Case Report 3

Food for Life Get Togethers and the Community Plate

Food for Life Get Togethers and The Community Plate

"The Community Plate"

Voluntary sector and civil society organisational leadership in food procurement– the production, acquisition, preparation and serving of food in community settings - to improve the diet, nutritional health and social wellbeing of vulnerable populations

Contents

Executive Summary

This is one of three reports providing an evaluation perspective on the second year of the Food for Life Get Togethers programme (2020-21), a national scheme to connect people through cooking, growing, sharing and eating good food.

The focus of this report is to consider Get Togethers within the wider sphere of community-based social food activities that fall outside commercial and public sector food system. We use the concept of the 'Community Plate' to draw attention to a range of these activities, their connections to each other, and the range of impacts they create.

This report is based on research conducted with fourteen Food for Life Get Togethers projects in the winter and early spring of 2020/21. It covered a particularly challenging time during national lockdowns across the UK when restrictions on social events were in place. The research provides an exploration of project origins, goals and organisational connections alongside more recent changes in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

Events surrounding the pandemic have demonstrated the importance of other actors apart from those in public institutions. Voluntary sector and civil society agencies have been remarkably responsive and resourceful in addressing the food needs of communities – often working with those most marginalised from mainstream welfare efforts.

Project participants emphasised that Get Togethers are strongly grounded in the lived experiences of communities. Often, they have their basis in small scale informal actions amongst neighbours and networks of acquaintances. These community contributions set normative expectations of how more organised forms of activities work. Small scale community groups (constituted and non-constituted) provided a basis to go beyond their existing social networks to reach a wider range of people. These groups take a wide range of forms and are shaped by the faith, social enterprise or activist concerns of members but share a common concern with the role of food in creating better connected communities.

Community centre hubs and virtual community networks have a role in aggregating and enhancing the reach and quality of provision of small groups. Evaluation participants reported on the value of these organisations, although there are issues around coordination and competition for limited resources. At the larger geographical level, particularly of the local authority, evaluation interviewees reported on the importance of a range of organisations in coordinating volunteering, food distribution, training and other resources. The leading agencies differ considerably in their goals and structures with respect to community food support, which can be difficult for grass roots projects to navigate.

For each of the projects taking part in the evaluation, their context indicates that community-based social food activities are widespread and – in some situations – form a community web of voluntary sector and civil society support for diverse groups. Despite their contributions to food security, social cohesion and social wellbeing, such grass roots initiatives are often overlooked in local and national policy, funding, and service commissioning.

Recommendations arising from this research include:

- Food for Life Get Togethers is well placed to enable exemplar networks and showcase their work. Through work with project leads and locally commissioned partners, Food for Life might facilitate the third sector and civil society leadership in social food activities through toolkits and alliances with partner organisations engaged in this field.

- Through publicity and advocacy work, Food for Life Get Togethers has an important role in giving voice to community-based social food initiatives, showing how work in this area can address strategic priorities for service development and commissioning at the local level. This is a field that also needs recognition in UK and devolved national work on national food strategies.

Introduction

This is one of three reports providing an evaluation perspective on the second year of the Food for Life Get Togethers programme, a national scheme to connect people through cooking, sharing and eating good food. The focus of this report is to consider Get Togethers within the wider sphere of community food activities that fall outside commercial and public sector food system. We use the concept of the 'Community Plate' to draw attention to these activities and start to examine how this sphere impacts on vulnerable and marginalised social groups. This includes an exploration of project origins, goals and organisational connections alongside more recent changes in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

The following sections outline the Food for Life Get Togethers programme and the wider field of community and voluntary sector food activities before reporting on research with 14 projects engaged with the programme.

Food for Life Get Togethers Programme

Food for Life Get Togethers is a UK wide programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and delivered with the support five national partners (see https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/get-togethers). 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". Food for Life provide the following definition of Get Togethers:

> *"regular community activities that connect people from different ages and backgrounds through growing, cooking and eating good food."*

The three key elements of Get Togethers are (1) the importance of that is good for people and planet, (2) people from different generations or backgrounds coming and (3) the creation of 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.

Food for Life Get Together is delivered in regions of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland by a partnership of six organisations led by the Soil Association. Since the start of Food for Life Get Togethers, 1710 different organisations or groups have engaged with the programme[1]. Engagement took multiple forms, including registering Get Togethers activities, receiving a grant, attending virtual networks and completing our online training modules. A total of 1274 Get Togethers activities were registered to take place in this time, reaching an estimated 66,106 people[2]. Up to 78% of activities were expected to take place regularly[3].

