



FULL REPORT

FOOD FOR LIFE GET TOGETHERS

PROGRAMME EVALUATION SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS
FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a summary and synthesis of UWE's evaluation of the Food for Life Get Togethers programme (2019–23). The phrase 'Get Togethers' highlights the connections that people from all ages and backgrounds can make through growing, cooking and sharing good food. The aim of the Get Togethers programme has been to help create a world where people of different ages and backgrounds regularly connect, learn and play a more active role in their local food system.

Get Togethers Partnerships and Networks

Get Togethers was formed from a new partnership of six leading organisations from across the nations of the UK, each with expertise in different aspects of community engagement and food system issues. These national partners collaborated with 'local partners' that brought specialised insights in how to facilitate Get Togethers activities in specific localities or with communities of interest.

Through engagement with over 5500 groups, the Get Togethers programme has shown the scale, breadth and depth of activities across the UK that might be defined 'Get Togethers'. Prior to Get Togethers, many grass roots initiatives lacked connections with like-minded groups either through national or regional channels.

Our evaluation work with 371 groups found that the smallest of these (with under £5k annual income) in particular sought 'more small scale grant funding', 'more national networking opportunities', 'more mentoring and peer support', 'better access to local facilities', 'better access to volunteer support', and 'more help to campaign on community food issues'. Many of the 'asks' of smaller agencies delivering Get Togethers activities are relatively modest and realisable.



GET TOGETHERS

Bringing people together through food

Get Togethers Small Grants

The evaluation of the £150 small grants campaigns – particularly ‘Cook and Share’ and ‘Plant and Share’ – provided a window onto a rich field of over 900 community and voluntary groups across the UK. With a focus on 393 award applications and six-month follow-up responses from 171 community organisers, the evaluation found Get Togethers small grant schemes engaged highly diverse types and mainly very small (40% under £5k annual income¹) organisations. The overall standard of applications was detailed, conscientious, and were often reported as an opportunity to try new ideas.

Award holders demonstrated a wide range of achievements around how to use food in social activities and how to create wider benefits for the communities they serve. Organisers felt that their events enhanced positive attitudes towards ageing (64%) and diversity (68%), and addressed loneliness and isolation (83%). Almost everyone believed their event(s) helped people connect with each other (99%)².

With an average of 35 participants (min 5, max 400), the small grant schemes delivered good value for money in terms of the scale and diversity of community engagement. There were additional benefits for organisers in terms of their own confidence and skills development.

Those with more experience of running events set more ambitious goals than those new to working on community food issues. Following success with the small grant a minority had applied for further funding and almost all organisers reported going on to run further activities after their first event.

4976

TOTAL GET TOGETHERS ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE UK

145,310

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN GET TOGETHERS ACTIVITIES

Get Togethers and My Food Community Leadership Programme

My Food Community (MFC) is a community leadership programme intended to create a network for good food champions to learn, connect and take action on issues that are important in their lives. Our longitudinal evaluations of both waves of the scheme to date found that there were statistically significant beneficial impacts on the knowledge, competencies and skills of participants in the broad field of community food leadership. The quantitative outcome evidence was very consistent with the qualitative evidence, suggesting that many of the self-reported changes could be attributed to participation in MFC, rather than other factors.

As with many voluntary training courses that run over a six-to-twelve-month duration, levels of participation fluctuated. For both deliveries of the programme, roughly one half were heavily engaged, one quarter were moderately engaged, and one quarter were lightly engaged or disengaged. For the positive outcomes, the evidence is most visible for those that had strong engagement with the process, which is to be expected from a participatory programme.

With its earlier inception, for Version 1 there is longer term data based upon participants’ use of the small grant. This provides good evidence that participants continue to derive value from MFC many months after they completed the online training. Indeed, there is significant potential for participants to continue to benefit over time with the delivery of further programme runs and the growth a network of MFC alumni.

¹ Data for Plant and Share.

² Data for Cook and Share.

Food for Life Get Togethers represents one of the most wide-ranging initiatives in the UK to elevate the importance of food-based community gatherings. Over a four-year period, Food for Life Get Togethers has collaborated and provided direct support to amplify the work of thousands of community groups. Spanning the pandemic and beyond, this has been a timely initiative where

the role of food in bringing people together has been the source of great public interest.

The different sections of this report compile key points. You will find depth, discussion, and learning from the participants in this research by reading the UWE evaluation reports on specific aspects of the programme (see links in the Introduction section).



Plant and Share event, Back to Our Roots, Cardiff, Summer 2023 © Scott M Salt Photography

INTRODUCTION

Food is a fundamental part of social life. Food growing, preparation and sharing express feelings of care, togetherness and connection in ways that we struggle to convey otherwise. Food with its origins, tastes and meanings offers a unique social currency that cannot be matched by words and money. Yet, possibly because it is so fundamental, food is often overlooked in efforts to address important contemporary issues such as isolation, loneliness, and social division. Moreover, significance of those who work with food in community settings is often given little attention, possibly due to a lack of appreciation of the knowledge, commitments, and skills involved in such efforts.

Food for Life Get Togethers represents one of the most wide-ranging initiatives in the UK to elevate the importance of food-based community gatherings. The simple phrase 'Get Togethers' highlights the connections that people from all ages and backgrounds can make through growing, cooking and sharing good food. Over a four-year period, Food for Life Get Togethers has collaborated and provided direct support to amplify the work of thousands of community groups. Spanning the pandemic and beyond, this has been a timely initiative where the role of food in bringing people together has been the source of great public interest.

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary and synthesis of UWE evaluation of the Food for Life Get Togethers programme. This has been a longitudinal programme of research with multiple areas of focus and the use of a variety of methods. While this report brings together many of the key points, you will find depth, discussion, and learning from the participants by reading the specific evaluation reports on different aspects of the programme. The boxed section provides a summary and link to this suite of reports.

