Case Report 1

Food for Life Get Togethers and Community Development

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"Community Development"

A process where community members come together to find solutions to shared concerns that matter to them. It is concerned with changing power structures to remove barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues that affect their lives. The focus is on individuals, groups and networks that want or need to cooperate in order to achieve change at a local or community level.

"Commensality"

"A practice that fulfils the role of strengthening cohesion among the members of a group, both in serving as an interactive space and in symbolizing a sense of belonging and respect for shared norms" Giacoman (2016, p.460)

Contents

Executive Summary

Food for Life Get Togethers is a four-year programme running from 2019 to 2023. This report is one of three concerned with Year 2 of the programme. 'Get Togethers' are regular community activities that connect people from different ages and backgrounds through growing, cooking and eating good food. 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 for everybody during national lockdowns across the UK. The report demonstrates how project leads and participants adapted to these circumstances through drawing upon new and established routes for community development.

Community development is highly influential in community food programmes and is recognised as a basis to address leading social and public health issues such as conflict, exclusion, loneliness, food insecurity, and long-term poor health. The Get Togethers Year 2 evaluation found that community development principles and processes are widely adopted by Food for Life Get Together projects. Food for Life Get Togethers initiatives often originated through the lived experiences of community members. They identified common concerns and shared interests and developed social capital that helped both bond and bridge connections between social groups.

Many projects had a strong informal element, shared decision making, learnt through practice, and made use of a wide range of community assets. While some projects were time limited, most were part of a longer term effort to build partnerships, develop community capacities, and embedded action into the fabric of communities.

Food-based activities, particularly eating together or 'commensality', give shape to these principles and processes of working. In doing so community development practices demonstrated a close affiliation to social food activities both as means and ends to the promotion of a range of benefits.

Appreciation of community development processes are important to understand the emergent and diverse outcomes of projects. In many instances specific impacts are discovered through action, rather than predetermined at the outset.

Evidence from projects shows that social connectedness was felt to be an underlying driver for shaping individual health, wellbeing, personal learning, and social attitudinal changes. A strength of the Food for Life Get Togethers project approaches was the emphasis on creating sustainable behavioural change that is strongly self-directed and not dependent upon service-led interventions.

Implications and learning for Food for Life Get Togethers include:

- While community development projects are often slow to develop, they have a strong track record of demonstrating their sustainability and resilience over time. The evaluation found that the Food for Life Get Togethers programme can have a role in facilitating the establishment and embedding of activities in communities.
- There are clearly opportunities to share best practice between participating agencies on specific issues relating to community engagement given that there are clear examples of innovative practice emerging from projects.
- It is important to recognise that limits on resourcing inhibit the ability of project agencies to realise their aspirations, particularly with respect to inclusive practice.
- In order to better demonstrate impacts, it is important to gather evidence of outcomes as they emerge.

Key recommendations for the development of the programme include:

- Food for Life Get Togethers might deliver short training inputs around aspects of community development relating to informal learning, collective action and organisation development.

- Food for Life Get Togethers is well placed to share learning to the wider community development field on the value of social food activities as a promising route for good practice.

Introduction

The central theme of this report is an exploration of the relationship between Get Togethers and community development. We selected this focus because community development models, principles and practices emerged as a central feature of many projects engaged in the Year 2 evaluation. An appreciation of community development matters because it provides an insight into the pathways for impact for Get Togethers social food initiatives.

Community development is commonly associated with the power of group interactions and real world experiences. For such forms of engagement, the past year has been like no other. It has been a period of contrasts. Coronavirus restrictions prevented social gatherings, put a stop to many forms of formal and informal care, and placed already vulnerable groups in positions of greater social isolation, financial hardship alongside disproportionate risks of the virus itself. On the other hand, there has been a surge of neighbourhood support, voluntary engagement and innovation in community outreach. Food, and roles it serves in social support, has been at the centre of peoples' experiences of the pandemic. Community development initiatives have adapted to the turbulent context to find ways around and alternatives to connecting people through food. This report highlights some initiatives, most of which employed community development, from across the UK that have been taking part in the Food for Life Get Togethers programme. They form a diverse range of projects, operating in different local settings, through a variety of networks, distinctive goals, and with many age groups and lived experiences.