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[1] Programme records up to 31 May 2021.
[2] Based on FFLGT registration data
[3] Based on Year 2 data.

Context

In this report we use the concept of the Community Plate to refer to the role of the voluntary sector and civil society engagement with food issues. We define the Community Plate as:

> *Voluntary sector and civil society organisation leadership in food engagement– the acquisition, preparation and serving of food in community settings - to improve social wellbeing, diet, and nutritional health, particularly of vulnerable populations*

The term provides a contrast to the concept of the 'Public Plate', a field in which the municipal, provincial, and national governments use food – particularly food procurement - in public institutions to improve the diet and nutritional health of vulnerable populations (Freudenberg, 2016, p.383). Both the Public Plate and the Community Plate contrast with what might be termed the 'Private Plate', or the sphere of social engagement with food that is characterised by market-based transactions. The leading place of the highly commercialised contemporary food system, framed around individual or household purchaser behaviour, can obscure alternative relationships based on food. The idea of a Community Plate draws attention to activities that are driven by forms of voluntary support, community contributions and locally situated interactions. Often organised on an informal basis, they are marginal to mainstream policy concerns but nevertheless constitute an important role in the lives of many, particularly those experiencing food insecurity and social marginalisation.

The Community Plate, with its emphasis on informal voluntarism, differs from other ways of thinking about community-based food organisation. For example, the concept of 'civil food networks' (Renting, Schermer, & Rossi, A. 2012) has tended to focus on consumer co-ops and solidarity buying groups of local and organic food, community-supported agriculture and collective urban gardening initiatives. A main point of reference for civic food networks is innovation within agri-food networks, whereas the Community Plate is primarily focused on the role of food-based practices in supporting social connections and addressing the food insecurities of vulnerable groups. Other concepts, such as 'food policy assemblages' (Sonto & Moragues-Faus, 2019) 'food movements' (Ashe and Sonnino, 2013) also take an interest in localised voluntary action but are primarily concerned with the potential of diverse groups to coalesce and create innovations in governance and policy. The types of initiatives illustrated in the Get Togethers programme tend to be less oriented towards policy and food system reform and more towards grass-roots visions of good community life. Nevertheless, as discussed below, there is a clear case to explore how this highly local orientation is supported through actions at greater scale and the processes that link micro and macro levels.