The Suite of UWE Evaluation Reports on the Food for Life Get Togethers Programme

● Networks Development

Hills, S., Ismail, S., Beardmore, A., & Jones, M. (2022). *Strengthening networks for community-based action on 'good food'*. UWE Bristol.

● Network Priorities for Food Activity Organisers

Jones, M., Hills, S., Ismail, S., and Beardmore A. (2022) *Priorities survey for community food activity organisers*. UWE Bristol.

● Cook and Share

Jones, M., Hills, S., Ismail, S., and Beardmore A. (2022) *Food for Life Get Togethers Evaluation. Good Food and Building Community Capacity through Cook and Share Grants. Full Report*. UWE Bristol.

● Plant and Share

Jones M, Beardmore A, Hills S and Ismail S (2023) *Plant and Share: Evaluation for Food for Life Get Togethers' Small Grants*. UWE Bristol.

● My Food Community

Beardmore A, Jones M, Hills S, and Ismail S (2023) *My Food Community. Full evaluation report on the first two years of the community food leadership programme*. UWE Bristol.

All reports available at:

www.fflgettogethers.org/about/our-impact-and-research/

Overview of the programme

Food for Life Get Togethers is a four-year (2019–23) UK wide programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and delivered with the support of six national partners (see <https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/get-togethers>). It is led by the Soil Association with support Food Sense Wales, Eden Project Community, Royal Voluntary Service, Generations Working Together, and Linking Generations Northern Ireland. The programme is part the wider Food for Life initiative led by the Soil Association with an overarching goal “to make good food the easy choice for everyone”.

Get Togethers seeks to achieve five outcomes³:

1. People of different ages or backgrounds have stronger connections with each other in communities across the UK, through cooking, growing and sharing food.
2. People across the UK have increased knowledge, skills, networks and resources to run and sustain social good food activities.
3. Get Together organisers are more connected with each other, actively participating in or leading their own peer networks, which increase the transfer of information, knowledge, and resources about social good food activities within or between communities of interest, practice, or geography.
4. Knowledge and understanding related to equality, diversity and inclusion in social good food activities is developed and shared widely through the programme.
5. ‘Good Food Champions’ influence and inform changes in policies, practice or behaviour in their communities, settings or projects that contribute to regeneration of a world with good health, in balance with nature and a safe climate.

As a form of event, Food for Life provide the following definition of Get Togethers:

“Regular community activities that connect people from all ages and backgrounds through growing, cooking and eating good food.”

The three key elements of Get Togethers are (1) participation in ‘good food’ activities in a broad sense of the term, (2) people from different backgrounds or generations coming together, and (3) meaningful social interactions. These elements illustrate the close relationship the programme has with a wide range of food events that take place in community settings. Often overlooked in policy debates, community food activities touch upon many areas of life and may have an important role in wellbeing, health and wider social benefits, including for disadvantaged groups. The Get Togethers programme aims to mobilise, build capacity and build leadership in community food activities. These different aspirations are set out in the programme’s theory of change (see chart).

As the boxed section shows, the Get Togethers programme has generated extensive engagement with community groups and organisations, and – through these agencies – is recorded to have connected with many tens of thousands of people from across the UK. Leading forms of engagement took place through the small grants schemes, the networking events, and the annual campaigns such as ‘Plant and Share’ and ‘Cook and Share’ months. Get Togethers also worked on a more intensive basis with individuals engaged in the My Food Community leadership initiative, and with agencies working as delivery partners at the local level. The main sections of the report below provide an overview of the evaluation findings from each of the key areas of the programme.

³ Updated in 2021.



Figure 1: Food for Life Get Togethers Theory of Change



Plant and Share event, Kushinga Gardens, Birmingham, Summer 2023 © Scott M Salt Photography

Summary of programme outputs

- The total number of people recorded taking part in Get Togethers events is 145,310.
- 5553 groups across 93% of UK local authorities have registered with the programme.
- Of these groups, 42.7% are located in areas in the top three out of ten areas of high multiple deprivation.
- 905 groups have been awarded a small grant.
- 1921 individuals have registered for a network event, with 60% of those registering being new to the network.
- Plant and Share resources were downloaded on 50,478 occasions.
- Cook and Share resources have been downloaded on 29,207 occasions.
- 114 individuals have participated in the My Food Community (MFC) programme.
- £50,000 worth of Action Grants have been awarded to MFC members.

Note: Figures to 26 June 2023

Evaluation research methods

Each component of the evaluation was informed by a set of specific research questions, with the themes connecting them concerning (a) the implementation of the programme (process evaluation) and (b) the effects of the programme (outcome evaluation). To explore these aspects, we used a mixed methods study design (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006): drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative data sources. We analysed the programme records concerned with planning, delivery, and engagement. Our primary respondents for baseline and follow-up (and retrospective)

surveys were community organisers, grant holders, and network participants. We interviewed members of the programme team, community organisation/group leads, organisers and members, as well as wider stakeholders. On some occasions, members of the programme team provided interview data collected as part of their work. We largely used the framework method for the analysis of transcripts (Gale et al., 2013). Ethical approval for this research was obtained through the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), Health and Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Reference HAS.20.11.034.

BUILDING CAPACITY

THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS

As the summary of the programme delivery outputs show (see above), Get Togethers was strongly designed and driven as a 'partnership'-based initiative. From the outset, the proposals for the programme were developed through the collaborative efforts of key national organisations with an interest in food and cross generational community-based activities. Alongside these 'national partners', the programme was designed to work with 'local partners' or agencies that might bring specialised insights in how to facilitate Get Togethers activities in specific localities or with communities of interest. Beyond such formal partners, Get Togethers facilitated looser and more emergent relationships through the 'networks' component of its programme. These partnerships and networks form the focus for the first evaluation findings section of this report.



PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES OF GET TOGETHERS NETWORK ACTIVITIES

For me, it's just nice to hear those stories and the different approaches, and even if I don't agree with how somebody would do it. It does feel very nice to have that space.

The kind of 'networking feel' I get by being part of those sessions was positive. It's left me with that, well, yeah, I've got somebody I can speak to.

