

Bridgend Farmhouse – supporting communities in EH16 and EH17 through the COVID pandemic and beyond

From the very beginning, over 10 years ago, Bridgend Farmhouse was intended as a community space, to bring people together to develop their skills, to meet others, to learn and to spend time outdoors. Key aspects of this approach are our commitment to offering volunteering opportunities, the way in which we use food as a tool for community engagement and learning, and our support and promotion of practical activities such as gardening, handicrafts, and art. During the COVID-19 lockdown, these aspects of life at Bridgend Farmhouse became more important than ever before. They literally became a lifeline for our community and the means of coping at an incredibly challenging time.

An emergency food response

The cornerstone of the Bridgend Farmhouse COVID-19 response was our COVID-19 Food Resilience Response Project. From April-July 2020, we produced and distributed food parcels to those isolating or struggling with access to healthy, nutritious food. In total, our kitchen, logistics, distribution and packaging teams, consisting of over 80 volunteers and including many people who had been furloughed or made redundant in the hospitality sector, distributed around 76,000 meals in the EH16 and EH17 area. This was a rapid expansion of our previous kitchen output, made possible with the vision and generosity of our volunteers, countless [funders and donors](#) (including Legal and General, Neighbourly, the Antonio Carluccio Foundation, National Emergencies Trust, Cash for Kids, and EVOC's Edinburgh Food Project), local partners Saltire Hospitality Limited, and the Bridgend staff team. Over the four-month period, the team used 7.6 tonnes of potatoes, along with 2266 kg of raw porridge, 4.1 tonnes of onions, 5.6 tonnes of carrots, and a lot of beetroot! This gives you an idea of the amount of food that our volunteers peeled, cooked and packed during our food response project.

Every one of our 536 clients said that the project meant that they felt less alone during lock down. We have received a large amount of positive feedback from the COVID-19 Food Resilience Response Project, including:

“Thank you so much for supporting me through this difficult situation. I probably would not have made it [without] having healthy meals. Am so grateful to the team at Bridgend Farmhouse.”

“This service was fantastic at a time of need. Thank you”



Figure 1: The Bridgend Farmhouse café and kitchen became an emergency food preparation and distribution centre for EH16 and EH17

One of our community distribution partners told us: “This place (Bridgend Farmhouse) has been amazing - we have received 100's of meals to give to those most in need in our community over the last 4 weeks and continuing each day. Always a smile on their faces too. Thanks Bridgend!”

One of our clients, a single mother of a 6 year old child with Additional Support Needs, who had just finished university, was not able to start a new job as planned and was waiting for Universal Credit to be paid, told us: “I can't thank you all enough. I can't begin to explain the feeling of knowing your child relies on you and you currently can't meet his basic needs. Thank you so, so much I will be eternally grateful.”

Keeping our community and key workers on the road, safe and healthy

As well as providing the practical support through meals, we offered The Big Bike Revival Scotland Scheme funded by Cycling UK (Scotland) in support of local key workers. The scheme is aimed at giving cyclists the confidence to cycle to work whilst following social distancing guidelines and keeping both physically and mentally healthy. During the main lockdown, Bridgend Farmhouse lent out 14 bikes to key workers during the Coronavirus outbreak. We have also offered countless free bike maintenance appointments across the local community on an appointment-only, socially distanced basis. Through this scheme, we aimed to reduce infection rates in the community by encouraging cycling, and to provide practical support to key workers and illustrate our appreciation of their vital work. We gained a national profile for our work through a segment on the [STV news](#).



Figure 2: A happy recipient of one of our Bridgend Big Bike Revival Scheme bikes

Combatting isolation and loneliness in our local community

Before the COVID-19 crisis, one in five people (20%) reported being often or always feeling lonely. Now, 41% of UK adults report feeling lonelier since lockdown (Red Cross). To try to support our community during the lockdown, we created the [South Edinburgh Mutual Support Facebook group](#) to help connect people, organisations and volunteers in South Edinburgh in these extraordinary circumstances. There are currently around 550 members including local organisations and individuals.

We also pivoted some of our existing workshops into online sessions via Zoom. Thanks to support from the Scottish Government Investing in Communities Fund, our regular crafts tutor, Gill Curran, has been running our regular Wednesday afternoon and Thursday evening Arts and Crafts sessions online (more than 20 sessions of each). Through the online delivery method, local participants have been able to re-connect with former regulars who have moved away and even abroad. We have reconnected with former group participants in Denmark, Italy, Spain, Greece and even the USA.

Through funding from Edinburgh University's Edinburgh Local programme, Darla Eno has continued the Tuesday evening singing workshops online from May until October, and hopefully beyond. With these activities we have been trying to encourage socialising and community building and to offer people meaningful structure and routine in their days.

One participant in the singing workshop said: "This group will definitely cheer you up! Darla leads us through some lovely songs - some old favourites, some new from across the world and I love learning new harmonies. Come join us - have fun and make new friends!"

