

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond. I'm your host Jim Millard, and in this week's podcast will be talking about food waste and what we can do to reduce the amount of waste food that we throw away. Just give you some context. All of us in Richmond upon Thames together throw away over 14,000 tonnes of food waste every year. In March last year, research showed that a huge 30% of what ends up in the boroughs rubbish bags is food waste, and most of this is avoidable food waste, which could have been eaten or recycled. To explore this further, joining me today are Emma Beal and Katie Allen. Emma is the Managing Director of West London Waste Authority and Katie is the Founder of Food for Thought, Heathfield. So, welcome both.

Emma Beal: Hi.

Katie Allen: Hello.

Cllr Jim Millard: Thank you so much for joining us today. I'd love you for you to tell us a bit more about yourself. So firstly Emma, if we could ask you to introduce yourself, you are the Managing Director West London Waste authority, the organization responsible for disposing of the borough's waste. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Emma Beal: Yes, certainly. So, we're a statutory waste disposal authority. And in effect we are shared by 6 West London boroughs. We have very simple philosophy. We want to treat waste as a valuable resource, and we've been working recently on what we can do to support Richmond upon Thames to be carbon neutral.

Cllr Jim Millard: Great thank you so much. And Katie, you're the founder of Food for Thought, Heathfield, a community project that distributes food that would otherwise be discarded.

Katie Allen: Correct, so we run a surplus food market stall on Heathfield recreation ground which started around mid-December and has been really popular with the local community and we make sure we're diverting that food from going to landfill going to waste, essentially.

Cllr Jim Millard: Fantastic. That sounds amazing and I'd love to hear more about that as we talk. So, Emma, I'm as I mentioned in the introduction, this research that was carried out last year, I believe the Council did this in partnership with West London Waste, could you expand on the findings and tell us more about food waste in the scale of the issue in Richmond upon Thames?

Emma Beal: Yeah, certainly it's called a waste composition analysis and it just gives us a little snapshot in time of what's being thrown away. Waste can be quite seasonal, so we do them every 15 months or so and we take a small sample equivalent to perhaps 200 or so houses. The analysis told us some really interesting facts about what's being thrown away. About 1/3 of what's in the rubbish is food waste, and you know that can be quite a sort of shocking thing to find out, but there's a little bit of good news behind it as well, because it's taken as a proportion - it actually means that Richmond residents are pretty good at recycling other things, and so that's why there's so much food that's left over. So, when we look at it, we look at what's avoidable food waste - It could and should have been eaten - and what is unavoidable food waste, orange peels and eggshells of the like. Most of it was avoidable, and about 52% of the avoidable food waste was still in its packaging. So, in the introduction you mentioned the number of tonnes of waste that's being produced, and when you talk to people about tonnes of waste or millions of kilograms of waste, it's a little bit difficult to understand.

Cllr Jim Millard: Sure

Emma Beal: But if you think, say, you know there's 8,000,000 kilograms of avoidable food waste, and then think that maybe a school meal might weigh 500 grams. That's 16 million school meals that are

being thrown away, so there's a social aspect to this. And then also food has got a carbon footprint. It's grown, transported, packaged, transported again, sold, transported, and then it's either eaten or thrown away. So, for every kilogram of food that isn't thrown away, that actually isn't purchased in the first place, there's a carbon saving all the way back through that supply chain. And the reason that I'm so happy to have been invited to come and talk to you today is because we know from experience that people who recycle their food, throwaway, much less than people who don't.

Cllr Jim Millard: I'm fascinated to know from both of you what food items do you both find most commonly end up either in people's bins or on Food for Thought's surplus food store. So, Katie, if we could talk about, I mean it's stuff that supermarkets and restaurants tend to throw away?

Katie Allen: Yes, it may be, so it could be that it's come from an independent organisation, or it could be, you know, a supermarket. And often what we're seeing is maybe something that's been damaged in store. So, one of our most popular items- One of our most found items I should say is often peppers, you know they've been in a bag in the supermarket. One starts to go and then the whole lot have to go because they're packaged together. So, it's about us maybe taking that plastic packaging apart, taking them out. Things like mushrooms as well. Things that sweat in plastic sometimes, and it's just about you know better packaging and storage to get that bit of extra life

Cllr Jim Millard: Makes you think maybe we shouldn't be putting them in plastic in the first place, right?