We have had lots of messages from people saying: "This was a fabulous idea [session on container growing] we're going to implement this in our own gardens, school gardens, homes..."

**Get Togethers Nations Networking Event,
Spring 2023, Manchester**
© Scott M Salt Photography

Collaborating as National Partners

Towards the end of Get Togethers, we asked representatives from the national partners to reflect upon their role and the influence of the programme. Four of the six national partners provided written contributions.

As a partnership-based UK-wide initiative each organisation brought different fields of expertise and contribution towards the programme. The Soil Association acted as a coordinating agency to bring the different perspectives and inputs together, and to create a cohesive programme plan. This involved a convening and engagement role, as well as a formal role in holding overall accountability and governance for the Lottery grant. All national partners felt that they were able to involve their existing networks in programme activities. This involvement helped inform how the programme reached diverse community settings and interest groups across the UK nations. It also helped raise standards across the programme, for example, on issues around working with volunteers or with non-formally constituted groups. National partners, building upon their trusted relationships, were well placed to communicate programme messages and collect evidence on the reception of the programme.

Some strengths of the specific partnership approach were the ability to amplify messages on good food, food citizenship, and community food leadership with audiences outside the programme. All partners were able to incorporate learning from the programme into their core business. Some challenges linked to the Get Togethers model included the balance of influence between different partners and the barriers to creating shared buy-in, especially when there were revisions to the direction of the programme. These changes, which occurred mainly because of the pandemic, were not consistently embedded. One difficulty, which was written into the original plan, was the decrease the scale of funding in the latter stage of the programme. This meant that national partners (and their local affiliates) lacked resources to fully engage in strategic shifts in delivery in programme Years 3 and 4.

Get Togethers embodied an ambitious vision to more strongly embed food growing, cooking and sharing activities into the community life across the UK. Irrespective of the difficulties raised by the pandemic, this was long-term aspiration that was challenging to evidence within a four-year programme.

Nevertheless, all national partners responding to the evaluation, felt that the programme's vision fitted closely to the long-term aspirations of their own organisations. The programme had also helped develop 'organisational competencies' around commitments to a network-based approach, developing leadership, working with diverse and/or disadvantaged communities, national collaborations, small grant delivery, and the primacy of using food as a material for community engagement.

Working with Local Partners

Get Togethers worked with commissioned 'Local Partners' as a mechanism to foster the development of community food networks and initiatives in specific local areas (or with specific communities of interest) across the UK. Local Partners also supported the development of the national network and to create a culture of mutual support and shared learning among Get Togethers participants.

The Get Togethers model of working with Local Partners evolved through a test and learn approach. In the first phase (January 2020–January 2021) 24 Local Partners were commissioned to deliver 'innovative' projects bringing people together through good food. In the summer of 2021, the Get Togethers programme piloted a Local Partners model that became the basis of the second phase of the Local Partners approach that ran from September 2021 to February 2023. We mainly focused on the partner agencies engaged in this second phase.

The results suggest that Local Partners was a partially successful approach for fostering community food activity, resource and knowledge-sharing and fostering supportive connectivity between groups sharing similar community food interests and challenges.

LOCAL PARTNERS EXPERIENCES OF GET TOGETHERS

"We've been really lucky to be part of Soil Association's Get Togethers, we became a local partner and have been involved in working together with other organisations across the UK, learning from them about how they're doing things on their different projects, what's going on, how people are combatting the crisis in the food system, and also sharing our learnings from running our community cooking classes."

Kirsty, Edinburgh Food Social

"I am really going to miss Get Togethers, it is an excellent catalyst to inspire and take the next step. It helped us do more than 'just food' – we now connect people to plants and where their food comes from and that is down to Get Togethers. You have to see it to be it. It is like the very best virtual hand holding, but one where you are heard too and can share ideas and also learn so much."

Vicky, The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS)

The model appears to have been particularly successful where there was good alignment between the aims of the Local Partner role and what a group or organisation was doing already. Connected to this it seems to have worked best for groups that were involved with frontline delivery across multiple domains rather than those who either had a very narrow remit or were not directly involved in service delivery.

Local Partners provided benefits to the Get Togethers programme in terms of working with diverse groups of people around the broad area of 'good food'. They helped create connectivity between individuals and groups working on similar aspects of community food at the local level. Local Partners also enabled diverse groups to access and engage with Get Togethers' learning resources, cooking and growing campaigns and small grants rounds.

Local Partners benefitted from the Get Togethers programme through:

- Acquiring new knowledge and skills.
- Promoting their work to a wider audience.
- Gaining new service-users and stakeholders.
- Being given the perspective and impetus to strategically develop their offer.
- The morale boost of being able to see their work in a broader context.

As part of the programme's 'test and learn' approach and something that was implemented relatively late in the programme there are inevitably aspects of the model that did not work so well. Multiple changes in Get Togethers staff were also disruptive for consistency of the Local Partner scheme. Our evaluation found that there were several considerations regarding the future development of local partnerships in this type of programme:

- It is important to provide clarity about the purpose of the role and how it should be operationalised.
- Local Partners might be enabled to administer their own small grants scheme.
- National leads should provide targeted support and focussed facilitation for Local Partners working on similar aspects of community food.
- National leads should be attuned to the skills and resourcing issues that can make it challenging for community food groups to work with the platforms and timings required by a much larger funding organisation.
- In a context where knowledge and skills are often shared with great generosity of spirit, it would be helpful to provide guidance and protocols around permissions and source attribution when drawing on and reproducing the work of others.

Creating a National Network

An important aspect of Get Togethers has been to support the aspirations of community food organisers by helping them make connections through their national and local networks. The focus on network building at a national level increased during the second half of the programme with the development of a programme of network events.

Our research between May to July 2022 sought to explore the experiences of participants and facilitators in networking events and associate work. Using a mixed methods study design, the research involved the analysis of programme records, a survey with 97 individuals engaged in programme Network Events and 19 in-depth interviews with participants and facilitators.