There is little doubt that food forms a point of reference, if not the basis, for many everyday interactions in community life. In informal settings, relationships between carers and recipients are often shaped around food provisioning, meals, and social visits involving food (Wiles, 2003; Milligan, 2016). In contrast to formal social care, the informality of such interactions means that they are often under recognised or valued despite their importance in the everyday lives of vulnerable groups. Such routine 'community contributions' represent acts of kindness and neighbourliness that form the basis for supportive local social networks, feelings of belonging, and bridging disconnection and division (Jones, Young & Reeder, 2016).
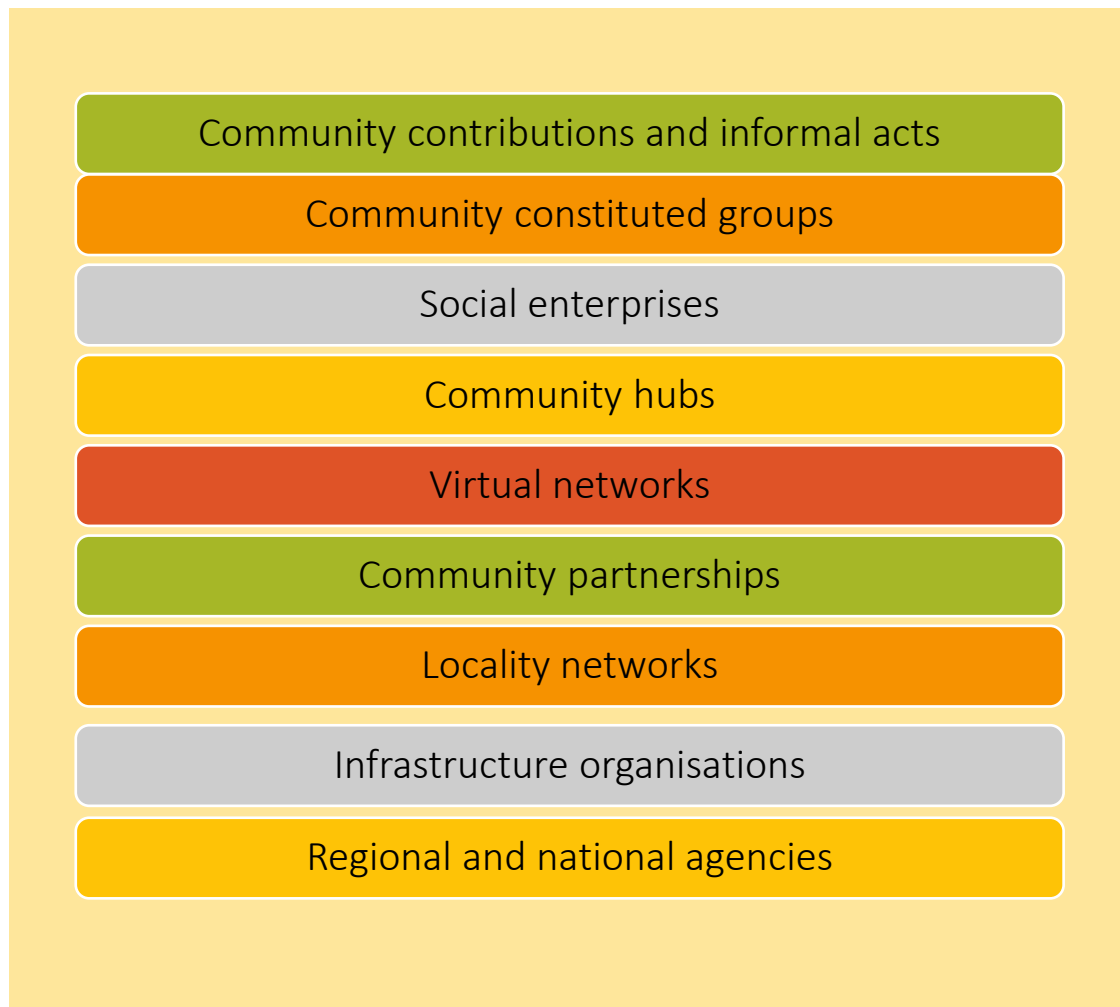
Furthermore, informal support is often the platform for more organised social action, particularly in terms of the transition into more formal voluntary roles in voluntary sector organisations (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011). Volunteers, where the opportunities are provided, bring local knowledge and connections to agencies, which in turn helps agencies ensure culturally appropriate provision and

obtain signals of opportunities and gaps for services (LGA, 2019). Voluntary sector agencies at the local level often comprise of a collection of highly diverse groups that focus on multiple issues, including new and emerging concerns that are not visible in mainstream policy circles. In the sphere of local food support, they can fill niches, bring novel solutions, and reach otherwise marginalised groups (Kirwan et al., 2015).

Voluntary sector organisations, often working with unstable resources and high levels of demand have limited capacity to address the scale of the social problems they encounter (Hemmings, 2017). They also often struggle to create a coordinated response given the autonomous organisation and diverse goals. Local community food initiatives, as with other spheres of voluntary sector activity, stand to benefit from higher level forms of organisational support (Kirwan et al., 2015). In any local context, a range of different forms of structures exist to meet this need. Area-based community hubs take on the role of a multi-purpose facility to host smaller agencies and activity programmes. Infrastructure, umbrella and national bodies provide a range of services such as access to specialist resources, training, funding, and advocacy. In this context, virtual online networks have formed a significant extension of civil society activity through the opportunities to draw together actors separated in time and space (e.g. Rheingold, 2000; Ganglbauer, et al., 2014). Despite restrictions on opportunities for in-person engagement, consequence of the pandemic appears to have been an intensification of civil society and voluntary food-focused activities all levels from the informal to infrastructural (Dayson & Damm, 2020; National Lottery Community Fund, 2020).

Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic model to represent civil society and voluntary sector structures that support social food activities. We draw upon this framework to further understanding of the context and pathways to impact of Get Togethers projects.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for the Community Plate

Community contributions and informal acts

Community constituted groups

Social enterprises

Community hubs

Virtual networks

Community partnerships

Locality networks

Infrastructure organisations

Regional and national agencies

Methods

This is a thematic case study of the role of communities of practice in social food projects. In this report we examine the following overarching research question:

How does the Community Plate perspective inform understanding of the impacts created through Food for Life Get Together activities?

