FULL REPORT

STRENGTHENING NETWORKS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION ON 'GOOD FOOD'

EVALUATION OF FOOD FOR LIFE GET TOGETHERS

GET TOGETHERS
Bringing people together through food

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Executive Summary

'Food for Life Get Togethers' are regular community activities that connect people from all ages and backgrounds through growing, cooking and eating good food. The programme seeks to support the aspirations of community food organisers of which an important aspect includes fostering connections through their national and local networks.

➢ UWE's research between May to July 2022 sought to explore the experiences of participants and facilitators in Get Togethers networking activities. Using a mixed methods study design, the research involved the analysis of programme records, a survey with 97 individuals engaged in programme Network Events and 19 in-depth interviews with participants and facilitators.

➢ Work to strengthen networks has evolved as a strategic focus for Get Togethers. The latest programme theory of change reflects this in terms of strengthening networks to build local capacity, enabling community food leadership, and mobilising an agenda for good food.

➢ Get Togethers has occupied a unique and valued space in facilitating connections between local and national community-food stakeholders; providing a source of inspiration as well as practical and moral support.

➢ Overall, the study highlights the way in which the Get Togethers Network Events in particular have fulfilled a latent demand for practical guidance and peer support and collaborations around community-scale action on good food.

➢ The research provides an indication of the potential for community-based food initiatives to gain traction, develop and broaden and deepen their impact through making regional and national connections with others working on similar issues. It also points to the potential for a central facilitating entity to occupy this community food supporting space into the longer term.

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

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

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

➢ The Get Togethers Network Event series was launched in May 2021 and over twelve months the programme hosted fourteen events presenting a wide variety of themes and showcasing community food initiatives.

- Over the course of its delivery, over 2912 groups or individuals have registered with the programme, of whom 918 registered for Network Events. From these larger figures, a small number (under 100) can be defined as 'highly engaged' in multiple aspects of the programme.

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

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

- The continued high proportion of newly registered individuals indicates a substantial pool of interest in topics covered at Network Events.

- Reflecting on the value of the Network Events, participants reported a wide variety of benefits including practical ideas and the courage to implement them, affirmation of others, and the value of a shared space to talk.

- Sixty-nine per cent of survey respondents used ideas, knowledge, and contacts from the event to help organise food activities and 61% said that the session had strengthened their capacity to run food activities.

- Thirty-seven per cent of survey respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that their engagement with Network Events helped them lead their own peer networks.

- Fifty-two per cent of survey respondents said that the Network Events helped them to feel more connected to the Get Togethers programme.

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

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

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

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

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

➢ Local Commissioned Partners (agencies funded to work at a local level with Get Togethers) have themselves delivered Network Events. These have acted as a catalyst for the development of new working partnerships that were unlikely to have come about otherwise.

➢ Get Togethers' events and associated activities have proved to be popular with diverse individuals and groups from across the UK. The continued high proportion of newly registered individuals indicates a substantial pool of interest in topics covered at events.

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

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

➢ The programme has invested efforts to investigate and learn from patterns of engagement to date. The team recognise that there is scope to enhance and build upon existing network activities. However, it should be noted that the focus on developing networks occurred relatively late in the life-stage of the programme, which has inevitably led to the need to retrofit planned activities and for post-delivery rationalisation.

➢ In the final year of Get Togethers, the programme team look to enhance their approach to network building and create a legacy from which future community-based food initiatives can be supported. This requires further insight into the needs and interests of existing and potential network members. This will help refine the network's objectives, value proposition and the identification of the most appropriate mechanisms to achieve the network's aims.

➢ A key focus in year four will be to support ongoing connections between network members, the different Get Togethers initiatives as well as with the relevant strategic areas of Soil Association work.

1. Introduction

As well as bringing communities together through food, Food for Life Get Togethers (FFLGT) also has a significant focus on bringing together event organisers and other good food activists through a range of networking activities. As a result, Get Together organisers are supported share learning and ideas about how to develop "social good activities within or between communities of interest, practice or geography." This report explores the networking building work of Get Togethers from the perspectives of organisers, programme staff and wider participants. We draw upon evidence from FFLGT networking activities, and a survey and interviews from a diverse range of event organisers.

This is one evaluation report in a series concerned with a different aspect of the Get Togethers programme, each covering a particular aspect of the programme's theory of change. This report is

closely linked to a subsequent report on the role of Get Togethers small grants in community capacity building. It links to previous UWE evaluation concerned with the community engagement elements of Food for Life and research by Coventry University on community participation in good food activities. It also links with work that is currently underway (due to report in November 2022) to assess the impacts of My Food Community; a Get Togethers initiative that is focussed on catalysing and supporting community food leadership.

2. Food for Life Get Togethers

2.1 The programme

Food for Life Get Togethers is a four-year (2019-23) UK wide programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and delivered with the support of six national partners (see https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/get-togethers). 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". Updated in 2021, Get Togethers seeks to achieve five outcomes[1]:

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

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

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

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

Food for Life Get Togethers is delivered in 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

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[1] FFLGT Network Session Debrief Building Local Partnerships (Nov 2021)

Togethers, 2912[2] different organisations or groups have engaged with the programme. Engagement is taking multiple forms, including registering Get Togethers activities, receiving a grant, attending virtual networks and completing online training modules.

2.2 Summary of the programme's networking activities

Following the test and learn approach adopted by the Get Togethers staff team, networking activities have emerged and evolved over the course of programme. A shift in emphasis, particularly since the end of Year 2 of the programme in mid-2021, has led to a set of networking activities intended to link Get Togethers organisers at local, regional and national levels and with respect to a range of issues linked to the programme. The Get Togethers Network Coordinator has overall responsibility for the networks area of work for the programme. A new member of staff took over the role from the original coordinator in early 2022, building upon learning from the initial phase of the programme and its new strategic direction.

The Community Orchards webinar in September 2021 was one of the most popular Network Events hosted by Food for Life Get Togethers

Get Togethers networking activities take place in a number of situations. Centrally coordinated networking activities are promoted through Soil Association communications team in the form of a monthly newsletter, targeted emails and social media posts. Local and national commissioned partners promote Get Togethers events, resources and funding through their networks. This includes disseminating information about the funding rounds. Since 2021, locally commissioned partners have been funded to facilitate network events – both virtual and in person – in their locality. Commissioned and national partners themselves take part in meetings that include a networking role.

While funding from the National Lottery Community Fund for the programme is set to end in mid-2023, the Soil Association (SA) is exploring the legacy of the programme and the potential to build

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[2] As of Year 3, Quarter 3.

upon the network approach over the longer term. SA states an aspiration that "*[t]he value of the trusted relationships FFLGT's has developed is not lost as SA has maintained a connection to as many of FFLGT's network of community organisers & national partners who want to stay in contact with us as possible, and enabled ongoing connection between community organisers which does not need SA input longer term"[3]* This might include an ongoing communications programme, annual get togethers campaigns, and a decentralised / distributed digital means to connect existing and new network members.

3. Strengthening Networks: A review of theory and practice

This section is concerned with theory, research, and practice relevant to the network building element of the FFLGT programme. There is a wealth of literature on how to develop agendas for change through creating social connections. In this section we have selected material concerned with the following subjects:

- Networks and the development of social movements, particularly regarding food-based issues
- Understanding how networks work
- Evidence of the effects of networks on social issues
- Good practice in developing and strengthening networks

3.1 Perspectives on networks and social movements

Networks are central to the theory and practice of social movements. Within this context a network can be described as a group of actors who share knowledge, resources and learning to effect change around a common social or environmental cause. Networks are viewed as both the precursor and outcome of a social movement to the extent that some commentators view social movements as networks (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Saunders, 2013).

Outside of protest movements, the intentional use of networks is increasingly being seen as a key tactic to build capacity and foster the collective impact of civic society organisations (see for example, Chandler and Scott-Kennedy, 2015; Raynor, 2018). Chandler and Scott-Kennedy (2015, p. 2) suggest that:

> "When it comes to capacity building…. leveraging the connections and taking advantage of the resources available through a network are resource-efficient ways for a nonprofit to improve its effectiveness."

3.2 Networks and sustainable food system transition

In the context of sustainable food system transition, connecting local and national stakeholders into food policy networks has been a key tactic to drive ambition, create frameworks for action, share knowledge and resources and lobby for change. Until recently, there was relatively little research that offered an in-depth understanding of the processes through which food policy networks emerge, evolve and function. More recently Coulson and Sonnino (2019), Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019), Santo and Moragues-Faus (2019) and Sonnino (2019) have started to explore the emergence, impact and limitations of trans-local food networks. These highlight the fluidity and vulnerability of these networks and how local and broader economic and political forces constrain their impact.

