paid for by local people by others in the community.

Around 80% of all the food used is from waste and surplus produce, with the remainder purchased from its own income, grant funding and private donations. Each year The Bank diverts around 13.2 tonnes of food waste from landfill.

Most of this surplus is collected from the local Co-op supermarket and FareShare deliveries. Donations from individuals, and seasonal gluts and surplus from allotment holders are also received. Less occasionally, surplus is collected from larger supermarkets further afield, typically through food waste apps such as Neighbourly.

Larger supermarkets have proven increasingly unreliable as they have quotas for food waste distribution by volume, which encourages them to donate bulky goods such as bottled drinks rather than useful food items.

The community market is well received by residents and benefits around 150 local households a month. There is plenty of demand for fresh fruit and vegetables.

Customers are not afraid to try new items and often enquire how to cook items that they do not normally see. When funding is available, the community market is topped up regularly with fruit, vegetables and other groceries purchased from supermarkets to ensure healthy foods are offered as priority and customers have access to a range of fresh produce. There is scope to use this funding to support small scale local producers. Although it may not be possible to source as much in terms of quantities due to higher prices, the advantages include higher quality, chemical-free produce with far less packaging waste.

Customers pay £3 and are restricted to one bag of shopping in the community market. The market is increasingly used at the weekends by double income households, who are still unable to afford items at mainstream prices.

The Bank is trialling the sale of artisan local produce made and crafted by local residents as a way to generate additional income and support local livelihoods. The food offer currently includes local honey and jams, with scope to expand this further to other items such as pickles, relishes and ferments that have a long shelf life. These could also be made in house from surplus foods donated to the Bank, offering another way to reduce food waste further.

Meals prepared at the café make use of the surplus food from the market with regular items such as milk and bread purchased from supermarkets. Surplus from meals served at the café are refrigerated or frozen for redistribution as ready meals. Surplus produce that does not sell at the market that cannot otherwise be salvaged is collected by a very small handful of local allotment holders with whom The Bank has built good connections with, as is some

waste from the kitchen such as coffee grounds. Two residents with chickens also collect some waste.

The Bank occasionally run restaurant nights which have proven very popular, however they are not able to run these more regularly due to staffing capacity.

A collection point is also due to be set up at the Bank for Chopwell customers of Gibside Community Farm's (GCF) veg bag scheme. It is hoped that this new arrangement will make it a lot easier for Chopwell residents to access local chemical-free produce, and raise the visibility of the produce and of small scale organic farming. The Bank could also benefit as a result from more customers to the café, and from occasional receipt of surplus produce or seconds directly from GCF.

There are small number of planters in the back yard which keen volunteers have planted out with culinary herbs, however these are not presently being used in the meals. There is opportunity to make better use of these planters but more training and engagement will be needed to make this routine practice and find creative ways of using them.

Case Study: Cooperative purchasing through Gateshead Food Hub

The Gateshead Food Hub is an exciting new development set up by Green Heart NE CIC and funded by the Gateshead Food Partnership with support from Feeding Britain. Green Heart have partnered with Gateshead Council to build a 'food hub' for the borough. The hub aims to provide a way for local Gateshead organisations to get the food they need at wholesale prices without the hassle of bulk buying or driving around supermarkets.

It will also enable redistribution of food surplus from retailers and manufacturers who might have more ad hoc, large amounts of food that one or two small organisations would not be able to handle on their own.

The food hub is located in a warehouse in Blaydon, and benefits from an electric delivery van from Gateshead Council, and accounts set up with three national suppliers. Trials for this new service are underway and the project is looking for more organisations to get involved.

To find out more, visit the [Gateshead Food Partnership website](#).

6.1 Recommendations: Community food provision

The village is fairly well-served in terms of its provision of community meals, particularly for the elderly and socially isolated. However, there is scope to increase the involvement of local producers, use locally grown produce, and develop cooperative purchasing in food provision to help develop a stronger local food economy.

- **Establish a food provision working group**

The organisations mentioned above are all providing valuable services to the local community. With more joint working, there is scope to increase the reach and effectiveness of these services even further, as well as sharing costs. It would be beneficial to establish a working group to enable this to happen.

- **Work more closely with allotment holders and private landowners to glean surplus produce and encourage more systematic sowing of extra crops for the community**

The Boltons Bungalows is a fantastic example of a project that links allotment growing with community meal provision. This experience should be drawn on. At the moment, donations of surplus food from allotments is ad hoc and based on informal networks, rather than systematic efforts to encourage allotment holders to sow a little extra for the community. Such an approach would be straightforward to develop as it is building on already existing relationships, but limited in the amount of food that can be expected from individual growers.

- **Cooperative purchasing**

Organisations should explore possibilities to collectively purchase the ingredients and produce used regularly in community meals. This will help reduce costs and enable more affordable access to fresh, chemical-free produce that is typically more expensive to buy. A comparison of prices suggest that seasonal organic produce grown regionally is comparable to, or cheaper than, supermarket produce when purchased wholesale. The Organic Pantry and its delivery partner Paddock is an example of a North East based organic wholesaler that offers a potential alternative to sourcing from supermarkets. Organisations in Chopwell could also benefit by getting involved in the Gateshead Food Hub recently set up through the Gateshead Food Partnership to provide local organisations with the food they need at wholesale prices without the hassle of bulk buying or driving around supermarkets.

- **Support the development of a community farm**

Organisations serving meals should work together to support the development of a community farm or growing project that can supply the produce used in meals. There is plenty of land available in Chopwell to do this, provided there is strong support from all organisations that will benefit. In addition the community meals use mostly traditional fruit and vegetables that should be easy to grow in the local area.

- **Seasonal meals and celebrations with emphasis on fresh local produce**

Even if fresh local produce cannot be sourced regularly, there are opportunities to prepare special meals at different times of the year, celebrating fresh seasonal produce. There is often a marked superiority in the taste, flavour and quality of this produce compared to what is readily available in the shops. If the difference in quality can be experienced more regularly it will be easier to build long term support for the use of such produce, even if the cost of purchasing it is a little higher.

- **Sale of local produce at community organisations**

More homemade food products can be made available for sale through community organisations, alongside the meals already offered. As well as providing additional income for organisations, it can provide a platform for local makers to try out ideas and become a source of local pride, whilst building a local food economy at a small scale.

- **Utilise small spaces on site to grow herbs, salads and supplementary produce**

There is scope to use rear yards, planters and small spaces around community organisations more intensively to grow supplementary produce for meals. Herbs can be grown easily in this way, as can some salad greens and tomatoes, where close proximity to kitchens can ensure they are easier to oversee. Chefs should be encouraged to make use of these herbs or provided training to find creative ways to use them. Staff exchanges or visits to similar projects such as the Magic Hat in Newcastle or REfUSE in Chester-le-Street can be very informative in this regard. Catering staff at one of sites attached to the Herb Hub project in Bensham prepare meals in-house using some of the produce and put on monthly specials where the herbs take centre stage.

7. Tackling food waste together

The UK produces the largest amount of food waste in Europe. Approximately 9.5 million tonnes of food is wasted in the UK each year, enough to feed the entire UK population 3 meals a day for 11 weeks^{xxiv}. On average, each person in the UK wastes around 70 kg of food per year, the equivalent of 140 meals or £470 worth of food per household per year.^{xxv}

A significant amount of food is wasted at household level with consumers buying more than what they need, often encouraged to do so by supermarket offers, or not knowing how to make use of leftovers.

However, a substantial amount is wasted by the UK retail and manufacturing sectors, with supermarkets being a major source. However, only 7% of total food surplus generated in the food supply chain post farm gate is being redistributed.^{xxvi}

Whilst the food that goes to waste from supermarket shelves and at household level is well known, it is only a small part of a far bigger issue. A vast amount of produce is wasted at the farm gate, even before it reaches the shelves as a result of the purchasing policies and control of the food system by large retailers.

The best way to address food waste is therefore to support a local food system where:

- As many people as possible are supported to grow food for themselves
- As much food as possible is grown in the community
- As much food as possible is purchased from small scale local producers

The food waste hierarchy below sets out a framework for how the reduction of food waste should be targeted to bring about systemic change.

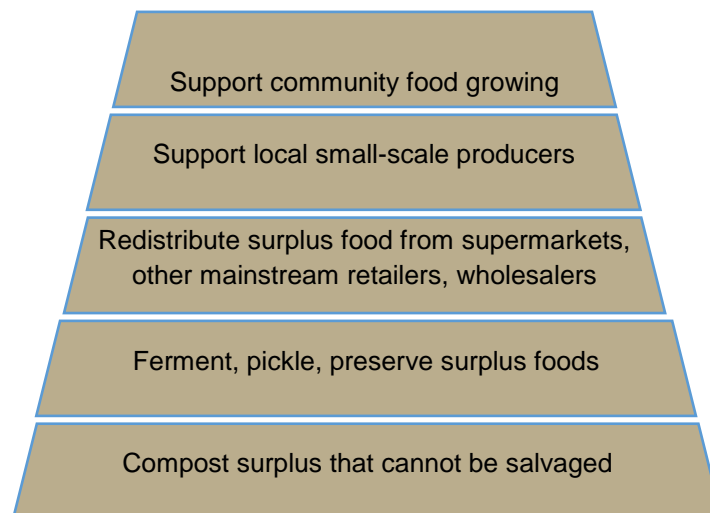


Figure 3: Food waste hierarchy. Source: Than Gunabalasingham

Whilst many of the organisations providing foods and meals in Chopwell benefit from the donations of surplus food and/ or are actively involved in redistributing surplus food, much less is being done in terms of supporting those producers, businesses and organisations that are generating far less waste in the first place. Locally grown produce or those from ethical producers are also less likely to be packaged, reducing plastic and packaging waste all round.

For example, the Bank receives around four bin bags worth of surplus food from a single weekly collection day at the relatively small local Co-op supermarket in Chopwell. The waste from larger supermarkets are likely to be even more significant.

Food that is grown on allotments and private gardens is associated with the least wastage as it is more likely to be valued, savoured and eaten by those growing it, given the level of individual work that is often involved. More individual attention is also given at harvest, meaning that less is discarded or forgotten due to economic, time or quality constraints.

Following this is food waste arising from small organic producers supplying directly to consumers through box schemes, farm shops or local independent retailers, which is likely to be lower than large industrialised farms locked into contracts with national retailers. These contracts are inflexible and demand cosmetic perfection, which means much of what is grown can be wasted at the field.

Alongside more support for community food growing and local producers, recommendations are provided below on how organisations can build on existing systems in place to tackle food waste.

7.1 Community Composting

Historically almost all of the waste produced in the village would have been collected to be turned into compost or fed to animals.^{xxvii}

“Almost everybody had a two-wheel barrow and you were forever out collecting horse manure off the streets for the garden”

Chopwell's Story by Les Turnbull

There is no community composting facility in Chopwell. The village also does not benefit from municipal food waste collections like some other parts of the country. Unless residents are disposing of food waste in their garden waste bins, or have access to an allotment or private garden where they are using food waste to generate their own compost, it is very likely that a significant portion of the food that is thrown away is going in refuse bins. This means that it will end up in landfill or be incinerated, contributing to greenhouse emissions and missing a massive opportunity to produce local compost and return nutrients to the soil.

It is also unlikely that any of the food scraps left over in the preparation of community meals is composted. Nor is it likely that much of the surplus donated to organisations that cannot either be salvaged or redistributed, is actually composted.

It is understood that The Bank has in place an informal arrangement in which the chef keeps food scraps for collection by dedicated local residents who use it for their compost. However this arrangement depends on the availability and capacity of residents, and time pressures of staff, so is not considered sustainable.

There is opportunity for a community composting facility to be set up in the village as part of a larger community garden or food growing project, and a system developed in which volunteers or organisations can drop off this waste at the designated facility. The food waste can be turned into high quality local compost to be used to grow more food for the village, or distributed to residents and other organisations, creating a closed loop system.

An informal open bay setup has been trialled by a resident in the Whittonstall area with mixed success. Whilst the setup was definitely being used by local residents, not all the materials that were being disposed of were appropriate for composting in spite of signage indicating what can and can't be composted.

There is a risk that if wrong items such as cooked food wastes are composted it could attract rodents or end up with materials that do not degrade at all. Bulky materials such as logs and large branches can also complicate the composting process. For these reasons it is best that a community composting facility works closely with organisations first, rather than the residents and general public, so that there can more scrutiny and control over the waste.

Case Study: Community Composting at the Hop Garden, High Spennings

The Hop Garden is a community allotment based growing space located in High Spennings, incorporating an orchard, forest garden, annual growing beds and chickens. The garden brings together young and old, teaching organic principles and sharing local produce among volunteers and the wider community. The garden is open to volunteers every Friday morning, who help maintain the site.

The garden recently secured funding to purchase an enclosed composting system (twin-chambered Jura composter) and create a new covered community composting area. In contrast to more traditional compost bins and open bays, the enclosed composter is sealed and located off the ground, minimising the risk of attention from rodents and contamination from unsuitable materials. The system handles both cooked and uncooked food wastes, enabling a greater range of wastes to be composted. The added insulation also helps difficult materials to break down faster and more effectively.

They have been working closely with the local primary school to engage children on food waste and composting. Since September 2024 they have been taking food waste from the school kitchen and saved over 85kg of food waste from landfill in the first term alone. Children bring the food waste each week and help to add it and turn the composter. This provides a great chance to chat with them about the garden, reducing waste and composting. The garden is hoping in future to be able to take more food waste from the local area, possibly through a membership scheme, and be able to share the compost with the wider local community later this year.

Recommendations

- **Build relationships with other small local businesses to redistribute potential surplus**

Good relationships appear to exist already with the local Co-op supermarket in the village to distribute surplus. However, there are other businesses in the vicinity and further afield that could also be approached such as the Village Café in Chopwell, River View Bakery in Blackhall Mill, and Santonio's Restaurant in Hamsterley Colliery. The amount of waste generated at these businesses may be small but collectively add up to be significant.

- **Build relationships with local producers**

Identify local producers who may be open to gleaning some surplus from fields or orchards in return for some kind of exchange. Gibside Community Farm and other examples are mentioned in this report. It is important that good relationships based on fair exchange are built. Consultations with REfUSE, a food waste charity and café based in Chester-le-Street, highlighted that local producers are more likely to distribute surplus if community organisations also play their part in supporting them by buying their produce. This does not need to be regularly if the costs of doing so are prohibitive, but at least as part of the procurement process for special meals and events.

- **Preservation of surplus food**

If surplus food cannot be distributed to residents straight away or turned into community meals, it can often be preserved to use at later dates. This can be particularly helpful when there is a seasonal glut of specific produce from allotments, producers or retailers ordering too much at certain times of the year. Methods of preservation include pickling, fermentation and dehydration. There is considerable scope to preserve more food in the village, much like it would have been done in generations past, and help revive these skills. Bensham Bites have developed projects elsewhere in Gateshead, around the dehydration of food to make meals for residents who would not otherwise have access to kitchen facilities.

- **Community cookery classes**

Some organisations such as The Bank and Pickle Palace have been offering cookery classes in the village with a focus on using food surplus. As well as developing cooking skills and creative ways to use new food and leftovers, these activities help build confidence and address social isolation. The village benefits from at least three community kitchens – The Bank, the Community Centre and Boltons Bungalows, which could be hired for such purposes. However, only 10% of the respondents surveyed indicated that they would be interested in more training in the village on how to cook fresh fruit and vegetables, with a further 35% open to the possibility. More research therefore needs to be done on what kinds of support residents would be interested in.

- **Community composting**

The village will benefit greatly from a community composting facility. Composting food waste from households and surplus foods that cannot be salvaged returns nutrients to the soil and generate compost that can be used to grow more food locally. There are existing examples of facilities set up in Chopwell and surrounding villages, learnings from which can be drawn upon.

8. Growing more food

Chopwell benefits from a significant amount of land in and around the village and is very fortunate in this regard. A vast majority of this is either public land (at least 43 acres) or large private holdings. Much of the open land is unused or under-utilised, with very little being used to grow food.

This land includes:

- Public land owned by the Council
- Public land under trusteeship of the Council (e.g. Chopwell Park)
- Designated public and private allotment land already being used to grow food
- Institutional land (e.g. belonging to the Church)
- Large private landholdings (e.g. farms)

The map below provides a broad indication of land ownership in core areas of the village.