The core team were well placed to facilitate connections between local and national community-food stakeholders. Get Togethers 'Network Events' appeared to fulfil a latent demand for practical guidance and peer support and collaborations around community-scale action on good food.

Get Togethers networking activities indicated the potential for community-based food initiatives to gain traction, develop and broaden and deepen their impact through making regional and national connections with others working on similar issues. The evaluation also points to the potential for a central facilitating entity to occupy this community food supporting space into the longer term.

The increased emphasis on network building coincided with and was also given impetus by Covid-19. Changes in the pattern of social engagement that resulted from the pandemic created the conditions in which relatively large numbers of Get Togethers participants had both the desire and means to connect into national online events.

There is a large body of theory, research, and practice on strengthening networks in the context of civil society and social movements. To enhance their potential impacts, networks benefited from four conditions of (1) clear purpose, strategy, and activities (2) clear value proposition (3) well-defined network composition (4) effective governance, structure, and capacity.



Get Togethers Nations Networking Event, Spring 2023, Wrexham © Scott M Salt Photography



Get Togethers Nations Networking Event, Spring 2023, Belville community garden, Greenock

© Scott M Salt Photography

The key elements of Get Togethers work to support networks include the hosting of Network Events (mainly online), communications newsletters and campaigns, training, and support through local partnerships.

The Get Togethers Network Event series was launched in May 2021 and since then the programme hosted 22 online and 10 face to face events presenting a wide variety of themes and showcasing community food initiatives. Over the course of its delivery, over 4973 groups or individuals engaged with the programme, of whom 1921 registered for Network Events. From these larger figures, a small number (under 100) could be defined as 'highly engaged' in multiple aspects of the programme.

Participants found out about Network Events through a wide variety of routes. Previous engagement with the Soil Association and Food for Life or other national programme partners were important influences. It was notable that each Network Event to date attracted a significant fraction of individuals who have no prior record of engagement with the programme.

Get Togethers' Network Events and associated activities have proved to be popular with diverse individuals and groups from across the UK. Many were volunteers or working on the frontline in community settings and appreciated the welcoming and relaxed style of the events.

Reflecting on the value of the Network Events, participants reported a wide variety of benefits including practical ideas and the courage to implement them, affirmation of others, and the value of a shared space to talk. Sixty-nine per cent of survey respondents used ideas, knowledge, and contacts from the event to help organise food activities and 61% said that the session had strengthened their capacity to run food activities. Thirty-seven per cent of survey respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that their engagement with Network Events helped them lead their own peer networks.

These survey results indicate the value of the Network Events in building capacity, providing practical ideas and resources that participants were able to put into action and providing the impetus for the development of ongoing meaningful relationships.

Participants felt that Get Togethers Network Events helped them become more actively engaged in networking than before. This experience applied both to those who felt themselves already very active as to those who defined themselves as not at all active prior to attending a Network Event.

In total, 50% stated that they made connections with others following Network Events, of which a small proportion (13%) of super networkers made more than 16 connections out of events they attended.

Positive feedback on Network Events was statistically significantly associated with making post-event connections and willingness to take action on community food issues. These links lend plausibility to the idea that national networking events help stimulate local action.

Facilitators of Network Event also benefit through the opportunity to broaden their audience and create new collaborations on special topics.

Local Partners have themselves delivered Network Events. These have acted as a catalyst for the development of new working partnerships that were unlikely to have come about otherwise.

Interviewees and survey respondents illustrated a variety of roles in relationship to Get Togethers network activities. As wider research shows, understanding how to best work with these diverse capabilities and interests is vital for the growth of the network and its impacts.

There were difficult challenges involved in interpreting patterns of engagement, not least in terms of the factors that convert registration into attendance at events, supporting multiple attendance, and tracing onward actions arising from events.

The programme invested efforts to investigate and learn from patterns of engagement. The team recognised that there was scope to enhance and build upon existing network

activities. However, it should be noted that the focus on developing networks occurred relatively late in the life-stage of the programme, which has inevitably led to the need to retrofit planned activities and for post-delivery rationalisation. In the final year of Get Togethers, the programme team looked to enhance their approach to network building and create a legacy from which future community-based food initiatives can be supported.

Understanding the Priorities of Network Members

Over 3700 community-based groups have engaged with Food for Life Get Togethers. This probably represents only a small fraction of the agencies involved in community food activities in the UK. The purpose of this part of the evaluation was to obtain an insight into the priorities of people and groups involved in community food activities. The programme partnership emailed approximately 3000 contacts⁴ with a request to complete a survey developed by UWE. We obtained a total of 371 respondents (representing about a 12% response rate)⁵.

A large proportion of groups (53% n=160) were based in England and the leading description for type of group was 'informal group (not formally constituted)' (n=79).

About one-third of the groups (n=78, 30%) had an annual income of less than £5000 and were classified these as small organisations.

We sought to understand how different scales of organisation ranked their priorities. Compared to larger organisations, smaller organisations gave higher rankings to 'grant funding', 'more national networking opportunities', 'more mentoring and peer support', 'better access to local facilities', 'better access to volunteer support', and 'more help to campaign on community food issues'. This means that smaller organisations feel in need of more these factors to achieve their goals relative to large organisations.

⁴ The precise total is difficult to estimate, given that Get Togethers partners may have contacts in common, and some recipients did not fit the target criteria for the survey.

⁵ There were missing data for some of the responses and therefore some totals do not add up to 371. Proportions are reported excluding missing data as this gives a better indication of valid responses.

Further analysis showed a correlation between scale of organisation and types of priority. The smaller the organisation, the greater priority they place on 'more grant funding', 'more national networking opportunities', 'more mentoring and peer support', 'better access to local facilities', 'better access to volunteer support and 'more help to campaign on community food issues'. However, these correlations were not strong.

Most respondents (n=130, 43%) felt that more grant funding was extremely important in helping them attain the goals of their groups.