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[3] FFLGT Legacy. Draft 17-6-22

Jones and Hills (2020) and Jones, Hills and Beardmore (2022) examine network dynamics of Food for Life's sister programme Sustainable Food Places. This work provides a practice-orientated account of the evolution of this network over its ten-year history. The analysis focusses on the mechanisms (including grants, supported campaigns, platforms for relationship building and information sharing and awards system) that have been used to create a shared vision and framework for action. It also assesses how these programme mechanisms have been used to harness the collective knowledge, resources and power of places across the UK to drive food system change.

Networks in the context of community food is an under-researched area. Saxena *et al.* (2021) suggest that strengthening networks and alliances is a critical driver of participation in community food activities. Studies in this field, however, are largely focussed on local or relatively small-scale collaborations.

3.3 Understanding how networks work

The fundamental nature of networks is a subject of debate. Some commentators view the actors and linkages within networks as relatively fixed entities, whilst others argue that network elements and the relationship between them are more fluid and transient. Rodríguez-Giralta, Marrero-Guillamón and Milstein (2018, p.257), for example, refer to networks as:

> *"complex ecologies within which agents, both human and non-human, mobilise to effect change in overlapping social, ecological, economic and technological realms. In these studies, relations take precedence over substances, thereby forging a radically decentred, redistributed approach to mobilisation."*

These perspectives have implications for the way that networks are studied and fostered. From a methodological perspective, the idea of networks as relatively static entities comprising discrete features such as nodes and links lends itself to the quantification and mapping of networks through methods such as Social Network Analysis (e.g., Krinskey and Crossley, 2014). The second perspective (as set out by Actor Network Theory and the closely related Assemblage theory) aligns well with qualitative approaches that illuminate processes of network (re)formation, development and demise, the quality of relationships and interactions and whether, why and how the network has value for its members and helps to amplify and accelerate the achievement of collective aims.

Raynor (2018) building on the work of Wolff (2003) suggests that networks can take many different forms based on factors such as the formality of the organisational structure and the nature and strength of participant commitment (Figure 1). This model also illustrate how groups may 'progress' towards greater formality and accountability as they take on agendas that require more structured organisation. From another perspective, Figure 2 illustrates the wide variety of forms that networks can take based on the degree of centralization, each adapted to its purpose. As noted by Searce (2011) this categorisation simplifies a complex reality in which network forms can often fit into multiple categories.

It is useful to understand the different ways in which people work through networks to create change. Gladwell (2006) has studied how tipping points propel novel ideas into the mainstream. He proposes that there is a 'law of the few': in any social network a tiny percentage of people do most of the work to build momentum. These individuals often adopt the special roles of:

- the Connector: who has a gift for bringing people together,
- the Maven: an information specialist who accumulates know-how and shares it with others,
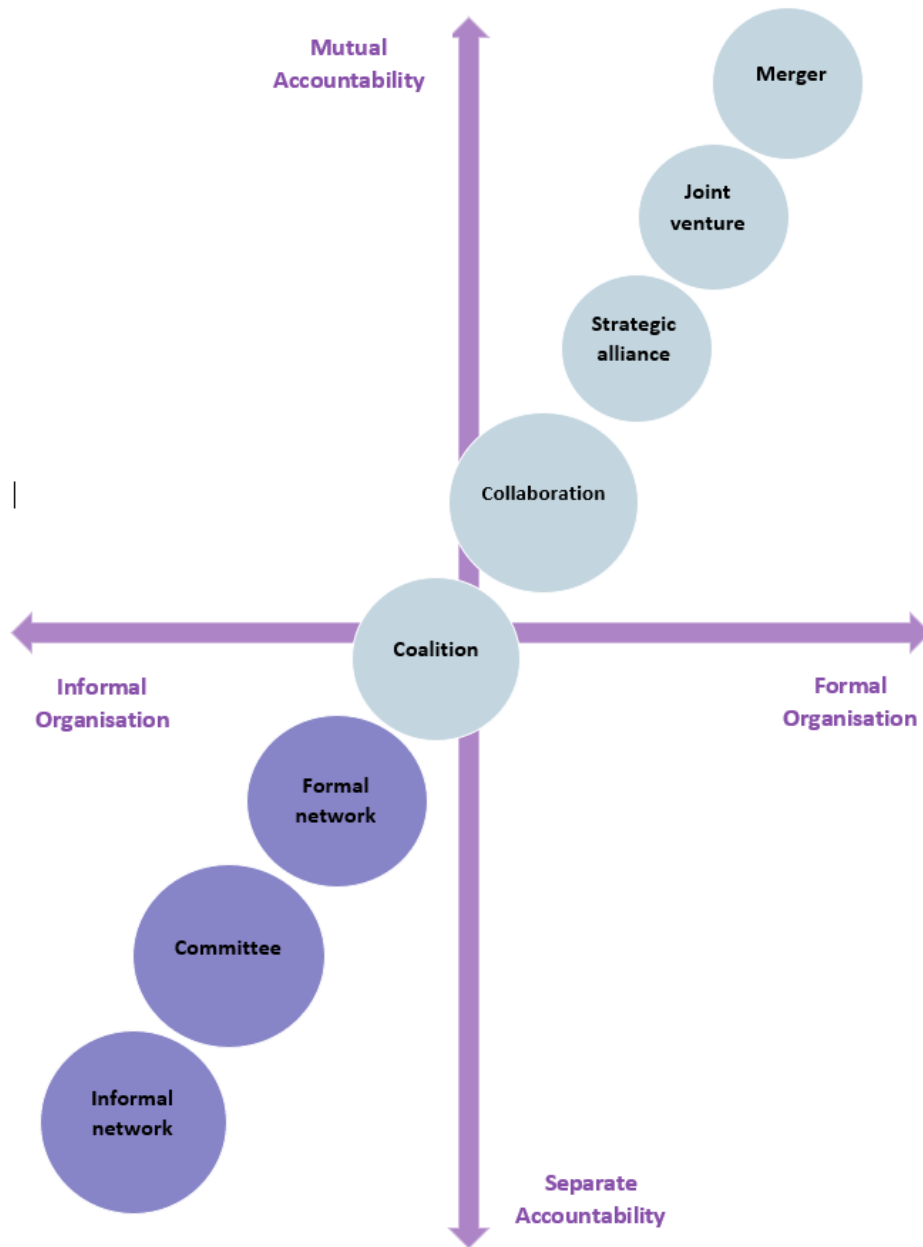- the Salesperson: a charismatic person with skills of persuasion.

Figure 1: The Network Continuum (Raynor, 2018, p.2 adapted from Wolff, 2003)
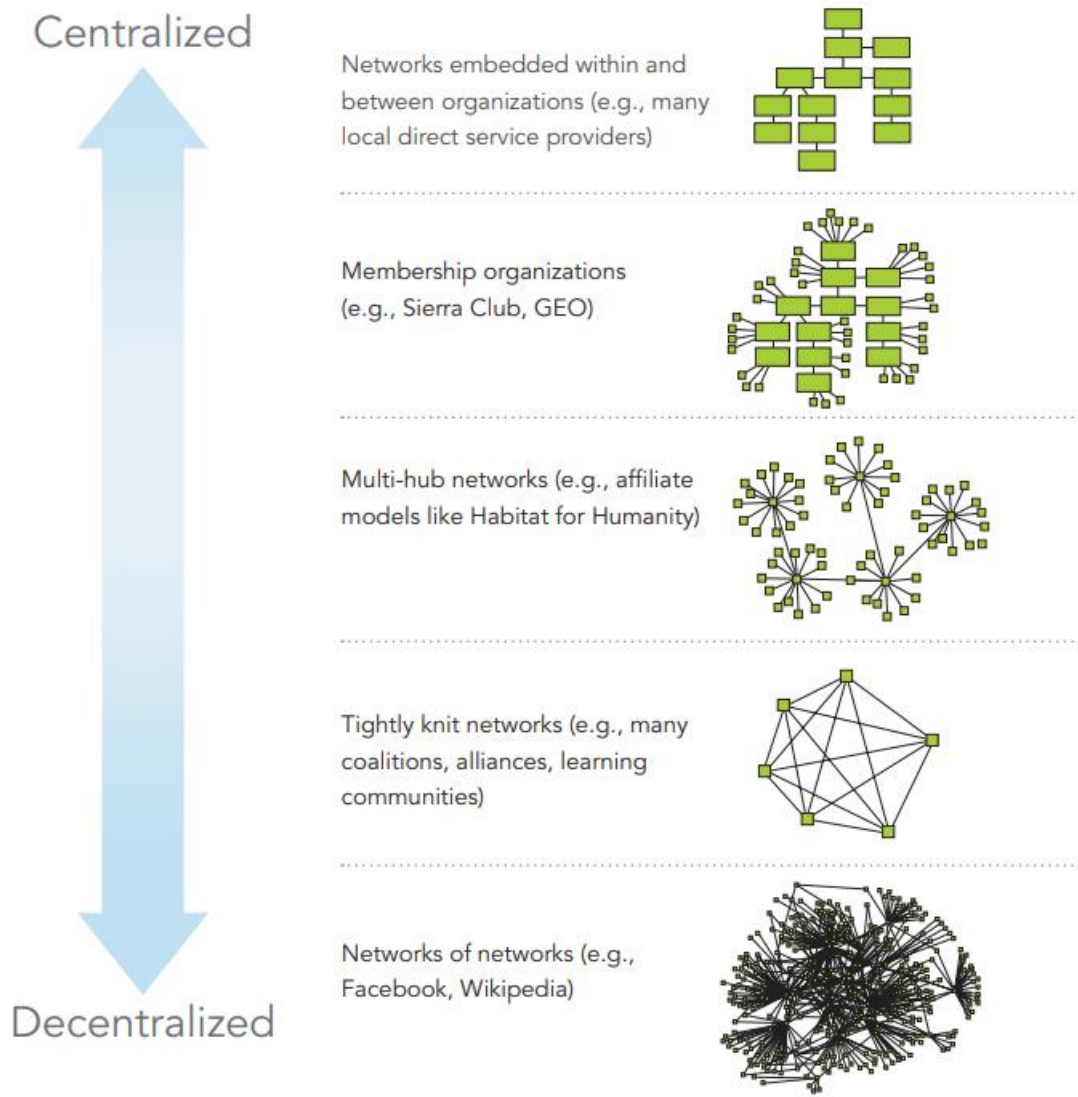
Figure 2: A typology of network forms (Source: Searce, 2011, p.6)