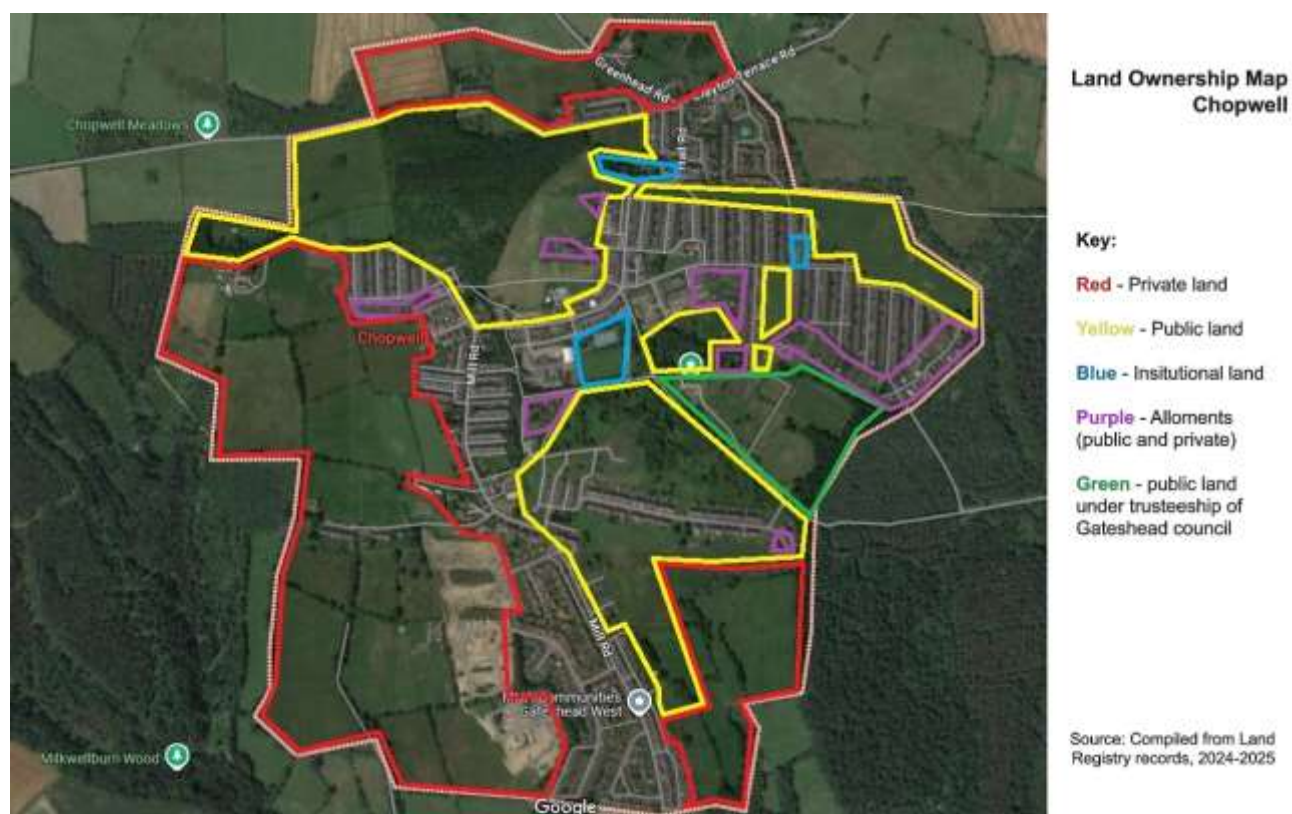


Figure 4: Land ownership map of Chopwell area

8.1 Current community food growing provision

At present there are only three small sites expressly growing to produce at least some food or herbs for the community:

- Allotment plot supplying produce for Boltons Bungalows and Chopwell in Bloom
- Trinity Methodist Church – fruit trees, soft fruit bushes, and planters with a small amount of herbs and annuals within the quiet garden
- The Kitchen Garden community allotment plot – small site in the process of being developed by Chopwell Community Food Growers

A community allotment plot was also initiated and established by the Chopwell Regeneration Group at the Officials Club, and has been running successfully for a few years through the help of volunteers and supplying produce to the Bank. However, tenure for the site is ending as of July 2025.

Of the existing sites, only the Boltons Bungalows allotment plot is dedicated exclusively to the supply of produce and plants.

Trinity Methodist Church site also serves as a quiet garden and community space for gathering and reflection.

The Kitchen Garden, whilst intending to grow some produce for the community, also serves as a space for learning, gathering and well-being centred on food growing, as well as to support residents to grow their own food.

A fourth site – a community forest garden that was being developed in Whittonstall on disused Council land – has been halted following restrictions placed by the Council.

In light of the above, there is considerable scope to both build on existing projects and expand community food growing provision in the village.

8.2 Support for community food growing projects

There is very strong support for more land in the village to be used for community food growing projects.

87% of respondents surveyed support the idea of a food project run by the community that could supply affordable, locally grown food to residents.

Respondents cited many different reasons why they would support a community food growing project, including:

- more convenient and affordable access it would provide to healthy produce
- greater choice particularly for those who were not otherwise able to shop outside of the village such as some older people
- environmental benefits including resilience in the context of climate change, less need for chemicals or packaging
- educational opportunities to engage children and young people in growing food

“A lot of people are suffering with the cost of living; something like this would help everyone”

Survey Respondent

Of the very small percentage of respondents who did not support community food growing,

“We should be supporting local shops that employ local people”

Survey Respondent

concerns included fears that growing spaces would be damaged and produce stolen and adverse impacts on local shops. Some also believed that efforts should be focussed instead on teaching people to grow their own food.

Just under half of all respondents (46%) wanted to be involved in a local community food growing project. 37% were unsure and only 17% did not want to be involved.

Respondents want to support community food growing in different ways. Three-quarters of those who wanted to be involved (77%) stated that they would volunteer to grow food, over a half (55%) said they would volunteer to distribute food and over a fifth (23%) said they would support financially.

Consultations also indicated interest in the creation of a skills and resource bank for the village, through which individuals with specific skills and resources of the community could be drawn on for community or even private projects such as the development of community

food growing spaces. The skills bank could work on different forms of exchange such as time or produce.

Respondents felt that produce from community food growing projects should be made accessible in different ways, this included being able to buy it directly (61%), sold through local outlets (51%) and donated to community markets, local organisations and food banks (57%).

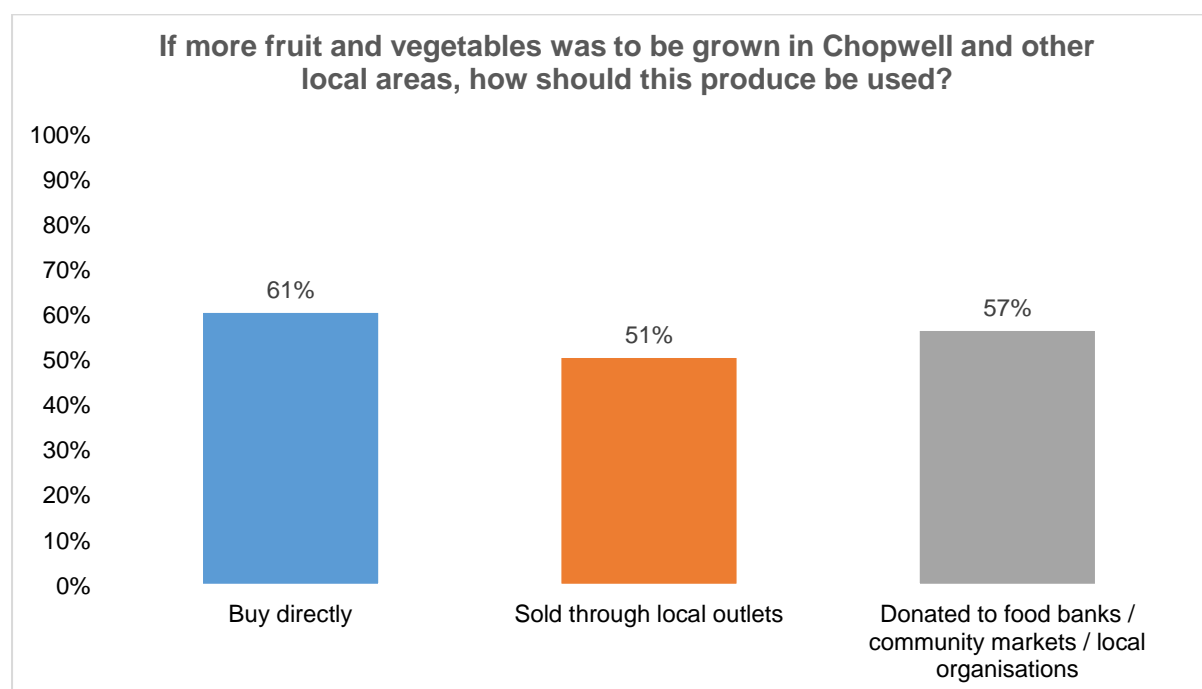


Figure 5: Graph showing responses for how locally grown produce should be used. Source: Local food survey (see Appendix 1)

What should the focus of a community food growing project be?

Responses also suggest that people do not think a community food project should focus on one goal, but rather have lots of different aims that meet the diverse needs of the community.

Three-quarters of respondents (75%) felt that a focus of a community food growing project should be to support people to grow food – this was the most commonly cited reason.

69% stated that yield should also be a focus, with the aim to grow as much food as possible.

65% considered an educational focus to be important, providing a learning space for children.

60% respondents felt that a focus should be to create a community space for food/ nature events, and 59% stated that it should focus on becoming a wellness space.

Over a half (53%) thought that a community growing project should focus on accommodating smaller sized plots.

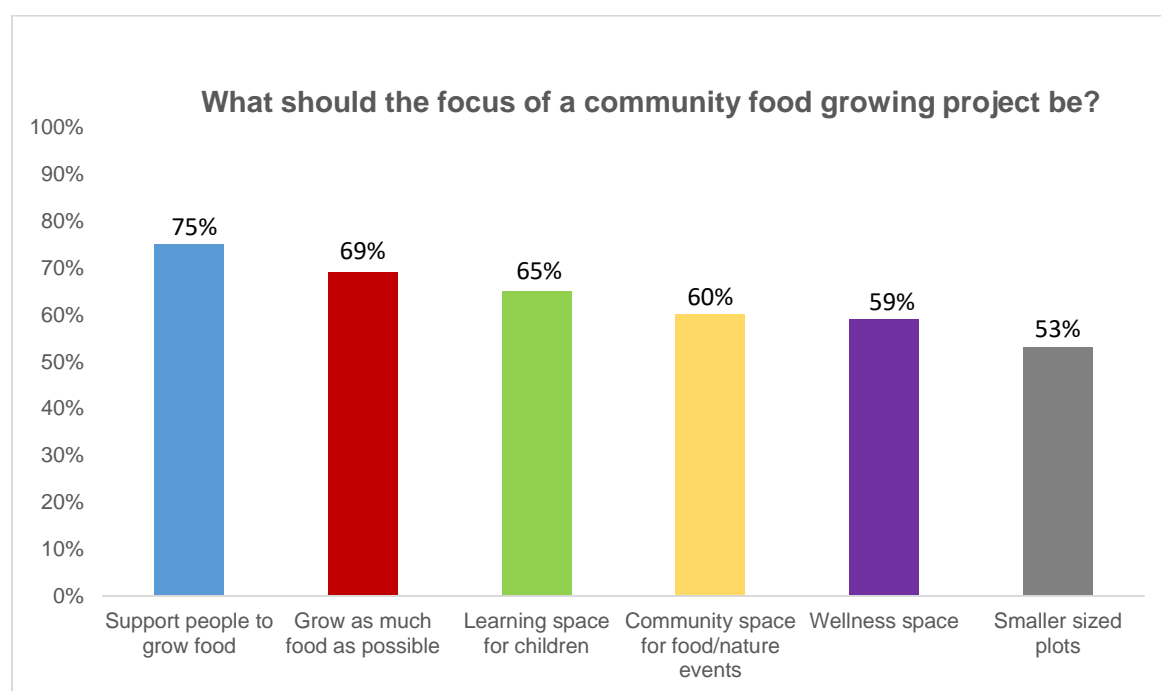


Figure 6: Graph showing responses for the focus of a community food growing project.

Source: Local food survey (see Appendix 1)

8.3 Community food growing on public land

Open public land in and around the village amounts to some 43 acres or more. Much of this is underused, derelict or overgrown, and is managed as amenity grassland at much expense to the Council.

Some of these are of important habitat and biodiversity value whereas others can usefully be converted in part or whole for community food growing.

If even 10% of this land was to be cultivated for community food growing, the village could be producing between 38 and 62 tonnes of fruit and vegetables annually. This produce can be used to supply community organisations with fresh high quality produce, be sold through local outlets or distributed to volunteers.

Various locations were suggested by residents as possible locations for food growing during the public consultation process. These areas included Chopwell Park, land in and around the River Streets, and the Whittonstall area. The feasibility of these areas for food growing are considered in more detail below.

8.3.1 Chopwell Park

Chopwell Park was once the green heart of the village and an important recreational space, since it opened in 1939. The park covers an area of around 16.4 acres and was created by the Chopwell Miners' Welfare Scheme. In its heyday, it boasted a well-used football pitch, cricket pitch, bowling green and pavilion among other facilities for the leisure and well-being of the community.

Following the closure of the pits in 1966, the park was donated to the village, and managed by the Council. The park was registered as a charity for the benefit of the community under the name of *Chopwell (Blackhall Mill) Recreation Ground*, with the Local Authority serving as a trustee to steward the land.

Since the mid-late 90s, much of the park has fallen into disrepair with many of the facilities now in disuse. The Council continues to undertake some maintenance tasks every month or so during the growing season, mostly involving the mowing of grass and seasonal trimming of trees and shrubs. However the park no longer benefits from a full or part time paid ranger to maintain the site as it once did.

Local residents have made efforts to help revive the park especially through the formation of the Friends of Chopwell Park group in 2015. Although the group has disbanded in recent years, their stewardship helped restore parts of the park, including the reopening of the Pavilion and the inception of the Pump Track.

The Pavilion is now run by the Bibliotheca Magica CIC following an asset transfer from the Council with the bowling green and crazy golf course also in the process of being transferred. Bibliotheca Magica provide board games and other activities for neuro-divergent

children and adults, and are keen to work with other groups to see the park flourish as a multi-functional space for the community.

Despite these positive strides, the park remains a shadow of its former self, with significant opportunities to better utilise it to meet the changing needs of the community. It is important that the future of the park is shaped by residents and organisations in the village working together to create a multi-functional space.

The use of the park as a location for more community food growing in the village has been cited by residents during the public consultation process. Growing food in public parks is not new, and has a long history since the Dig for Victory campaign during the Second World War. With local authority budgets increasingly curtailed, there are many examples of Councils around the country helping support residents and local groups to take over stewardship of unused land for the benefit of the community through food growing projects.^{xxviii}

There are numerous advantages of a community food growing space being located within Chopwell Park over other locations. Being fairly prominent and centrally located, the park is easily accessible to most residents of the village, making it potentially easier to engage more people.

Although there are other significant Council and privately-owned plots of land in and around the village that could be used for similar purposes, these are less well located. A food growing space can complement other existing uses of the park such as the Pump Track and Pavilion, providing opportunities for people who may not otherwise be interested in existing activities or want to try their hands at something new.

Encouraging more diverse uses of the park also provides more safety and security for each of those uses, reducing risk of crime and anti-social behaviour associated with under-used and derelict spaces. The park also benefits from well-laid paths that make it easier for people, in particular the elderly and less mobile, to access most parts of it safely.

As community food growing spaces can have different objectives it will be for the community to decide where the primary focus of any park-based project should be. This can be for example to maximise food production for the community, providing a therapeutic horticultural space that brings the community together around food growing, or training or educational activities.

This report evaluates the potential for different areas of the park that are currently under-utilised or disused to be repurposed for community food growing, and considers the social, environmental and economic benefits this can bring.

If all potentially viable and currently under-utilised areas of the park are used to grow food for the village, including all of the former sports pitches, then it would amount to around 40% of the area of the park being dedicated to fruit or vegetable cultivation. This amount of land can produce between **15 – 21 tonnes of food for the community per year**. If only a much smaller area of the park was repurposed to food growing, such as an area the size of the bowling green, it would amount to around 2% of the area of the park, and produce between 0.7 – 1.7 tonnes of food per year^{xxix}.

It is understood that local authorities managing certain recreational sites such as sports pitches may be obliged by policy to meet a minimum level of provision. The recent Gateshead Council Playing Pitch Strategy Action Plan^{xxx} identifies that many sports pitches in the Borough are at capacity and that current provision is inadequate to meet projected demand. This has brought renewed focus on any pitches in the Borough that are under-utilised, such as those in Chopwell Park, to be brought back into use.

Such policies invariably obstruct the conversion of sports pitches to other community uses. Whilst the need to preserve recreational uses can be a legitimate aim in many cases, there is also a strong duty on local authorities to support communities to exercise their right to grow food, particularly in the context of a growing population, resurgence of public interest in food growing and the high proportion of homes in Chopwell without access to private gardens or to allotments. The Action Plan ultimately aims to enable the *‘inactive to become active, increase participation levels and help improve the health and well-being of all of our residents.’*^{xxxi} In this regard its objectives are the same as those that could be achieved through greater public participation in growing food. If strong public support in the village can be established for food growing or indeed other community uses focussed on health and well-being, there may be scope to negotiate greater community autonomy over the use of public land.

Cricket Pitch

The cricket pitch is located in the south-western corner of the park and has been a feature of the park since its opening. Like many of the sports facilities in the park, it is not currently in use. The pitch covers an area of just over two acres and represents a generous sized

growing space – the largest single area of cultivation viable in the park. If used to its full potential and managed well, the pitch may be capable of producing up to 7.7 tonnes of food annually.

One of the main advantages the cricket pitch has as a community food growing space, over other areas, is that, along with the football pitch, it is fully enclosed by a high fence, making it very secure and suited to more extensive cultivation.

It also benefits from access to mains water in close proximity that should be relatively easy to reconnect, as well as a derelict cricket pavilion and storage containers that can potentially be repurposed for horticultural use such as storage and shelter. The pitch enjoys a sunny aspect suitable for cultivation, although there is some shade from trees along its south-eastern boundary where it borders Chopwell Woods.

However further investigation will be needed into the quality of the soil and whether it is safe for cultivation. It is possible that spoil from the mining pits was used to form the pitch when it was originally developed and could therefore present some risk of contamination. These constraints are not insurmountable if guidelines and best practice are followed to identify and mitigate risks.^{xxxii}

The experience of similar sites that have recently been converted from sports use to cultivation, such as Community Orchard Greenside, suggest that these concerns have not ultimately proved problematic.