The report therefore examines the evaluation overarching research questions through a community plate practice perspective:

1. To what extent, and in what ways, do people of different ages or backgrounds have stronger connections with each other in communities across the UK through cooking, growing and sharing good food leading to health and wellbeing?
2. To what extent, and in what ways, do participants of Get Togethers have a more positive attitude to ageing and/or people from different backgrounds in society as a result of being more connected through food?

Selection of projects

We requested a minimum of two projects from each of the programme delivery areas. Although we would have liked to use a purposive selective approach, regional managers felt that only a limited number of projects would be in a position to take part in the evaluation. We were therefore allocated a list of projects to contact. Follow up work with the project leads enabled us to contact and interview participants, wider stakeholders and individuals engaged in partnership projects.

Table 1: Projects taking part in FFLGT Year 2 evaluation

Project number	Type of organisation	Number of years established		Interviews / Written responses
Project 1	Community of interest organisation	Over 5	Volunteer run	5
Project 2	Youth arts organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	3
Project 3	Neighbourhood community centre	Over 5	Paid staff	3
Project 4	Older persons care home group	Over 5	Paid staff	3
Project 5	Outdoors community organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	5
Project 6	Outdoors community organisation	Over 5	Paid staff	3
Project 7	Voluntary sector infrastructure organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	2
Project 8	Faith-based food sharing organisation	Under 5	Volunteer run	2
Project 9	Volunteer food aid organisation	Over 5	Volunteer run	2
Project 10	Youth performing arts organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	3
Project 11	Participatory arts organisation	Over 5	Paid staff	6
Project 12	Faith-based food sharing organisation	Under 5	Volunteer run	4
Project 13	Outdoors community organisation	Over 5	Paid staff	2
Project 14	Neighbourhood community centre	Over 5	Paid staff	1
				44

Interview process

The interviews took place primarily by video conference with the assistance of a topic guide. These interviews were between 15 minutes and 110 minutes, with an average of 35 minutes. Five individuals replied to our request for interview by providing written responses to questions.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed in full. We used the framework method for the analysis of transcripts (Gale et al., 2013).

Ethical issues

Participants were requested by email to take part in an interview. Written information about the research and participants were asked to provide written or recorded verbal consent to take part in the interview. 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.

Findings

Overview

As Table 1 (above) shows, interviewees were from agencies that differed in terms of their staffing numbers and the role that volunteers played in operations. There was also diversity in terms of the level of organisation with respect to social food activities, with some focused at a very local level and, at the other end, some more concerned with delivery across a local authority area.

1. Making a community contribution: the origins of projects in personal experience and neighbour support

Nearly all Get Togethers initiatives began on an informal basis with very few resources. The biographies of those most closely involved was important in shaping the ethos of projects. The starting place for many individuals engaged in community food projects was rooted in personal experiences, often in experiences from family life or childhood.

> Granny would make, you know, cakes, and, you know, treats and lovely meals. And, you know, my mom did our best with it, you know, the cooking dish and family meals were a very special, lovely, positive experience for a group of that group of people. 11.3

> [Where I was brought up] we used to mix with a lot with people. We'd go out and help people, whether it's through poverty or through illness and things like that. Then when I came here to England, I thought well I might as well continue, so getting involved with [the project] was just a good opportunity for me to carry on with what I like doing. 12.4

For others, connections and help with neighbours, or other influential encounters, provided the stimulus to become involved in the project.

> My neighbour she's an elderly lady. I met her when we moved in. She was so good to us, gave us a hand and everything. It was through her that I got involved with [the project]. 12.3

2. Community constituted groups

Some leads described how they went from informal help amongst their social networks to taking a more organised approach. One group initially formed to provide an emergency response to the extensive flooding of people's homes, then became increasingly formally organised as an ongoing project to run events on a weekly basis. The events of the coronavirus crisis were a stimulus for some projects. At the start of the first lockdown, a group of teenagers and parents involved in a performing arts project used their networks to organise a delivery service of food boxes and meals across their local area.

> [When lockdown started] we didn't just want to sit here doing nothing. We wanted to be part of the solution, not the problem. So that's how we came about bringing food together and delivering parcels and meals to families who were running short. 10.1

Many of these small community constituted groups ran on small donations of cash or food – sometimes having to make up expenses through personal contributions.