The report sits alongside two other reports on Year 2 of the Food for Life Get Togethers programme. These are concerned firstly with people's passions and interests aside from food that shape projects and, secondly, the civil society and voluntary community food context into which Get Togethers project take place.

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

Food for life Get Togethers

Food for Life Get Togethers is a 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). 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 good food in a broad sense of the term, (2) multiple generations coming together, 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].

Context

Understanding community development

Community development is a widely used phrase that covers multiple meanings. The following definition of community development brings together a number of key features building on Gilchrist and Taylor's review (2011), European Community Development Network (2014), and International Association for Community Development (2018):

> Community development is a process where community members come together to find solutions to shared concerns that matter to them.

> Its key purpose is to create a better overall life for everyone, through building communities based on justice, equality and mutual respect. It is concerned with changing power structures to remove barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues that affect their lives. The focus is on individuals, groups and networks that want or need to cooperate in order to achieve change at a local or community level.

The term community development can be used to describe an occupation, a way of working with communities, as well as a social movement. For all circumstances, Gilchrist and Taylor (2011: 10-12) provide a useful framework to draw attention to three 'vital aspects' of community development:

- informal learning
- collective action
- organisation development

Informal learning takes place predominantly through direct involvement in community activities. This might be understood as a form of experience-based community education where participants

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

try new activities, take on roles, and obtain feedback. In so doing this builds knowledge, skills and confidence that can support both personal and community growth.

Collective action involves finding the power of combined voices and determination; the strength of many people acting for their mutual benefit or to champion the interests of those who cannot stand up for themselves. A concern here is with the potential of social networks, and notably ideas linked to social capital. Drawing on the work of Putnam (1993), community development practice can be seen to work with three forms of social capital: bonding capital that brings together close-knit links between family and friends, bridging capital that links wider networks together, and linking capital that describe links that span different levels of power.

Organisation development consists of helping groups and bodies to evolve a form that enables the members to achieve their goals, to act legally and to be accountable to the membership and wider community. This work can be seen as following on from informal learning and collective action: where groups have reached a point where they are seeking to build more concerted and sustained forms of action that can benefit from a more formal footing.

There are a number of traditions of community development, each with somewhat different areas of concern. For example, 'community education' traditions clearly have a focus on processes of learning, while 'community organiser' traditions emphasise the importance of building resilient and inclusive groups to act on a cause. However – according to Gilchrist and Taylor – all forms of community development have a shared interest in the three vital aspects of informal learning, collective action and organisation development.

Figure 1 represents an adaptation of a leading model for understanding key elements of community development practice. As such it can be used to review projects and forms of practice to understand in what ways they correspond to central aspirations and principles. Not every community development initiative will demonstrate these elements at one particular point in time. However, over a project duration each can be anticipated to have a role in the implementation of good practice. This conceptual framework therefore represents a useful basis to interpret Get Togethers projects.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Community Development adapted from Community Learning and Development Competency Framework (CLDSC, 2017)

Social food activities and community development

Community development has a long and intimate connection to social food activities. However, these connections tend not to be reported in the overarching terms of how food activities shape community development, or *vice versa*. There is an extensive field of research on community-based growing and gardening projects, cooking projects, and food sharing and distribution schemes (e.g. Hake, 2017; Garcia et al, 2016; Veen, 2015). Many of these studies refer to practices that are commonly found in the field of community development. For example, many studies refer to the importance of local engagement, informality, experiential learning, relationship building, organisational development, and reflective learning (e.g. Marovelli, 2019; Firth, Maye & Pearson, 2011; Blay-Palmer, Sonnino & Custot, 2016). Considered from another perspective many studies allude to food-based interactions as a particularly salient route for achieving wider community development goals. Overall, while there is little research that has pulled together an overview of social food activities and community development, extensive literature touches upon relevant themes.

Eating together and social benefits

From a public health and wellbeing perspective, social food activities in community settings are reported to have a range of beneficial effects. This is well illustrated in the research on 'commensalism' or eating together. For many people, mealtimes can present three times a day when the lived experience of loneliness comes to the fore. In addition to feeling more connected, commensality is shown to lower stress, increase social bonding, and improve health outcomes (Pliner et al., 2006; Paquet et al., 2008; Dunbar, 2017). Commensality can therefore provide one solution to addressing social isolation and loneliness.