It is also understood that the cricket pavilion has been scheduled for demolition due to its poor condition and the potential safety risks it poses. It may be possible to salvage and renovate it for simple storage and horticultural uses if the cricket pitch were to be allocated either in part or full to community food growing. The Gateshead Council Playing Pitch Strategy Action Plan sets out within its recommendations that opportunities should be explored to bring back into use unmarked cricket pitches in the Borough such as at Chopwell Park, ensuring that they are provided to a suitable standard for cricket. Specifically it recommends that a club should be identified to take on management of the pitch, and that ancillary provision should be improved by the Council if there is demand.^{xxxiii} The Action Plan nonetheless recognises this as a long term aim, and one that would be at high cost to the Council.

Even if a cricket team could be found, the recommendations also make clear that realistically a new pavilion would need to be provided if the pitch was to be brought back into use.

Indeed the Action Plan cites that among the reasons why the last cricket team to use the pitch relocated, was due to the deterioration of the pavilion. The construction of an entirely new cricket pavilion is a far more expensive and unrealistic proposition than the repurposing of the building for simple horticultural storage and shelter, at a time when Council budgets are increasingly stretched.

Notwithstanding the pavilion, there are a few other structures in close proximity, including a shipping container which could equally be converted to storage facilities. Needless to say, it would be financially more prudent to renovate existing structures rather than erecting entirely new ones.



Figure 7: Map of Chopwell Park showing outline of cricket pitch (green) and area suggested for fruit tree planting (yellow). Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

Even if there is not enough public support to repurpose the cricket pitch itself for community food growing, there are opportunities to use some of the marginal land around it which still benefits from being located within the enclosure. There is for example a substantial parcel of marginal land, around quarter of an acre in size, located on northern corner of the cricket

pitch (outlined yellow in the above map) that would be well suited to some form of cultivation such as a community orchard.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure – fully enclosed with fencing • Well-defined area that has been in long-term disuse – does not impact on other existing uses of the park • Largest single area suitable for cultivation in the park • Proximity and access to mains water • Existing building could be repurposed for storage and shelter • Fairly good aspect for cultivation (although some shade from trees on south-eastern boundary) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil condition unknown – possible contamination or waterlogging due to compaction • Buildings may need to be demolished if unsafe – more capital outlay • Recommended within the Playing Pitch Strategy Action Plan to be brought back into cricket use.

Football pitch

The football pitch is another unused area of the park with potential for conversion to community food growing. The area is also significant in size though slightly smaller than the cricket pitch at just over 2 acres, and has potential to produce between 5 and 6.6 tonnes of food per year for the community. The pitch is also fully enclosed providing good security.

However it is not known whether there is access to mains water and unlike the cricket pitch there are no buildings on the site that could be repurposed to meet the needs of a community food growing space.

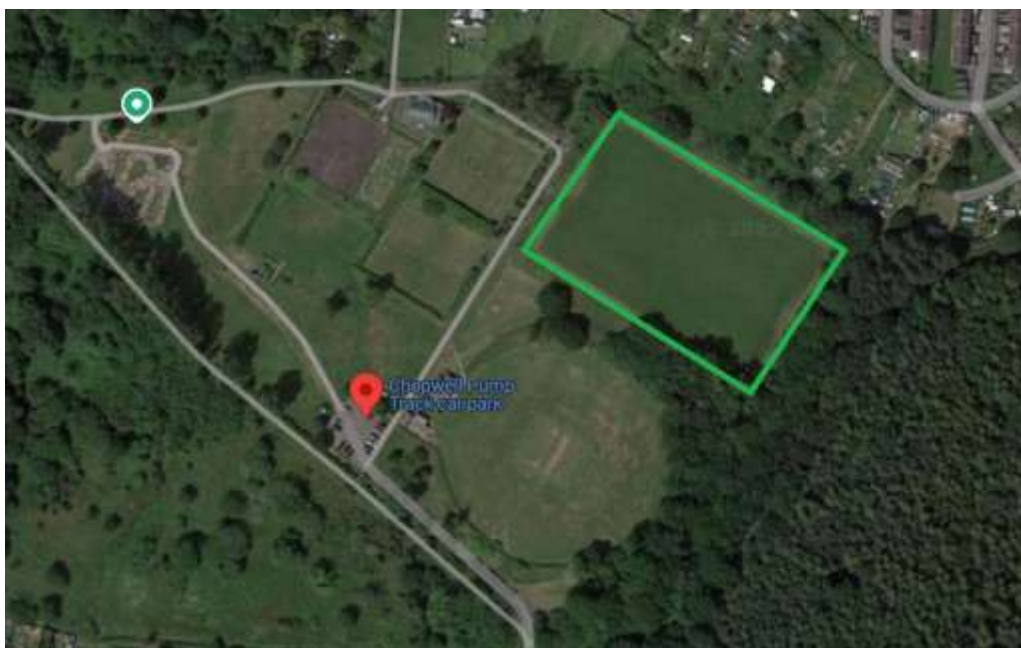


Figure 8: Map of Chopwell Park showing outline of football pitch (green). Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

The Gateshead Council Playing Pitch Strategy Action Plan identifies the ground as an unmarked pitch that could be brought back into use. The Action Plan recommends that a local football club or organisation should be identified for a Community Asset Transfer so that the site can be secured, and depending on the needs of the identified user, works could be carried out to improve pitch quality and ancillary provision. It also suggests that the Council could reconfigure the pitch to meet shortfalls in the Borough. Nonetheless, much like the recommendations for the cricket pitch, it recognises that this is a long term aim that would be costly for the Council.^{xxxiv}

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure – fully enclosed with fencing Fairly good aspect for cultivation (although some shade from trees on south-eastern boundary) Fairly good aspect for cultivation (although some shade from trees on south-eastern boundary) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Soil condition unknown - possible contamination and waterlogging due to compaction No existing buildings that can be repurposed for storage or shelter. No direct access to mains water, though some access from the Pavilion may be possible

Bowling Green

The bowling green occupies an area two-fifths of an acre adjacent to the Pavilion. The space is currently in the process of an asset transfer to Bibliotheca Magica. There has been some interest by local groups in running outdoor exercise and fitness related activities for the community in the bowling green. Its flat profile makes the green a particularly versatile space that can be used for many different purposes including for community events, open markets, fayres and other activities.

The Pavilion building itself has recently undergone some renovations and is now run by Bibliotheca Magica who currently use the space in the evenings from Wednesday to Sunday. The bowling green historically benefits from large raised ornamental beds around the periphery. These beds are overgrown and have been in neglect for some time. Bibliotheca Magica are looking to clear them out and work with Chopwell in Bloom and Chopwell Primary School to help plant them, alongside other areas around the Pavilion and bowling green. There is real opportunity here to incorporate as part of these efforts some edible fruiting trees, shrubs and herbs, as well as plants that support biodiversity and wildlife.

Provided there is support from Bibliotheca Magica and other stakeholders, there is possibility to plant parts or edges of the space with edible fruit trees and fruit bushes. A site survey must be undertaken to establish if the soil is suitable for fruiting trees and a clear maintenance plan put in place to ensure that trees are successfully established and looked after.

It is noted that the bowling green has many benefits owing to its proximity to the Pavilion. Whilst the green itself is not enclosed, some visibility and security is provided by the regular activities taking place at the Pavilion. Moreover, the site benefits from a relatively sunny aspect suitable for cultivation, and mostly escapes shade from trees or buildings, which previous locations that been trialled for orchards did not benefit as much from. Although there is no access to mains water on the green itself, its proximity to the Pavilion would make it relatively easy to access water to maintain plants during the warmer months. There is also possibility to benefit from rainwater capture and storage from the building's roof. In addition there would also be convenient access to toilet facilities particularly for those less mobile or children, as well as some potential for storage and use of the space for shelter during inclement weather.

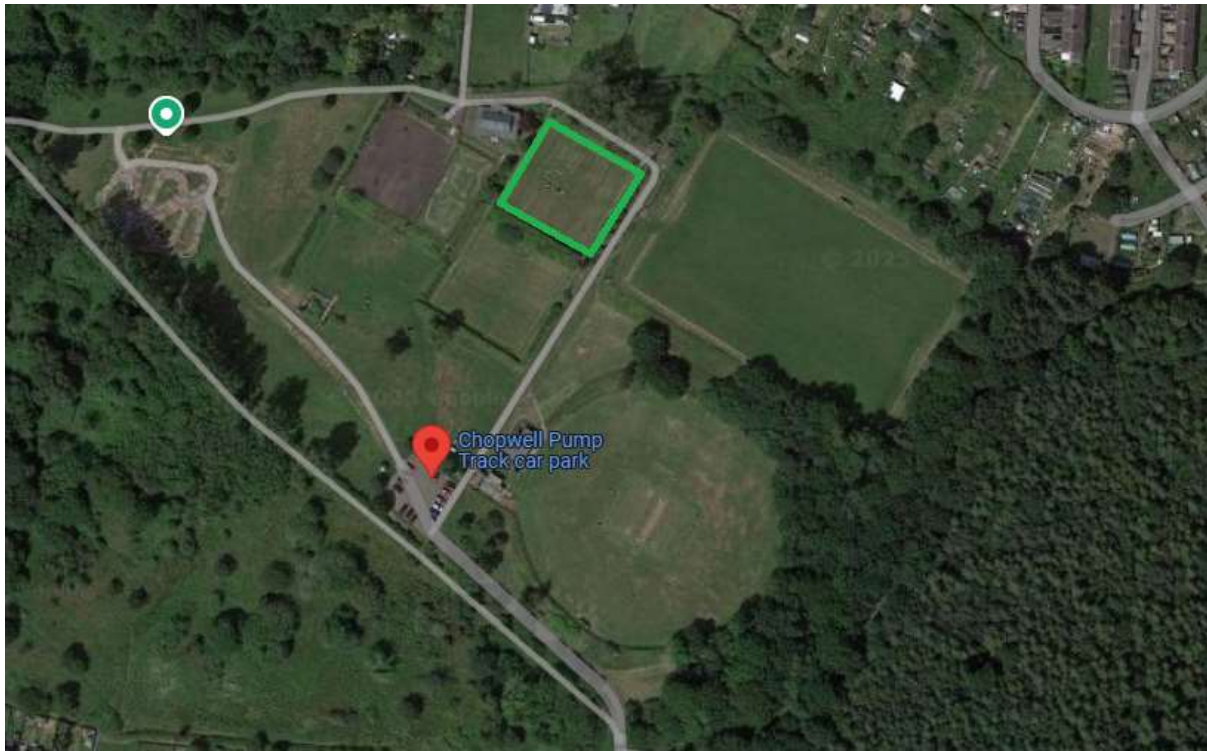


Figure 9: Map of Chopwell Park showing outline of bowling green (green). Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some security through proximity to Pavilion • Relatively easy access to mains water from Pavilion and rainwater storage • Relatively easy access to toilet facilities in Pavilion • Relatively easy access to shelter and possible storage in Pavilion • Sunny aspect • Small site easy to manage • Well-defined area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enclosed • Small area with lower yield and flexibility of space compared to other sites • Some prospective competing uses such as potential exercise and fitness classes

Five-a-side Pitch

The five-a-side pitch is located adjacent to the bowling green and is similar in proportions. It is understood that the space is used regularly by children and young people for recreation and sport, so is not disused like some other areas of the park.

Converting some of this space for food cultivation would not be feasible unless other under-utilised areas of the park could be opened up for public recreation. In any case such proposals would need to carefully consider competing interests and the best use of the land.

The pitch has the minor drawback in terms of its potential for growing food in that it is slightly further away from the facilities of the Pavilion than the bowling green, though this is not considered to be significant. Otherwise it shares many of the benefits and limitations of the bowling green, as well as comparable yields were it to be converted to fruit trees or community food growing site.

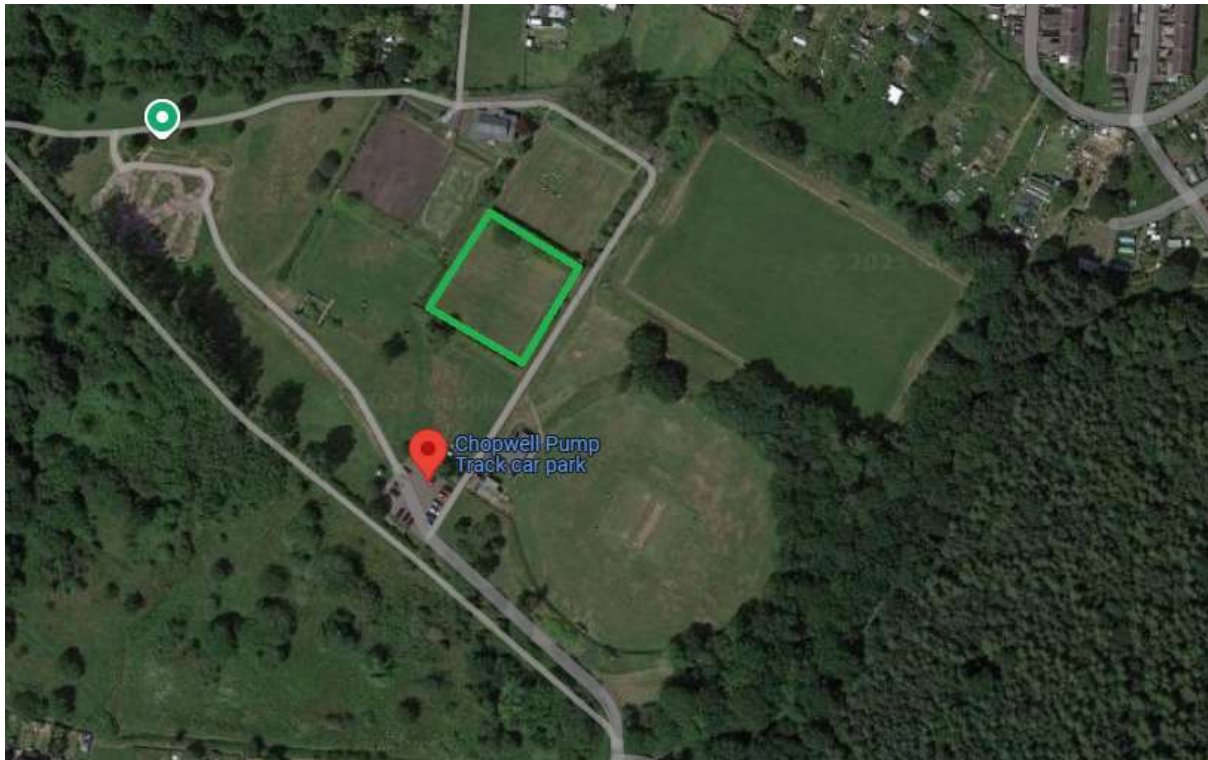


Figure 10: Map of Chopwell Park showing outline of five-a-side pitch (green). Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some security through proximity to Pavilion • Possible access to mains water from Pavilion and rainwater storage • Possible access to toilet facilities in Pavilion • Possible access to shelter and storage in Pavilion • Sunny aspect • Small site easy to manage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competing uses as utilised by children for play and sport • Small area with lower yield and flexibility of space compared to other sites • Not enclosed

Other areas of Chopwell Park with potential for cultivation

Alongside the sports grounds there are numerous other open areas of amenity grassland around the park that can be utilised in some way for food cultivation (outlined green below).

As they are not as well-defined as the sports grounds, are not enclosed, and are in areas of the park that are more actively used, they are not as suitable for intensive cultivation or as designated growing sites. Rather they could be planted sporadically with hardy fruit trees that are well integrated into the landscape and require little by way of maintenance.

If only 10% of the land identified within these general areas of amenity grassland were planted with fruit trees (i.e. around 1% of the total area of the park) there is potential to produce between 2.6 and 4.5 tonnes of fruit per year for the community. This will no doubt require some maintenance during the period of establishment, including possible weekly watering during hottest summer months and seasonal pruning tasks. However, maintenance demands can be reduced by planting larger, more resilient trees on their own rootstocks as well as generous mulching around the base of trees during establishment.



Figure 11: Map of Chopwell Park showing outline of possible areas for fruit cultivation (green).
Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

Perspective on the former community orchard site

It is acknowledged that the small patch of land to the north of the bowling green was formerly the site of a community orchard that did not successfully establish or become productive for a number of reasons.

It is understood that the site suffered from waterlogging and shade from surrounding trees. It is also quite possible that neither the right trees nor approach was taken given the constraints of the site and challenges faced by volunteers. Moreover, without a clear maintenance plan, public visibility or active engagement from park users, the orchard ultimately suffered from being planted in an unsuitable location and without the necessary aftercare.

It is possible to bring difficult areas into cultivation with careful selection of trees, in particular appropriate rootstock and species selection, which can handle waterlogging and other difficult environmental conditions. Most importantly, it is critical that there are plans in place to maintain the trees especially in their formative years, and clearly delegated management or aftercare responsibilities.

Community orchards and fruiting trees more generally can be a real asset for the village and require far less time and input than the cultivation of annual vegetables. The failure of previous orchards in the village should not therefore mar the planting of fruit trees on public land for future generations to enjoy.

Case Study: Community food growing on public land at Community Orchard Greenside

Community Orchard Greenside is a fledgling orchard set up by passionate local residents of Greenside in 2024.

The orchard stands on the site of the former bowling green, and is helping to transform what was a forgotten and underused piece of land into a thriving, biodiverse and multi-functional space for the benefit of the community.

A public consultation was undertaken prior to the development of the site, to gauge the level of support for a community orchard and build popular support. The project has seen support from local residents volunteering their time, skills and resources.

Soil tests were undertaken to ensure that ground was safe for planting fruit trees before proceeding. Although there were initial fears over what could be found in the soil, none of these concerns proved problematic in the end with residues well within safe limits.

The orchard is accessible at any time. The club house is being repurposed into a versatile space for events, workshops and tool storage.

There are plans to plant up to 32 mixed fruit trees, including apple, pear, plum, cherry, medlar and cob nuts, the majority of which are already in the ground.