Another told us: "It's a fun, relaxed, joyful singing time, where no one can hear you sing as on zoom the mics have to be off. You hear the tutor or person who wants to share a song. It's lovely

to be in a zoom room of warm friendly people every week and have that connection to the wonderful Bridgend Farmhouse.”

We have also delivered a number of virtual, online and outdoor activities, including nature-based activities, activities focusing on our local history and heritage, and school holiday activities.

Funding from the Wellbeing Fund and Edinburgh Local enabled us to distribute a number of packs for individuals and families to provide activities to do at home. These included 37 Cultural Survival Packs for children and families by Lyra, an arts and drama organisation in Craigmillar; 20 Edinburgh Fringe packs for children and families, as well as seed packs to grow herbs and vegetables at home, and no-sew mask kits to make at home. The Edinburgh Remakery donated 9 laptops/ desktop PCs, to be given to digitally excluded households.



Figure 3: Making face coverings at home with the Bridgend Farmhouse Crafts Collective

The Wellbeing Fund also meant we could check in on all our previous and regular volunteers and participants, referring them to the emergency food service or other organisations where appropriate and offering the socially isolated some much-needed friendly contact. To date, over 150 calls have been made, including weekly calls to 12 people and 500 emails to 250 people. Feedback has included the following comments: “How absolutely heart-warming to receive your email. Thank you for your kindness and keeping in touch. You're an amazing bunch.”

“Thanks for checking in, it’s a very kind sentiment.”

“You're all doing an amazing job!”

“I love the fact Bridgend focuses on community not disadvantaged groups.”

“Keep up the amazing work!”

The Wellbeing Fund meant we could appoint a Skills Development Coordinator, Wing Yee Li, who joined us during the lockdown. She has run an Online Life Skills Course, a 13-week personal development and stress management course in a peer support setting. An average 7 participants attend each week.



Figure 4: Volunteers in the COVID-19 Food Resilience Response Project in the distribution hub (aka the Bridgend café)

Our Community Engagement Workers (initially Judy Paul, and now Zoe Murdoch), have been running Community Action Research training sessions since 7 May in partnership with Scottish Community Development Centre and the Scottish Government Investing in Communities Fund. These sessions have produced a community survey for local people in EH16 and EH17 to share experiences, ideas and solutions, and to inform the development of activities at Bridgend Farmhouse. The Community researchers also contributed to a marketing and communications strategy to increase distribution and awareness of the survey both physically and online. Over 120 people responded and we are excited to read all the responses and design new activities to meet local needs! With the help of our communications volunteer, Joanna, Bridgend Farmhouse now has a digital community map giving an overview of what services are available for people in EH16 and EH17. We plan to use this map to develop our engagement strategy as we emerge from COVID-related restrictions.

United in adversity; united in diversity

Another positive outcome of this difficult situation has been the strengthened bonds we have developed with existing and new volunteers, and our local communities. The rapid scale up of the COVID-19 Food Resilience Response Project gave Bridgend the opportunity to work with a variety of passionate volunteers, particularly those with hospitality, catering and logistics experience, who had lost their jobs or been furloughed. “I’m not the kind of person who can sit

down in front of the TV all day. I get bored, I always need to do something”, says Tania Radeva, a cafe manager. As a matter of fact, only three days after her company had shut down, Tania was already volunteering at Bridgend Farmhouse as Head of the Packaging Team. Her employer, Saltire Hospitality Limited, provided invaluable help and support throughout the project in the form of equipment, expertise and volunteers.



Figure

5: Tania Radeva, our packaging and distribution superstar!

As well as gaining the knowledge and experience of experts in their field as volunteers, Bridgend Farmhouse has also valued the work of passionate young people growing their skills.

Teenager, Meryn, was well-known to Bridgend Farmhouse before the pandemic:

“Coming here gave me like an eye-opener into what exactly I wanted to do in cooking.

And it was just better learning here than in a massive restaurant,” Meryn explains.

Thanks to the Farmhouse, the teenager obtained her REHIS Food Hygiene Certificate.

And in September 2019, she competed for FutureChef in Scotland. “I came second”, she reported proudly. During the pandemic, Meryn didn’t hesitate to offer her help. “From the beginning of May, I’ve been coming here five days a week to cook”, she explains. This was a further boost to a promising career, just before she entered a cooking school in Edinburgh in August.



Figure 6: Meryn, our youngest volunteer on the COVID-19 Food Resilience Response Project

Clément is also well-known at Bridgend Farmhouse and has participated in many workshops on site. Clément recalls being present when Eric, Bridgend Farmhouse’s Food Support Worker, first mentioned an emergency food response. Clément volunteered with the packaging team once or twice a week. Now the COVID-19 Food Resilience Response Project has concluded, Clément intends to stay very much involved. “Bridgend Farmhouse has become an important part of my life. If I had to leave Edinburgh one day, it would feel sad to leave these people and this project behind.”