Katie Allen: Yeah, I think that there is something we need to do with looking at how we expect our foods to be in supermarkets. A lot of the time we get bananas, so many bananas, and a lot of that is to do again is with just us, maybe thoughtlessly picking up one box to put another box on top to find the slightly different colour bananas you want to take home, rather than you know, going with the one slightly more ripe on top, and then you cause damage to the ones underneath. So, things like that. So, there's actually even within the public using the supermarket is a lot of food waste that happens just by sort of careless shopping, I think, and by perception of what are fruits and vegetables should look like and be like when we purchase them.

Cllr Jim Millard: Thank you and Emma, what do individuals and residents, what's the most common things that they tend to throw away that when you when you looked in people's bin bags, which I have to say is dark and lonely work, but I'm glad that you've done it. Vital work. What did kind of come up most?

Emma Beal: So, it falls into three main categories. The first one is good intentions. So, salads and fruits and you really want to eat healthier, but you don't always get around to eating it, and it's perishable. The second category is bolt staples, breads, and potatoes for example, people buy a lot of, but they really like it to be fresh. And then the third category is the hardest to pin down. It's the cheaper or the bigger it is, the more likely it is to be wasted. So, where portions are predetermined and I think Katie touched on that slightly. You know having to have two Peppers in a bag, for example. It doesn't quite fit your needs or two for one offers or buy one, get one free where you're sort of your entranced into buying it, but actually it wasn't on your list in the first place.

Cllr Jim Millard: what I'm hearing is obviously it's very important to try to reduce the amount of food waste, but then if you are going to have to throw away food, obviously the Council does offer a food waste recycling service for houses. But the research suggests a lot of people are still throwing their food waste into their black bin bags. So, Emma I wanted to ask, how does the food recycling service work and why do you think a lot of people aren't using their food recycling bins?

Emma Beal: Yes, you're right, it's offered to most households, but there's still a large percentage that don't use it. One of the biggest problems we face is universal. Everybody thinks they don't waste food, but unfortunately everybody does. Even Katie and I who are trying our best and have been for a while. Whether it's loose, packaged, raw, cooked, everybody does it, just in different proportions and with different items. How the food waste Service works is quite simple really. We collect food waste weekly. We collect it separately, separated from everything else. We provide a caddy for the kitchen and a caddy for outside. They're quite small and compact and we ask for pure food waste. Nothing more, nothing less. If you want to, you can use a biodegradable liner or a square of paper in the bottom of the caddy. But we ask please, absolutely no plastic. And why people don't use it? Partly the reason I mentioned a lot of people think they don't waste food, but also it's a lost habit and habits can take time to build back up again. Some people don't have much space, some don't have much time. Quite often there's a lot of different people in the household who all like to eat different things. And the reality is that it can be a bit off putting the look of it when you're, you know, putting it into a container, and that in itself is the thing that that people don't necessarily want to face up to the fact that it is food that's being thrown away, and that's the reason why it's so important that we ask everybody to use the system because recycling food definitely reduces the amount that you throw away. The physical act of emptying half a loaf of bread out of its packaging or emptying half a tub of uneaten takeaway into your food waste caddy - you make a mental note, you don't necessarily need to think about it too much: you change your buying habits; you change your portion control. And it's just a really natural progression, and that's why we see less food waste from food waste recyclers.

Cllr Jim Millard: And when food waste caddies, as you described, are used and the food is recycled, can you tell us what happens? How does this help climate change and our environment?