8.3.2 The River Streets

The River Streets area of Chopwell comprises some 623 homes across 16 residential streets, located at the centre of the village. The area has the highest density of housing in the village and is the most populous.

The majority of the streets have houses with back yards. 90% of homes on these streets are without a garden space. The streets benefit from a communal green running the full length between them.

In addition there is a patch of land located between Coquet Street and Mersey Street that is notably larger and wider than the comparatively narrow strips that characterise most of the terraces. A small triangular patch is also noted to the rear of Tay Street that is not regularly

maintained. All of these areas (outlined below in yellow) were cited among others, in the public consultation responses, as possible locations for community food growing.

At present these public areas comprise amenity grassland with some ornamental trees that form the streetscape. Collectively these strips of land cover 2.6 acres – a significant area of public land. A few residents have over the years planted out small sections of the green with ornamentals and small shrubs, typically in front of their own homes. It is understood that a minority of residents have opposed these ideas in the past. For the most part, despite a few incidences of vandalism and misuse, these pockets of planting have not been damaged.

It is important to ascertain the level of support for wider planting in the River Streets and better understand barriers such as access to resources, horticultural knowledge or simply uncertainty over Council regulations. If support can be garnered both with residents and the Council, there is great potential to develop resident-led edible growing spaces between and around the terraces.

Given the proximity of these spaces to residential housing, any project developed within them are likely to be easier to maintain by residents. It is noted that many community planters located around the village have fallen into neglect owing to a lack of upkeep and local ownership. These planters are located in prominent public locations but are not necessarily close to housing. By redirecting such planting efforts to those areas with the highest housing densities such as the River Streets where there are plenty of residents nearby to look after them some of these obstacles may be easier to overcome.

If support is strongest for growing of annual vegetables, then it is likely that raised beds will need to be constructed to minimise fouling and damage from pets. Owing to its shape and size, the large patch of communal land between Coquet Street and Mersey Street holds the best potential for a more developed community growing space.

It could also be the case that residents may want planting to focus on perennial fruit trees and bushes which will not require as much maintenance nor necessarily the construction of raised beds. Equally cultivation can involve a mix of tree planting and annual growing beds. Conservative estimates suggest that if half of the green spaces between River Streets can be cultivated, it may be possible to grow between 3.7 – 6.3 tonnes of food for residents.

Even if this land cannot be put towards the cultivation of food it would be relatively easy to increase planting for biodiversity and visual amenity of residents. With the right selection of plants, both aims can be achieved easily, providing visual and sensory interest for residents throughout the seasons, as well as forage value and habitat for birds, insects and pollinators.

There is also a considerable expanse of open space around South Play Park to the north east of the River Streets, part of which could be potentially developed. This area stretches up to West Meadows and represents around 9.5 acres. If 10% of this land could be cultivated for fruit and vegetables between 8.3 – 13.6 tonnes of food can be grown.

At present Council resources are being used to maintain the spaces as lawn, often involving considerable energy to run machinery and the use of herbicides that are injurious to health and environment. The development of any project in these areas has potential to be ecologically, socially and financially beneficial.



Figure 12: Map of the River Streets area of Chopwell showing outline of possible areas for food cultivation (yellow). Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

8.3.3 Whittonstall

The Whittonstall area lies in the west of the village, and is made up mostly of a small number of residential terraces and Council allotment plots, as well as more significant areas of public green space, and larger private land holdings used predominantly for grazing.

There are a total of 141 homes located in the six residential streets off Whittonstall Road. The majority of these homes, some two-thirds, have access only to a small garden space. These are confined to Ravenside, Hollings and Broad Oak Terraces.

The private holdings are largely located to the south of Whittonstall Road and to the far west are bounded by Milkwellburn Woods.

A significant portion of land to the north of Whittonstall Road is however Council-owned and stretches eastwards to include the site of the former mining pit. Most of this land appears to be grazed by neighbouring farmers, but also includes scrub, regenerating woodland, a recreational sports field and children's play area. The public consultations identified a section of land adjacent to these facilities, and measuring just over one-third of an acre.

A further plot that is much larger and well screened by mature trees and scrub was also identified, covering an area of 1.1 acres and capable of producing up to 3.2 tonnes of food. This plot lies on land that was formerly designated as Council allotments until a few decades ago but has now been mostly reclaimed by scrub and trees. It is understood that efforts were made by local residents over the past few years to convert this piece of land into a relatively low maintenance community forest garden sympathetic to the natural setting. However this initiative was not supported by the Council, and further works have been halted.

Excluding the aforementioned areas, the large public fields to the west of the former pit works and restored woodland represent another 8 acres or more of land. If 10% of this was to be cultivated between 7 and 11.5 tonnes of fruit and vegetables could be produced.

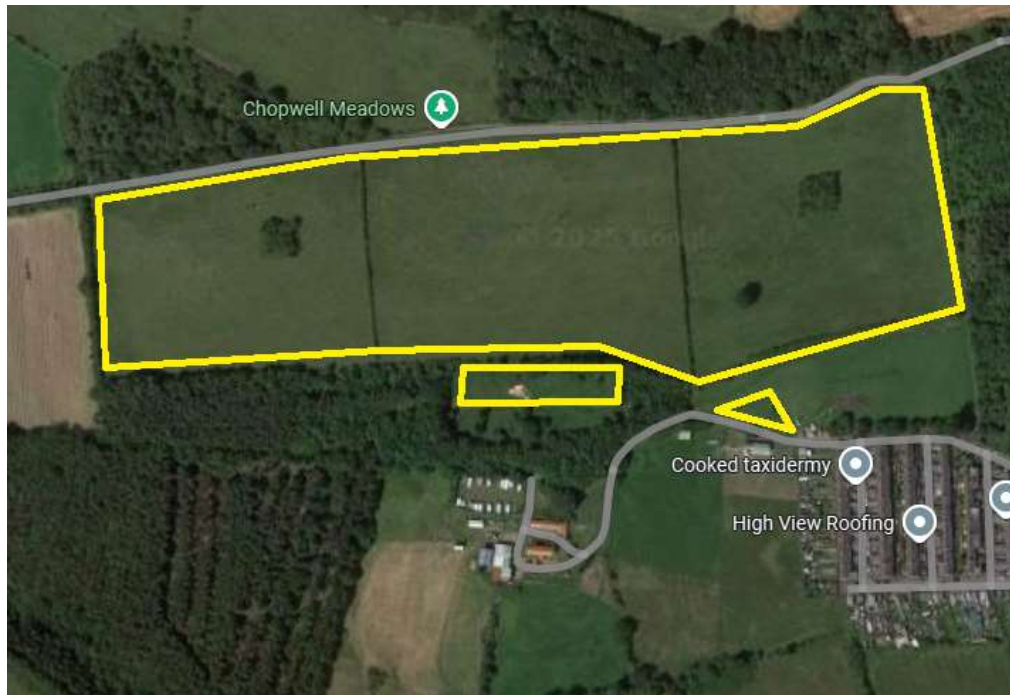


Figure 13: Map of the Whittonstall area of Chopwell showing outline of possible areas for food cultivation (yellow). Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

Although there is plenty of public land around Whittonstall Road, a drawback is that it is not centrally located and therefore not considered to be as accessible as other locations in the village. It would be more difficult to engage a wide segment of the village were a community food project to be sited in such a location. Conversely, it is also acknowledged that the need for security in a Whittonstall based growing site could arguably be less given the limited footfall to these parts and considering one of the plots benefits from mature vegetation and natural screening around the periphery. However, on the other hand, damage to crops from wildlife such as deer and rabbits may be higher in a less built up area.

Notwithstanding the above, there is considerable scope to consult neighbouring residents on the best use of the land around Whittonstall Road. Given the size and particularly scenic location of some of this land there is real potential to convert it into spaces for community wellbeing centred on edible, sensory and healing trees and shrubs such as a forest garden or simply a more traditional model of food growing such as an orchard. Equally the Council could consider reverting some of the land back to its former use as allotments to bolster much needed food growing provision in this part of the village. It is important that any project

builds on the efforts already made by residents and complements the existing allotment provision nearby.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively large areas • Reduced risk of vandalism and damage due to less footfall • No known competing uses for land other than existing nature and biodiversity value • Some enclosure and screening from existing trees and vegetation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location is less accessible than others – difficult to engage wider community • Lack of formal enclosure • Lack of access to water • Higher risk of damage to crops by wildlife as area is less built up

8.3.4 Recommendations: Growing on park and public land

- Local organisations should work together to support the development of larger community farm or growing project for the village. One of the objectives of the project should be to supply produce to all of the organisations providing food in the community. This is best facilitated through a working group with representation from all of these organisations and consultation with residents as to where the site should be located.
- Chopwell Park appears to be the most suitable location for a larger community food growing site owing to the good access paths it benefits from; security around some enclosed areas; how central it is; and given that it is under-utilised. Community food growing can help transform the park by meeting different needs of the village, and fit within a diverse mix of activities offered.
- The enclosed areas within the park, in particular the cricket pitch, is most desirable for purposes of security, storage and access to water. Efforts should be made to restore and repurpose existing buildings rather than demolishing in order save on initial capital outlay.
- Other marginal areas of the park should be used for some planting on a smaller scale. Planting of fruit trees should be encouraged as require the least maintenance and are an easy way to build local food sufficiency.
- There is scope to develop a separate food growing project in Whittonstall as this can be considered a well-defined and distinct area of the village on its own. The Fanny Bush forest garden could be formalised and developed further with consultation from local residents or areas around the recreation ground could be converted into a growing space. However consideration would need to be given about security and access to water on these sites.
- Some residents are actively harvesting from fruit trees, bramble and other native species growing wild in and around the village particularly in margins and scrub. There is significant opportunity to bolster community harvesting and foraging opportunities by planting a lot more fruit trees and hardy fruit bushes around the village in a naturalistic way or supporting designating spaces for foraging. Existing wild growing fruit trees could be mapped as a resource for the community. Trees planted on larger rootstocks would need very little aftercare, short of guarding in the early years. Planting near scrub also affords more protection from deer or rabbits, as well as from dogs and vandalism.

8.3.5 Allotments

There are two main Council allotment sites serving Chopwell:

- Heartlands – Primary School, GP Surgery, River Streets
- Whittonstall

The Heartlands is the larger of the two, comprising around 76 plots, spread across three distinct sites located loosely around the centre of the village – to the rear of the Primary School, River Streets and GP surgery. The Whittonstall site is much smaller, and is made up of around 12 plots concentrated in a single location to the south of Whittonstall Road. There are also several private allotment sites around the village:

- Rear of Chopwell Hotel
- South of Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church
- End of Marx and Lenin Terrace
- Forth Street adjacent to Council allotment plots

These private sites together account for around a further 40 plots, with the Forth Street site being the largest.

The total area of allotment land in Chopwell across all sites is around 12.95 acres with private sites accounting for around a third of this area. This figure is likely to be the lowest it has ever been, with less public land in the village reserved for allotments than in decades past.

Nationally, the amount of people growing food themselves has significantly reduced over the past half century, with changing lifestyles and the onset of supermarkets. That said, interest in food growing has seen a slow resurgence in recent years. Chopwell is no exception to these trends. At one time, the majority of food eaten in the village would have been grown in allotments or produced locally. The aerial photos below show the sheer extent of allotment land in the village in 1934, a time when the village is likely to have been more or less self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables. Indeed allotments would have contributed immensely to food security particularly during the miners' strikes and other notable episodes in social history that have shaped the village.



Figure 14: Chopwell Colliery (Pit No 1) and environs, Chopwell, 1934, with yellow areas showing scale of allotment gardens.

Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with maps taken from ^{xxxv}



Figure 15: Chopwell village and the Garesfield and Chopwell Railway, Chopwell, 1934, with yellow areas showing scale of allotment gardens.

Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with maps taken from ^{xxxvi}

Demand for allotments remain high although the average plot size has become smaller. There is fast uptake of vacant plots in Chopwell, and it is understood that allotment waiting lists have very recently been brought down. Waiting lists are considerably shorter than national averages,

but typical of semi-rural areas.

Nonetheless, there are ongoing challenges with allotments not being utilised fully or neglected, as well as high churn of plot holders with residents taking on new plots that they are unable to manage. The Council has plans to divide some of the larger plots to make them more manageable for residents.

Based on the current level of provision of Council allotment plots, fewer than 5% of households in Chopwell would be able to access an allotment plot should they want one. With the population of the village set to increase and no clear strategy in place to expand allotment land, that figure is likely to become even lower.

The Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne indicates that land at Chopwell is allocated for approximately 305 new homes.^{xxxvii} Nationally only 13% of homes do not have any garden.^{xxxviii} However in Chopwell, it is estimated that between 30-40% of homes either do not have access to a garden or only have access to back yards. Public allotments are therefore the only viable means through which these households can grow food.

“I’d like to do this in my house but we don’t have any grass”

Comment from child participating in fruit tree planting activity in Chopwell, 2025.

The right to grow food is a fundamental right that individuals should be enabled to exercise, through better access to land, including public provision of adequate allotment land. Alongside efforts to ensure that existing plots are more effectively utilised, there are other ways in which the Council can increase the number of available plots relatively easily.

There is unused Council owned land adjacent to some of the Heartlands sites that could be turned to additional plots. Some of the former allotment land in the Whittonstall area could also be converted back to create more plots. Based on the current level of allotment provision in Whittonstall, there is only enough plots to serve 13% of homes in the area that lack access to adequate private garden space. Potential areas for expansion of allotment provision is outlined in yellow below.



Figure 16: Possible expansion of allotment provision in Heartlands sites, marked in yellow.

Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

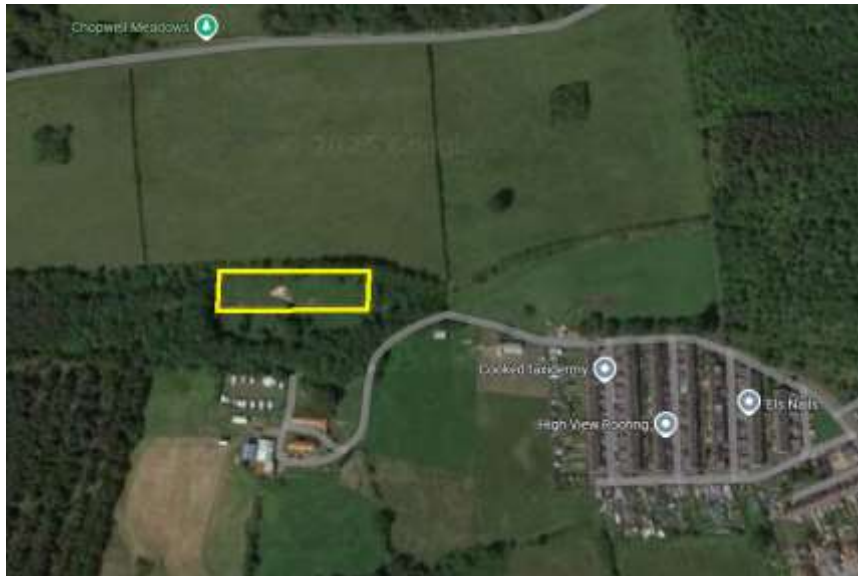


Figure 17: Possible expansion of allotment provision in Whittonstall area of Chopwell, on former allotment land, marked in yellow.

Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

At least two Council allotment plots in the village have been deemed unsuitable by the Council for private tenure as they are significantly overgrown. These plots have been earmarked for community groups who wish to take them on collectively, but as of early 2025 remain unlet. The plots are also on a slope which would make them quite difficult to cultivate easily and to access by all members of the public. However they could suit a wildlife garden, food forest or small orchard for the community.

Another overgrown plot has recently been let to the newly formed Chopwell Community Food Growers group at the end of 2024 to be used as a small community garden for the village. It is noted that a small area of private land attached to the rear of the Official's Club was being managed by Chopwell Regeneration Group as a community allotment for the past few years. This plot is due to be handed back following termination of the lease.

Allocating disused, overgrown or marginal plots to community groups or projects, which would otherwise be hard for individuals to manage, is not uncommon in Gateshead and more widely. Examples in Gateshead include the Big Local Gateshead Community Allotment. Such approaches no doubt provide part of the solution to ensuring allotment land is better utilised whilst also reaping many of the social benefits associated with community projects.

Chopwell Kitchen Garden

Chopwell Community Food Growers are an independent group of volunteers in Chopwell who are passionate about bringing the community together around food growing. The group has recently been permitted by the Council to take on an overgrown allotment plot and transform it into a small community garden for the village. The site will be called the Kitchen Garden and is intended as a welcoming space where residents can help and learn to grow food communally to distribute to organisations in the village, adopt mini plots to grow food for personal use, as well as providing an outdoor space to socialise and meet like-minded people. Works to make the allotment more accessible and ready for cultivation commenced in 2025.

8.3.5.1. Recommendations: Reviving allotments for the 21st century

A number of ideas on how residents can be supported to grow and distribute more food from allotments, were raised in the public surveys and launch event. Some of these are measures which the Council is already starting to take.

- **Enable residents to take on manageable micro plots**

Many residents are not physically able to or have the knowledge or time to take on a standard allotment plot, but are nonetheless keen to grow some of their own food. They can be enabled to grow by creating significantly smaller and more manageable plots to cultivate within the site of a community allotment. 53% of residents surveyed felt that the focus of community food growing projects should be support people to grow food.