Commensality, the act of eating together, is widely thought to be beneficial for individuals, groups and society more generally. At the level of the individual, Grignon (2001) defines commensality as: "a gathering aimed to accomplish in a collective way some material tasks and symbolic obligations linked to the satisfaction of a biological individual need" (p24). Giacoman (2016) elaborates that commensality is a "practice that fulfils the role of strengthening cohesion among the members of a group, both in serving as an interactive space and in symbolizing a sense of belonging and respect for shared norms" (p460). Food is even thought to taste better in the company of others (Nakata and Kawai, 2017). From an evolutionary perspective, sharing food is thought to have evolved to facilitate social bonding, where 'people become more like each other' and to develop intimacy (Miller et al. 1998; Fischler, 2011; Dunbar 2017).

This section has provided an overview of community development and its relationship to food-based activities. The conceptual framework forms a point of reference for the research and its findings as presented in the following sections.

Methods

Design and research questions

This is a thematic case study of the role of community development approaches in community-based social food projects. In this report we examine the following overarching research question:

> **What role do community development principles and processes have in the impacts created through Food for Life Get Together activities?**

This question is intended to support the broader research questions that underpin the evaluation of the Food for Life Get Togethers programme:

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

The focus of these findings is on the roles and influences of community development on Food for Life Get Together activities. The sections are organised broadly in line with the framework for good practice in community development and corresponds to CLDSC cycle of community engagement (2017), starting with knowing and understanding communities through to reflecting on learning and sustaining initiatives.

1. Working with the life of the community

The majority of FFLGT initiatives grew out of an in-depth understanding of the local context and particularly the personal experiences of leading participants. One project lead felt that without these insights, there were risks that activities could be misplaced.

> You can often be way off beam if you haven't actually got first-hand knowledge, or don't have a very good understanding of your niche group - in our case, parents of children with additional needs and adults with mental health problems. 6.2

For food based activities there was an appreciation that community members had extensive personal knowledge.

> There's a wealth of natural knowledge, embedded knowledge, life knowledge from people in their home [environment]. Particularly over 60s, but not exclusively, it's what they know from everyday life and customary ways of being and knowledge that is handed down. 11.3

Food was considered to be a strong basis around which to start engagement –the enjoyment of eating together or issues such as food security were matters that people shared common feelings.

> I think there's something non-negotiable about food. You can discuss lots of things about food, but you don't have to discuss "Shall we eat or not?" You know, and everyone knows "That's wrong" if people can't eat, that's a kind of fundamental wrong in society, isn't it? People need to be fed and people need to be fed well. 11.2

> Food is great, everybody loves it, because we get to eat what's made and what's on the table. I think it's a real social event for people, I think people do connect [around food]. 4.1

Some agencies explicitly described how their project was developed on co-production principles in order to work with the lived experience and insights of community participants.

> We're an organisation that's very much run on a co-production basis. We're always out and about in the community and asking "What do you want?" 2.3

2. Connecting and bridging divides

Ideas of community self-determination informed many of the FFLGT projects. There was a strong theme of respect for the right and ability of communities to define their own issues and interventions. In this context, project leads served as coalition builders rather than the agenda setters.

> Food focused activities are always a good one to do because it's a great leveller. Everybody needs to eat, whether you're dealing with people who love to cook or don't like to cook. Bringing people together through an interest around food, it's a pretty good theme. 13.1

Project organisers often have to take a flexible approach to the running of events where the level of participation was hard to predict.

> We had got no idea how many people were going to turn up. 13.1

Food based events proved to be very successful where there had been extensive preparatory work to bring together different groups of people.

> The idea of the role that food could play in our community. It interests people what could be put on the table. It brought together people who didn't know each other. At the first event we had over 100 people from all walks of life. We had beautiful babies. A lady in her 90s. We had profoundly disabled people and somebody from the LGBT community. There was a real buzz. 13.2

A theme across a number of projects was the blurring of the distinctions between 'givers' and 'receivers' in food based activities. For example, at one nursing home the residents made gifts of food for women at a centre that supported people experiencing domestic violence.

> We teamed up with a women's centre - like disadvantaged women who would use the centre because they're single parents or they've been in domestic violent relationships. So we sent snack boxes to the woman's group, and had a wee note to thank the residents at the nursing homes. Then on Pancake Tuesday last week, we made fresh butter and sent a snack box to one of the other supported living accommodations. 4.2

Working with diverse groups could mean that there were differences that needed to be resolved in order to make events inclusive.

