

BOROUGH FOOD COOPERATIVE

A COOK FOR CHANGE CASE STUDY

Brian Cummings runs a community food pantry operating three times a week from the crypt of a church. They support around 80 people a day to access subsidised food from the pantry, equating to approximately 10,000 shops and 60,000 kilos of food distributed a year. He is the only paid member of staff, supported entirely by volunteers. Brian's wider goal, now that the pantry is well established, is to develop a new community café in the crypt, and provide cooking classes to try and encourage pantry members to spend more time in the space, combatting social isolation and boosting wellbeing.

Brian joined the Cook for Change programme run by Cook for Good in 2025. This incubator is designed to drive wider social change through food and cooking, by supporting social entrepreneurs to develop more sustainable community food hubs. A key part of the programme is to connect entrepreneurs to mentors and advisors within Cook for Good's culinary partner network. Restaurant Associates were a cornerstone partner for the first year of this programme.

Cook for Change connected Brian with Adam Thomason, the Culinary Director at Restaurant Associates, who matched Borough Food Cooperative with Geoff at Ceba, a refitting company who would refurbish and redesign the existing kitchen.

However the support from Restaurant Associates has gone significantly beyond what Brian anticipated. Adam assembled a team of six specialists, each covering a different area of need. Ian, a group chef, has visited twice to work on menu development. Louise is advising on café design – layout, flow between kitchen and café, furniture, and creating a welcoming atmosphere. Jack, the head of coffee at Restaurant Associates, is lending a coffee machine for a year at no cost and has offered to gift a year's supply of coffee. Steph is on hand for health and safety and front-of-house documentation. Sam from the marketing team will support on social media. Adam himself – a highly acclaimed chef – visited the site and used his expertise to enhance Geoff's initial kitchen design. Critically, the team members are in communication with one another, cross-referring Brian to the right person as new needs arise.

The kitchen renovation begins in May and is expected to take around one week. From June to August, Brian plans a soft launch – a series of pop-up café events to test the offer and understand what members actually want.



Over the same period, he will advertise for a kitchen lead or head chef, having been firmly advised by the Cook for Change team not to try to manage the kitchen himself on top of everything else. The hard launch is planned for September, initially running the café once a week alongside the pantry, offering hot meals, coffee, and pastries. Cooking classes are planned to follow a few months after that.

Brian is clear that without this collaboration the project would still have happened — the money was there and the will was strong — but it would have been unrecognisable in comparison. A commercial kitchen company would have cost much more than his budget. There would have been no collaborative process, no community-aligned partners, no integrated team across design, menu, coffee, health and safety, and marketing. It would have been piecemeal, time-consuming, and, in Brian's words, would have taken years rather than months.

What Restaurant Associates provided was not just expertise in individual areas, but a single point of contact in Adam who coordinated everything and ensured the whole process moved at pace. The result is a kitchen and café concept shaped by people who genuinely understand the community mission, not just the commercial requirements. As Brian himself says: "There are days where I literally could cry at how happy I am with how this has all worked out, and how helpful Adam and Restaurant Associates have been."

And Adam Thomason, Culinary Director at Restaurant Associates says: 'Supporting Brian on the Cook for Change project to redesign the kitchen into a more practical, multifunctional space was a real honour. Not only was it the right thing to do, it was an incredibly rewarding project to be part of. Brian does amazing work for the community every day, and it was a pleasure to connect him with our network of kitchen designers, front of house specialists, health and safety experts, and chefs to help bring the vision to life. One of my proudest moments was standing alongside Brian and Geoff, an outstanding kitchen designer, mapping out how the space could work. Together, we designed a space that could support barista training, teaching and skills development, community cooking using surplus food, and even events. We created a kitchen that can truly do it all, and I can't wait to see it come to life.'