- **Build better, more formalised ways of working with allotment holders. Support the formation of a group for allotment holders and gardeners in the village to share advice, find ways to support each other, and connect more effectively with other organisations in the village for the benefit of the community.**

There is currently no allotment society in the village such as for example providing support to those facing difficulties in accessing and cultivating their sites. All of the charitable organisations providing community meals in the village acknowledged that they received surplus produce from allotment holders, especially during seasonal gluts. Some allotment holders are also collecting food waste from community organisations for their compost. These arrangements are mostly informal and ad hoc, but could also be formalised by reaching out more systematically to allotment holders such as through an established group.

- **Encourage allotment holders to plant extra for community meals and food provision** particularly of those crops that are regularly used in community meals.

- **Neglected and under-utilised allotment plots could be allocated by Council to community groups to bring back into cultivation**

- **Large under-used allotment plots could be divided into smaller ones to encourage take up and more efficient use of plots**

- **Provide better training opportunities for new allotment holders to gains the skills and knowledge to grow food confidently and make the most of their plots**

- **Support more allotment events such as harvest festivals and competition to increase interest and profile of food growing in the village.** Whilst there are one or two events that take place in the village, including an annual Leek show at the Central pub, there is scope for additional events promoted more widely around the community.

8.3.6 Community Planters

A number of community planters have been erected in prominent locations around the village to improve the visual amenity of the area.

These efforts have been spearheaded through the Chopwell in Bloom initiative led a by dedicated local resident, and around which different organisations and residents have later galvanised.

At present there are around 27 planters dotted across 14 different locations in the village. Responsibility for the upkeep of these was delegated between dedicated local residents living nearby as well as some organisations. Details of the planters are outlined below.

Location	Number & Size
Top of Village	2 x Regular
Bend at Monument	3 x Regular
Central Bus Stop	1 x Regular
Co-op Bus Stop	1 x Regular
Old Library	1 x Regular
Notice Board	3 x Regular
Opposite Doctors	2 x Large
East St Bus turning	2 x Regular
Community Centre	2 x Regular
The Wheel	2 x Regular
The Green	1 x Large
Valley Dene Bench	2 x Regular
West Crescent	1 x Regular
Bus Station	4 x Regular

Some of these have been well looked after whereas others have fallen into disrepair and in need of reconstruction. A few planters have also recently been replaced.

2025 marks the centenary of the miner's strike and provides an opportunity to rebuild on the momentum started by the Chopwell in Bloom initiative. There is also scope within other recent initiatives such as Brighten up Chopwell coordinated by the Chopwell Regeneration Group to support the work of Chopwell in Bloom, particularly ahead of this year's centenary celebrations.

Thus far, the majority of planting has been ornamental, involving annual flowers which provide colour and seasonal interest. It is understood that culinary herbs were also briefly trialled at some point though halted due to concerns around theft and vandalism. There is opportunity to explore this further and find ways to engage residents more effectively. It would be relatively easy to incorporate a mix of pollinator friendly flowers and herbs into the community planters so that they are not just visually appealing but also of edible, medicinal and biodiversity value.

In order to sustain the planters going forwards, it will be important to ensure that responsibilities are more widely shared and do not fall on a very small handful of dedicated residents.

Recommendations: Community Planters

- **Incorporate a mix of edibles, culinary and medicinal herbs, and pollinator friendly flowers** to create more educational, biodiverse and multi-functional planters.
- **Use more perennial plants** over annual flowers as they are more resilient and require less maintenance.
- **Consider making educational signs** for some of the planters to raise awareness of the plants and their benefits for us and wildlife, and encourage residents to take care of them.
- **Consider enlarging planters** to make them higher and wider so that they are more engaging and less likely to be damaged by dogs. Raising the height will also enable edible plants to be used safely if desired and make planters more accessible to volunteers.
- **Consider relocating planters** to where it would be easier to look after them if it is not possible to find a group of local residents in close proximity or organisations willing to take on existing ones. There is advantage in relocating or adding more planters to areas with the densest populations such as the River Streets where there is also the least access to private green space.

8.4 Growing on institutional land

There is currently only one community food / garden project attached to institutional land in Chopwell – at Trinity Methodist Church.

Chopwell Primary School is looking to expand food growing capacity at its site for the benefit of the children. Due to restrictions in access and the safety of children, this is not considered to be a community food growing project.

All other projects are on Council land.

There is scope for small growing spaces to be attached to other institutions in the village such as care-based organisations. The Chopwell Primary Health Care Centre was approached in this regard, but has declined at the present moment.

Trinity Methodist Church

Chopwell Trinity Methodist Church is located on South Road, in what is the most densely populated part of the village. The Church serves a congregation of around 25 people and is open twice weekly on Wednesdays and Sundays. Open coffee mornings and a bairns group take place every Wednesday, and the main service and gatherings on Sundays.

The Church benefits from green space on its grounds, amounting to around a fifth of an acre in area. In 2022, part of the land was developed into a small quiet garden. The garden is mostly maintained with the help of local residents and members of the congregation, though more volunteers and community engagement would be welcome. Tidy up events are also occasionally organised with plans in 2025 to hold more regular sessions on a monthly basis. The garden is intended as a place of quiet and reflection for the community, but also has several raised beds with some sensory herbs and edibles including sage, rosemary, lavender, chives, chard and strawberries.

Six fruit trees have been planted as of early 2025, mostly around the perimeter of the site, with several soft fruit bushes also due to be planted. If half of the available green space at the church can be cultivated for food, it is possible that between a third and half a tonne of food can be produced.

Biodiversity has also been improved with a mixed native hedging planted around the boundary of the site, as well as a living willow fence enclosing the quiet garden.

The site enjoys a sunny aspect, has access to mains water from an external tap at the building and storage facilities within the premises, all of which are of great advantage to food growing. However, a major constraint is the suitability of the soil. It is understood that much of the land to the rear has been formed from rubble and spoil. This can be overcome with raised beds and selective planting favouring perennials and more resilient food plants. Another constraint is labour. Although the Church has local residents and some members of the congregation who help look after the site, more volunteer support will be needed if food growing capacity is to be increased.

The Church grounds are not enclosed and therefore open to the public all the time. Despite fears of vandalism, for the most part, the garden has not seen anti-social behaviour with the exception of some damage to the seating areas in the quiet garden.

Being located in the heart of the village, the garden has real potential to bring people together and serve as a model of what is possible when less used green spaces are converted to growing food and other community needs.



Figure 18: Map showing the Chopwell Trinity Methodist Church site, shown in yellow. Source: Than Gunabalasingham, with map from Google maps

Other institutional land

There are two other churches in Chopwell which benefit from grounds around them – Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church and St John the Evangelist. These parcels of land are not considered to be significant and are constrained by grave stones. St John the Evangelist is further constrained in that it is located somewhat away from the centre of the village. Nonetheless some low maintenance fruit trees and soft fruit bushes could be planted if there is interest to do so.

A fourth church, Magdalene Community Church, is based completely outdoors and does not have a premise or site of its own at present. Nonetheless it is deeply committed to the care and stewardship of the land, and is fully supportive of more community food growing in the village. The Church shares a longer term vision to acquire a site to live intentionally on the land producing food for both itself and the wider community.

8.5 Growing food on private land

Neighbouring farms and landholdings

Chopwell is surrounded by farms and other private holdings which together account for a significant share of land in and around the village.

The land ownership map in Figure 4 outlines in red some of the large private land holdings in the village. These holdings are owned by a very small handful of local landowners. The overwhelming majority of this land is used to graze animals, either as hobby farms or commercially.

A smaller though not insubstantial parcel of private land to the south of the village is being developed for new housing. Almost none of the holdings in and around the Chopwell are in arable or horticultural use, with the exception of one field located in the far north of the village that appears to be under arable cultivation. However, given the broader context of agriculture, it is highly likely that the few arable fields in and around the area, are used for growing livestock feed rather than for direct human consumption.

This pattern of land use is not atypical of the north east or nationally. At least 60% of all of the land in the UK is currently used for animal farming either directly for grazing or the growing of livestock feed.^{xxxix}

Were some of this land to be converted to the production of food for the community, it would contribute massively to food security, the development of a local food economy and access to fresh local produce in the area.

As raised in consultations, there may be potential to build closer relationships with local landowners to lease one or more fields for the benefit of the community.

“Persuade local farmers to be involved. If they could designate say one field to grow lots of different vegetables within that area e.g. potatoes, onions, carrots, parsnips, turnips, peas, beans, etc and then get people to sign up to have veg boxes each week, that would be great.”

Comment from public launch event

At the moment such relationships do not for the most part exist. Nonetheless there are some examples of exchange that are already taking place and others that may be relatively simple to establish. The former community allotment site located to the rear of Official's Club, for example, benefitted from a supply of compost from the neighbouring farm.

It is also understood that one of the neighbouring farms benefits from a non-commercial orchard from which it may be possible to glean surplus fruit for the village if closer relationships can be established with the landowners. The fruit, can for example, be exchanged in return for pressed juice, cider or support to maintain the trees.

Local grain and legume production

Another option is to work with farmers and landowners to grow food for the community on a semi-commercial basis. However there are practical constraints to this in that farmers and landowners shifting from livestock to arable or horticulture would need to acquire new skills, knowledge, machinery and facilities amongst other things, particularly if they have no prior experience of the above. It would be useful to identify those few farms in the surrounding areas that are mixed (arable and livestock), and fewer still that are entirely arable, for possible collaboration.

It would be relatively easy for landowners who have at least one or more fields in arable cultivation to convert them to the field scale production of grains or legumes for human

consumption. However, any ambitions along these lines would be hampered by economic realities and lack of local demand or purchasing power. Fewer than 40% of those surveyed stated that they would be interested in buying locally grown grains, pulses or cereals.

As the majority of grain consumed in the UK is purchased by shoppers from supermarkets, in processed forms such as bread, flour and pasta, any grain produced in the locality will need to be sent to a processing mill willing to accept small quantities, and be able to segregate it from other batches so that provenance can be retained.

There are almost no small scale mills left in the UK given the industrialisation of food supply chains, rise of big retail and resultant decline in independent bakeries, groceries and other retail. In addition, with the homogenisation of many products, millers and manufacturers tolerate very little deviation in the properties of grain. This type of standardisation is not compatible with the natural variations inherent in growing crops in local soils and climactic conditions.

These fundamental barriers to the development of a more local grain and pulse economy will be difficult to overcome without changes in eating habits and demand. Unprocessed heritage wholegrains such as naked oats, spelt, wheat and barley grains have the potential to be consumed without need for processing and therefore circumvent the need to go through industrial milling and manufacturing facilities. In this regard they redistribute economic control from large processing companies to small local farmers, retailers and communities.

These products can be found online or in wholefood stores around the country but thus far enjoy only a small customer base. Hodmedod's Wholefoods, a company based in Suffolk, have been working to create a viable market for local grains and pulses nationwide.

Much more can be done locally and regionally to encourage and re-popularise these foods, which in many ways would have been the staple of generations past. Heritage food festivals, supper clubs and the incorporation of these foods in community meal provisions are just some ideas how they can be supported.

Private Gardens

Nationally around 87% of households in the UK have gardens, although the average size of gardens has shrunk considerably over time with increasing housing densities. The total area of gardens in England is more than four and a half times larger than that of National Nature Reserves.^{xi} The proportion of homes in Chopwell with gardens is lower than national

average, accounting for under two-thirds of the housing stock. However this is not insignificant as there are still more than a 1000 homes in the village that benefit from access to a garden.

There are likely to be at least some residents and homeowners in the village who would like to grow food in their gardens but for various reasons are unable to. This could be due to time constraints, lack of knowledge, physical limitations or other factors.

It is worth exploring ways in which these households can be supported to bring their gardens into cultivation, and the possibility of sharing their land in return for produce and skills. Those with larger gardens could for instance be encouraged or distributed with subsidised food plants/ fruit trees in return for a share of the harvest. Such initiatives have been trialled around the country such as Time to Grow in East London.

Households can be supported in simple ways such as through the distribution of starter kits for growing, plug plants, soft fruit bushes, dwarfing fruit trees and information on easy to grow crops. This will be particularly invaluable to the many residents in the village who only have access to a back yard.

Time to Grow

Time to Grow is a network of community food growers in East London that aims to use unused green space to grow food, starting in gardens. The group currently looks after 13 private gardens in the area. Matching people who have gardens with people who want to learn to grow food and do it, Time to Grow offers free training and practice at food growing.

The project benefits garden owners who need help growing food, increases the area's biodiversity, connects communities and strengthens the food resilience of the community.

Whilst Time to Grow operate in an urban area, there is no reason why the model cannot be replicated in a semi-rural location. The challenges facing Chopwell are not dissimilar. There are many residents who do not have access to back gardens, at the same time as others who have the space to grow food, but are unable to do so for other reasons.

Recommendations: Growing food on private land

- **There is opportunity to create projects that support people to grow food in their own gardens or even back yards, particularly older people or those with physical difficulties and illness.** There may also be people in the village who want to grow food in their own gardens, but are unable to do so due to time and other constraints such as resources, skills or space. There is scope to help these people, in exchange for some produce in return for the community. The Time to Grow project in East London is a successful example of this. Support could take different forms, including physical help on site for those who are least able or the development of starter packs to empower people to help themselves.
- **Community organisations could work together to build closer relationships with landowners and ask to lease suitable and accessible marginal fields for a larger community food growing project focussing on field scale cultivation.**
- Farmers could be recruited to cultivate grain for direct human consumption rather than livestock feed. However this idea is restricted by the absence of small scale milling infrastructure locally and would not be feasible unless **significant efforts are made to encourage local demand for unprocessed heritage grains such as naked oats, spelt, barley and wheat grain**, which do not require milling. Examples include seasonal celebrations and special meals crafted and served by community organisations to re-popularise these foods.

9. Food growing for well-being

Community food growing projects are a great way in which people can meet and socialise outdoors in nature. This can be especially beneficial for the elderly, socially isolated and other vulnerable groups. Just under a quarter of the population of Chopwell and High Spen are 65 years or over.^{xli} Not unsurprisingly, this is much higher than in urban areas. More than 40% of households in Chopwell are single person households, and over half in some wards.^{xlii} Around a fifth of Chopwell residents of pension age are classed as living in poverty.

Three-fifths of respondents surveyed wanted a focus of community food growing projects to be to provide an outdoor 'wellness' space for elderly and adults with additional needs. With the exception of the nascent Chopwell Kitchen Garden, which is in a very early stage of development, there are no community food growing spaces in the village that serve these needs. A number of organisations in the village working closely with elderly and vulnerable groups such as the Methodist Homes Association and Chopwell Regeneration Group have expressed their support for more community food growing projects that their service users can participate in.

However, in order for community food projects to be inclusive of all groups, it is important that sites are safe and easy to access, have plenty of spaces to sit, and are in close proximity to facilities such as toilets and shelter.

The small community allotment overseen by the Chopwell Regeneration Group is an example of a site where a difficult location and issues around access and facilities ultimately made it difficult to engage the elderly, vulnerable and other local organisations working with those groups. If more community food growing projects are to be established in the village, it will also be particularly useful to establish closer links with social prescribing services so that service users can be better signposted to suitable activities.

There are opportunities to explore collaboration with GP surgeries, health practices and residential care homes in and near Chopwell, where there is adjacent land available for cultivation. Chopwell Primary Health Care Centre was approached for consultations with regards to the potential for developing some community food growing capacity on its land that could also benefit patients and service users. Whilst the practice did not consider using its green space for community food growing as an option at the moment, it is possible that they may be open to re-consultation in the future.

There are some well-known examples around the country, such as the Lambeth GP Food Co-op in South London^{xliii}, of community food growing projects that have been initiated by medical practices, with the aim of providing patient-centred gardening activities for physical and mental well-being. More locally, the Herb Hub project in Bensham manages several growing sites, including one attached to a shelter housing scheme.

Case Study: Growing for well-being with Lambeth GP Food Co-op, South London

The Lambeth GP Food Co-op in South London is a co-operative of patients, doctors, nurses, and local residents who grow food together and is one of the first of its kind in the UK. The Co-op has been running successfully for over eleven years, and grows food in three gardens attached to GP surgeries and hospitals in the Borough.

The gardens were designed with needs of service users in mind with raised beds and other facilities that enable them to benefit from and contribute to the spaces regardless of their conditions. The gardens not only support patients with long-term health conditions to learn how to grow food, and in doing so, improve their health and wellbeing, they also contribute to the sustainability of the health and social care system.

The gardens are also spaces for social interaction, helping reduce social isolation and building stronger community bonds.

The project promotes a more holistic approach to healthcare that could potentially also reduce costs for the NHS in the long run. Doctors report that patients who regularly use the gardens require fewer appointments.

9.1 Recommendations: Food growing for well-being

- There are opportunities to **build inter-generation links through community food growing** for example through a buddying or mentoring scheme. Older residents can exchange horticultural knowledge, skills and experiences with young people, in return for physical help with food growing or simply whilst working together in community food growing spaces.
- **More can be done to provide support to older people and those with physical difficulties to grow food in their own gardens or allotment plots.** Many older residents as well as those suffering from illnesses and disability can sometimes feel forced to give up their allotment plots or neglect their gardens if they are no longer able to manage it alone. This can be debilitating in many ways as it often means they also lose access to fresh food and nutrition at a time they need it most. The rights of older people and other vulnerable groups to enjoy fresh, nutritious food into their old age or ailing health is therefore widely overlooked. There are opportunities to access support from volunteers or community funded growers to help them to grow food in their own spaces.
- **Community food growing spaces need to be inclusive of the needs of all site users, including those with physical difficulties.** It is important that sites are safe and easy to access, have plenty of spaces to sit, and in close proximity to facilities such as toilets and shelter.
- **Community food projects should establish close links with social prescribing services so that activities can be signposted to all those who may be interested.**
- **It is worth exploring the possibility of working with local health and care-based organisations to develop some food growing capacity at their sites. This can for example be as simple as raised bed planters with sensory aromatic herbs.**
- There is a rich history of independent food retail and food growing in Chopwell, which elderly residents are proud of and have a lived experience of. These **memories and knowledge of local food history should be celebrated through local events and shared to younger generations**, and form the basis of a vision for a more local community-centred food system.