> After our funds ran out, we'd been running from our own pockets and on fresh air. We managed till we got a grant for the Christmas period. 8.2

Projects had to be flexible, making the most of private donations, food surplus schemes and occasionally local produce. One community project rejected offers of highly processed foods and

designed its home distribution service around vegetarian meals cooked from scratch as an economical solution with broad appeal.

> Out meals are all vegetarian basically. It's an option that will appeal to more people. It keeps the cost down for us, and generally it's healthier.' 14.1

However, work with limited options could make it difficult to provide the types of foods that organisations might want.

> We try to discourage them from the junk food, but with the donations we get, you know, sometimes we go to Asda they'll give us a box and you're thinking, wow. We've just got crisps and pies and biscuits in here. 9.1

> Part of our operation is that we don't accept the donations from Tesco that are cakes and sort of nasty stuff. What we redistribute is basically fruit and vegetables, and not much else. 11.1

The latter agency volunteer talked about the priority to feed everyone well as being a matter of food justice and having a good relationship with food.

> We have vegetables, protein, fresh foods, cooked foods, rather than like takeaways and frozen meals so we cook everything from scratch, which I'll say is better to have a healthy meal when everything is cooked from scratch, like curries and mash stews and things like that. 12.3

A majority of the Get Togethers projects were running alongside covid emergency response initiatives that had been supported through government funds. Get Togethers projects appeared to extend the reach of these programmes to wider and more diverse networks of families and older people. The focus of Get Togethers on the social aspects of food and on good quality food went beyond the functional and impersonal provision of some food box scheme programmes. Social relationships built better trust around the intentions of project teams, better alignment between personal food preferences and provision, and a virtuous circle of new contacts through community networks.

Social entrepreneurship

Five of the Get Togethers projects were not-for-profit agencies that either operated as social enterprises or had a core member of the team with commercial expertise. This was not surprising given the cross-over of skills needed in the management of food businesses and community projects.

> What used to be a garden centre is now like a social hub for community and people come in and have a cup of tea and do whatever. We wanted to be able to share the love of plants and growing and all our knowledge and experience over the years, but in a way that was actually doing good in the community as opposed to just getting people to spend money. 6.1

For this agency, the experience of running a commercial business brought skills in managing budgets and running multiple projects to time. The main theme for other agencies was the experience gained from running commercially oriented cafés or festival events as a basis for organising community kitchens.

3. Community hubs

Community hubs, or multipurpose centres, had an important role in supporting Get Togethers-type activities. They provided venues, facilities, entries into existing community networks, and publicity routes. Several of the interviewees took part in Get Togethers events alongside other social events run through community hubs. The links between different activities helped bridge new relationships and draw in new people with needs, interests and skills. Community hubs were therefore well placed

to scale up participation and promote greater social cohesion through their pivotal position between diverse social networks.

> We're expanding though various groups almost working independently in our venue. It's a common community space and it's evolving in whatever way they want. It's all kind of working nicely together. 5.2

> We see ourselves as an organisation that is a bit of a node in a, a big network of people and groups and organisations and ideas and projects and actions. 11.1

Community hubs also acted as bridges to external funding and inputs through other organisations. Four agencies reported supporting social prescribing work with GP services. Others were involved in different forms of link, signposting and referral work with external agencies.

4. Neighbourhood partnerships and work with local agencies

Agencies leading on Get Togethers activities often expanded their reach and engagement through schools and other children and youth initiatives. These environments had ready-made social networks often enabling connections with other community initiatives, for instance through links to care homes and other community food projects. One agency team saw themselves as facilitating these connections through Get Togethers activities.

> We have streams of people coming to us from various areas. We work with school teachers, GP surgeries, social workers to make new connections. 6.1

In another case, the agency used its food growing expertise to rekindle activities in a cluster of schools.

> When we arrived, nobody [in schools] knew what to do with the growing spaces. They were an absolute mess. People were put off, because what happens is, they're growing something and it either grows like mad or they end dying over the holidays when they come back. We were able to connect our expertise with how to know how to work within the season within the school calendar and sort of work the seasons to go in calendar. 5.2

5. Virtual community networks

In the context of the pandemic restrictions all project agencies put greater efforts into promoting their work through virtual networks. This not only enabled projects to maintain some momentum and contact with core participants, but these agency-led social media-based activities also helped them extend their reach.

