

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond. I'm your host, Jim Millard, and in this week's podcast, I'm thrilled that we're joined by Clare Box, founder of the Real Junk Food Project, Twickenham, a local food redistribution project whose mission is to feed bellies and not bins. I love that. That's a great line. This uses food that would have been wasted, turning it into great meals and redistributing any surplus food in the local community. So we'll be discussing how we can all keep our weekly grocery costs down, which is, of course, especially important during the current cost of living crisis, as well as the wider issue and issues around food waste. So without further ado, a very warm welcome Clare to talk Richmond.

Clare Box: Thank you, Jim. Hello, nice to meet.

Cllr Millard: Hello. It's nice to meet you. Thank you for coming. And to kick us off, please. Could you tell us more about the Real Junk Food Projects and the work you do in the borough?

Clare: Yes. So we are a pay-as-you-feel, not-for-profit organization. We're an environmental project saving surplus foods going to landfill. We turn it into healthy meals in our cafe at the Etna Community Centre three times a week, so Monday, Wednesday and Friday at the Etna Centre from 11.30am to 1.30pm. We have a food hub table outside in Hampton Hill on a Tuesday and a takeaway cafe with a food hub on a Thursday at Linden Hall Community Centre in Hampton. So we operate on a pay-as-you-feel basis so if people have the means to be able to give us a donation, that's fantastic. But we are open to everyone and yeah, we're a happy cafe.

Cllr Millard: I love that and 'happy café', 'feeding bellies, not bins'. These are great. You obviously got a good turn of phrase. You know, there's a lot of options there for people to come along and take advantage of this fantastic service you're providing. It's so good to hear about and I wanted to ask to start off really how can better food management help people spend less on food?

Clare: Well basically I think if people were to bulk by what they use regularly. Shop around for the things that you know that you're going to want in your cupboards. What I tend to do is I'll go into all the different shops that have available to me or on my day-to-day and then just check out the prices because in certain stores you're going to find that you're gonna get a better deal or save a few pounds. And for instance, if you like olives, instead of buying a little tub of olives, then you can go and buy a jar. Like a tub of olives can cost you £3.00 but you actually buy the big jar and it's £2.50. Own brand is a good option as well. Own brands are actually the big brands because they have the means to provide the volume for the big supermarket. So if you like Heinz beans go and have a look, check out all the different ones and you'll find your Heinz beans somewhere for a lot less of the price. Also having a good stock of spices, sauces and things like that in your cupboards just to be able to get creative with your leftovers and knowing what you have in your cupboards or in the fridge when you go shopping is key really, because then you just buy what you actually need.

Cllr Millard: Yeah. I think that's really good advice. We've done that in our House. We've tried a lot of own brands and we switched to quite a few because I think you know they're equal or if not better. So you know it's well worth it, I endorse that. But I'm gonna try the other things you're talking about as well. They all sound very good. So I mean obviously we're in the cost of living crisis. It's so important that we look after the financial side of feeding our families. But this isn't just about the economics of it, is it. It's also that food waste has a huge cost to the environment. So why is reducing food waste so important for the environment?

Clare: Well, in the UK alone, 36 million tons of gases that we could actually prevent in the UK alone in a year. And also if people are throwing away the food that's out of date in the packages itself. I think we should be recycling the things packaging rather than just going "oh, that's out of

date, it's gone a bit mouldy" and throw the whole thing away. You know, if you could just sort of manage it better so that you're doing your best, your bit for the environment. Definitely.

Cllr Millard: It really seems that we're in a place where – I've already talked to some people in previous weeks about other aspects of the cost of living crisis and it always comes down to what helps us survive financially, also helps us to protect the planet for our future generations at the same time, it seems. So do you have any top tips for reducing waste?

Clare: I do. So I would definitely write a list before you go shopping and meal plan is also a great way to do that. Know what's in your cupboards and your fridge and get creative with your leftovers. Wrapping food before – properly, when you put it into the fridge or freezer so it doesn't actually spoil once you've tried to save that for the next time. It doesn't get freezer burn, whatever you call it. Also cutting up meat and things into portions before you store it ready for the next meal. So say you buy a pack of 3 chicken breasts. You know, instead of having a chicken breast each for the dinner you could have two for that meal. Chop it into chunks, but then the third one slice it really thinly ready for your stir fry for the next meal so that you can bulk that out. That's a that's a tip that I use.

Cllr Millard: I like that it's less washing up as well. You don't have to chop it and wash up twice. It's all in one go. I like it. Yes. Carry on. Sorry. I know it's me interrupting.