10. Food growing for the next generation

“[Community food growing] could be educational if children were encouraged to grow their own vegetables and feel the pride of eating their own produce”

Survey Respondent

As less and less of us grow our own food, nationally, fewer children also receive the opportunity to connect with how food is grown. More widely there is strong evidence to indicate the positive role of nature in supporting well-being among children. Eight in ten children agree that being in nature made them very happy.^{xiv} However, even the amount of time children spend outdoors has diminished over time. Only a quarter of children play out regularly on their street, whereas three-quarters of their grandparents' generation said they played outside a few times a week.^{xiv} There are also marked disparities in access to nature between children from more affluent households and those from the least. Around three-quarters of children from households with a total annual income below £17,000 spent less time outdoors, compared with under three-fifths from households with an annual income above £17,000.^{xvi}

There are a number of groups and institutions in the village working with children and young people. These include Bibliotheca Magica, Chopwell Primary School, Chopwell Youth Club, Scouts Group, Stomping Grounds and Chopwell Regeneration Group.

Most of these organisations were consulted as part of this report.

Organisations in Chopwell work with many children and young people at risk of food insecurity, with many eligible for free school meals. 32% of children aged 0 - 10 in Chopwell are living in income deprived families.^{xvii}

Together they provide mainstream education, as well as alternative and extra-curricular provision to children during holidays and outside of school hours.

There is plenty of scope to get children and young people involved in more food related activities, including cooking and food growing in the village. The benefits of doing so are manifold:

- Helps connect children with their food and encourage healthy eating
- Helps connect children with the soil and local landscape, raising awareness of environmental issues such as biodiversity loss, food waste and climate change and to become environmental stewards
- Helps teach practical cookery and land-based skills to build self-esteem and confidence
- Improves physical and mental well-being by working outdoors and connecting with the land
- Provides an alternative to those children who may struggle in a classroom environment
- Provides a medium through which other curriculum subjects can be taught, such as maths, science and geography

All of the stakeholders consulted acknowledged the benefits of incorporating food growing into the activities they were already delivering, and were keen to find opportunities to do so. However they faced a number constraints:

- Lack of community food growing spaces in the village
- Limited physical and financial resources to set up a food growing space themselves and sustain activities
- Limited skills and knowledge in food growing to be able to support children

At the moment the village does not benefit from an established site where children and young people can engage with food and the land, although The Kitchen Garden may offer some potential in this regard when it is fully set up.

More food growing spaces may need to be set up in the village to improve this provision for children and young people. It is important that sites are safe and large enough to accommodate small groups of children and that projects themselves give children sense of ownership by encouraging them to be part of developing a space. Activities should also offer some continuity in which children are able to see and reap the rewards of their efforts, for example by being involved in the process from sowing through to harvesting and cooking.

Chopwell Primary School

Chopwell Primary School has around 200 pupils. Currently it benefits from regular activities around food waste reduction and cooking run by Pickle Palace. These activities are

delivered as part of the design and technology curriculum and make use of the school's community kitchen facility, utilising food that would otherwise have been wasted.

There are no activities at present that link food preparation with food growing, presenting a significant opportunity in this regard.

The school has plans to introduce outdoor forest school activities for children with additional learning needs and those who struggle with classroom learning, as well as part of their after school club provision. This will include activities such as den building and fire lighting, although the school is also keen to offer opportunities within this provision for the children to learn to grow food.

The area designated to be used for forest school activities is located in the north eastern corner of the school grounds. There are already six raised beds in this area, although these are not currently being utilised. There is enough space to build several more beds. Subject to the availability of resources, the school is looking to recruit an additional member of staff to facilitate these activities as part of a wider remit. It is likely that school will also need support to equip members of staff with knowledge and skills to grow food. Support from volunteers has been welcomed.

The school is not constrained by land as it benefits from relatively generous grounds that are presently underused and can be used to support food growing in some form if there are resources and enthusiasm to do so in future. There is a large rectangular school field used by children in summer months that becomes waterlogged in the winter. There is possible scope to plant hardy fruit trees in parts of this field that can cope with the difficult conditions. The designated forest school area is also adjoined by a long strip of land where there is some potential to plant fruit trees.

The main challenges to growing food at the school were identified to be the ongoing maintenance needs, particularly during school holidays when staff and children were away. Access to water was also found to be an issue. Whilst there is access to mains water from the school building this is some distance away from the area designated for forest school and food growing activities. It is possible to carry watering cans in wheel barrows to where it is needed. If this is a significant barrier, the school can look into growing vegetables in raised beds on the concrete closer to the school building.

Growing food at the school presents opportunities to celebrate seasonal produce through events and markets where produce can be sold to raise funds for the school, and engage

parents and the community more widely. Children can also take produce home, becoming a catalyst for healthy eating habits at home.

Chopwell Youth Club

Chopwell Youth Club provides weekly activities for young people in the village. The club is open two evenings a week in Chopwell, as well as one evening at Blackhall Mill. It is very well used, receiving between 15 - 20 young people at each session. Many of the children accessing the service benefit from free school meals and are likely to be at risk of food poverty.

The activities are youth-led. There have been activities in the past engaging kids in outdoor food growing activities but not for some time. The club has facilitated the occasional cookery class working with Pickle Palace, though this has been subject to funding.

The club always makes sure to have some food available to the children, even if this is mostly snacks based on what has been donated. Fresh fruit and healthy snacks would be very welcome. During the winter holidays, the club runs the HAF programme, providing extended activities and at least one cooked meal for children who may not otherwise get one at home. There is scope to provide fresh local produce to supplement these meals through a community food growing project, and provide much needed access to high quality nutrition.

More community food growing spaces in the village can contribute to the diversity of activities young people can participate in and offer the chance for them engage with food in different ways. The club is supportive of more food growing activities, but noted, based on experience, that it would be more appealing to the younger age groups (10-13 years) they work with. Whilst they did not rule out the possibility of engaging the older groups (14+ years) in these activities it would be important to ensure that the children had a sense of ownership and responsibility in projects.

Stomping Grounds North East

Stomping Grounds North East is a charity that primarily delivers forest school sessions for children in various locations, including paid-for forest school provision, alternative provision for children not in mainstream education, and publicly funded holiday activities.

Their holiday programme includes a lunch provided for the children, with the menu suggested by the children themselves and prepared with their help on a fire. The children are encouraged to find and forage wild foods from the site and use it as part of the meal.

Whilst there are policies in place to source food sustainably, in practice, food is typically procured on route at supermarkets by staff commuting to the sessions. As Stomping Grounds do not have premises, there is no storage space where they can store foods purchased in bulk.

In Chopwell, Stomping Grounds have previously delivered a forest school youth club on a Tuesday evening. They are also looking to resume a fortnightly women's group running for three hours in the middle of the day, with lunch provision. There is scope for both of these groups to be involved time to time with food growing around the village, foraging and learning about wild foods and medicines.

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme is a government-backed scheme that provides funding to organisations delivering free activities and meals to children in receipt of benefits-related free school meals during school holiday periods.

This programme has been delivered during different holidays by Chopwell Youth Club and Chopwell Regeneration Group through the Bank.

During the Easter and Summer holidays, the programme of activities ran by The Bank has included activities at the former community allotment site at the Official's Club. These were very positively received by the children.

However, delivery of the HAF programme is a significant commitment requiring time and capacity to organise, deliver and report on. To overcome these obstacles, it may be beneficial for organisations in the village to work in partnership to deliver the programme, with a lead and supporting delivery partners. Community food growing projects have the potential to share some of this responsibility, by contributing to the delivery and helping diversify the range of activities offered to the children.

There may also be opportunities through the programme to identify additional needs that the children and their families can be supported with. Food poverty in the village is growing with many families unable to provide fresh nutritious meals to their children. Projects could

perhaps be developed to support these families to grow their own food, volunteer in community food growing spaces or distribute local produce directly to those in need.

Case Study: Growing with young people – Herb Hub, Gateshead

Herb Hub is a community herb growing project started in 2023 by Gateshead Big Local. The project established a number of small sites to grow culinary and medicinal herbs in Bensham and Teams. Herb Hub now oversees six different sites in the area, mostly on underused land attached to local institutions, including a primary school, youth centre, probation centre, sheltered housing scheme, community centre and a community allotment plot.

Most of these sites are maintained with the support of host organisations and one paid part-time coordinator who oversees all sites and facilitates horticultural activities. The project focuses on the cultivation of a small replicable selection of familiar herbs, chosen for their simple therapeutic and health-boosting properties and culinary value. These herbs are also easier to maintain than annual flowers or vegetables. Herbs are picked and used by site users. There are plans to put in place systems to dry and process the herbs collectively to generate more income for the project.

The Herb Hub site at The Drop-In – Dunston & Teams Project, has successfully engaged youth of an older age normally seen as more difficult to involve in food growing. Youth have helped at the site from its onset, helping convert areas of hardstanding into growing space which they also help maintain. Herbs are picked by the youth to make snacks, teas and seasoning food. As the youth have been involved in the whole process, from developing the site to harvesting, the project has helped build a strong sense of ownership and responsibility among them to look after the space.

10.1 Recommendations: Food growing for the next generation

- There is possibility to share responsibilities between the different organisations working with children and young people in the village, as well as with those involved in community food growing, to enable provision of more holiday activities for children in the village, particularly during the Summer holidays. Community food growing projects and other food related activities such as cookery could be part of diverse mix of activities that can be delivered and help to reduce the pressure on any one organisation. This will require better joint-working between organisations.
- Chopwell Primary School is looking to introduce more on-site food growing activities for the children, subject to resources. This can also be supported by wider community food growing projects in the village, which can for example facilitate school visits to different spaces and enable children to engage in the wider community.
- Organisations can also support the school in other ways through engaging children in the village in festivals and local competitions around the theme of food growing and healthy foods. Projects and events could be developed to distribute starter kits for children to grow their own pot plants, particularly those who do not have access to a garden.
- It is important that community food growing projects give children a sense of ownership and responsibility, ideally even in developing spaces so that projects can be sustained into the future. The Herb Hub youth project is an example of this. Closer to home, Bibliotheca Magic and Chopwell in Bloom are looking to partner up with the Primary School to give children more ownership of planting up some of the beds in the park around the Pavilion. There are also plans to develop a junior park ranger scheme in which local children can take on the role of looking after the beds. There is scope to incorporate some edible plants into these activities, which could enable children to return and harvest. It is important that food growing activities involving children offer continuity, by enabling children to be involved from sowing through to harvest and even cooking.
- By working closely with children and young people to grow food, it may be possible over the longer term to identify and develop more effective ways in which their families could also be supported to reduce food insecurity and access better nutrition.

11. Conclusion

Food has the power to unite communities. Thus far, efforts in the village have focussed on providing food, rather than producing it. Whilst more can be done to increase provision and reduce food waste, there is significant opportunity to join the circle from field to fork, by producing more of this food in the village.

This report has established, through consultations and surveys, that there is plenty of public support for more community food growing in Chopwell.

As highlighted in this report, the benefits of doing so are manifold – benefitting young and old alike, small businesses and community organisations, the health of the village and the health of the planet. Community food growing can help future-proof the village in an increasingly insecure world.

“It will be important that communities become more self-sufficient for the future because of economic changes and climate change”

Survey respondent

There are many forms that community food growing can take, including multiple food growing spaces spread out across the village, street planting and larger sites focussing more on production. Some key sites such as Chopwell Park have been identified. These can form a network with local allotment plots and larger landholdings.

In order to make this possible, organisations will need to work together more closely to create a shared vision for the future. A food working party with representations from residents and community organisations is strongly encouraged to establish where, how and by whom these ideas can be taken forward.

This year marks the centenary of the Miners’ Strike of 1925-1926. Chopwell has a proud food growing heritage and independent retail history – one that has seen it through hardships and struggle for worker’s rights. This local food heritage can once more be celebrated and revived for the future. The trees we plant today bear fruit for generations to come.

A vision for the future

In 2035 the village will have its own farm growing food for community organisations ...

All residents who are physically able to will be tending their allotment plots and gardens and growing their own fresh seasonal produce ...

Those who are unable to do so will be supported by other residents and community growers. All will enjoy the right to fresh seasonal produce from the local soil ...

Local independent food retail will be flourishing in what were once vacant stores...

Community food growing spaces will become a place for gathering, meeting and working together. Social isolation will be a thing of the past ...

The school will be growing its own food on site. Children will be involved in food growing in the community. All children will have access to high quality nutrition ...

Appendix 1: What did respondents say about local food?

A total of 106 people completed the public survey on local food. Of these, 88% (94 respondents) were residents of Chopwell, with the remainder from neighbouring areas. A summary of responses is provided below.

Are fresh fruit and vegetables eaten regularly?

93% of respondents regularly eat fresh fruit and vegetables

The high proportion of respondents eating fresh fruit and vegetables regularly, provides some confidence in the demand for fruit and vegetables. However this is likely to vary between different segments of society, with some households likely to be eating far less. Factors such as insecure housing and fuel poverty can all have an impact. It is well known for example that there are households in the village that do not have adequate cooking facilities or cannot afford to pay for the energy to cook food.

What types of fruit and vegetables are commonly eaten?

Respondents appear to be purchasing a wide range of fruit and vegetables, with over 28 different types of vegetables and 11 different types of fruit cited in total. Traditional root vegetables including potatoes, carrots, turnips, onions and garlic were commonly cited, as well as traditional leafy greens such as cauliflower, cabbage and broccoli. Salad vegetables such as cucumbers, lettuce and tomatoes were also being eaten regularly. Popular fruits included apples, pears, plums and strawberries.

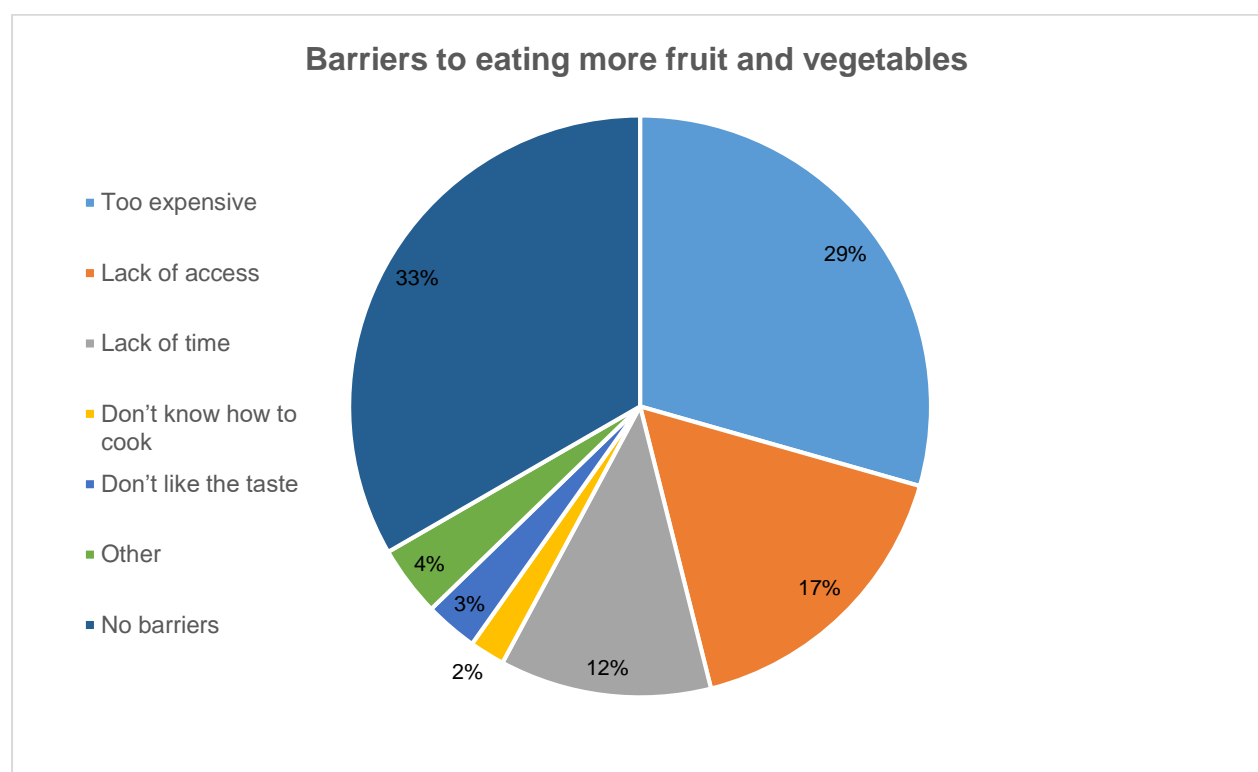
Barriers to eating more fresh fruit and vegetables

Two-thirds of all respondents (67%) cited at least one barrier that prevent them from eating more fresh fruit and veg.

Only a third (33%) stated that there were no barriers preventing them eating more fresh fruit and vegetables.

Cost (29%), lack of access (17%) and lack of time (12%) were the most commonly cited barriers.

Only 2% felt they were constrained by lack of confidence in cooking. Corroborating this, just under half of all respondents (48%) did not express any interest in more training provision in cookery, with only 10% stating that they would definitely be interested, and 35% open to the possibility.



Where are fresh fruit and vegetables purchased from?

55% of respondents buy their fresh fruit and veg from supermarkets, with a further 11% opting to order online for home delivery. This means that a total of 66% of respondents get most of their fresh fruit and vegetables from supermarkets.