There were more respondents who felt that more local networking with like-minded groups (n=31) was extremely more important than more national networking with like-minded groups (n=16). This depicts the need to support more local connections for community food activity organisers.

Many respondents perceived training and information resources as very important (28%, n=29) in helping them to meet their goals; while only 6% (n=6) felt that this was slightly important.

When it came to more mentoring and peer support as a factor to help groups achieve their goals, a minority (26%, n=27) felt that this was moderately important and only one group saw this as not all important.

Only eight respondents (8%) perceived better access to local facilities such as kitchens and growing spaces not all to be important in driving them to attain their goals. A majority (26%, n=27) however indicated that better access to these local facilities was extremely important in helping them achieve their goals.

Volunteer support was seen by many respondents as an extremely important factor in achieving their goals (27%, n=28).

While fewer respondents (18%, n=19) perceived more help to campaign on community food issues to be slightly important in attaining their goals, most respondents (25%, n=26) ranked this to be moderately important as a catalyst in achieving their goals.

67.0%

PERCENTAGE OF ACTIVITIES THAT WERE REGULAR (AT LEAST SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR) – TAKEN PLACE TO DATE

There were other factors that respondents identified as essential in contributing towards attaining their goals. These included: developing children's knowledge of the food they eat; food donations; showcasing activities; helping people in need; keeping abreast with food legislation/rules; co-operation from the Council Environmental Health Department; reassessment of food hygiene laws; more access to free food and hygiene courses; more care services for community members; more constructive exchanges; support around academic training and careers in food systems/public health work and trustee development.

Conclusions

One outstanding point of learning from the partnerships and networks components of the programme has been the scale, breadth and depth of activities across the UK that might be defined as 'Get Togethers'. If the programme engagement represents a window into this world, many run through voluntary efforts and obtain little funding. They are remarkably diverse and have few or no affiliations – in the form of partnerships and networks – with other agencies.

This finding highlights the case for further work to gain insight into the needs and interests of existing and potential groups working in this field. There are also roles for national and larger local organisations to support smaller agencies. As the survey of priorities indicates, many of the 'asks' of small agencies delivering Get Togethers activities are relatively low cost and realisable. The next sections of this report provide evidence of the range of benefits that such groups can bring when given (often modest) support and opportunities to learn from each other.

MOBILISING COMMUNITIES THROUGH **SMALL GRANTS**

Small grants formed a key route for Get Togethers to engage over 900 (mainly small) community groups and organisations from across the UK. Over the course of the programme, Get Togethers delivered a series of small grant initiatives on different themes, but all with the intention of helping organisers to deliver Get Togethers activities within their community. We evaluated the two leading small grant schemes within the programme called “Cook and Share” and “Plant and Share”. Although wider evidence shows that small grants (or ‘microgrants’) are often used to support small community initiatives, there is relatively little research on what happens to the funding – particularly where the spending goes towards food-based social activities. Using a mixed methods study design, we analysed the plans of organisers and surveyed their experiences of putting their grant awards into practice. We collected further qualitative data through interviews and case studies.



EXPERIENCES OF **SMALL GRANT AWARD HOLDERS**

Many of the volunteers live by themselves. Like myself – my husband died six years ago. We get more out of it than we put in really. We thoroughly enjoy it.

Even though people have a language barrier or a different economic and political agenda, it doesn't matter when it comes to food...we can easily communicate through the food.

On one hand the £150 wasn't much, but on the other it was. This was a way of us being able to go "Oh look, we've managed to get a little grant!" It gave us the drive to think, "We've done this, we can fundraise."

What started off as a gardening group became a lot more. We didn't ask for formal feedback but the fact they kept coming was enough for us. It's amazing how far £150 has gone.

Photo: Plant and Share Event, Clydach Community Garden, Swansea, Summer 2023
© Scott M Salt Photography

Cook and Share Small Grants

Under the Cook and Share scheme community organisers applied for a £150 grant to deliver cooking and sharing activities that would bring people together from disadvantaged and diverse communities. The aspiration was that these activities would reduce experiences of loneliness and social isolation and also intended to promote positive attitudes towards ageing and diversity. While the focus was on Cook and Share Month (October to November), organisers were encouraged to run events on longer-term basis. Our research sought to explore how these microgrants might help build community action and promote the value of good food.

We analysed the plans of all 153 successful grant holders for the 2021 cohort. A total of 88 award holders responded to our survey about their funded activity. Of these, 19 leads took part in an in-depth qualitative interview about their small grant.

The Cook and Share grant scheme in 2021 attracted a remarkable range of small-scale organisations and groups serving different communities of place and interest. Cook and

Share events were often substantial social occasions, with the estimated number of participants at an event, or events, ranging from 10 to 400, with a mean of 39 and mode of 20 participants.

While most groups of participants involved multiple generations, it was also notable that there was also strong engagement with people living with mental health issues, long-term conditions, on low income, or with other forms of social and health disadvantage.

Small grants benefited organisers differently depending on their experience. First timers stood to gain basic skills in setting up community cooking events. Those with more experience used the opportunity to reach for more ambitious goals. This shows how grant givers can work with community food groups to grow the capabilities of people who get involved.

Organisers have a wide range of motivations for wanting to run a cook and share activity. Alongside a desire to support good causes, personal benefits (social connections, skills, feelings of achievement and recognition) were important drivers for organisers.



Cook and Share Event. Hornbeam Community Cafe and Environment Centre, London, Autumn 2022
© Edward Shaw Photography



Cook and Share Event, Community Supporters Charity, East Sussex, Autumn 2022 © Edward Shaw Photography

The majority of organisers felt that their Cook and Share events help improve the quality of life of participants (92%), enhance positive attitudes towards ageing (64%) and diversity (68%), and address loneliness and isolation (83%). Almost everyone believed their event(s) helped people connect with each other (99%).

Almost all organisers go on to run further activities after their first event. The strong commitments set out in the applications were confirmed at survey three months after this first occasion. This provides evidence that the grants had benefits that extended beyond the funding of the initial Cook and Share event. Organisers also learnt from experience, with over 50% intending to make additional changes.