> Where there are massive clashes in personalities, we will try and work with those people to resolve it. But it's also a case of 'that's life '. Working with conflict is, is another skill set that's important for everyone to have. 6.1

3. Working with community assets

All FFLGT projects were working either in areas of social disadvantage or with groups experiencing forms of social exclusion. Projects often had limited opportunities to draw upon a range of existing facilities and community resources. However, rather than focusing on the deficits of areas and

groups, projects tended to concentrate on the opportunities available through existing community assets. For one project lead this was born out of poor experiences of working in a needs-based and service-driven environment.

> We felt like a lot of [participant and volunteer led] services can be created if you just have better connected communities, rather than relying on a paid service. And actually, identifying assets that you have in the community connecting those together, reduces the dependency upon paid service. 14.1

To reduce the sense of dislocation when running activities over a wide area, another project team had decided to embed their work more firmly in a local context.

> We were finding there was a short term-ness of it. The fact that we had to travel to places and we weren't really able to embellish on those relationships. We thought we'd start our own project in the place we live and make it a much more meaningful experience for everyone involved. 2.3

Projects often had to think creatively about venues.

> Our first big Food for Life event was to bring together the community to share food. But we had no space to bring people together indoors. Then we found that the local rugby club was a great place to host it. 13.1

Venues were often an issue, particularly in the context of coronavirus lockdown restrictions. There were also challenges in terms of how to run locally successful projects. One project explicitly modelled their Get Together events on a successful model developed by a nearby partner agency.

> They already had a community meal running every Friday. So we also started on Friday doing the same sort of thing. And it was good to know how to do something similar. There was about 30 to 40 people who came, so we got off to a good start from the beginning. 3.1

Preparation was felt to be very important.

> Don't assume you can do anything without first having done the groundwork. 11.4

Much of this learning had come about from past personal experience of developing activities. No practitioner interviewees reported that they had received formal training in assets-mapping or community capacity learning exercises, However there was clear awareness that community assets could take a wide variety of forms. For example, in the context of the coronavirus lockdowns, FFGLT agencies rapidly learnt how to make use of digital channels.

> We also have we also set up our own YouTube channel, growing and cooking tutorials on Facebook. 2.3

4. Promoting personal learning and development opportunities

Participants pointed out that there were opportunities for them to take an active project role, rather than acting as passive recipients of a service. Some participants started out quite passively, but became increasingly actively involved over time. One person with learning disabilities was very cautious at the outset, but grew in confidence over time as his range of roles expanded as his mother explained.

> [The project volunteers] actually made the window box. We didn't plan it ourselves. But it gave us an interest for this year. So, I got a load of seeds and stuff, and X got really involved in growing and sharing the produce. This year he got even more things he's growing with [the project]. So it's moving on from last year. 5.4

One project lead felt that it was easy to over-estimate the barriers to active participation, For instance while digital exclusion is an issue, s/he felt that the effects were nuanced with nearly everyone taking part in the FFLGT having a smart phone. The lead set high expectations for engagement which she felt reduced the risk of infantilising participants.

The non-hierarchical organisation of some agencies also promoted a sense of shared responsibilities and collaborative decision-making.

> We pushed ourselves to adopt different job titles, partly to sort of help external partners understand us as an organisation. In truth the four of us who are the real kind of core of the organisation shape the programme together with everyone. We do that, you know, as a group in a very collaborative way. 11.2

Several agencies emphasised that decision making was actively distributed amongst everyone involved. One project decided to be entirely volunteer run, to avoid divisions between salaried and non-salaried staff and to emphasise the skills that each individual brought to the project.

> We all discuss what to do so no one person was takes any control we just say to each other "Everyone's got skills that they can offer". So we just utilise what we've got. 9.2

Similarly, a community cooking project rotated decision making on meals to put on the menu.

> We all said that everybody should come up with ideas of what to cook and what we should do and things that others haven't tried yet. 12.2

Another community meals project made sure that everyone played an active role in events.

> There's very much a case of anybody who comes into [this project] is equal to everybody else, and everybody kind of is part of that so there's no sort of their leading this group over here and they're leading that. We're all together, I think, and that's when food comes in. When our lunch is served everybody sits down together. I think the whole thing around food puts us on a level quite naturally, you know. 5.2

Ensuring widespread participation in projects needed planning and preparation, as one agency described with the design of the cookery course.