10% of respondents get their fresh fruit and vegetables from local shops in Chopwell, either from the Coop or other convenience stores. As all of these stores are national chains, then taken together, around 75% of respondents were shopping mostly at national supermarket or convenience chains.

Of the supermarket locations cited, those in Consett were the most widely frequented (30%), Blaydon (7%) and supermarkets elsewhere (18%).

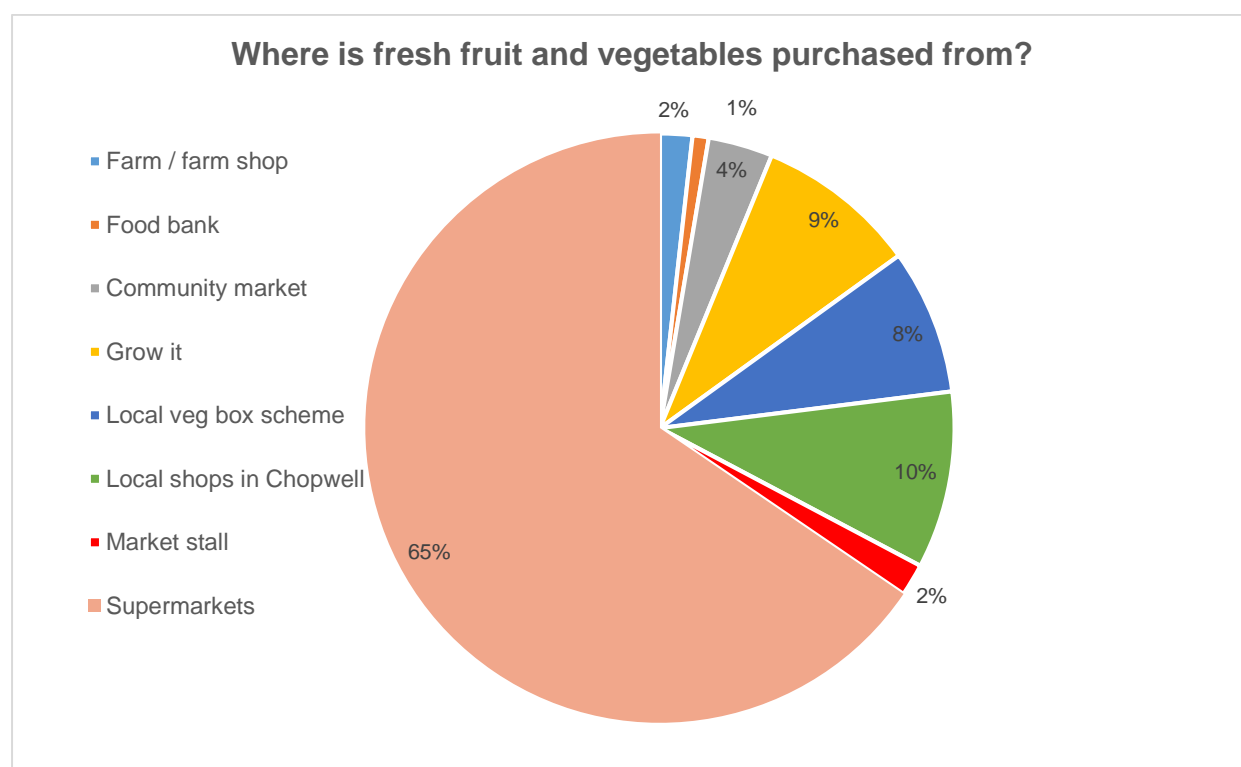
9% grow their own, or get fresh fruit and vegetables from family or friends who grow their own.

7% are part of a local veg box scheme.

2% buy directly from a farm or farm shop.

2% buy from market stalls.

5% of respondents cited using community markets or food banks. Of these, 4% get their fresh fruit and vegetables from a community market e.g. The Bank / Pickle Palace and 1% get their fresh fruit and vegetables from a food bank.



What do respondents value when making shopping decisions?

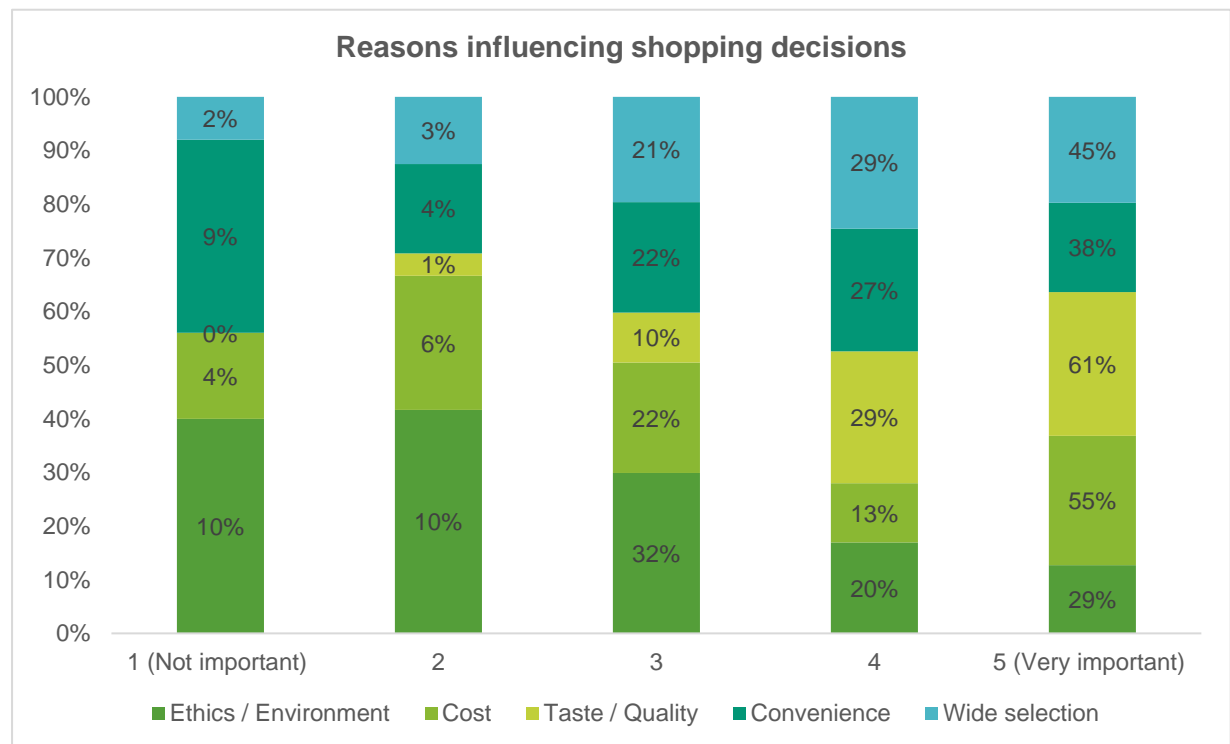
Taste and quality of produce was valued as either very important or important by 90% of respondents, and was therefore the most important of all the reasons cited.

Wide selection was valued as very important or important by 74% of respondents.

Cost was valued as either very important or important by 68% of respondents.

Convenience was valued as either very important or important by 65% of respondents so therefore not as important as some of the other factors.

Least important to respondents was ethics/ environment, though 49% of respondent still considered this to be either very important or important.



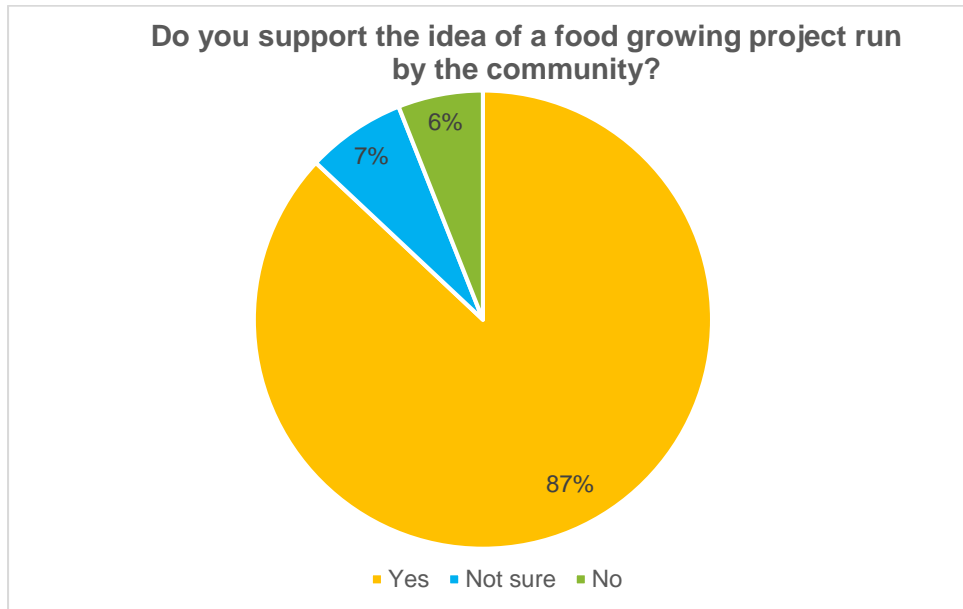
Average weekly household spend on fresh fruit and vegetables for Chopwell respondents

Size of household	Number of households	Average weekly spend per household
1	24	£11
2	41	£14
3	13	£14
4+	13	£21

Based on these average spend and household compositions in the village, Chopwell residents spend in total around £33,000 on fresh fruit and vegetables weekly. Annually this equates to somewhere in the region of £1.7 million spent by locals on fresh fruit and vegetables, with the majority of this going to national supermarket chains outside of Chopwell.

Support for community food growing projects

87% of respondents support the idea of a food project run by the community that could supply affordable, locally grown food to residents

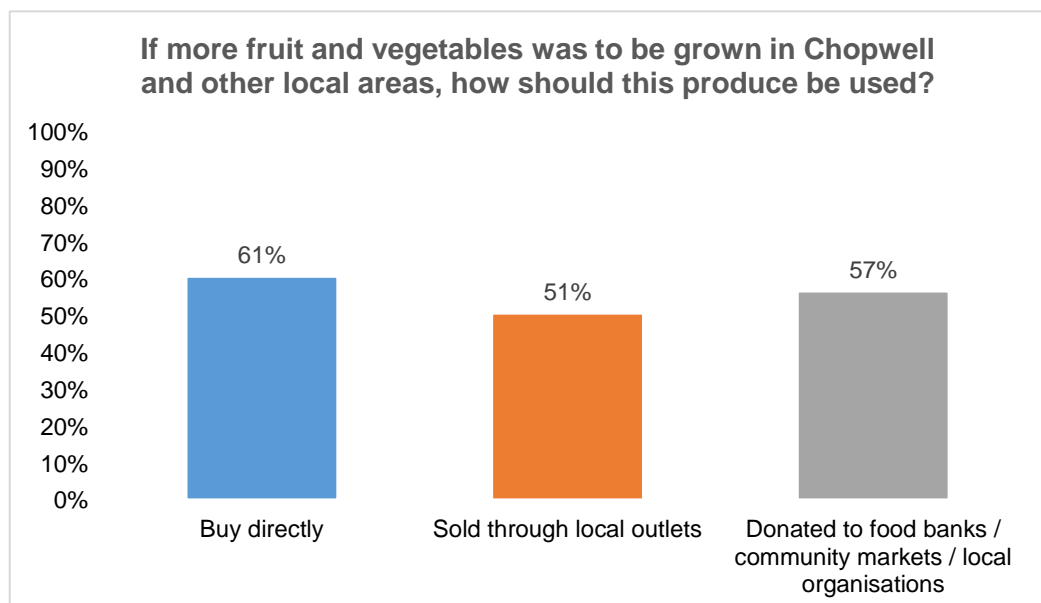


If more fruit and vegetables were to be grown in Chopwell and other local areas:

61% stated that they would like to buy some directly

57% think it should be donated to local food banks / community markets / community organisations

51% think it should be sold through local outlets



Why do people support this idea?

Respondents cited many different reasons why they would support a community food growing project, including:

- more convenient and affordable access it would provide to healthy produce
- greater choice particularly for those who were not otherwise able to shop outside of the village such as some older people
- environmental benefits including resilience in the context of climate change, less need for chemicals or packaging
- educational opportunities to engage children and young people in growing food

“I would like to be able to shop in Chopwell (affordably). I would like to have the option to be able to eat food grown in my own village.”

“Because it’s local and therefore convenient for me”

“This would be great to involve youngsters in”

“It would hopefully give people a chance to buy and eat and taste organic food without the excessive added costs that are incurred when buying organic produce from supermarkets etc. Also it is healthier and could be educational if children were encouraged to grow their own vegetables and feel the pride of eating their own produce.”

“A lot of people are suffering with the cost of living; something like this would help everyone”

“To build resilient self-sufficient communities and make seasonal, chemical-free food more readily available”

“It would be good for food grown locally to go to people in the community who maybe don’t have access to good, fresh food”

“It will be important that communities become more self-sufficient for the future because of economic changes and climate change”

“Some old people cannot shop outside the village so not much choice of what to buy”

Reasons why people think it isn't a good idea:

Respondents who did not support more community food growing were concerned about how affordable it would be, risks of theft and vandalism, undermine local shops and employment, as well as efforts to teach people to grow their own.

“People may steal the produce or destroy the growing space.”

“We should be supporting local shops that employ local people.”

“We should be teaching people to grow their own food.”

What should the focus of a community food growing project be?

The responses suggest that people do not think a community food project should focus on one goal, but rather have lots of different aims.

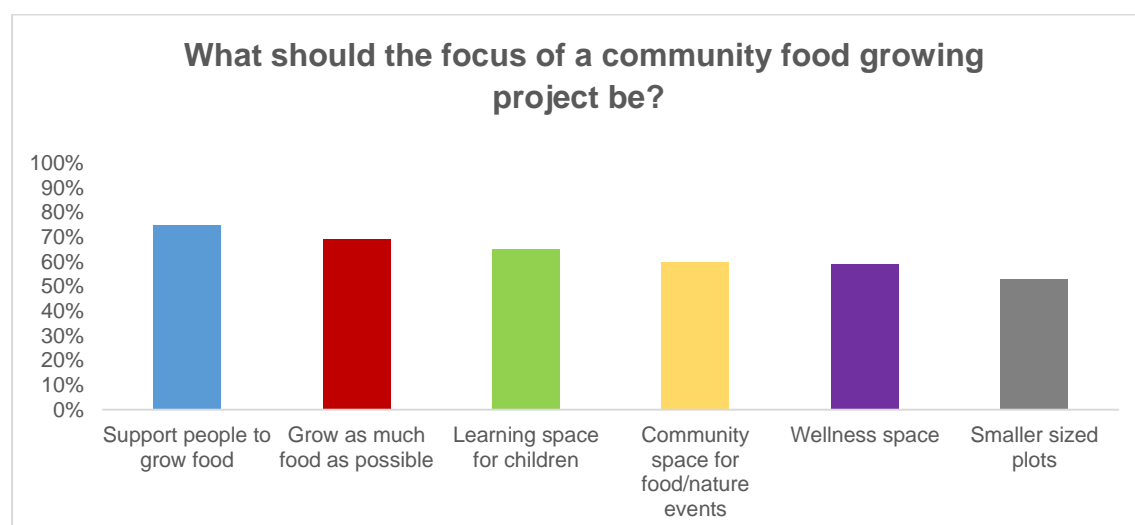
Three-quarters of respondents (75%) felt that a focus of a community food growing project should be to support people to grow food – this was the most commonly cited reason.

The least respondents, although still over a half (53%) thought that a community growing project should focus on accommodating smaller sized plots – this was the least cited reason.

69% stated that yield should also be a focus to grow as much food as possible.

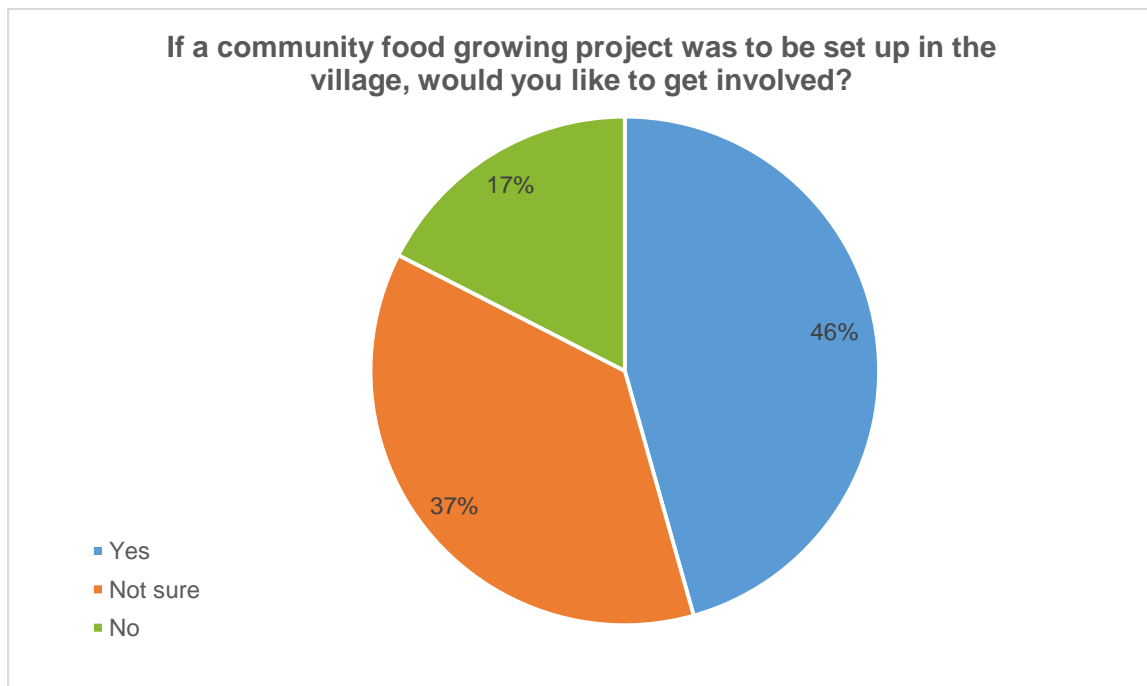
65% considered an educational focus to be important, providing a learning space for children.