Many other social network analysts have observed similar patterns. For example, Anklam (2007) identifies the Liaison (who connects people in different groups); the Gatekeeper (who influences what information comes into a group); the Broadcaster (who conveys information from the group to the outside); the Coordinator (who connects people in the same group); the Peripheral Specialist (who provides expertise when needed): and the Isolate (who does not actively connect or communicate, but may do so). More complex academic studies (such as Santo and Moragues-Faus, 2019) have found that clusters of networks can themselves adopt different roles as part of 'assemblages' for social change.

Similarly, scholars of the diffusion of innovations through networks have an interest in the characteristics of key actors and their connections (Cross, Parker and Sasson, 2003). The successful spread of ideas commonly takes the form of an adoption S-curve, from slow initial engagement to the point of critical mass in which interest rapidly grows, snowballs, and sustains itself. Such chain reactions can take surprising forms. For instance, Granovetter's (1973) study of the role of 'heterophilous individuals' in social networks, found that people are often strongly influenced by individuals who sit on the boundaries of their existing close contacts. Granovetter's 'strength of weak ties' theory illustrates the power of new chance encounters in collective change.

3.4 The value of networks

In the context of social movements and community development, networks are seen to have several benefits and functions. Krinskey and Crossley (2014) suggest that for social movements, the main benefits of taking a network approach are threefold. First, relationships are vital for building and maintaining coalitions. Many studies suggest that social relationships are the reason that individuals and organisations are drawn into social movements in the first place and are often vital in securing long-term commitment and the willingness to tolerate the sacrifices necessitated by sustained engagement with a cause (See for example, Diani and McAdam, 2003; Han, 2014). Second, networks facilitate the co-creation and ongoing codification of values and goals. Finally, the connections and enhanced communication facilitated by networks enable social movements to amplify their impact through the sharing of knowledge, skills and resources and through enabling resources to be directed in a timely and efficient manner.

Within the voluntary and community-sector (particularly in North America), there is a growing body of funder and practitioner literature that aims to encourage and support groups and organisations to build capacity and amplify their impact through taking a network approach (Chandler and Scott-Kennedy, 2015; Grantmakers for Effective Organisations, 2014; Han, 2014; Wei-Skillern, Silver and Heitz, 2011). This literature shows that in the United States, grant funding bodies appear to be particularly interested in and actively promoting nonprofit networks as a way to amplify the impact of their grant streams.

As with social movements, this literature emphasises the value of networks in agenda development, the facilitation of new partnerships and the efficient and effective sharing and management of resources. This literature also places great emphasis on the role that networks can play in capacity building and the intentional use of networks to develop skills, share knowledge and ideas, support strategic thinking and accelerate the transfer of innovation (Grantmakers for Effective Organisations, 2014; Kanla, Hanleybrown and Juster, 2014). This literature features many examples of how non-profits have used a community of practice approach to build the capacity of organisations within their networks. Taschereau and Bolger (2007), cited in Chandler and Scott-Kennedy, (2015) suggest that networks can be thought of as a " 'bank account' of relationships… that members can draw upon over time, and that holds the potential for mobilizing assets collectively to achieve a common purpose, thus increasing…capacity".

3.5 How to build and strengthen networks for change

According to the literature, successful networks have several characteristics in common. A key is that network facilitators need to be highly intentional, focussed and committed, especially where a clear direction has been established. This means being clear about the aims of the network and having the ability to provide sustained and consistent facilitation and resourcing over the medium to long-term (Raynor, 2018).

Conversely groups and organisations need a range of qualities to engage in collaborative action and foster an effective network. This includes leadership that encourages and supports network activity and the willingness to partially relinquish authority and - in some cases - specific organisational priorities. They also need the capacity to be trusting, trustworthy, adaptable and flexible (Grantmakers for Effective Organisations, 2014). Raynor (2018, p. 27) suggests that key capacities of effective network participants include:

- ability to touch and engage multiple stakeholder groups – known as boundary spanners,
- time and space to engage in the network,

- relevant skills and interest that would provide credibility within the network,
- desire to be part of, and working towards, something bigger.

The practice and academic literature highlight a variety of factors that determine the benefits and outcomes of networks. These fall into four main categories.

1. Clear purpose, strategy, and activities

Successful networks are clear about their overall goals, focus and intended short and long-term outcomes. Outcomes can be broken down into those that affect the external environment such as progress towards furthering a collective agenda or greater external visibility and internal outcomes such as the development of new knowledge and skills, better information, and greater resource efficiency.

 In the context of learning networks for social change, Keijzer, Ørnemark and Engel (2006) suggest that there can be a tension between the need for networks to adapt to a rapidly shifting socio-economic context and staying focussed on and sustaining activity around well-defined themes. They suggest that networks that limit and stay focussed on a relatively narrow sphere of interest are more likely to achieve tangible outcomes. A linked point is that there needs to be careful consideration of the design and facilitation of learning processes.

To foster the conditions for capacity building and scaling up impact, network facilitators also need to be clear about the tactics, interventions and tools that will be used. Raynor (2018, p. 21) highlights the following types of potential network activities:

- Providing professional development and skills building.
- Create linkages and relationships among individuals and groups of individuals.
- Creating, aggregating and organising data and information and providing it in a more accessible form.
- Initiating joint action towards a common goal such as influencing policy, developing new work programmes and raising funds.
- Horizon scanning to spot challenges and opportunities relevant to the overall network aims.
- Detect and interpret signals in the environment through, for example, monitoring new developments and identifying trends.

Finally successful networks consider their endpoint. This may come as part of a natural process of attrition as goals are achieved or become less relevant or due to the end of a funded programme of work. It is important to think about issues such as how the network or network relationships will be facilitated/supported if the initial facilitator and/or funding stream withdraws/is withdrawn. Consideration needs to be given to how members will continue to access shared resources.