> I have to say I stole the idea from Food for Life [webinar events]. The people are doing a six week cookery course and then about growing food. Then they will actually come together and host the community café for all the other groups. So that's what each eat at the end of the six week course. Those people would then be part of the community cafe. 5.3

Active participation was often described as an important value for promoting personal growth.

> People who have mental health conditions you often find that they look after pets very well, they look after plants very well also, even though they're not necessarily looking after themselves well. So we're about making that connection. It's the journey of growing vegetables, cooking and taking that learning back to their life. 6.1

The active participation of community members was not always possible, but nevertheless projects made a clear effort to avoid the sense that participants were in receipt of charity.

> Our project is about "Why don't you come over and spend some time with us celebrate plus enjoy a meal with us?" You know, to really emphasise the taking part and it's not about being given a free meal. 3.2

5. **Personal empowerment and valuing diversity**

The boundary between volunteers and service users was sometimes blurred for projects.

> We have a bit of a grey area where we have 'participant-stroke-volunteers'. So some of our participants who want to, work on how to get the confidence to go into the work environment will start with voluntary for us as well. 6.1

A central value for many projects was that everyone had something to contribute.

> For me, it is about identifying the assets that each individual person brings…What do they love doing? It doesn't matter whether you're, you know, the director of the business, or somebody who volunteers two hours a year with us. 1.1

The practical aspects of food growing or cooking were appealing and accessible for participants that might have found other forms of social engagement more difficult.

> All the recipes that we follow make an actual meal. They're vegetarian or vegan so they're fairly cheap. I get good sense of achievement from it, I don't really eat at home [usually]. 6.3

> We have a guy he's 19, he's got autism and a much younger mental age. He got to really excel in cooking and he likes to share what he's doing- [for instance] he likes to show people how to hold the knife correctly. I think his confidence has grown so much. 6.1

Eating together helped develop social skills around eating with others.

> I think the act of eating together teaches your etiquette and manners and turn taking, and all those sorts of things that a lot of children with additional needs need that extra help with. 6.2

Project leads found it helpful to have guidelines in place as a point of reference when bringing together participants from different backgrounds.

> If anyone speaks out of fashion, we have to challenge them. Knowing that yes, we don't accept that sort of behaviour. The ground rules list on the wall say: "Enjoy yourselves, let's share what we've got things in common." 9.1

6. Informality / Informal learning

In many instances projects adopt a very informal approach to the organisation of activities. This was particularly the case of small scale growing and cooking activities that only involved a small number of individuals. Participants could try new activities, take on roles, and obtain feedback. In so doing this built knowledge, skills and confidence that can support both personal and community growth. One account shows how this was a slow but sustained process for an individual joining a community garden project.

> He came to this country and around about five or six years ago as a refugee. He had [a professional career] in Nigeria. He joined group to really get his hands dirty and achieve something. He came along when the site was very overgrown. He's created the most beautiful herb garden, it's very much his domain. It gave him inclusion into a community, and in a way that he was struggling to access in any other way. [With the wider project] he's very much part of the team and got a sense of achieving something together. 6.1

Other project activities were quite informal in their approach to working together.

> Super Supper is where everybody brings vegetables. We have a huge pot, make a soup, and everyone shares it together while outdoors. That was one of the ways we actually got the community talking and interested. 13.1

> What normally happens is there's 10 or 15 of us with our families. A few people will be in the kitchen. I mainly help in the kitchen, like cleaning the vegetables. Afterwards others bring in the plates and wash up and everything. So lots of people join in. 12.2

> Groups have been quite fluid really depending on how they've been doing and what they want to get out of it. And we're fine with that. 5.2

Some project activities benefited from taking a more structured approach, for example with regular meal events, so participants can choose and plan when to attend.

> We've got a rota format for running activities. From open up, to closing. There's a natural flow. Something for everyone to do – with what fits for them. We try and not have a one size fits all. 6.1

> Whenever we have a meal, we have volunteers in to help prepare the foods. So it's kind of a crossover of roles. 3.1

The gift and receipt of free food is a sensitive issue for groups that feel their dignity may be undermined.