60% respondents felt that a focus should be to create a community space for food/ nature events, and 59% stated that it should focus on becoming a wellness space.

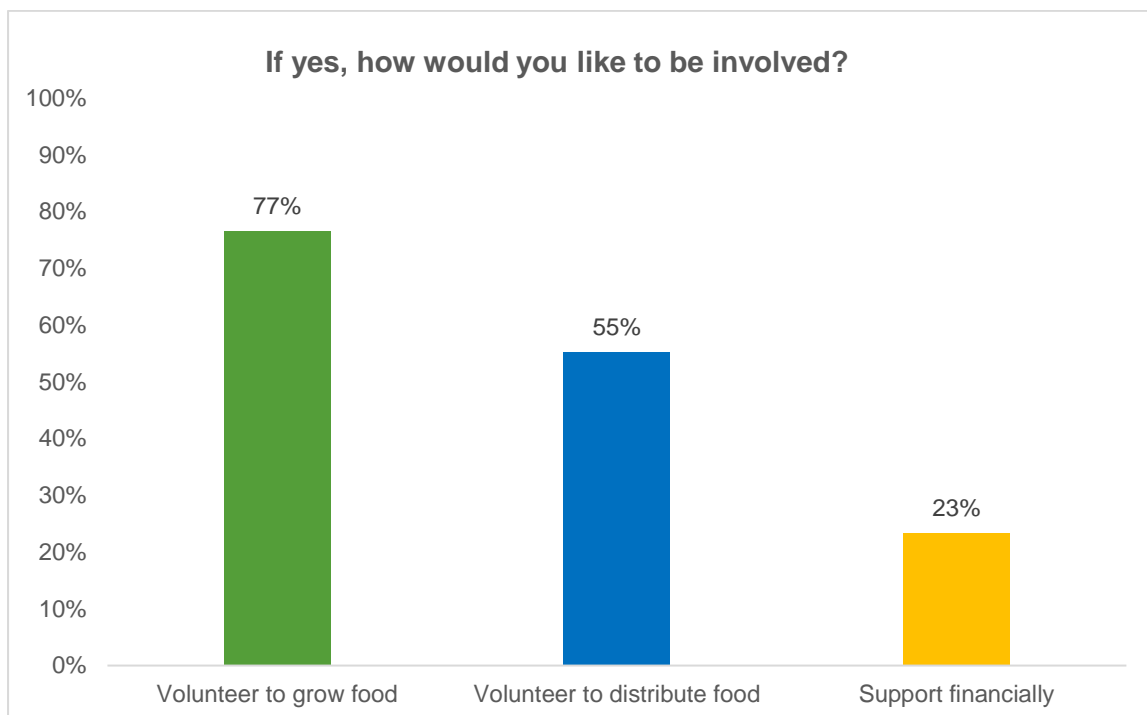


Involvement in a local community food growing project

Just under half of all respondents (46%) wanted to be involved in a local community food growing project. 37% were unsure and only 17% did not want to be involved.

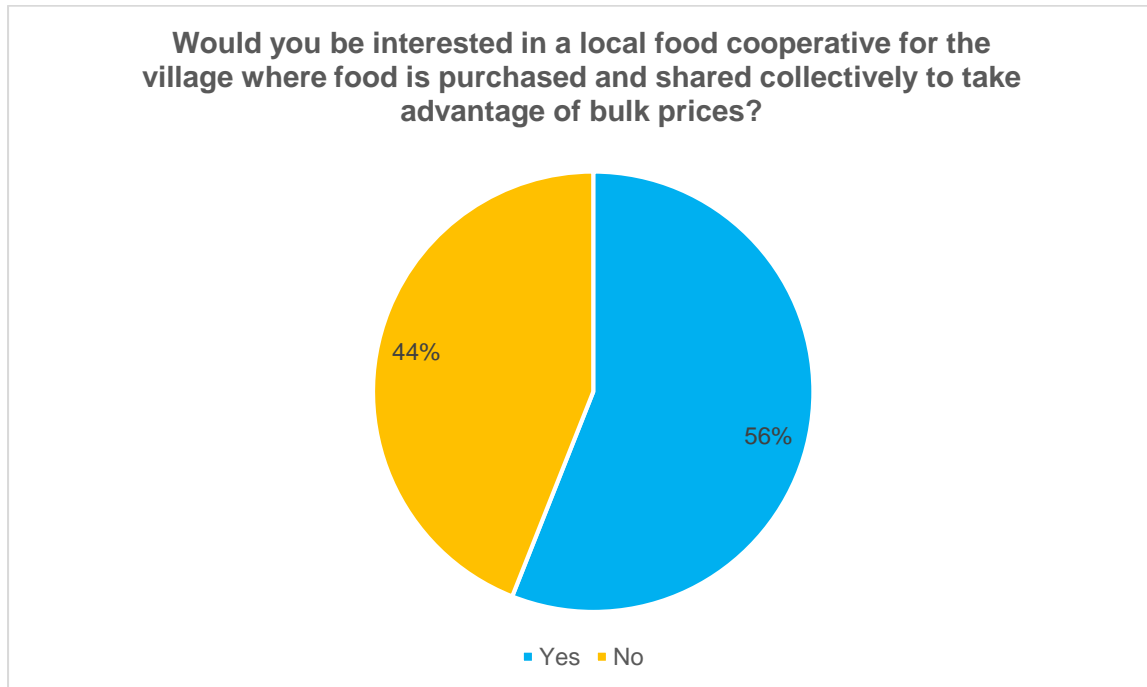


Of those who did want to be involved, 77% said they would volunteer to grow food, 55% said they would volunteer to distribute food and 23% said they would support financially.



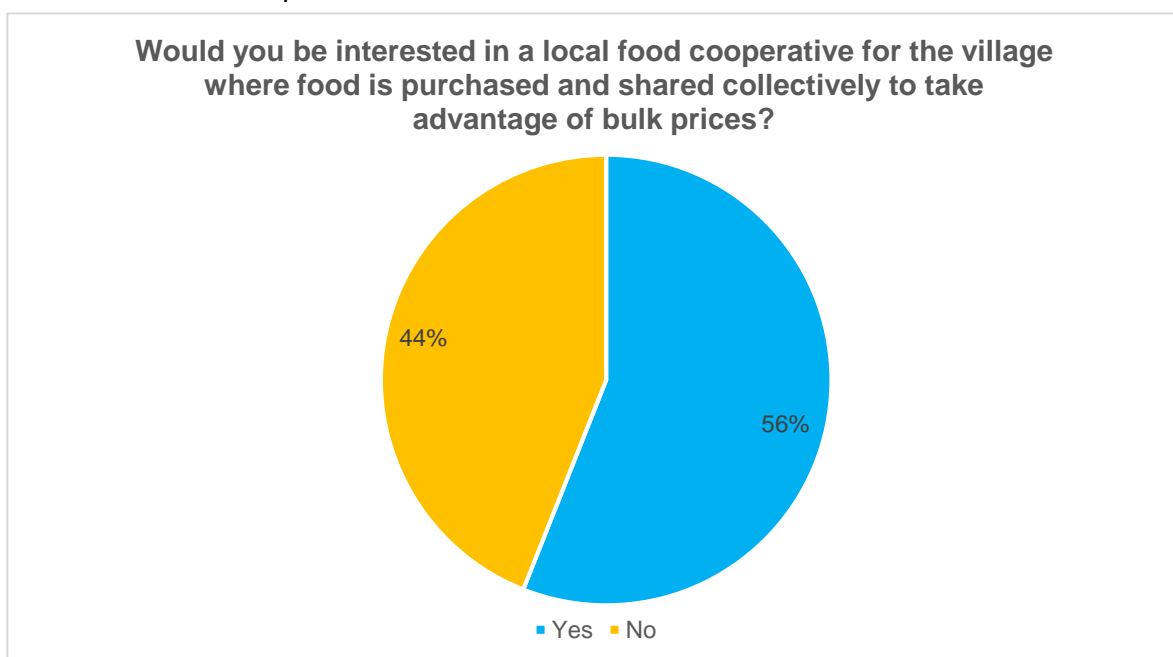
Support for buyers' cooperatives

56% of respondents said they would be interested in a local food cooperative for the village, where food is purchased and shared collectively to take advantage of bulk prices.



Interest in locally grown grains, pulses and cereals

39% of respondents said they would be interested in buying grains, pulses and cereals such as oats and beans produced in the wider area.



Appendix 2: Ideas for future food projects from public launch event

The following ideas were suggested at the public launch event held in September 2024 for future food projects. They share a number of common themes and so have been grouped together accordingly under the following headings:

Support to grow food

Sharing skills

Sharing land

Education and engagement

Developing a local food economy

Food distribution

Support to grow food

Training/mentoring in how to grow veg

Allotment "tasters"

Container gardening for small back yards

Education - "Field to fork"

Windowsill herbs

Seed bank

Communal tools/tool library

Communal compost, woodchips and hay

Starter packs

Sharing skills

Found an Allotment Association (or cooperative)

Skills database

Chilli seeds and chilli growing knowledge

Men's Shed making containers

Sharing land

- Council land to share (e.g. Coquet St)
- Methodist Church garden
- Utilising existing allotments for sharing
- Underused allotments
- Network people who have/want space
- Orchards, perennial veg, growing wild, free access (e.g. Highfield orchard)
- People sharing their gardens if do not want it
- Would churches grow trees on their land?
- Persuade local farmers to be involved. If they could designate say one field to grow lots of different vegetables within that area e.g. potatoes, onions, carrots, parsnips, turnips, peas, beans etc and then get people to sign up to have veg boxes each week that would be great. These could then be supplemented by any allotment activity e.g. soft fruit, apples etc. I'm sure we could organise some sort of delivery system maybe using volunteers, and possibly volunteers to help harvest. Technically I suppose they could also grow wheat and maybe get it ground into flour at Path Head Mill in Ryton (but that's probably very expensive), and hops that The Red House could use in brewing Chopwell Beer!

Education and engagement

- Local community input
- Community composting
- School education project
- Workshops (e.g. plants for health)
- Barn festival
- Picnic in the park
- Harvest festival
- Herb planters around village
- Seek volunteers

- Education around processed foods and drinks
- School visits
- Tea blending workshops
- Enter competitions (e.g. "in your neighbourhood")
- Create a competition
- Mushroom foraging workshops
- Foraging with set recipes

Developing a local food economy

- Monthly food market at the Bank
- Weekly farmers market (local produce)
- Build connections with local farmers and producers
- Alternative economies based on time and resources rather than funding
- Jam and pickle making (sale opportunity)
- Persuade local farmers to be involved and designate say one field to grow lots of different vegetables

Food distribution

- Online mart for unwanted food and volunteers to collect
- Windfall collections (e.g. unwanted fruits)
- Gleaning fields (after farmer harvested)
- Ready meals for convenience

Appendix 3: Endnotes

- ⁱ Gateshead Food Partnership: <https://www.gatesheadfoodpartnership.co.uk/community-food-provision>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/food-poverty-in-the-uk-the-causes-figures-and-solutions/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.dw.com/en/agriculture-seeds-seed-laws-agribusinesses-climate-change-food-security-seed-sovereignty-bayer/a-57118595>
- ^{iv} <https://www.pan-uk.org/the-cocktail-effect/>
- ^v <https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/en/grocery-market-share/great-britain/snapshot>
- ^{vi} <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/nov22-unpicking-food-prices-new/>
- ^{vii} <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/uncertain-harvest-does-the-loss-of-farms-matter/>
- ^{viii} National Food Strategy. Independent Review. The Plan. (2021)
- ^{ix} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024-theme-4-food-security-at-household-level>
- ^x National Food Strategy. Independent Review. The Plan. (2021)
- ^{xi} Based on average weekly spend on fresh fruit and vegetables per household from a public survey undertaken in 2024 as part of this project, and ONS (2021) data on household compositions in Chopwell. A population of 4,000 was assumed for Chopwell based on ONS (2021) data and accounting for new housing developments.
- ^{xii} Areas derived from ArcGIS Planning Services (2024). All tonnage calculations are adapted from: *Assessing the Direct Resource Requirements of Urban Horticulture in the United Kingdom: A Citizen Science Approach* available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/5/2628>.
- The above study used an average figure of 1.8kg of produce harvested per square metre in sample allotments in Sheffield. A very conservative range of between 0.9kg and 1.2kg of produce harvested per square metre was used in this report to factor challenges in growing in public spaces and Chopwell's more northerly latitude. Cultivable land area within specific sites at Chopwell Park was derived by reducing the total area of a site by a factor of a third, to account for loss of growing space to paths, compost bays and other facilities.
- For estimated yield of fruit trees, a conservative range was used, based on low to average end of yields indicated by Frank P Matthews for Apples on MM106 rootstock (45-110kg) and plums on St Julien A rootstock (12-28kg): <https://www.frankpmatthews.com/advice/tree-planting-distances/>.
- A mix of apples and plums as half-standards were used for the calculations as these were considered the most easiest to grow and most accessible in northern conditions. A mean of low yielding trees (MM106 + St Julien A) = 28.5kg per tree and mean of average yielding trees (MM106 + St Julien A) = 48.75kg per tree was used to derive a range estimate. A 12 feet diameter was assumed for trees planted on MM106 and St Julien A rootstocks, based on <https://realenglishfruit.co.uk/fruit-tree-rootstock-and-tree-size/>.
- ^{xiii} <https://britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw043822> and <https://britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw043821>

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- xiv *Chopwell's Story* by Les Turnbull, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council Department of Education
- xv *Chopwell's Story* by Les Turnbull, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council Department of Education
- xvi *Of Cabbages and Kings: The History of Allotments* by Caroline Foley, 2014, Francis Lincoln Limited
- xvii Page 9, *Chopwell's Story* by Les Turnbull, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council Department of Education
- xviii Based on average weekly spend on fresh fruit and veg per household from a public survey undertaken in 2024 as part of this project, and ONS data on household compositions in Chopwell
- xix *The Money Trail: Measuring your impact on the local economy using LM3*. New Economics Foundation, 2002. <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/money-trial.pdf>
- xx Calculations based on the price of a basket of seasonal fruit and vegetables from a number of local shops and national supermarket chains, obtained during market research between November 2024 and January 2025.
- xxi National Food Strategy. Independent Review. The Plan. (2021)
- xxii Calculations based on the price of a basket of seasonal fruit and vegetables from a number of local shops, national supermarket chains and an organic wholesaler, obtained during market research between November 2024 and January 2025.
- xxiii <https://www.sustainweb.org/reports/may24-growing-the-local-food-sector/#:~:text=Local%20Food%20Plan-,Growing%20the%20Local%20Food%20Sector%3A%20A%20snapshot%20of%20barriers%20and,to%20transform%20local%20food%20systems.>
- xxiv <https://www.wrap.ngo/taking-action/food-drink/actions/action-on-food-waste>
- xxv <https://www.wastemanaged.co.uk/our-news/food-waste/food-waste-facts-statistics/>
- xxvi <https://fareshare.org.uk/news-media/news/only-7-of-surplus-food-in-uk-supply-chain-reaches-charities-despite-uplift-in-amount-businesses-redistribute-to-good-causes/>
- xxvii *Chopwell's Story* by Les Turnbull, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council Department of Education
- xxviii *Food Growing in Parks: A Guide for Councils*. Sustain, 2018.
- xxix See endnote xii for note on tonnage calculation workings
- xxx Gateshead Council Playing Pitch Strategy Action Plan (2024): <https://gateshead.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s41624/Gateshead%20Council%20Playing%20Pitch%20Strategy%202024-2030%20E%20Updated.pdf>
- xxxi Ibid
- xxxii https://www.theorchardproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-%E2%80%93-Urban-Contamination-and-Fruit-Trees_Updated-2019.pdf
- xxxiii Gateshead Council Playing Pitch Strategy Action Plan (2024): <https://gateshead.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s41624/Gateshead%20Council%20Playing%20Pitch%20Strategy%202024-2030%20E%20Updated.pdf>
- xxxiv Ibid

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- xxxv <https://britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw043822>
- xxxvi <https://britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw043821>
- xxxvii Policy GV1 https://www.gateshead.gov.uk/media/7765/Core-Strategy-and-Urban-Core-Plan-for-Gateshead-and-Newcastle/pdf/Core-Strategy-and-Urban-Core-Plan-for-Gateshead-and-Newcastle_SMALLER.pdf?m=1526313509250
- xxxviii https://www.wlgf.org/garden_resource.html
- xxxix *Regenesiis. Feeding the world without devouring the planet* by George Monbiot, 2022, Allen Lane.
- xl https://www.wlgf.org/garden_resource.html
- xli <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth/population/age/resident-age-3a/aged-65-years-and-over?msoa=E02007094>
- xlii ONS (2021) – based on averages of wards in Chopwell
- xliii <https://nhsforest.org/locations/lambeth-gp-food-co-op/>
- xliv <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/survey-reveals-inequality-in-children-spending-time-outside-during-pandemic>
- xliv <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/children-today-62-percent-less-likely-to-play-outside-than-their>
- xlvi <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/survey-reveals-inequality-in-children-spending-time-outside-during-pandemic>
- xlvi <https://cuf.org.uk/parish/130079>