Clare: No, no, I'm sorry. I'm waffling. I'm a foodaholic. And also how many people will cut off the florets of the broccoli and the cauliflower and throw away the stalk. But that is actually one of the best bits of the vegetable. And so that's another three or so portions. And actually they actually taste great raw as well. So you can grate those into salads or something. Actually one of my volunteers made a salad in the cafe. And then – I hadn't actually tasted it – and one of the visitors said "what is that in the salad?" And I said, "well, I'm not sure, which bit?" and he said "this bit here". So I went off and I've tried a bit and I was like "that's fantastic – what is it" and I found the volunteer that made the salad and it was actually raw parsnip.

Cllr Millard: Oh wow. OK.

Clare: Or is it turnip? No, I think no. I think it was all turnip. Sorry, not parsnip. Parsnips you should roast. Yeah, but yeah, I learned something that day as well. Yeah, it's brilliant. Another great tip actually is, I actually leave the skins on my mashed potatoes at home, so I call it crunchy mashed potato. So actually you're saving time with the peeling and the thing, and you're just mash it all together, chop it really finely. Small cubes when you're rushing. And when I was in Barbados, the crisps are so expensive out there, it's ridiculous. So I was teaching everyone when you peel your potatoes, just add a bit of oil or melted butter with garlic, put it in in the oven. Homemade crisps.

Cllr Millard: Wow.

Clare: And they were amazed at that.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic Barbados tips. I love these tips. If you got more, I don't wanna stop you.

Clare: Oh yeah no. What else do I do? Batch cooking? So if you go and buy, say mince, for example. If you buy the bigger packs, it's actually works out cheaper. If you cook it all at the same time. But then say you want some for that meal, which could be a Bolognese and a shepherds pie. So you take out the portion that you're gonna use for the shepherds pie because you don't want the tomato in it, and say you cooked it all in one. So you've saved time, effort, cooking costs, etcetera. And you could

even, you know, the £7.50 pack of mince, you could actually make three meals out of that if you get creative. You add pulses, you add tins of tomatoes, etcetera. That's sort of thing.

Cllr Millard: So pulses like lentils and that sort of thing?

Clare: Lentils, potatoes, things like that.

Cllr Millard: And you've already touched on this, I think to a certain extent, but we were talking earlier about good questions to ask and we wondered if you got any recipes for leftovers or things we wouldn't normally cook.

Clare: One of my favourites is when you roast the chicken. The chicken, you can have a couple of meals out of that, so I never waste the carcass of a chicken. You pop in some bit of celery with the carcass and some onion, salt and pepper. And once you've boiled that, you then let it cool down. You literally strip every little piece of chicken off of there. Well, actually, you can slice off some before you do that for your sandwiches. So you've got your sandwiches and then you turn into a lovely soup or a stew with potatoes, lots of bay leaves. Another quick one, if you'd like a really quick fish curry. So Super Noodles. You know, you get a little pack of Super Noodles – 30p, 40p. You start off with a pan, little bit of butter or oil, you get some spring onions. Anything left over that you have: tomato, whatever. Pop that in. Fry that up a little for a little bit. Then you get tin of sardines or tinned mackerel in tomato sauce. Pop that in. You crunched down the super noodles pop that in, pop those in, top it up with water and/or tinned tomatoes. Lid on. Let that simmer for a little bit, voila.

Cllr Millard: Wow.

Clare: Olives. I'll chuck olives in there, a bit of everything.

Cllr Millard: That's fantastic. Gotta try that.

Clare: I used to have that when I taught karate and I've been out all day and I wanted something quick, easy, nutritious, protein. Yeah, that's one.

Cllr Millard: Yes. If that's the sort of thing that sustains a karate teacher, then I think we can all agree that's probably quite good fare. We're learning quite – I like this, there's a thread here, we're learning quite a lot about Clare Box as well. Karate teacher lived in Barbados.

Clare: Yes, my husband's Bajan, his family is Bajan

Cllr Millard: Ah, so how long did you live in Barbados for?

Clare: Oh I didn't live there unfortunately, I went out there. Been there twice. Yeah. Working honeymoon out there.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. What was the inspiration in your life to start this Junk Food Project?