> There a lot of issues of shame and embarrassment. Like some asylum seekers are really struggling. We make sure we spend time aside [with them] and respond confidentially. 9.1

Making connections between different communities was not necessarily an easy thing to do

> [One social group] don't really go out....you know they keep to their own community if you see what I mean, right. You know with as a mixed race type of thing. We're not talking about racial background or anything but when there's a mixed community because it looks like the [one social group] stick to their own. So, it is quite like a problem to have different people coming in…

> We've tried - we've really tried. There was once we had like a little mini fair. And we advertised. But I just wanted to maybe three or four [of a social group] to come in [and sit down], but people just kept walking in and out. 12.3

7. Community organising

Community development practice often starts from small informal activities. However, the aspiration is often to grow and consolidate action over time. All agencies involved in delivering FFLGT activities had experienced a turbulent year, particularly those that were new. In the course of the year, event leaders, volunteers and participants had sought to embed their learning.

> Personally, I've learnt to love helping in the community. When I started I was just helping at events, but then I've got more involved and am now on the advisory group. 11.6

> Last year, food was getting thrown out left, right and centre. There were people getting food who didn't want food and other people that did want food didn't get any and that was a bit chaotic because it was an emergency response. But now we're more organised. We've been able to take a step back and do it in a way that's more respectful. 5.5

> Other community groups are working through us now we're working through them. We set up a partnership so that none of us are overlapping and everybody knows what everybody else is doing so that there isn't a waste of resources. 14.1

A number of projects were keen to make sure that community members had an active role in the running and oversight of activities.

> We set up a young person's advisory group – we don't like the term – but they basically help us sense check on our priorities 2.2

8. Developing and supporting collaborative working

Community development, as the term implies, involves scaling up and expanding social networks. While they might start small, some initiatives were able to scale up quickly through the facilitation work of agencies as this example of a plant swap project shows.

> We did a plant swap. One person had a few leftover plants, and she put them on a table the house. She spoke to us about this and we publicised it and got more people to set up their own tables. And in the end, in the local area we ended up with five different plant swap tables in the local community where people were exchanging plants for something they could grow in their garden. If they couldn't exchange it, they made a donation towards the NHS. We've got some great responses to what people have grown in their garden that they've never thought to grow before. 13.1

Other projects scaled up their work particularly in the context of the coronavirus lockdowns. One agency partnered with a holiday food activities programme and went from a few meals to 2500 sandwiches at the peak of the summer holiday. Other agencies reached out to schools and care homes to coordinate the delivery of meals to vulnerable residents.

> We've been doing a weekly vegetables for instance to some elderly homes. It's very low effort for us but it means an awful lot to them. There's no financial or monetary value, but what we're doing is important to them. We're working with a sheltered housing complex with a residential care home element. Their occupants select what they want to use. 1.4

Running larger scale projects involved working with community members who were prepared to take on the roles of bridging and brokering connections between people. One agency adopted a strategic approach to draw upon the interests and skills of participants in a community meal.

> We identified some of our volunteers who are sort 'core community connectors'. At our community meal we made sure that there was a community connector on each table, and they were the people that just chatted to anybody. What they managed to achieve is absolutely phenomenal, in respect of getting people talking getting people engaged, introducing people to other people. 13.2

Another person in the same initiative acted as a recorder and publicist.

> One guy has Down's syndrome, but he loves blogging - that's his thing. So, he came along to our event. He did a brilliant job reporting online about the day. 13.2

Other roles that developed include people who act as specialist advisors on food growing or cooking, supporters and carers for people with access needs, and mentors to newcomers.

> One of us is sort of a mentor: he will show new people the ropes. He's very quiet unassuming guy, so he's good for somebody who comes in who's at rock bottom with their self-esteem. 6.1

The diversity of roles commonly means that projects have an inner core of very keen participants and a much wider base of individuals who have more intermittent engagement.

> You do end up with a core of people that are regularly engaged. On social media we've got over 1000 members on our on our main Facebook page, but most of those we don't see much of. 14.1

Digital engagement – amplified during the coronavirus pandemic – considerably increased the reach and diversity of potential roles and contributions that participants could bring to Get Togethers activities. All projects taking part in the research reported that they had extended their social media work during the pandemic. While most of this activity built on their existing digital networks, some projects were able to connect their local work to national social media-based issues, such as the mutual aid neighbour support movement and the holiday hunger campaign. Digital partnerships

with other agencies – in terms of shared events and messaging – further extended the forms of participation in projects.

