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Customers at Ely's community café have been enjoying freshly-grown vegetables from the local allotment thanks to donations from a band of green-fingered volunteers.

Adults with learning disabilities have recently been earning Time Credits by supporting the new My Way allotment which was set up at the Bridge Fen site earlier this year by the charity Thera East Anglia.

The project, based in the city's only allotment site with the famous black fen soil, was set up to enable adults with a learning disability to learn new skills and give back to their community.

Volunteers grow a number a number of different fruit and vegetables including potatoes, onions, beans, sweetcorn and spinach which are all donated to the community café at Ely Community Centre, and turned into tasty meals.

The café, which opened three years ago and is one of Cambridgeshire County Council's 'Supporting into Work' projects, employs people with learning disabilities to help them develop new skills in a real life working environment along with wider skills through community integration.

Terri Dumont, Employment Support Manager at Thera East Anglia, said: "The allotment aims to support people to gain new skills who in turn give back to the community and help those in need. We are thrilled to donate the food we grow to the Ely community café, we hope it makes a real difference to the people who use it. This is all part of our work with local charities to provide families in need with fresh vegetables and a friendly face".

Sami Yusuf, Employment Skills Worker, has been working with service users from Ely Community Café to turn the donated vegetables into curries to sell at the Community Café.

He said: "Receiving the vegetable donations from Thera has been very exciting for us at Ely Community Café. We have been able to easily incorporate the lovely donations into our fresh meals, which we cook for the service users, members of the community and the staff here at Larkfield. For example, there are the delicious carrots which we use in our cottage pie, to the enormous marrows in our popular Friday Vegetable Curry.

"It has also given the service users a better understanding of where the food has been grown locally and the processes behind this, ultimately giving them a better respect for the ingredients we use. Thank you from all the Café Team!"

My Way allotment is one of the latest organisations to join Cambridgeshire Time Credits, which is commissioned by Cambridgeshire County Council who work with Spice, a social enterprise that delivers the initiative in various locations in the county.

The innovative scheme creates opportunities for communities to share assets and skills and work together in exciting ways while offering access to new and interesting opportunities in recognition of the time given. For each hour that a person gives to their community, such as helping children read in schools, companionship for older people or setting up a peer support group, they could earn a printed Time Credit.

These can be spent on an hour's activity in other community organisations, further education classes, local businesses, social or leisure activities and at large venues such as St. Paul's or the Tower of London. They can also be shared with friends and family or use them to thank others in return.

Cllr Steve Criswell, Chairman of the Communities and Partnership Committee at Cambridgeshire County Council, added: "This is a fantastic way for the allotment volunteers to give back to the community whilst learning new skills at the same time. It is just one example of how Time Credits helps to strengthen and build strong connected communities by encouraging people to give time to their communities in a wide range of ways."



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