Read more stories from our COVID-19 Food Resilience Response Project volunteers [here](#).

Emerging stronger and more resilient than ever

We are grateful to the National Lottery Community Fund for their continued support of Bridgend Farmhouse, not least for funding to support core staff and activities and the loss of income we have experienced since we suspended on-site activity at the Farmhouse in March 2020.

With support from the Wellbeing Fund, we have been able to take the time during lockdown to review internal policies and structures and for staff, volunteers and trustees to undertake essential training. This has included training on Safeguarding and Mental Health First Aid.



Figure 7: Clément, long-standing and multi-talented Bridgend Farmhouse volunteer

Bridgend Farmhouse staff have been working predominantly remotely since March. In the meantime, the Land and Buildings Group has renovated the office and the whole site has been deep cleaned. Thanks to our generous funders, including the Third Sector Resilience Fund, we have been able to support core and staff wifi and telecoms costs, including the purchase of equipment where necessary. Thanks to Community Land Scotland, the Supporting Communities Fund, and the Wellbeing Fund, we were also able to contract freelance communications support to communicate our COVID response via social media and manage the Facebook group we created, as well as supporting the staff, trustees and volunteers to develop their skills in digital communication for the future.

Beyond the Crisis

Bridgend Farmhouse worked – and will work – to support our local communities before, during and beyond this current crisis. As our communities begin the effort to rebuild lives and develop new ways of living, staff, Trustees and volunteers and Bridgend Farmhouse are planning how to deliver our services and organise activities in the new context of COVID-related restrictions. We are grateful to the National Lottery for their support in ensuring our premises are safe, hygienic and welcoming as we begin to slowly resume on-site activities. As a community resource with access to a large, well-ventilated outdoor marquee, Bridgend Farmhouse has the unique capacity to provide safe socially distanced workshops and activities for a limited number of people.

Our Food Resilience objectives are being furthered by the [Empty Kitchens, Full Hearts](#) initiative, which began its life in the Bridgend Farmhouse kitchen, and which is led by Lewis McLachlan, a Bridgend Farmhouse shareholder. Our bike service continues to grow,

as we repair and re-sell bikes and develop plans for our Bike Hub to become an Active Travel Hub for South East Edinburgh. Many of those who received loans of bikes continue to cycle and reap the benefits of active travel.



Figure 8: Virtual board meeting in September 2020

Our arts and crafts workshops will be continuing and will be supplemented by a number of socially distant, online and outdoor activities into the colder months of the year. Although COVID has brought many negative impacts, one positive is that we have been able to be more inclusive in our arts and crafts activities by offering them via Zoom. So much so, that Gill Curran, our tutor, intends to deliver sessions in a blended way in future – using a webcam and Zoom as well as face-to-face tuition once we can bring learners back on site. We have installed a new TV screen in the arts and crafts workshop for this purpose, thanks to funding from the National Lottery Community Fund.

The COVID crisis has highlighted a number of areas where we would hope to strengthen our activity in the coming months and years. Digital poverty has become a key issue as services and connection are increasingly found online. This is especially true for older and socially isolated people, who are a key target group of our Skills Development Coordinator's work (funded by the Gannochy Trust, Robertson Trust and STV Change to Succeed Children's Lottery). In the past, many people have benefited from Bridgend Farmhouse's services and activities as a chance to connect with others and support their mental wellbeing. The mental health impact of lockdown restrictions associated with COVID is still emerging, but we will develop our services cognisant of the increased need for support in this area for many local people. Bridgend Farmhouse's community food initiatives have previously focused on social connection, skills development and wellbeing, but what became even more obvious during the pandemic was the extent of [food insecurity](#) in our local area. We are designing our work under funding from Edinburgh Integration

Joint Board/Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership in this context, using the connections and networks built during our emergency response to strengthen our efforts. A grant from the Clothworkers' Foundation and money from various funders of our emergency food response have enabled us to make capital investments (a new fridge and oven) which, now our emergency response is over, will support our community food work as well as our plans to develop income streams from our café and kitchen. We are also working with Dr. Kirsteen Shields from the Global Academy of Agriculture and Food Security at University of Edinburgh on a research project around food insecurity, poverty and the impact of COVID-19 using our area of benefit (EH16 and EH17) and our food parcel recipients as a case study. This will enable the team to develop evidence-based solutions and funding applications to support local people's wellbeing, connectivity and skills development as we emerge from the pandemic and plan for the future.

Bridgend Farmhouse as an idea and an ethos existed before our building was renovated and reopened in May 2018. We had plans to celebrate its 2nd birthday before we were forced to suspend activities and close our doors. Bridgend Farmhouse as a charity, a community owned and run hub and a centre for people to come together existed long before the pandemic and we will continue to support our local communities beyond the crisis. As we look forward to re-opening our doors, we are not just a viable charity, but one which is more resilient and with great potential.

Poppy-Anna Waterman, volunteer & Lynn Houmudi, outgoing Interim Manager

October 2020