7. Sustainable and resilient activities

Sustaining activities over time was a matter of creating enduring changes for participants, which in turn would reinforce the motivation of all stakeholders to continue.

> One of the local principals actually rang me and said, 'You know, there is nothing we can do in school, to replicate what you do'. Because they come back and they're smiling from ear to ear, since I've seen guys smiling after coming from young up there for a few hours that I've never seen before. 5.1

One organisation contrasted their long-term view on building relationships with participants, with the short-term interventions of mainstream services.

> The things that we do are long term. We're trying to encourage working with families and children as a process of growth. It's about a conversation about growing food as a family. We always think about the long-term mental health benefits, the relaxation and the mindfulness. That's the sort of thing that we are moving towards. 6.1

An important consideration for one project was about the capacity of volunteers to take on social support and how the wellbeing of volunteers was central to the sustainability of projects.

> We don't want to put pressure on ourselves. It needs to be fun and rewarding. We won't carry on if it isn't. We get social prescribing referrals, but we have to be frank about what we can take on. We care, but we can't be carers. We just don't have the capacity. 1.3

Participants taking part in Get Togethers often emphasised the importance of learning through doing, reflecting on actions and self-evaluation as an ongoing process. The strong emphasis on relationships-based practice was not always easy to communicate to those outside stakeholders who were primarily interested in quantifiable outputs and outcomes. This created some tensions for one agency.

> We have to deal with systems and processes all the time. It's all bureaucracy: "how many people came to see you and how many people were from this area?" They're always wanting us to collect data. What we see is that people want food in their stomachs, to feed their children, or they need a school uniform because they can't afford it. 9.2

8. Alternatives to community development approaches

Not all of the projects we explored had strong connections to community development principles and practices. This was particularly the case for agencies working in the social care and education sectors that were more oriented towards service delivery and intervention delivery. However, these agencies had to adapt their more formal approach to project delivery in the context of the more informal community settings of Get Togethers. Community development was therefore a highly influential perspective on Get Together activities, but not a necessary feature of practices in this area. It is also an approach where further support through the programme could be provided given that many of the project leads and volunteers appeared to have had little formal training in community development. This gap in training opportunities is part of a wider issue for community development practice in the UK (IVAR, 2018).

Discussion: Community Development and Pathways to Impact

This report has explored the intimate connections between social food activities and community development. It illustrates how community development principles and practices form an important basis for enhancing the delivery of Get Togethers activities. This is a two way relationship. Not only is there learning from community development to support the aspirations of Get Togethers, it shows how social food activities provide a route for effective community development.

Many of the project leads taking part in Get Togethers started with a very open minded approach to their engagement with potential participants. This involved learning about the experiences and preferences of community members and discussing options for activities, rather than imposing a pre-determined plan of action. The work included efforts to bring together different groups and identify points of common interest. As a strengths based approach, practitioners assumed that all potential participants could bring value to initiatives as a consequence of their lived experience.

This non-directive approach opened up a space for informal learning and opportunities for different kinds of contributions over the course of time. The informal dimension was particularly important given that many participants were quite tentative to get involved, for instance in terms of enjoying socialising, having fun, trying new activities, or sharing skills and other capabilities. The community development skills of practitioners included translating these tentative forms of engagement into more concerted forms of action. For those who expressed an interest, this involved extending and consolidated roles to take an active part in the delivery and reach of the group. Not all projects exemplified these empowering processes, particularly in cases where the emphasis of project leads was on 'helping' and 'meeting needs'. As Toomey et al (2011) points out some approaches to community development do not necessarily lead to greater empowerment. Given that this is a complex and important area for practice, Food for Life Get Togethers is well placed to convene discussion and learning around participant empowerment in social food projects.

The majority of projects taking part in the research were in an early stage of development. While all experienced major obstacles during the pandemic, the pressures also produced innovation and growth with raised public concerns about food access, social isolation and the wider consequences of the crisis. This led to an amplified interest in donating and volunteering for projects, as well as moves to collaborate between both like-minded and very different organisations. The rise of digital networks facilitated these opportunities. As a consequence, some of the smaller initiatives taking part in Get Togethers rapidly consolidated their work from tentative beginnings to fixtures within the field of local community and voluntary sector activity.