Searce (2011) outlines a typical network lifecycle from the initial mapping of issues, stakeholders, and relationships through to the end stage where the network is evaluated, and its assets are either transformed or transitioned.
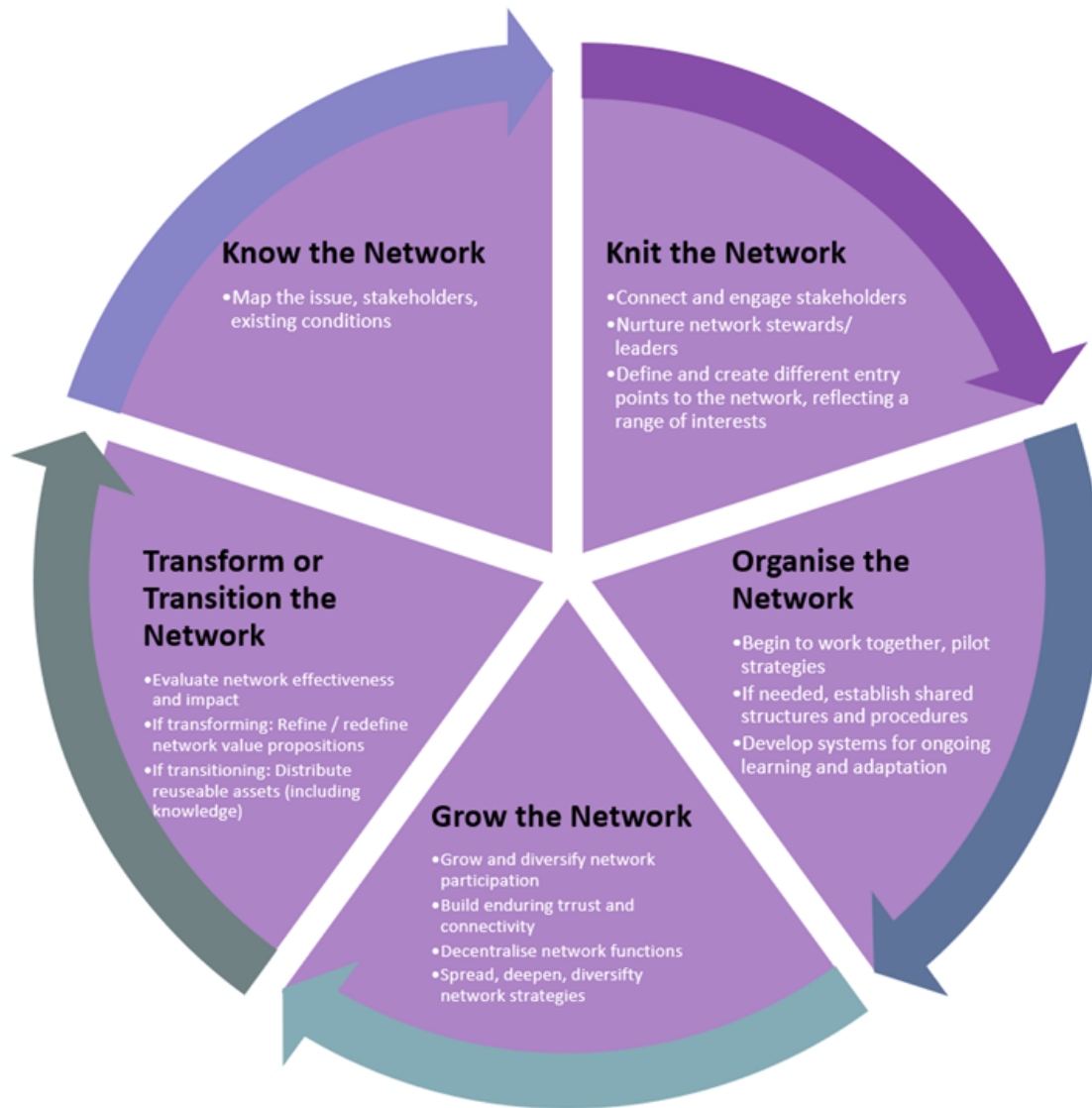
Figure 3: An idealised network lifecycle (adapted from Searce, 2011, p. 15)

2. Clear value proposition of the network

This means being able to articulate why the network is/will be of benefit to members and an effective vehicle to achieve joint aims and ambitions. This is particularly important because it can be resource intensive for organisations to participate in networks and there may be multiple networks operating in the same field. To overcome these challenges, rigorous appraisal of the potential value proposition is required at the outset. Facilitators also need to scan the horizon to identify existing networks within the field and where the proposed new network will add value. Keijzer, Ørnemark and Engel (2006) suggest that the pertinence of the network is something that should be regularly reviewed and discussed with members to keep the value proposition fresh and relevant to the evolving field and members' needs.

3. Well defined network composition and target audience

This requires asking which actors are most likely to help the network achieve its aims and what the facilitating entity can do to make it easy for them to engage. Raynor (2018) suggests that whether the network is designed primarily to serve individuals or institutions will have important implications for how the network develops and its likely chances of success. They argue that networks comprised largely of individuals are likely to have more adaptive capacity and the ability to grow more quickly. Networks comprised of institutions may be more likely to encounter challenges around conflicts of interest, but on the plus side are likely to have greater visibility, collective resources and ultimately, may be better placed to advance the network's agenda and aims.

4. Effective governance, structure, and capacity

As noted previously, networks can take many forms from those that are more informal and bottom-up to those that are more formal and bureaucratic in nature. Whatever the form, successful networks purposefully develop relationships and help effective decision-making about strategic and operational issues. A key consideration is the systems that are put in place to support ongoing learning and adaptation (Searce, 2011). Linked to this, successful networks build in regular formal opportunities to review their work, evaluate their impact, and are prepared to change course (Keijzer, Ørnemark and Engel, 2006; Raynor, 2018; Searce, 2011).
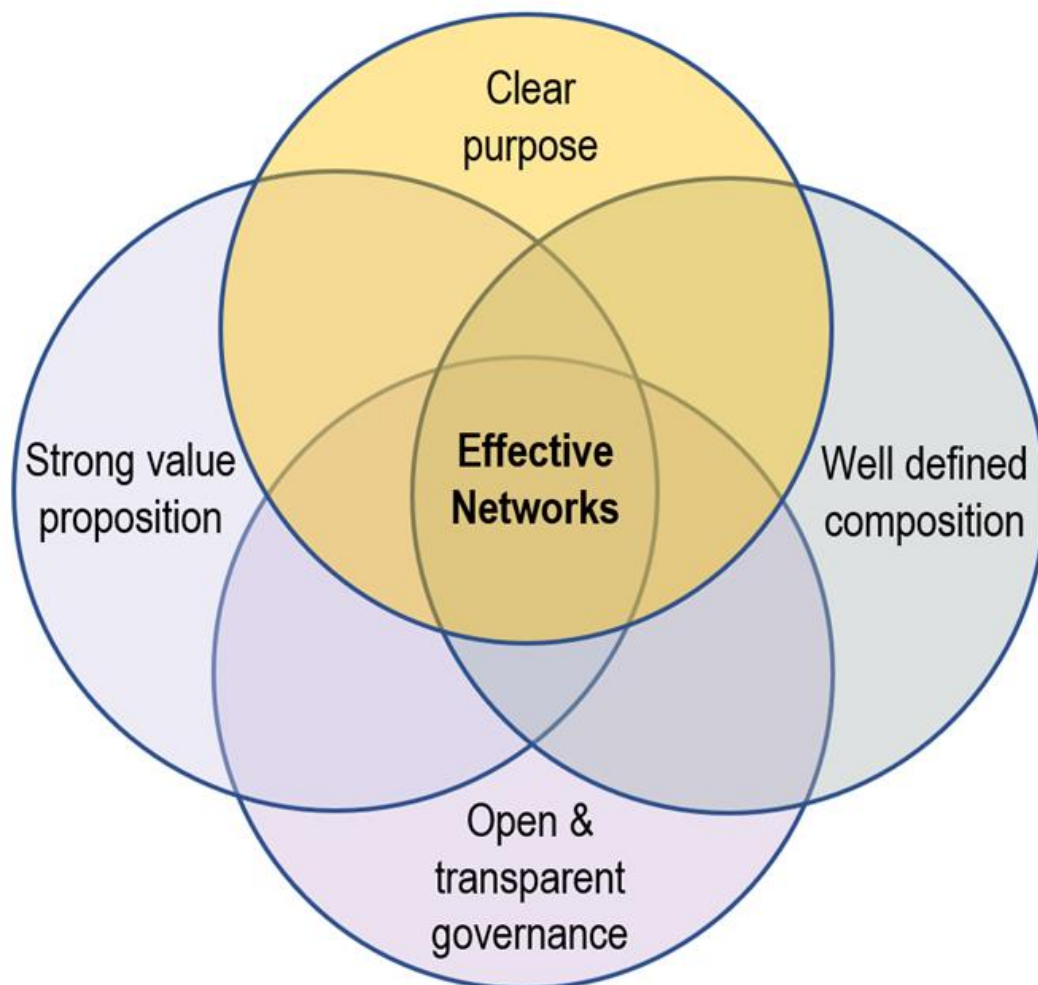

Figure 4: Conceptual model for understanding effective networks in the context of voluntary sector and civil society change programmes (adapted from Raynor, Searce and others)

Searce (2011) refers to an informal poll of networked organisations that posed the question 'what's the secret sauce for catalysing networks for social change?' 'Openness' (inviting others into conversations, decision making and actions) and 'transparency' were identified as some of the most important qualities. Whilst more inclusive governance models can increase participation and commitment, they can also be very resource intensive and hinder swift and effective action. The network also needs sufficient leadership, management, technical and adaptive capacity to achieve its aims.