Emma Beal: Yeah, sure. So, all of the food waste that's collected goes to our food waste recycling building, and there it's put into a trailer and it goes to a company called by Biocollectors in south London, and they have a process called Anaerobic Digestion, it's a biological process, it mimics what happens when we eat our food and because it's pure food, it can be turned into energy and a high-quality compost. And that's the reason we say no plastics please. Our contractor creates a gas, the energy actually it comes out as a gas, and they use that gas to power the vehicles that then come to collect from our food waste recycling. So, it's really nice circular process. And I mentioned before that food has a carbon footprint. We know on average that the embedded carbon of every item that's thrown away. And when you when you look at it, food waste is about third on that list. But when you multiply by the number of tonnes that are being thrown away, it becomes number one. So just as an example, I was at a climate emergency conference and I heard about all these wonderful, exciting projects with solar panels and bicycles and planting trees, and these examples were saving 10 to 15,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide. And I actually had to go and check my presentation because I was really worried that what I was saying was incorrect. Because food waste in west London. Well, actually I'll give you a Richmond number: about 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide saved, so you know it really is one of the biggest and most important things that we can do.

Cllr Jim Millard: That is astonishing. I really had no idea that I hope that we can start to spread that message, because this is something we can all do more of. Katie, how would people come along to your service and how does that work?

Katie Allen: So, anyone can come down. It really acts like a market store so you can just come along, join up in the queue, we ask you to bring your own carrier bags, but we often find is that there's more than a carrier bags worth that you'd like to take so we have a few that we recycle actually from the community who donated their carrier bags. We try and, you know, be quite resourceful

ourselves, and yeah you can come and join in and just take what you need and what you would use. And what we ask is that it is something that you would use because otherwise you go home and obviously create more food waste. And that's not what we want. So, it's about coming and planning your meals. You know having a look at what you've already gotten your cupboards, but sometimes being a bit creative because of course you haven't got a shopping list for what may be on the store.

Cllr Jim Millard: Wow, that sounds so amazing and it, what about people across the rest of the borough, are you planning to roll it out or do you have any sort of fellow projects that you're aware of in other parts of the borough?

Katie Allen: I mean for ourselves we are currently on that green space and it's a wonderful space and we feel there's been now such a sense of community with people coming out and you know, doing shopping in a slightly different way, taking part in, you know, reducing your carbon footprint, being kind to the environment. So maybe in the future we could see ourselves rolling out to some other green spaces, almost like a pop-up store. Then in the meantime, you've got wonderful projects such as the Junk Food Project, Chaplains in Saint Margarets and Hampton as well you can look them up online, they actually cook with that surplus food. So anybody in the community can go and at the moment and grab a takeaway lunch or pick up surplus food, pick up bread. Yeah and just be part of the community really. And you know being a bit kinder to the environment and thinking about how we use food.

Cllr Jim Millard: Amazing thank you, and your organisation Food for Thought must have loads of tips, reducing the amount of food we waste. Could you share the sort of top tips?

Katie Allen: I think the biggest one is probably making sure that you're storing your foods you know correctly within your own home, because that way you can get that longer life out of it. I mean often what you might find from us as your fruit is already, your fruit is already at that ripe stage. So what you might do in a normal household would be, you know, having that out in an ambient temperature, but as it ripens, sort of thinking about things like putting it in the fridge, then to extend its life a bit longer, you know by a week and then as it starts to turn, rather than deciding you're going to chuck it in the bin - you know you might chop it up and freeze it, so it's looking at how we store that food in the best way. Also, maybe how we cook and you know, make use of those leftovers. If you've got something that you could freeze potentially and you're not gonna eat it within the next day or two, but that's been in the fridge, then make sure you popping it in the freezer and before you go shopping definitely you know, shop your fridge and freezer first and your cupboard and making sure you're using up what you've got in there. Because otherwise you could go out you get tempted by all these weird, wonderful things that you see on the shelves - those multi buys that Emma refers to - and you end up buying more food than you actually need. And then at that point you're looking at having to either eat it up or you know or waste it.

Cllr Jim Millard: Yeah, that sounds brilliant, it's an important issue. Emma, do you have anything to add?

Emma Beal: I found that my habits have changed in the last year. I think that waste on the whole and food waste in particular is connected to time and how much time we have. So, I think my top tip on in that respect would be just decide quickly if you know you've got too much, decide at that point, freeze it, chop it up and don't wait.

Cllr Jim Millard: Yeah, that sounds very sensible. Well, I mean what role you sort of touched on this world is planning have in managing food waste?