A focus on food provided a channel for community development action. In part this was due to the prominence of food-based issues during the pandemic. However other factors were demonstrated through the widespread appeal and recognition of food activities as a route for informal socialising. Food focused activities lent themselves to routine and regular points of contact (for instance through weekly meal sharing) and as a basis for marking special occasions (through events in the social calendar). While food often offered a point of connection, there were also some instances where food demarcated social differences between communities. While some project leads struggled to cross community boundaries, many found common ground around foods with widespread appeal, such as vegetarian dishes. Others took a pragmatic view around the subject of 'good food' and prioritised foods with good recognition value and appeal, over foods with health, social and environmental credentials. Food for Life Get Togethers resources for meals and cooking activities were positively received by activity leads, most of whom talked without prompting about the importance of considering the health and environmental aspects of foods used.

The projects taking part in this evaluation illustrate how there are a number of reasons why community development is difficult to evaluate in terms of impact. In contrast to structured interventions, community development initiatives evolve goals over time through dialogue and learning with community members, and such goals may be diverse, enmeshed with other activities, and occur beyond the term of the project (Blanke and Walzer, 2013). Indeed, community development processes might be better understood as 'events in systems' rather than as 'causes and effects of interventions' (Hawe, Shiell and Riley, 2009). This poses a problem for those seeking evidence of the effects of community development projects on public priorities, such as improved health and wellbeing. For these reasons it is often more appropriate to gather retrospective evidence of what outcomes have occurred rather than assess initiatives against a predetermined framework that can obscure unanticipated effects (Wilson-Grau, 2018).

The main limitations of this study concern the diversity of the projects and participants taking part in the evaluation. While there were a wide range of projects, the field appears to be quite extensive given the variety of potential Get Together type activities. Furthermore, we would have liked to have interviewed a wider range of participants, however accessing participants proved complex given a combination of lockdown conditions and the very limited capacity of some project agencies to organise contacts. Nevertheless, at this stage of the programme the research did succeed in engaging a range of stakeholders from all of the programme regions and from a wide variety of projects. It therefore demonstrated many dimensions of community development practice that are likely to be encountered in Food for Life Get Togethers.

Learning and Implications

- While community development projects are often slow to develop, they have a strong track record of demonstrating their sustainability and resilience over time. The evaluation found that the Food for Life Get Togethers programme can have a role in facilitating the establishment and embedding of activities in communities. An important aspect of the evaluation is to understand the contribution of the programme towards these longer term developments.

- There are clearly opportunities to share best practice between participating agencies on specific issues relating to community engagement given that there are clear examples of innovative practice emerging from projects.

- While many project leads had experience of elements of community development practice, it was evident that the majority did not have extensive training in this field. It is likely that Get Togethers leads would benefit from short training inputs around aspects of community development relating to informal learning, collective action and organisation development.

- To be highly inclusive, it should be recognised that there are additional costs for community-supported social eating projects. These include preparatory outreach and consultation work, translation services, preparatory partnership working especially where new connections are being sought. Limits on resourcing inhibits the ability of projects to realise their aspirations in this respect.

- The wider community development field could learn from the Get Togethers programme on the specific value of social food activities as a promising route for good practice. For example, food-focused social events provide an informal and accessible context to bring diverse groups

together. The multiple tasks involved in running events can encourage active participation, knowledge exchange and skills development over time.

- Understanding of the role of community development in Get Togethers activities reveals some of the challenges involved in evidencing impacts. Tracking projects and gathering evidence of outcomes over time represents a potential solution, although it is important to recognise the time and commitment of project delivery leads to support the gathering of this evidence.

Conclusions

This study shows that food focused activities represent a strong platform for community development in a wide range of contexts. Food activities represent a good basis for initiating open dialogue with community members, a point of focus for collaboration, and a springboard for wider collaboration and partnerships. The research also indicates that the scale and extent of food-focused community activities is poorly recognised within policy circles. The events of the pandemic have brought community food issues to greater public attention, however much of this discourse has been highly 'needs' orientated rather than attending to the capabilities of communities to organise food activities – including social food activities- under extreme circumstances. This is illustrated in the projects participating in this research, where participants and leads found solutions to connect through innovative ideas and collective efforts.

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