> We've definitely seen impact; our membership has continued to grow. We've had engagement on not just a local level but on a national level, in fact we had engagement from someone in Australia. 13.2

A particularly strong example was the connection between projects and the emergency food aid through Facebook-based Mutual Aid groups. However, two agencies felt that while their virtual work had enabled them to extend their reach, it was very difficult to understand the impacts of their work in the absence of direct feedback. For example, for one project a cooking demonstrate activity appeared to get many views, but less than ten viewers responded with likes or comments. The agency decided to suspend this work until they could feel more confident about their reach and engagement.

> We got some feedback from people saying oh yeah me and me and my kids have made this and made that but again it's difficult to know exactly what your impact is you're having when everything's online. 2.1

6. Volunteer coordinating hubs and infrastructure organisations

Nearly all the projects had some form of link with volunteer coordinating agencies and voluntary sector infrastructure organisations. However, Get Togethers projects were running in areas with quite diverse local authority and partnership structures, and the degree of coordination varied considerably. National funding for covid related emergency food support was discussed by several interviewees. This had injected short term resources which, alongside a wave of interest in volunteering, had led to efforts to create an organised response to food needs at the community level. One coordinating agency lead believed that the crisis had led to better partnership working between agencies.

> There were of food clubs and social eating projects that existed in the borough, but there was no connection between these projects. So, it was difficult to refer people to the right option, and we had to create some strong pathways around food. 7.1

In this instance, FFLGT provided grant support and advice to create better coordination. Agencies involved in social food activities and food distribution agreed to work through a central warehouse, have shared protocols for information sharing, and distribute areas of community focus between them. Smaller agencies were able to draw upon a wider range of foodstuffs on a more reliable basis and, as a consequence, extend their provision of meals and food boxes. Regular online meetings enabled agencies to share their learning.

> It's about working together and networking and making sure that no one's left behind. 10.1

> Covid has made small organisations go outside their small space – to think about coming together – we hadn't looked beyond our [faith group]. 8.2

> Everyone can come and air off in a safe environment. You know, have those difficult conversations, and say what's working and what's not. Especially [with the local authority] we can say where there are gaps and where you're not reaching people on the ground. 9.1

7. National agencies

Local project agencies experienced a range of benefits from national agencies, particularly those directly involved in the Get Togethers partnership. National bodies provided case studies of innovative practices, advice on governance and legal aspects, information about funding opportunities, and peer networks. Some project leads gave specific examples of other projects that had inspired them.

> I have to say I 'stole' the idea from Food for Life. We're doing a six-week cookery course, growing food and coming together and host the community cafe. So, we eat the products at the end as part of a community activity. 4.1

Another agency had learnt about how to better promote their projects through contacts made as part of a Food for Life Togethers event.

> We'd particularly keen to do some live cooking in the garden. We wanted to understand more about what's involved with in terms of health and safety, tips for activities and games and public promotion. We've made a few interesting links already with [another organisation. 1.1

Links to national programmes could provide additional recognition, particularly for agencies new to social food activities.

Our own credibility and visibility in the community has increased fast, I would say that a lot is due to Food for Life project last year. I think that boost from Food for Life last year was really enormous for us. 4.2

[Having started the Get Togethers project, we found] food was so important for the wider wellbeing of people. It was pretty key. So, yeah, we're definitely will definitely continue with sort of food-based initiatives. 6.3

From another perspective, several agencies adapted national schemes to their local context. For example, in one project the team developed a series of online cookery activities based around the theme of Veganuary. The range of food-focused calendar events and sponsoring schemes was reported to be difficult to keep abreast of for a minority of project leads.

Discussion: Community Plate and Pathways to Impact

The aim of this report has been to use the perspective of the Community Plate to inform an understanding of the impacts created through Food for Life Togethers. Interviewees taking part in the research represented agencies working at a range of levels of the community and voluntary sector led food system. Often initiatives built upon personal experiences at a very local level and had grown from one off events to longer term projects that brought together a team of staff and volunteers. Local projects were supported through community hubs, virtual and infrastructural organisations with the effect of forming a 'civil society ecosystem' for social food action.

In a similar pattern to the findings from Renting et al's study (2012), many of the projects engaged in this research may be seen as representing expressions of food citizenship that go beyond economic exchange and contribute towards the 'moralisation' of the food system. This is particularly demonstrated in the redistribution of foods, efforts to support the food security of vulnerable groups, and to express values of 'care' in social food activities. A feature of many of the projects was an interpretation of 'good food' that included engaging with the origins of foods, to cook from scratch, and a desire to resist the use of highly processed foods. Working with diverse groups, project leads and participants sought to find 'common ground' in the selection of meals and food based activities, for example through opting for vegetarian menus that would be enjoyed by all.