Katie Allen: I think it's just really important that we, you know you sort of plan your weekly meals, and then you've got an idea of exactly what you need when you go down to your supermarket or to your store to get your food that you're buying only what it is you need. I think it's also about sticking to your shopping list by only what you're going to be using. You know, take a look in your fridge and your cupboard, see if there's anything else you can use up. And buying in bulk only really saves money if you're able to use that food up.

Emma Beal: Can I add something to that, just to say that I think probably one of the most important things to plan is to use the food waste recycling system and stick at it and everything that Katie's talked about will just come naturally.

Cllr Jim Millard: Yeah, that sounds brilliant. Thank you. So, we've been talking about some of the more commonly wasted items and how we can try to avoid that. But if you do have leftovers, you know, I wondered if I both of you could ask, do you have any sort of great recipes that are good for using up leftovers or things we might usually throw away?

Katie Allen: I think I'm a bit of the Queen of the slow cooker myself, so and just for a purely time saving and once you get into the habit of putting a slow cooker on, you know you free up a lot of time if you take in that little bit of effort, say in the morning and left it on for the day, and I find you can throw in all those extra things that are hanging about that need to be you know you need to be eaten up, so whether it's an onion or a bit of pepper, or you know the extra Peppers in the bag, you can just fill the whole thing out, put it on, and then you've got a meal at the end of it. So that for me I mean is crucial. I'll do everything in the slow cooker to be honest.

Cllr Jim Millard: Great sounds good! And what about you Emma?

Emma Beal: Umm, I've got a few. If that's alright with you. If you like takeaway but find that the portion sizes are a bit too big, then buying your starters from the freezer section and mixing and matching actually saves you money as well as giving you a bit more of an exciting takeaway. I found that cherry tomatoes, they're lovely in salad, but once they go bit squishy, they're not quite so desirable, but they make a fabulous base for pasta sauce and it's so easy you just Pierce them, boil them up, sieve it and there you go, taste of Italy. And another one for busy parents – if you've got too much fruit or it's not, it's not being picked, chop it up and freeze it and the kids will eat it straight out of the freezer.

Katie Allen: Smoothie's are another good one, just smoothie everything up.

Cllr Jim Millard: Yeah and if you have some frozen that can go into smoothies it really helps the smoothie to be nice and cold. If anyone listening has any great recipes, do email them into us. That would be fantastic. Who knows we could do a Talk Richmond listeners cookbook!

Katie Allen: Bread and butter pudding and banana bread, although I was loathed to mention them because they seem to become lockdown recipes, but they are still always popular.

Cllr Jim Millard: Thank you so much guys. Finally, Katie if anyone listening to this wants to help find food waste what would you suggest people do to get involved?

Katie Allen: I mean you can always seek out stores like ourselves or projects like the junk food project where you're coming down you can donate for your food as well so that goes back into the project um, and keep things keep things going, but just yet just think very carefully about how you use, you know food and that waste management system in your own home. If you're someone who has been hoarding tins since the first lockdown and sort of cupboards exploding - there's nothing to stop you donating that food as well and making sure it goes to a better place, so it's not going to be

wasted. And that's to stalls like mine. You know you've got local food banks as well, and other surplus projects.

Cllr Jim Millard: Brilliant, thank you so much. I mean it just you know I take my hat off to you. Well thank you so much for talking to us on Talk Richmond, Katie and Emma. It's been fantastic listening to your food waste wisdom.

Katie and Emma: Thank you.

Cllr Jim Millard: It's clear that more needs to be done to stop the enormous scale of food that gets thrown away and wasted, especially when we look at the impact on climate change and the fact that so many people have to go hungry. It's been really fascinating listening to just what an enormous amount of carbon can be saved by doing food waste recycling, and I hope that we all have a real good look at what we can do and make a difference. It's easy to turn a blind eye to the amount of food we waste within our own homes, but it's been very clear: it's one of the easiest things we can do to play our part to help tackle climate change. For helpful tips and links on all of these things, please check out the episodes show notes. Do email us with all your tips, recipes, thoughts at talk@richmond.gov.uk with any feedback or questions. And if you're listening on a service that allows you to leave a review, please don't waste the opportunity to give us a review that's not rubbish. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.