This work on effective networks for change provides several useful pointers to explore the development of FFLGT's network activities. We summarise insights from Raynor, Searce and others in the conceptual model in Figure 4.
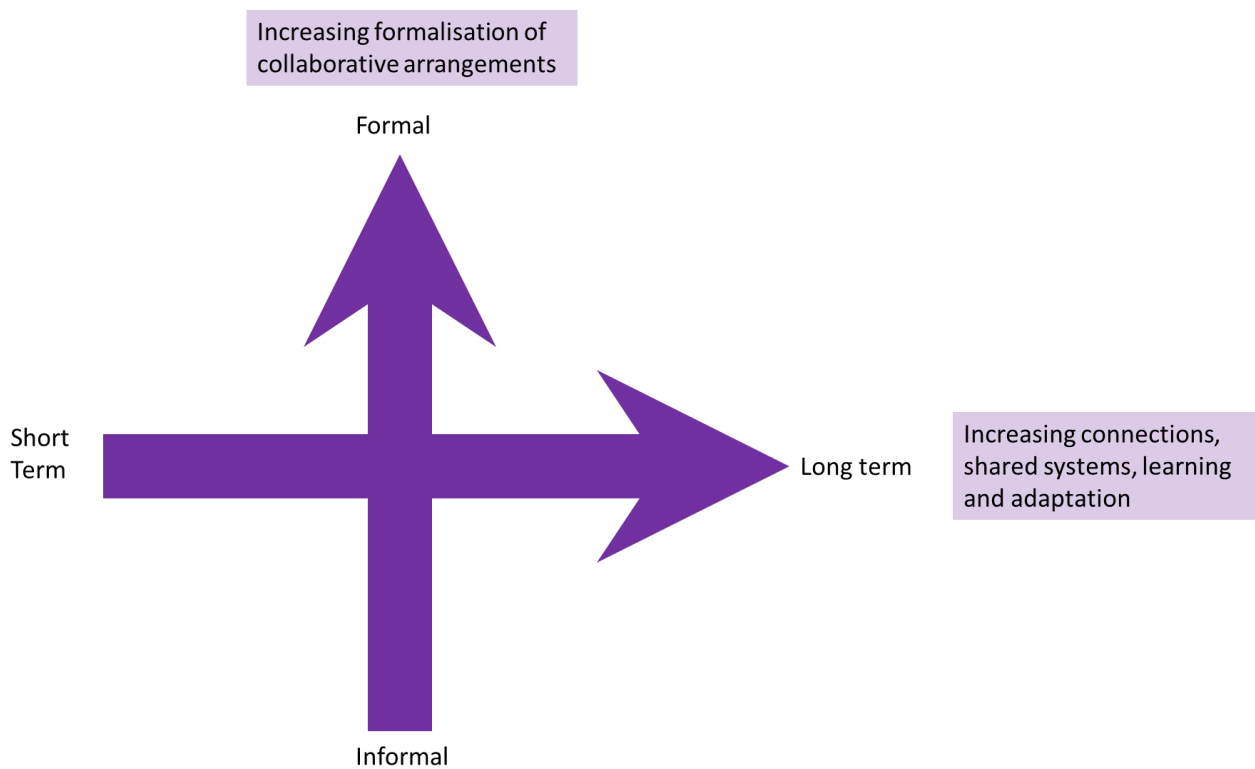
Increasing formalisation of collaborative arrangements

Formal

Short Term

Long term

Increasing connections, shared systems, learning and adaptation

Informal

Figure 5: Characterising networks in terms of formality and duration

To place FFLGT in context of other initiatives, Table 1 provides a summary of some other relevant network building initiatives, drawing upon models and characteristics of networks discussed in the above section. The cases illustrate a mix of small scale directed movements and large scale self-organising networks that differ in terms of their formality and duration.

Table 1: Examples of network building initiatives in community, voluntary and social enterprise settings with an interest in food issues

Title (and organisation)	Network characteristics
Garden Organic Master Gardeners https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/master-gardeners	• Directed network with specific member tasks • Centrally directed and clearly defined role description • Expert facilitated networking activities with scope for peer support and formal buddying roles • Closed membership based in applications • Medium term
Rockefeller Foundation Food System Game Changers Lab https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/video/food-systems-game-changers-lab/	• Networks loosely linked to shared principles and interest in social innovation/entrepreneurship. • Closed membership based on applications • Expert design and facilitation. Resource intensive • Advanced IT platforms (Open IDEO; Miro; Hubilo etc) • Short term. Task and finish project, with off-boarding to leadership training and self-directed networks
Community Organisers https://www.corganisers.org.uk/	• Network governed by shared principles and shaped by common training and funding • High local autonomy for local members • Closed membership, with affiliates • Medium term. Project funded with aspiration to become a community interest company
Mutual Aid https://www.mutual-aid.co.uk/	• Network based on shared general principles and causes • Highly autonomous and decentralised ethos • Open membership. Highly diverse. • Strongly underpinned by social media platform • Low resource • Long term. Open ended
Sustainable Food Places Rise Up List https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/get_involved/	• Community of practice • Based upon shared broad principles and programme interest • Largely self-directed, with occasional facilitation • Closed group, open to new members on application • Low direct resource (although indirect staff costs) • Long term. Project with potential to migrate to self-organised membership
Food for Life Cooks Network Calderdale https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/commissioners/current-commissions(archive)	• Initially a direct network with aspiration to move to peer leadership • Clear focus, aims and objectives • Facilitated: in-person as well as online • Mid-level resourcing • Local level • Short term. Commissioned project

4. Methodology and methods

The overarching question for this research study is:

> To what extent has FFLGT contributed to a movement for good food through its programme of network activities?

A full list of the research questions is provided in the Appendix.

The research took place between April and July 2022 and consisted of three main elements as part of a mixed methods study design (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006). Firstly, we analysed the programme records concerned with the planning, delivery, and engagement with FFLGT network related work. This also included a review of prior evaluative work led by UWE and FFLGT on networks.

Second, with the support of the FFLGT team, 951 FFLGT network members were invited to take part in an online survey in May-June 2022 of their networks. The survey consisted of structured questions with some open text options. In the survey, we collected data on the demographic characteristics of respondents and their participation in FFLGT Network Events. We also collected information on the outputs and benefits they derived from the network events including how they implemented such outputs in their activities and connecting with other groups following the Network Events.

Through the survey, we were able to assess respondents' level of engagement in connecting with people before taking part in the Network Events and their future plans for connecting with other groups following the events. Full details about the survey questionnaire can be found in Appendix. Recipients were invited to enter a £50 prize draw.

Survey data was downloaded from Qualtrics and analysed in SPSS version 28 (IBM SPSS Statistics, 2022). All inferential statistical analyses are based on 95% confidence level with a 2-tailed p-value of 0.05 as the cut-off for statistical significance.

Third, all survey respondents were invited to take part in a telephone or online interview. Of the 97 respondents, 40 agreed to be approached for interview. Of the 40 agreeing to take part in an interview, we sought a range of organisations in terms of types of organisations and successfully conducted 19 interviews. Interviewees were provided with information about the research and asked whether they would give permission for us to report the name of their organisation or group. All interviews were transcribed in full, with edits to remove natural speech repetition and hesitation. We used the framework method for the analysis of transcripts (Gale et al., 2013).

Ethical approval for this research was obtained through the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), Health and Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Reference HAS.20.11.034.

5. Findings from programme records

5.1 Overview

The focus of this section concerns the evidence available through the programme of FFLGT's networking activities. It draws upon the following sources of information

- Original programme plan and theory of change
- Revised programme plan and theory of change
- FFLGT team internal analysis of programme data

5.2 Original programme plan and theory of change 2019-20

The original programme plan and theory of change addressed network building primarily from the perspectives of (1) promoting social networks at the local level of events and (2) in terms of the sharing of learning between Get Togethers Organisers of events. National and regional networking events and training were not a strong feature of the delivery plans in Years 1 and 2 of the programme. However as a result of a stakeholder consultation undertaken in April 2020 and during national and regional partnership meetings it became evident that there were added benefits arising from the potential to scale up and out networking activities. This insight also provided a basis to refine the operation of the final two years of the programme in which the intention had always been to promote greater peer directed work in regions and localities.

5.3 Development of the theory of change from 2021 onwards

In early 2021 the FFLGT team explored alternative ways to conceptualise network building activities[4]. This included a discussion paper on **Directed Network Model** (see Figure 6) where the team stated:

> *"We have been exploring the theory of Distributed Organising (DO) within FFLGT which involves creating self-sustaining leadership within communities around good food where volunteers take ownership of aspects of the work. If successful, DO could reach more people and deliver increased outcomes with a smaller team."*

> *There are challenges to operationalising this within the context of Get Togethers. One is that "letting go" in the ways proposed by DO raises questions about how we keep the work aligned to the charity's wider goals. It is also a challenge in practical terms to provide sufficient support to volunteers without ongoing support in year 4 and beyond.*

> *A possible solution to this is to use a form of DO known as Directed Networks. This incorporates many elements of full DO but retains a centralised strategic core with network hubs designed to give a lot of control over to members.*