A recurrent feature of grass root Get Togethers projects was their organisational fragility. Few had ongoing funding continuity, secure tenure, or a long-term coordinating umbrella agency. While volunteering was a key element for the smaller delivery agencies, the resources to manage volunteers were highly constrained. Small agencies in particular reported tensions with larger agencies over the distribution of local funds (cf. Harris & Schlappa, 2008). The pandemic had led to the provision of government emergency grants; however these were largely short term and sometimes difficult to access. This environment of uncertainty had led some project agencies to contain their work to a small and therefore manageable and less risky scale. Part of the learning from the public response during the covid restrictions was of the latent potential for voluntary action on food issues. The surge of donations and in-kind support indicated public interest, often with the small capacity of voluntary organisations and associated infrastructures was a limiting factor (Jacklin-Jarvis & Haslam, 2020. The potential of voluntary sector and civil society action in this field was a subject that layered over the pre-pandemic challenges of public spending austerity and cuts to voluntary sector infrastructure.

National agencies – of which Food for Life Get Togethers is one body – were reported to assist community agencies with channelling resources, training, knowledge exchange, policy – which in turn can help with policy advocacy and amplify awareness and impacts of localised initiatives (Jones &

Hills, 2021; Pitt & Jones, 2016). There is, however, a large and diverse field of national agencies. This can be difficult to navigate for local agencies and potentially dilutes the value of community food social activities across a range of related agendas. Nevertheless, the acceleration of virtual forms of engagement during the pandemic clearly appears to have enabled a surge of networks and new connections between grass roots and national agencies that share a broad interest in the importance and potential of food-based activities at the community level. These emergent virtual communities represent some of the most visible and potent achievements linked to Get Togethers over the past year. Alongside networks hosted by the FFLGT partnership, there are close connections with the Sustainable Food Places 'Rise Up Network', the Covid-19 Mutual Aid Network on Facebook, and the Food Power Network, as well as other networks that take an interest in food alongside other issues.

At this point in the Food for Life Get Togethers programme there are some inviable limitations to this evaluation report. Clearly the pandemic events put a range of delays and restrictions to many of the planned events from Get Togethers participating agencies. A consequence has been that we have had a limited range of project and interviewees available to take part on the evaluation. There are, therefore, some elements of the Community Plate that feature only briefly in this study – but are likely to be likely to be of more significance in other contexts. Examples, include the place of virtual food networks, school-community networks and street-events. As the programme rolls out in years 3 and 4, we anticipate that there will be opportunities to engage a wider diversity of initiatives in the evaluation.

Implications and Learning

- Events of the last year have focused attention on community action on food security and related issues. There is evidence that agencies have been in closer dialogue and greater coordination worked than before. This context provides an unprecedented opportunity to promote the role of social food activities at the community level.

- There is considerable scope for documentation and sharing of learning between geographical areas. There are lessons to be drawn from local learning in each of the FFLGT programme delivery regions. This is an area that FFLGT might focus on in next phase of the programme, especially through supporting project leads and champions.

- In future evaluation for the programme, it would be useful to document how grass roots organisations obtain support from infrastructure and strategic organisations, particularly in areas with established good practice. Wider data from across the programme will help us understand the scale and generalise-ability of findings.

Conclusions

In this report we developed the concept of the Community Plate as a lens to understand the scale, organisation and public significance of the sphere of Food for Life Get Togethers-type activities. Taking a systemic perspective on the links between Get Togethers activities the report understands individual initiatives as a part of a wider sphere of action on a range of issues such as food insecurity, social cohesion and the promotion of nutritional health. Events of the last year have highlighted the

significance of food support work at the level of neighbourhoods and social networks. They have also demonstrated the connections between the local level and a web of support organisations that, at their most effective, can coordinate food support for vulnerable groups and transfer learning. In this sphere of voluntary and civil society action, Food for Life Get Togethers programme has a national role in helping to articulate these expressions of food citizenship The programme is well placed to gather and share learning between local areas across the UK. This could include creating a better understanding of how grass roots organisations can obtain the support they need from infrastructure and strategic organisations.

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