Organisers reported a range of positive developments after the grant period. Groups that were first time recipients of external funding felt an enhanced sense of the status of their group and had a new perspective on what the group could potentially accomplish in the future.

Some Cook and Share grant recipients used the initial monetary award to attract further cash and in-kind funding. Others used creative means to make the grant funding stretch further.

Cooking and sharing events appear to be powerful connectors for participants. This was partly because food-based events made social interactions feel less threatening and encouraged those experiencing social anxiety to attend in the first place. Events provided opportunities to make conversation, swap points of view, find out about others, help out in small ways, and generate ideas for other community activities.

The quality of the food was important for many organisers and participants. For some groups, shared meals were a way to provide nutritious food to those experiencing food poverty in a way that preserved the dignity of recipients. However, grant holders showed many ways to engage with agendas on 'good food' those linked to the environment, learning, local production, culture and celebrations.

Given sensitivities and different points of view about what makes food 'good', many organisers made it a priority to give participants the opportunity to make decisions about what they wanted to cook and how they wanted to eat together.



Plant and Share event, Back to Our Roots, Cardiff, Summer 2023 © Scott M Salt Photography

Plant and Share Small Grants

As with the Cook and Share scheme, under Plant and Share £150 grants were made available to community groups, but in this instance the emphasis was on the role of food growing activities in promoting social connections. Our evaluation focused on the 2022 cohort in which 240 groups across the UK obtained a grant to coincide Plant and Share month (April–May 2022).

Of the 240 grant holders, 83 (34.6%) leads completed a UWE online survey about approximately six months after Plant and Share month. A wide range of groups were recipients of the Plant and Share grants. Given the focus of the grants on food growing, it was not surprising the leading description of type of organisation was for ‘allotment, community garden or community farm’.

In terms of annual income, the leading category of grant holding groups was an income under £5000 (n=26, 40%), while a smaller proportion of grant recipients (n=15, 23%) had an income of over £100,000.

Survey respondents were 83% female and 16% male⁶, the modal age bracket was 40–49 years, and 85% identified themselves to be of a White ethnic background. Respondents were active in groups from all four home nations.

For most organisations, this was the first occasion on which they had run a Plant and Share type activity (81%). Only 27% of groups had been involved in organising community food activities for more than 3 years.

Survey respondents were asked to estimate the total number of participants in their Plant and Share activities. From 73 respondents’ answers, the mean was 33 participants (minimum 5, maximum 180, standard deviation 28)⁷.

⁶ 1% of respondents preferred not to say.

⁷ One respondent estimated 1000 participants based upon the total number of pupils in their school. As an extreme outlier this estimate was excluded from the analysis.

A wide range of different social groups were engaged in the Plant and Share activities, with 'older people', 'children and younger people' and 'families' the three most frequently selected options. There was also representation from groups that might experience social disadvantages such as those experiencing mental and emotional distress.

Respondents named growing a wide range of produce, including at least 61 different types of fruit and vegetables. Based upon the leading varieties reported, many grant holders had a good season for courgettes, tomatoes, potatoes, pumpkins, strawberries, multiple types of salads and herbs.

The majority respondents felt that their Plant and Share activities helped participants connect with others in the community (97%⁸), enhance positive attitudes towards diversity (60%) address isolation and loneliness (89%), and improve attitudes towards ageing (53%). All four of these perceived effects were significantly associated with one another.

Event organisers themselves benefit from Plant and Share activities. It was evident that there are important impacts for organisers in terms of bringing people together, helping people obtain healthy, low cost (or free) food and developing connections with other organisers.

As part of Plant and Share in 2022, Get Togethers provided resources that might be helpful for small grant holders. Of these resources, 39% (n=32) accessed the Facebook community site for Get Togethers, 57% (n=47) made use of the Plant and Share toolkit, and 11% (n=9) engaged with Get Growing online training events.

The strong commitments set out in the original applications for the small grant were also reported at the point of the post event survey. These included engaging new people, bringing people together through food growing and raising funds. As with the Cook and Share scheme, this provided evidence that the grants had benefits that extended beyond the funding of the initial plant and share activities. Only two respondents reported that they did not continue with a similar activity after the event.



Plant and Share Event, Clydach Community Garden, Swansea, Summer 2023 © Scott M Salt Photography

⁸ "Strongly agree/somewhat agree". N=73.

Survey respondents were asked to state how important a range of options for future support for groups that they represent or serve, their organisations and their own development. Of the options presented, 'more funding opportunities' and 'more local opportunities to network with like-minded groups' featured most strongly.

In terms of size of grant opportunities relevant to their needs, respondents were equally split between an option for very small grants of up to £1000 and the option for grants between £1000 to £10,000 (41% for both options).

Small organisations (annual income under £5,000) are more likely than larger organisations to state that the following issues are important to them:

- Better access to local facilities (kitchens, growing spaces etc)
- Better access to volunteer support
- More help to campaign on community food issues

Small organisations are more likely than larger organisation to state that small grants of £100–£1K (rather than larger grants over £1k) are most relevant to their needs.

On issues of mentoring and peer support, training and information resources, networking opportunities there were no significant differences when comparing different scales of organisation by income.

Regarding future priorities and scales of grant, there were no significant differences between organisations that had previously run plant and share type activities and those that had not.

After their Plant and Share award, organisations that have not raised more funding are more likely than those that have to state that they are seeking small grants of £100–£1K. But are otherwise not significantly different in term of their other priorities.

Individuals that reported that they have learnt new skills in growing food/gardening are more likely to state that small grants of £100–£1K are important for them as a future priority, but a no different in terms of their prioritisation of other issues such as training and mentoring.

Conclusions

The focus of our research on small grants provided a window into a rich field of community and voluntary action across the UK. As a microgrant schemes, Cook and Share and Plant and Share have been popular with a wide variety of community groups seeking to run many types of activities.