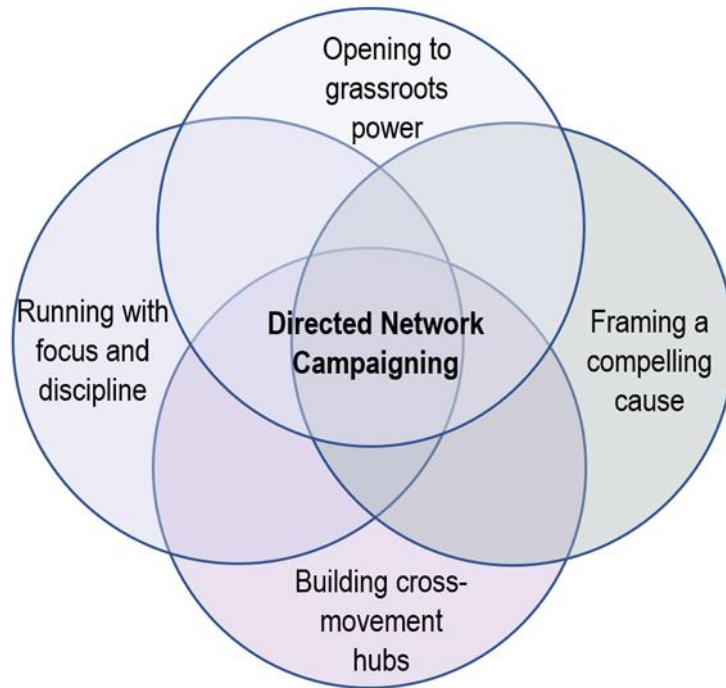[4] FFLGT Team Planning Session, March 2021 Directed Network Model

Figure 6: Directed Network Campaigning. Adapted from FFLGT Team Planning Session, March 2021
Directed Network Model

FFLGT/SA nevertheless recognised that the Directed Networks model did not entirely fit the programme and SA's practices:

> [I]t needs to be noted that DO theory and most of the examples of Directed Networks are about campaigning in a political sense. Only a few examples relate to charitable work comparable to ours. (ibid)

While the concept of Directed Networks did not feature in Year 3 and 4 of the programme delivery plans, some elements resemble the revised FFLGT Theory of Change (v6, see below) that was developed in early 2022. During programme reviews of 2021[5] other theories of change were also proposed, such as the Trans-Theoretical Model (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992) and Appreciative Enquiry (Bushe, 1998), concerned with processes of engaging Get Togethers organisers as individuals or groups.

5.4 The revised theory of change in early 2022

As a consequence of team development meetings, in early 2022 FFGT published a revised theory of change (See Figure 7), in which the Get Togethers Network(s) feature as a basis for the goals to mobilise, build capacity, and build leadership. Get Togethers Network(s) refer to a set of programme activities mainly concerned with national online events, training, newsletter, and social media communications, as well as the networking activities of Locally Commissioned Partners. However, elements of programme reporting also refer to networking aspects of small grants and My Food Community.

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[5] FFLGT Network Manager Report, November 2021

A world where people of different ages and backgrounds regularly connect, learn and play a more active role in their local food system

RESULTS FROM

1. People of different ages or backgrounds have stronger connections with each other in communities across the UK through cooking, growing and sharing good food

2. People across the UK have increased knowledge, skills, networks and resources to run and sustain social good food activities

3. Get Together organisers are more connected with each other, actively participating in or leading their own peer networks, which increase the transfer of information, knowledge, and resources about social good food activities within or between communities of interest, practice or geography

4. Knowledge and understanding related to equality, diversity and inclusion in social good food activities is developed and shared widely through the programme

5. 'Good Food Champions' influence and inform changes in policies, practice or behaviour in their communities, settings or projects that contribute to regeneration of a world with good health, in balance with nature and a safe climate.

RESULTS FROM

BUILD LEADERSHIP
My Food Community Leadership Programme
Get Togethers Network
Local Commissioned Partners

MOBILISE
Key campaigns
Promotion through FFL & partner networks
Press & social media
Small Grants
Get Togethers Networks

BUILD CAPACITY
Resources
Online training
Get Togethers Networks
Local Commissioned Partners
Small Grants

INFORMED BY
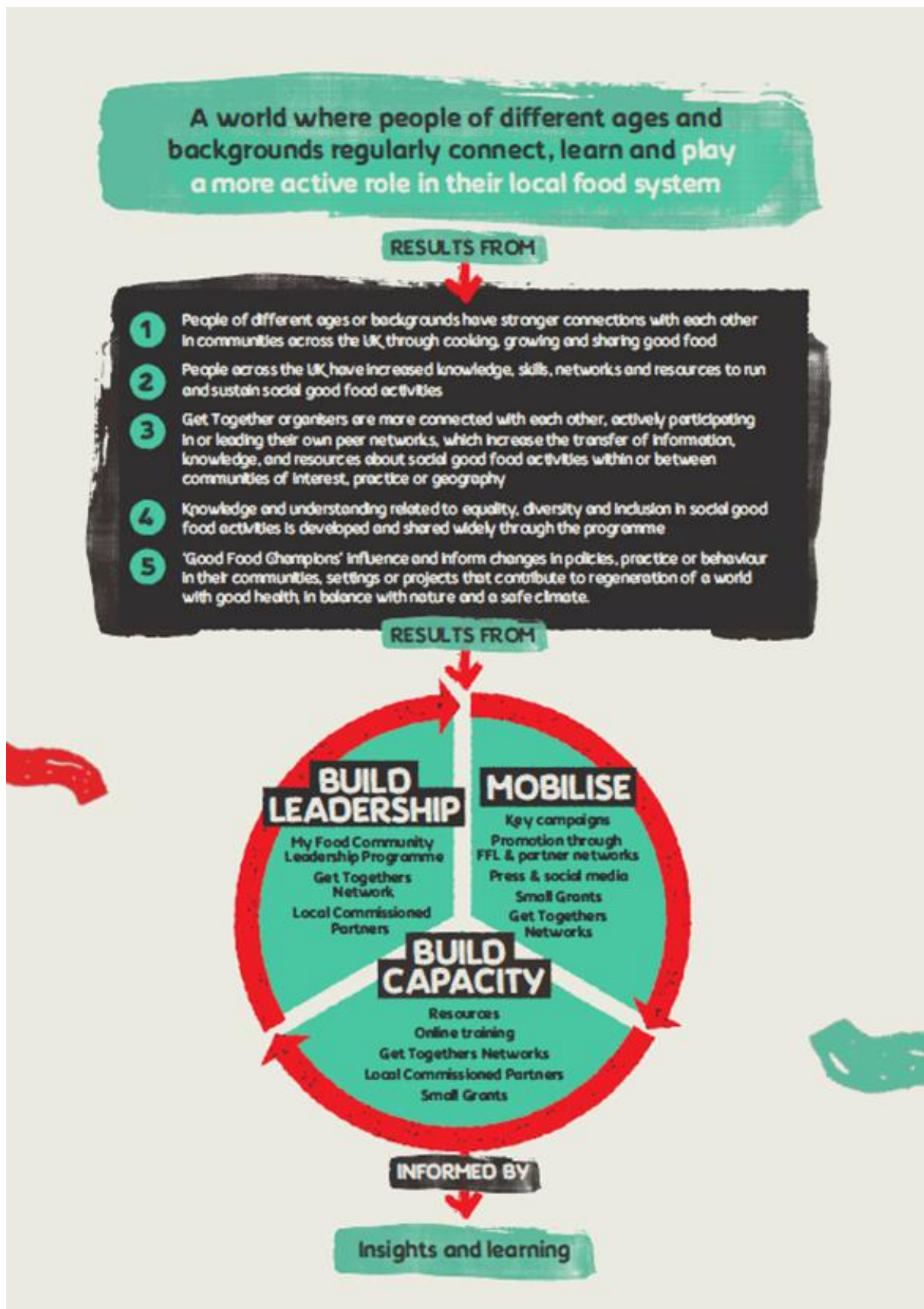
Insights and learning

Figure 7: Food for Life Get Togethers Theory of Change **(version 6)**

6. FFLGT monitoring records on engagement with the programme and its network activities

6.1 Overall engagement figures

FFLGT have developed structured process to build the engagement of new registrants. This consists of a six-part automated email journey that welcomes them to Get Togethers and signposts to resources, networking, and capacity building opportunities. By May 2022, a total of 2912 groups / organisations had registered with the programme[6]. This figure exceeded the target figure for the end of Year 3 and reflects an acceleration in the rate of new registrations over the course of the programme. From this total, the groups/organisations were involved in the following ways:

- 2102 registered at least one activity
- 1349 signed up to the FFLGT newsletter
- 696 registered for a Network Event
- 681 received a small grant

These forms of engagement overlap. While a substantial fraction has only limited engagement, a minority are involved with multiple aspects of the programme. FFLGT estimate that 56 fit the description of 'highly engaged'. These are defined as individuals or groups as those that have at least three of the above forms of involvement or completed the My Food Community scheme. In their capacity as a Locally Commissioned Partner, a further 24 can also be considered closely involved with the programme.[7]

While most areas of focus for the programme exceeded anticipated engagement, the online offer of cooking, growing and sharing training was less successful, possibly due to technical issues with promotion and registration.

