

TODMORDEN | FOOD SECURITY

The Incredible Edible Buffet of Kindness

In the British town of Todmorden, a ground-up community is building both food resilience and community bonds. We trace how a small local initiative grew into a thriving movement.



TODMORDEN



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Through the community's united efforts to grow edibles, the declining town of Todmorden turned into one of UK's best places to live.
 Image: Incredible Edible Todmorden

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 Beyond growing food as a community, the success of the programme is attributed to its focus on kindness.

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The Challenge

Since the closure of its textile industries in the 1960s and 70s, the British mill town of Todmorden had been on a path of economic decline. The town's main streets were unkept and dotted with empty shopfronts. Local employment opportunities were few. The local council lacked the resources to maintain public areas while 17.5% of the population was described as "income deprived", according to the UK's Index of Multiple Deprivation in 2015, higher than the national average. Population health was

also worse off than the national average. Housing prices trended downwards, while the resident population declined over time to approximately 15,000.

The global financial crisis of 2008 further exacerbated the economic and social woes in Todmorden and its surrounding region. Faced with dwindling funds, volunteer organisations serving the social needs of the community closed. The situation seemed grim.



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(Above and next page) Volunteers meet regularly to convert public and private spaces—at the police station, community college and roadside—into edible gardens.
Image: Incredible Edible Todmorden

The Solution

In 2008, three women sitting around a kitchen table decided to stop seeing themselves as powerless and started a small initiative to reconnect people with one another, and to the soil and seasons. They were motivated by the hope of arresting the town's decline while also addressing climate change. A town hall meeting was called where the women presented their idea—to clean up derelict spaces and plant edibles, even though Todmorden did not have a history or culture of farming. They were pleasantly surprised to find that many in the town heartily supported the idea. Within days, volunteers were planting edibles wherever they could find space, believing it was far more efficient to “ask for forgiveness than permission”.

Since then, Todmorden's volunteers meet on their own every first and third Sunday of the month, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. On average, 50 community members participate consistently to plant or garden on any green or clean public spaces. Today, there are more than 70 edible plots around town—from vegetable patches outside the police and fire stations, to herb planters at the train station.

While edibles and the regular group lunches are the glue that have brought the community together, the town attributes the programme's success to its focus on kindness. The wish to spread kindness permeates every decision and action, it says. For example, any member of the public can



Stronger social connections—the building blocks of a socially resilient community—have created the confidence to start more complex projects.

harvest the edibles—in fact, they are encouraged to do so with signs saying, “go on, take it, it’s free”. All are invited to the post-gardening Sunday lunch, including non-volunteers. Kindness is an integral part of approaching problems too. For example, when people were rushing to harvest the rhubarb before the plants were ready, rather than fencing off the plots, the group decided to grow more rhubarb so there would be enough for everyone. When plots were vandalised, volunteers helped to educate the community and at schools; as a result, there are now close to zero incidents. The community sees the plots as “propaganda gardens”—to remind people to live the life of kindness.

The Incredible Edible Todmorden movement supports itself with monies raised by volunteers conducting “vegetable tours” and speaking engagements. Government funding is avoided so volunteers can focus on their actions, rather than the paperwork. They have found the approach of drawing from their greatest resource—people—to be far more sustainable. One survey in 2013 found that because of the movement, 47% of residents in Todmorden expressed they had begun to grow food in their homes and 79% said they would like to see more food growing around the town.

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Food is the glue—the free lunch served after the volunteering sessions enhances regular, inclusive socialising, with people from different socio-economic spectrums, ages, mental and physical types, and ethnic backgrounds. These days, it serves vegan curry meals.
Image: Incredible Edible Todmorden



Todmorden introduced the concept of “vegetable tourism”, drawing visitors from all over the world.
 Images: *Incredible Edible Todmorden*

The Incredible Edible movement has since spread to more than 200 localities worldwide.

The Outcome

In 2021, the UK’s Sunday Times named Todmorden one of the 10 “Best Places to Live”, crediting the Incredible Edible movement. The group has achieved its goal of improving local socio-economic conditions. One study found that for every £1 (S\$1.88) invested through volunteer time and small financial contributions, £5.51 (S\$10.36) was returned to the townsfolk. Local home prices have also edged higher but remain affordable, avoiding gentrification. The population has become more diversified.

As Todmorden’s economic resilience increased, so too did its social resilience. Focusing on kindness has empowered people beyond growing food. Stronger social connections—the building blocks of a socially resilient community—have created the confidence to start more complex projects, e.g., teaching cooking and gardening in schools.

When the UK went into COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, the group mobilised their resources to provide free food daily in two locations for nearly six months. The needy were

also given bedding, clothes and toys. Three libraries were set up to offer books. In 2021, volunteers took over a former community college after five years of campaigning and fundraising to set up the Todmorden Learning Centre and Community Hub, providing learning, office and sports facilities for the public.

The Incredible Edible movement has since spread to more than 200 localities worldwide, each tailoring the activities to their own context and needs, with Todmorden’s volunteers available to advise them.

The movement took the tiny seed of planting edibles and “grew” it into something powerful. “It takes passion and commitment and the tenacity of a Rottweiler to get the community involved,” Mary Clear, one of the founders, said in a TV interview. But any community can do it. They simply have to tap two drivers: the fundamental human value of kindness, and a community’s desire to do better for the planet. As Clear added: “Our joy is in the people—our greatest resource.” 🗨️