Small grants for community food activities provide opportunities for funders and organisers to think creatively and try new ideas. Award holders demonstrated a wide range of achievements both around how to use food in social activities and how to create wider benefits for the communities they serve. Small grant schemes of this nature appear to deliver good value for money in terms of the scale and diversity of community engagement, with additional benefits for the organisers themselves in terms of skills development. There remains scope for further research in terms of understanding the longer-term effects of small grants. There is also a need to understand whether added value can be achieved when small grants are integrated with other support (such as mentoring and coaching) and how small grants can provide the platform for award holders to create learning networks among themselves. One legacy from the Get Togethers Small Grants initiative has been to inform how the national partners take their grass-roots engagement work going forward. For example, Food Sense Wales now guides multi-sectoral local food partnerships on how to make optimal use of small grants to stimulate public involvement in local food issues.

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY
LEADERSHIP THROUGH

MY FOOD COMMUNITY

In the context of a cost-of-living crisis, many activists are working within their communities to promote access to affordable, healthy, and sustainable food. Yet there are very few opportunities to share experiences, ideas, and resources between such community food 'champions', and to develop the skills needed to create change. An important element of the Get Togethers has been My Food Community (MFC): a community leadership programme intended to create 'a network for good food champions to learn, connect and take action'.

Central to the MFC design has been an ethos of 'test and learn', making the programme flexible and adaptive according to feedback during delivery. This iterative approach was intended to help the team refine the programme as it develops. In the second year of MFC, key revisions to the programme included using new channels for recruitment, presentation of more materials in advance, greater emphasis on the learning objectives and reflection processes, and a focus of the small grant on developing personal leadership skills.

EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS IN MY FOOD COMMUNITY

[I wanted to] develop my knowledge, skills and confidence to create change in my local community in the food system and connect and learn from other leaders creating change in other communities and places in the UK.

I am so often caught up in the day-to-day and just don't get the chance to actively reflect. This course...brings me into a space where everyone is working with one another to do the same thing...

Very useful from a technical perspective, and super-inspiring on a personal level. The number and variety of experiences stimulated by this programme that have led to tangible and significant real-world progress, is remarkable.

The MFC programme has exceeded my expectations. The facilitation and training have been excellent, with supportive and knowledgeable hosts and inspiring guest speakers, and a network of incredible people to learn from and share with each week.

My Food Community has been invaluable in gaining confidence to approach businesses, community leaders and individuals with my ideas... I learned how to place myself and learn skills in listening, how to position myself and how to succeed. Two years ago, I think I would have struggled to get this project to be a success.



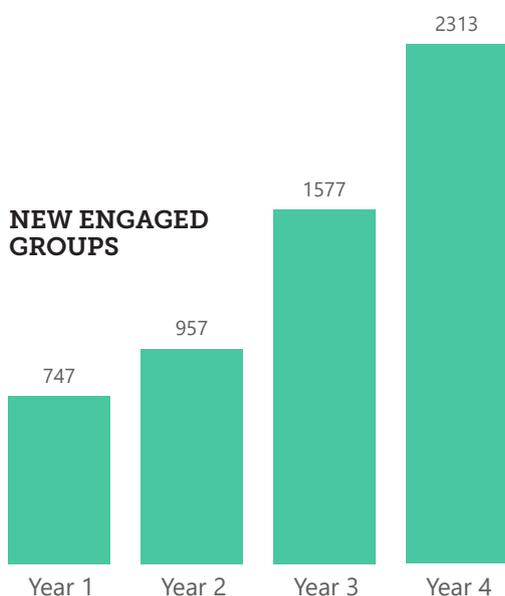
Virtual Get Together Event, Linking Generation Northern Ireland (LGNI), Winter 2021 © LGNI

Our evaluation of the MFC programme followed a mixed methods design that was tailored to two delivery runs that started in September 2021 (Version 1) and September 2022 (Version 2). We sought to explore the impacts of the programme on the community food leadership of participants as well as participant perceptions of the delivery and value of the programme itself.

MFC Version 1: Summary of the evaluation findings

The profiles of 39 participants in Version 1 showed that they were active across a wide range of community food projects prior to applying to the programme, with the majority involved in community events and workshops, activities associated with reducing food insecurity or growing produce. At the outset, 13 of 39 participants described themselves as being passionate about connecting communities and bringing people together through food, whilst reducing food waste, sharing food, food education and gardening or growing were all leading areas of interest.

Attendance fluctuated in the online sessions, with a core group of around one third of participants remaining highly engaged over the full course of the programme. Feedback showed that participants: felt a sense of confidence and kudos from taking part in a programme with national profile, had developed their personal networks at a national level, and changed their ideas around leadership and their own aspirations.



A survey of 22 participants, 12 months after the start of the course (and six months after receiving the small grant) found that a majority (73%, n=16) 'strongly agreed' that their grant helped them to apply their learning from MFC. Recalling their experience, over 85% of respondents reported to have made several connections after taking part in the MFC programme in terms of sharing ideas, contacts, resources or working together on activities with others involved in food issues. A majority gave improved self-reports for a range of measures relating knowledge competencies, and skills for community food work and leadership. These self-reports helped shape the measures adopted for the evaluation of Version 2.

MFC Version 2: Delivery and participation

For the baseline survey of MFC Version 2 (n=54/77), most of the respondents were women (65%, n=35) and from a White ethnic background (56%, n=30). The majority of the survey participants were aged 40–59 years = (37%, n=20). About one third described themselves as 'professionals' (35%, n=19), mainly from community and voluntary sector organisations. Most participants (44%, n=24) carried out their activities in England and the rest of the activities took place in Northern Ireland (7%, n=4), Scotland (9%, n=5) and Wales (9%, n=5).

Depending on the type of training, between one third and a half of participants had no prior experience of professional development support in five years. At the outset, 41% did not perceive themselves to be a 'leader' in food activities. Overall, participation in prior training courses was not statistically associated with better self-perceptions of skills and competencies linked to community food leadership.