6.1.1   FFLGT Network Event engagement 2021-22

FFLGT's June 2022 report on engagement with Network Events shows that there were:

- a total of 1343 network registrations
- 918 distinct individuals registered for a Network Event
- of which, 516 were new to FFLGT at network registration (56.2%)
- 24.9% distinct individuals registered for more than one event
- 807 distinct groups registered for a Network Event

Table 2 shows that Network Events differed in term of the number of registrations. The average attendance was 47%. Network Events appear to be of interest to individuals/groups that have not been previously registered with the programme with the average new registrants across events being 37%.This suggest that events have been a good route to grow the FFLGT network.

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[6] Source: FFLGT Data Report Year 3, Quarter 3. Y3Q3 FFLGT define "engaged" as registered a FFLGT activity, registered for a network, applied for My Food Community, is an Locally Commissioned Partner, or completed online training.
[7] Source: FFLGT email. Nov 21

Table 2: Analysis of online Network Event registrations[8]

Network Event	Event Date	Registrations, N	Actual attendance, N	Registrant attendance %	Registrants new to FFLGT %
Community orchards	Sep-21	209	85	41	49
Cook to connect	Oct-21	254	143	56	0
Cooking for your community	May-22	49	34	69	43
Developing a green and growing network	Mar-22	169	70	41	57
Don't go it alone	Nov-21	271	145	54	41
Eating well from birth	Apr-22	67	37	45	25
Edible hanging baskets	Apr-22	80	36	45	41
Engaging young people with good food	Feb-22	164	85	52	35
Local partnerships	Nov-21	172	70	41	24
Love trees, love your community	Sep-21	255	92	36	40
Mother nature	May-22	36	7	19	44
Putting dignity on the menu	May-22	65	38	58	45
Stronger communities through good food	May-22	62	28	45	39
What do you put in your mouth?	Feb-22	156	85	54	35

Registrations were located from across the UK, with strong representation from the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland nations when the proportions are compared to populations. In terms of group location, 45.3% had postcodes linked to the top 30% of areas of highest multiple deprivation.

FFLGT's year 3 Annual Report reflected that "attendance at online sessions regularly reached over 100 participants, our Network Events represent a low-cost method of engaging in a one-to-many model of delivery that initiates action." The latter point is based on positive post event survey responses although, given low response rates, caution is needed in the interpretation of this evidence.

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[8] Source: FFLGT Network Registration Power BI Report, June 2022 FFLGT Network Registration

Figure 8: Food for Life Get Togethers Team asks participants to evaluate all Network Events. Example Community Orchards 2021
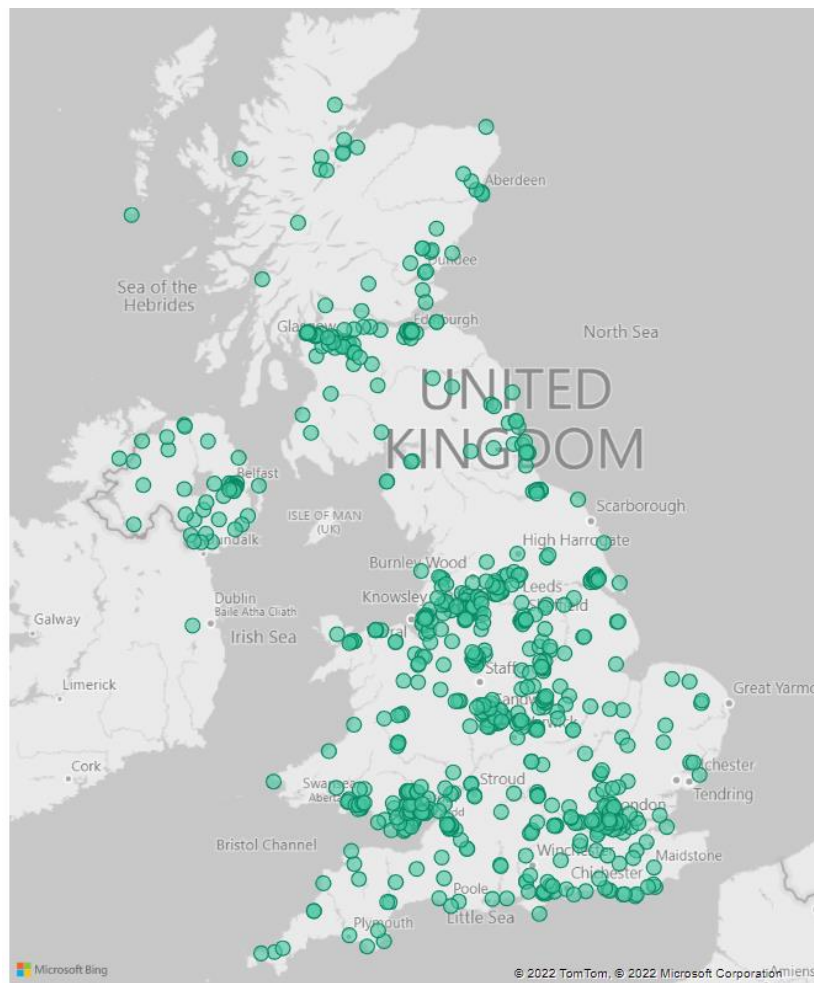

Figure 9. Location of network registrations (map). Source FFLGT report June 2022

6.2 FFLGT team internal social network analysis of programme engagement records

FFLGT's Network Manager[9] has conducted an analysis of individuals and organisations, and their engagement with FFLGT activities. This involved the use of Gephi, an open-source network analysis and visualization software package, and data from the programme's CRM. The goals of this Social Network Analysis (SNA) have been first, just to get a visual overview of the different projects and people involved and a broad sense of how people are connecting or not connecting across FFLGT. A second goal has been exploring how key people or institutions are themselves serving as hubs across the programme, with the potential to grow or shift how that is happening to make the network stronger overall. 'Strength' in this context is a network where there are multiple, dense interconnections between the network members rather than a series of hubs connecting people who remain otherwise unconnected to each other or to other parts of the programme. The initial results of this analysis are set out in Figure 10.
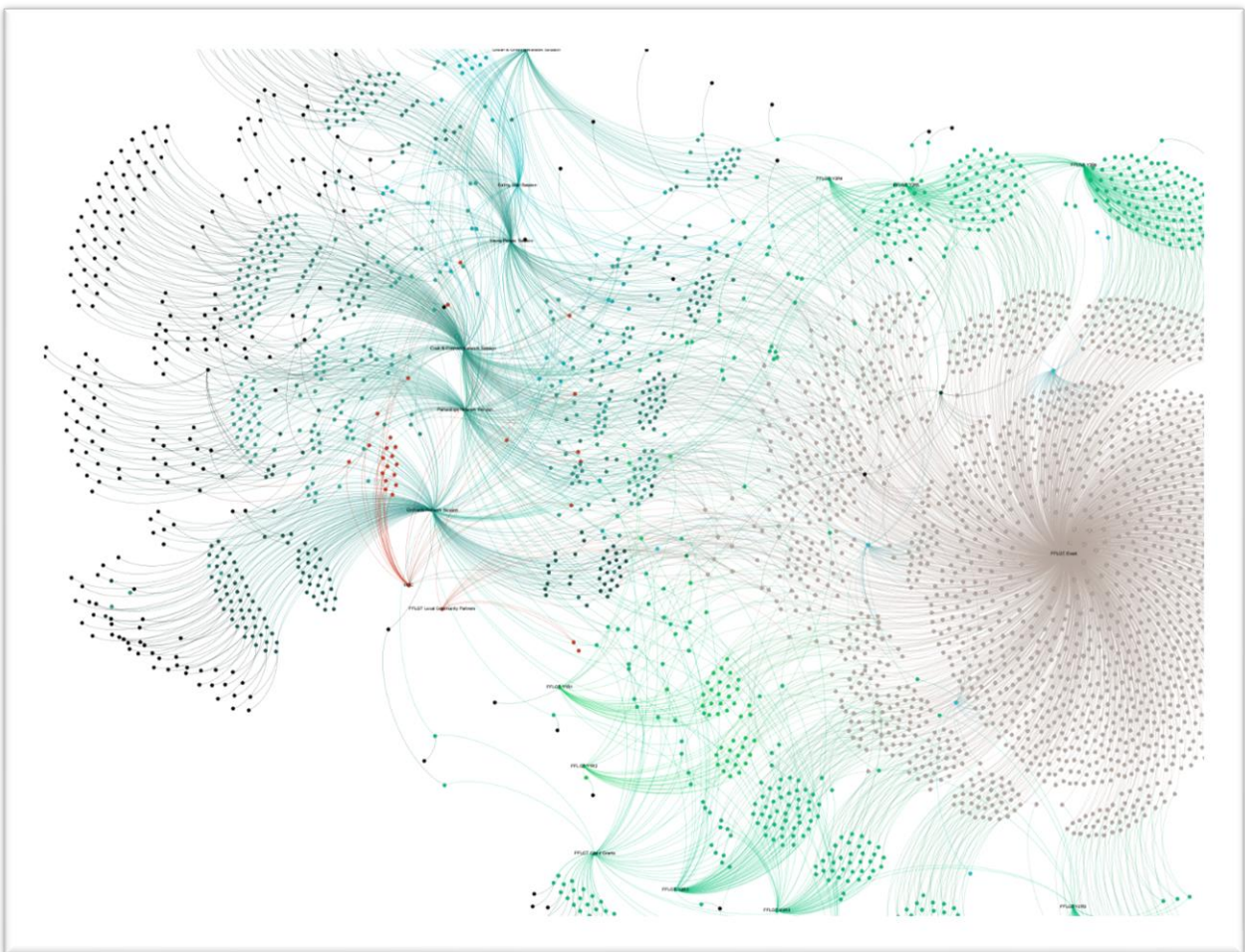

Figure 10: Social Network Analysis of FFLGT's CRM registrant engagement with programme activities.
Source: FFLGT Network Manager using Gephi. Data from 20th April 2022.