Clare: So it was a meeting with my friend Chrissy at yoga on Eel Pie Island back in 2017. It was actually, I'd seen a poster at one of our mutual friends about the junk food, about her thoughts of setting it up. She'd actually lived in Brighton, and there's a big Junk Food Project down there. So Chrissy wanted to set up one up here, and it turned out that although Chrissy lived on a boat in north London, she worked as a nanny in the same small street as I lived in Strawberry Hill. So that's how it came about. We both creative artists heads, but we managed to dolly step away through, had some help with the business side of things to get things up and running and took off from there.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic.

Clare: So in the beginning it was just myself and Chrissy running around doing all the collections, all the setting up, all the redistributions and now we have over 70 volunteers working with us, which is amazing, yes.

Cllr Millard: Wow. Wow, that is amazing. Yes. And if anyone listening to this wants to get involved, how can they volunteer?

Clare: So our we're on all the different social medias and our website is www.trifptwickenham.com. So you can see on there what we do, some photos and everything and see our e-mail and everything and contacts us through any of those means. Yeah.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. You know, you said you had help setting it up with the, you know, working out the finances, who did you get that support from?

Clare: So we, well, we're not-for-profit. So we didn't have any financial help to start with. It was just literally for the first year and a half, I think it was just in lockdown, actually it was the first time that we actually got some funding because our wonderful director, Penny Vegting had joined us and with her background, she had the skills that we didn't have to apply for funding and that sort of thing. So through that we've managed to expand, you know with different venues and we've had help with processes and it's been – we've been like water really, we've had to adapt practically on a daily basis since we started and things come up and then we've tackled that and all right well we need to work that one out and find a process for that.

Cllr Millard: A lot has happened since you started.

Clare: A lot has happened since we started. Yes, yes.

Cllr Milard: And I bet you had no idea how valuable – although it seemed important at the time – how the times that were about to come along, were gonna make it even more important for everybody.

Clare: 100% You know, as we said we were, we were just started our little cafe to stop, you know, food going to waste and because we both love food and loved creating and then the pandemic hit and we turned into a COVID response team at that point, where other charities and organisations that would normally collect foods, they were closed. We ramped up to seven days a week and were redistributing here, there and everywhere to fire stations and you know, the nurses' paces and care homes and we were putting out on all our social media. And obviously people wanted to get involved after that, which is lovely, so. And they had time on their hands as well from furlough and things, so. With the cost of living crisis, now, you know, the whole dynamics have changed. Where we click the yellow stickers from the supermarkets, I mean we never know what we're going to collect on a daily basis anyway. It's very sort of random. But now obviously a lot of people are in need of buying the yellow stickers that we collect. So you know, we did see a drop in the donations, but we always make sure we have staples in the pantry, should we say. You know, rice, pulses and things. So whoever comes through the door. You know, can have a hot meal and healthy meal. Yes.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. Well, Clare, it's been fantastic talking to you about what you do. About the Real Junk Food Project in Twickenham. Is there anything else you want to say to anyone listening about food waste? About making the most of what you've got to feed people and all those sort of things that you're clearly very experienced in?

Clare: Yes. I would definitely say get out of your comfort zone and try different combinations. You know when you've got leftovers, just save it, try different combinations with things that you have

that you wouldn't have tried before. That's the great thing about the junk food cooking as well because it's like, "oh, we've got this and we've got this and let's try and put a bit of that with it" and voila!

Cllr Millard: Yeah. And you might come up with absolute genius. So you know that is it. Thank you so much, Clare, for talking to us on Talk Richmond.

Clare: Thank you Jim.

Cllr Millard: Sharing your tips, making the most of food and saving food waste. It's great to hear about the work you're doing locally to reduce food waste and feed the community for less, especially when obviously as we've said, we look at the impact food waste has on climate change and the fact that sadly, food bank use is higher than ever due to the terrible cost of living crisis that we're having to go through at the moment. And you know, we can all be clear. It's easy to turn a blind eye to the amount of food we waste within our own homes. But this is one of the easiest ways we can keep our food bills down and play our part to help tackle climate change. It's a win-win. So let's all improve our cooking skills. Let's get outside our comfort zone, try some new combinations, spend less, waste less, and improve our awareness of the impact of food waste. Now and thanks for all the details about how to volunteer and how to find in all the locations it operates. We'll have links to that on the show, notes on the web page connected to this. So if you want to find out more, have a look down there, click through. We've also got links to our cost of living hub to show you all the ways you can get support at this time. Do e-mail talk@richmond.gov.uk with any feedback or questions. And if you are on a platform that allows you to leave a review, please do so. It helps other people find us. And if you want to leave five stars, I think that would be very tasty. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.