At the start of the programme, participants had high expectations. The main themes concerned their desire to make connections new people outside their networks who share interests on community food issues. Other themes reflected the goals of the programme, which was a good indication that the MFC application and selection process was well targeted.

The programme records show that the team delivered 26 online sessions over a six-month period. These covered themes around networking with the cohort, leadership approaches and skills, learning and inspiration on community food issues, peer-to-peer mentoring, and review/evaluation.

The team maintained contact to the end point of the online sessions with nearly all individuals enrolling with the programme (75 of 77). Records showed that session attendance varied between 49 to 18 people per session. About half of the cohort attended 25% or more sessions of the programme in real time (participants had the opportunity to catch up with recorded sessions). Attendance between different types of sessions varied, but there was little overall difference between the leadership component and the learning and inspiration component of the programme. Thirty five members attended one of the face-to-face events. A small number (n=3) had a very high level of overall attendance (75% or more) across the course of the programme. For those taking part in sessions, the feedback was consistently very positive, with the overwhelming majority strongly or very strongly agreeing that they felt they had met the specified learning objectives. From the total cohort of 75 completing the training element of the programme, 31 went on to successfully apply for the MFC Leadership Action Grant.

MFC Version 2: Effectiveness in developing knowledge, skills and competencies

At six months from the start, 31 participants completed a follow up survey. Out of these, 18 provided personalised codes that allowed us to directly link follow-up responses to their baseline survey responses. At follow-up, we obtained representation from all demographic variables reported at baseline, albeit there were higher proportions who identified as women, White and aged 50–59 years. Members of MFC Version 2 who took part in the evaluation baseline and follow-up surveys reported significant improvements ($p < 0.05$) in the following areas:

- Advocating and initiating for sustainable food-related issues within their communities
- Helping others to take action on healthy and sustainable food-related issues within their communities
- Developing ideas around healthy and sustainable food-related issues in their local communities
- Raising awareness around healthy and sustainable food-related issues in their local communities
- Helping others to identify opportunities to promote healthy and sustainable food-related activities within their local communities
- Inspiring others to contribute to healthy and sustainable food-related issues within their local communities and actively connecting with others outside their local communities in food activities
- Skills and leadership in driving local food activities
- Personal understanding of food citizenship
- How to become an active food citizen
- Active reflection on how to influence healthy and sustainable food related issues
- Leadership in healthy and sustainable food-related activities within and beyond their community

This wide range of positive impact findings indicate that MFC achieved many of its programme ambitions after six months of training.

MCF Version 2: Participant perceptions of the programme delivery

Participant perceptions of programme delivery help explain how many of the positive impacts were achieved. Several positive survey results showed that:

- The online and face-to-face environments enhanced flexibility to engage with the programme. The online sessions sometimes enhanced connectivity by bridging geographical barriers.
- My Food Community met or exceeded the expectations of members in various areas including leadership in food activities, networking, being inspired by others and learning new knowledge around food systems.
- Highlights that came through My Food Community for members concerned connections and networking, funding, opportunities for reflection, motivation and impact.
- Members found their Leadership Action Grant useful to enhance partnership working. They also found the grant helped them initiate and apply the knowledge and skills they had learnt from the My Food Community programme. They suggested that peer working or mentoring support would be helpful in developing the grant application.
- All those who were able to attend the face-to-face nation specific events, found them to be inspiring and motivating.



Plant and Share event, Kushinga Gardens, Birmingham, Summer 2023 © Scott M Salt Photography

Participants also reported on areas where there was scope for further improvement in the programme, these covered the following themes:

- Respondents found the use of Circle (the networking software platform) challenging and would have preferred a more user-friendly virtual platform.
- Some respondents felt that there was a balance between the Leadership Masterclasses and the Learning and Inspiration sessions; whereas others felt more focus needed to be given to the Learning and Inspiration sessions and more in-depth discussions on the leadership topics.
- Although respondents felt that the Action Learning Sets (ALS) were useful, they felt that they could have been better integrated into the programme and the virtual forms in which they took made them challenging to engage with. Poor attendance of the ALS sessions affected the value some participants got from them.
- Further areas for improvement included more networking opportunities, improvement in programme structure, better orientation into the programme, more collaborative working, mentoring and more in-person sessions.

To summarise, the evaluation showed that members of MFC Version 2 reported significant improvements in the following areas:

- Developing knowledge and understanding of food citizenship and local food system issues.
- Applying specific leadership skills to work on food issues with diverse communities and situations.
- Raising awareness and supporting other community members take action on food issues.
- Influencing local policies and programmes on food issues.
- Developing actions beyond their own community of interest or place.
- Reflecting upon their personal journey and developing strategies for personal growth as leaders on community food issues.

Conclusions

The evaluation findings of Version 1 of the programme helped shape the evaluation focus for Version 2. Both waves of the evaluation indicate that the MFC had beneficial impacts on the knowledge, competencies and skills of participants in the broad field of community food leadership. The quantitative outcome evidence was very consistent with the qualitative evidence, suggesting that many of the self-reported changes could be attributed to participation in MFC, rather than other factors. As with many voluntary training courses that run over a six to twelve month duration, levels of participation fluctuated. For both deliveries of the programme, roughly one half were heavily engaged, one quarter were moderately engaged, and one quarter were lightly engaged or disengaged. For the positive outcomes, the evidence is most visible for those that had strong engagement with the process, which is to be expected from a participatory programme. With its earlier inception, for Version 1 there is longitudinal data based upon participants' use of the small grant. This provides good evidence that participants continue to derive value from MFC many months after they completed the online training. Indeed, there is significant potential for participants to continue to benefit over time with the delivery of further programme runs and the growth of a network of MFC alumni. A key legacy from the MFC component of Get Togethers has been the preparedness of the Soil Association and its partners to invest further in leadership skills development for organisers of community food initiatives.

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Front cover photo: Plant and Share Event, Clydach Community Garden, Swansea, Summer 2023

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