

## Interview with **Isabel Oliver**, Consultant Epidemiologist and Director of Field Epidemiology for Public Health England

Isabel was in conversation with NAS member, Lesley Greene, Allotment Warden at Bisley with Lypiatt

I am also a Trustee of the Soil Association. I have an allotment on the Cheestergate Allotments, Bisley, Gloucestershire, where I grow a variety of vegetables organically. These are my personal views not those of PHE.

**You have a challenging and tough day job and you have accepted the invitation to undertake an important role as a Trustee of the Soil Association. So, given your limited time, what is the importance of your allotment to you?**

I have a very busy job but my allotment is important to me and I find the activity relaxing. I fit in a few minutes to weed and water on the way to work and on the way home. I have grown my own vegetables for over 20 years and it is very much part of who I am. I don't grow as much as I'd like – I have a quarter plot and pack a lot in a small space, although it is never the tidiest plot on the site. There are times when I want to grow more, but I have to be realistic. The social element is nice and I am inspired by what other people are growing. Taking on an allotment was a good way of meeting people when I moved to this Gloucestershire village. I was a bit afraid to ask for a plot at first in case the standards and expectations were too high, but actually it is a great environment and a great source of joy.

**On your plot you grow organically – why?**

Why would you not? I grow organically because of health and environmental reasons. It's no hassle to grow organically – why would you want to use chemicals on your food? I would encourage people to try to grow as organically as possible; it is a good way to try to live more sustainably and do our bit to help the environment.

**Your family is Spanish, and you live and work in this country. Can you comment on any differences you have experienced in the approach to food, food growing, and the 'Mediterranean' diets and that of the (perhaps) average British family?**

When I first moved to the UK in 1992 to work in a

hospital in the Midlands, I was completely shocked that my local supermarket had no fresh fruit or vegetables; that situation has improved a lot over the past few years. In Spain, we are used to fresh fruit and vegetables in shops, and each city district or village has its own market. At home, we would usually have fresh fruit for dessert instead of puddings. Also, we do not tend to worry about whether fruit or vegetables look perfect, and are usually sold without packaging. However, on a less positive note, allotments are rare in Spanish cities, although in the countryside people have small gardens where they often grow their own fruit and vegetables.

**Both PHE and the Soil Association aspire to encourage healthy eating and improved nutrition; can you tell us more about this?**

Public Health England's mission is to improve and protect health and reduce health inequalities. Improving diet and nutrition is a complex issue; eating more fruit and veg are key, as is taking exercise. The Soil Association works hard to improve access to healthy and sustainable food for all. I recently visited a Food for Life School in Rugby, and was very impressed by what has been achieved by the staff, pupils and community to provide healthy delicious school meals and raise awareness. It was amazing; young children growing their own vegetables, giving the produce to the kitchen to cook, and eating their own vegetables enthusiastically. Food for Life is a Soil Association evidence-based programme for schools, nurseries, hospitals and care homes to transform food culture. The project encourages schools to involve the local community, to teach the children about where food comes from and how to grow and cook it.

**Do you think local authorities have given enough consideration to the benefits from allotment growing in their health and wellbeing targets?**

There is a need for more evidence-based research about the benefits of allotments; the more evidence there is the better it is for the





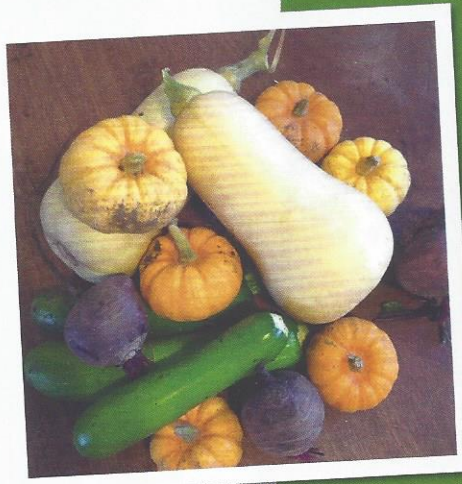
commissioning of programmes and strategies. Although there is quite a lot of evidence emerging about the impact of gardening on mental health and the physical activity of gardening, few studies have looked at the benefits for allotment holders in terms of diet and nutrition.

**How can allotments and the allotment movement help the healthy eating message to move forward?**

Allotments should be an integral part of the local community and be seen as part of the solution to improving sustainability and health. For example, we (Bisley Allotment holders) support the local Food Bank with our excess fruit and vegetables, which is a great way of supporting the local community. The Allotment Movement could have more of a role promoting healthy and sustainable food, increasing knowledge, access to affordable healthy food and developing greater links with schools as this would be a great way of engaging children with healthy food and physical activity. I travel a lot as part of my job; when I was in Angola recently I was struck by the fact that in a country with such rich natural resources and problems of poverty and malnutrition, I did not see a single allotment or cultivated field; fruit and vegetables were being imported from Portugal. Although that is an extreme example you can see that allotments have an important role to play in food security, as well as improving health and wellbeing.

**Finally, what is your favourite recipe from the plot?**

That is difficult. There is nothing like eating something really fresh; cutting a courgette with the flower and grilling it, or Swiss chard sautéed in olive oil with garlic and pine nuts, or butternut squash with lentils. Simple steamed fresh young runner beans are really popular with my children – they love them.



## Here is a recipe for Lemon Drizzle Courgette Cake

200g grated courgette  
125g melted butter  
150g caster sugar  
1 beaten egg  
Juice of 1/2 lemon  
200g plain flour  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon mix bicarbonate of soda and baking powder

For the drizzle  
Juice of 1/2 lemon  
25g caster sugar

Preheat the oven to 170 C  
In a bowl combine the courgette, melted butter, sugar, egg and lemon.

Sift in the flour, salt and add the bicarbonate of soda and baking powder.

Mix well, and then pour into a prepared loaf tin.

Bake for 50 - 55 minutes until golden brown.

Whilst the cake is cooling, bring the lemon juice and caster sugar for the drizzle to the boil, until it forms a syrup. Pour over the cooling cake.

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