Figure 10 illustrates the following points on interest:

- The labelled dots are FFLGT programmes (red and beige), grants (green) or network sessions (turquoise). All others are either individuals or organisations.

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[9] This summary is based upon a July 2022 report from the FFLGT Network Manager.

- The beige colour to the right represents all those registering for FFLGT activities. This started in June 2019, and so it is not surprising that many of those registering activities for either Plant and Share or Cook and Share have not become involved in newer programmes.
- It is surrounded by the green hubs, which are the various small grant recipients. These show that most small grant recipients did go on to register an activity with the programme, although, many have not been involved in other FFLGT activities. Far fewer of Covid grant recipients have engaged with FFLGT activities.
- The dark turquoise hubs to the left of the figure are the network sessions completed at the time of downloading data. The activity to the left shows how individuals or groups have attended multiple network sessions but not otherwise been very involved. The way they connect on the right shows that a number were involved with FFLGT through small grants or registering activities. This is an area where the FFLGT team hope to focus and grow connections.
- The red hubs are My Food Community and Local Community Partners. Both show different but strong levels of engagement across programmes.
- Finally in blue are some of national partners. They have engaged in activity campaigns and connect to their own networks through FFLGT activities.

Looking forward to the final year of the programme, the team believe it will be increasingly important to understand and support connections between network members and the various programmes within the Soil Association as well as with each other to ensure connectivity beyond the funded period of FFLGT.

7. Findings from the networks survey

Out of the 951 FFLGT network members whom the survey was sent out to, we had a response rate of 10%, that is, a total of 97 responses. It is important to acknowledge that this sample size is small and is not representative of the FFLGT network members. Hence, the results presented below cannot be generalised to the wider FLLGT network cohort. Caution is also needed in attributing participants' responses on the outcomes expressed solely to the FFLT events as we did not control for the influence of confounding factors such as participation in other Network Events outside FFLGTs.

7.1 Demographic characteristics of survey participants

Majority of the survey participants were aged 50-59 years (37%, n= 24). Most respondents were female (83%, n= 55) and from a White ethnic background (75%, n= 48). In terms of group categories that were represented in the survey, environmental groups (n= 13) and other business and social enterprises (n= 13) were mostly featured. There was no representation from housing, youth groups, and LGBTQI+ community groups. Sixty-three percent (n= 41) of respondents represented groups that were based in England; fifteen percent (n= 10) were located in Scotland and in Wales and four groups (6%) were situated in Northern Ireland.

7.2 Attendees of FFLGT Network Events

Respondents were asked in the survey whether they attended a Network Event organised by FFLGT. Almost a quarter of respondents did not attend any FFLGT Network Event (Figure 11).

Among those who attended a FFLGT Network Event (n= 66), 29 attended only one event; 28 attended 2 to 4 events and 3 attended 5 to 7 events (Figure 12). The most attended event was the 'Stronger Communities Through Food' which had sixteen (27%) attendees (Figure 13).

Other Network Events attended aside the ones organised by FFLGT were (direct unedited quotes from participants):

- *Not sure it had a name – 2 days of cooking lunch together and then eating together*
- *FFL get together at Manchester University Cohort 1*
- *Stronger community through good food*
- *a launch event in Hull*
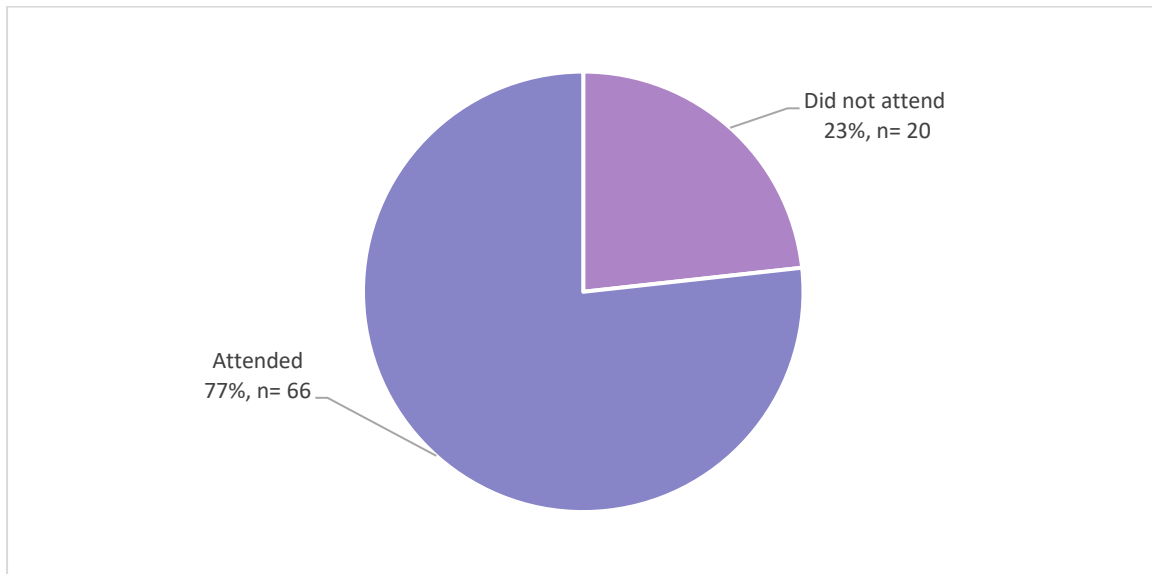- *Food for Life Get Togethers November Network Session (Local Partnerships)*

Figure 11: Proportion and number of respondents who attended or did not attend a Network Event organised by FFLGT (n=86)
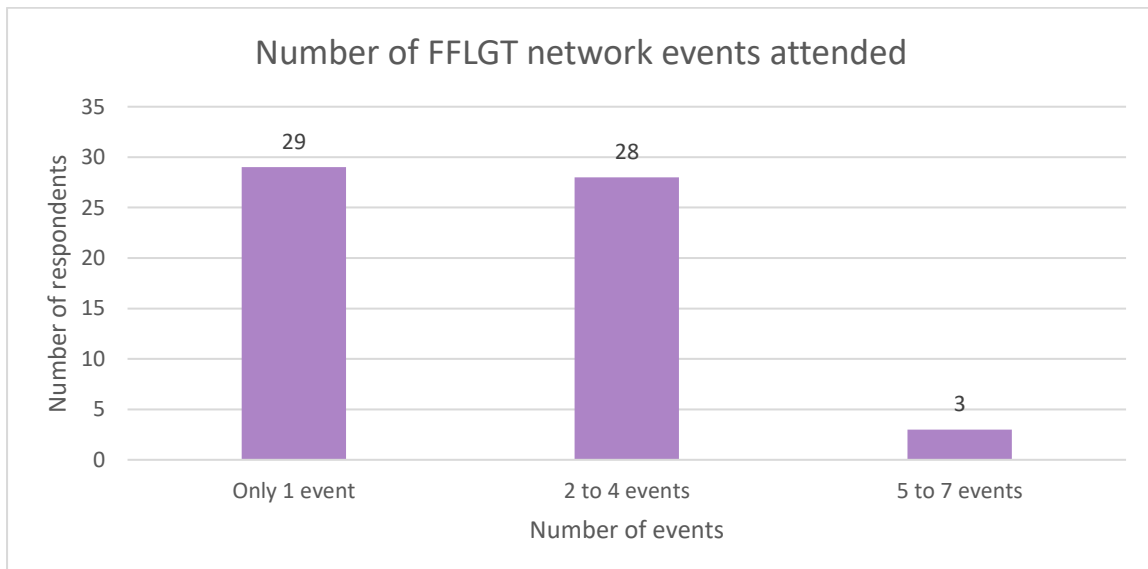

Figure 12: A bar graph showing the number of FFLGT Network Events attended
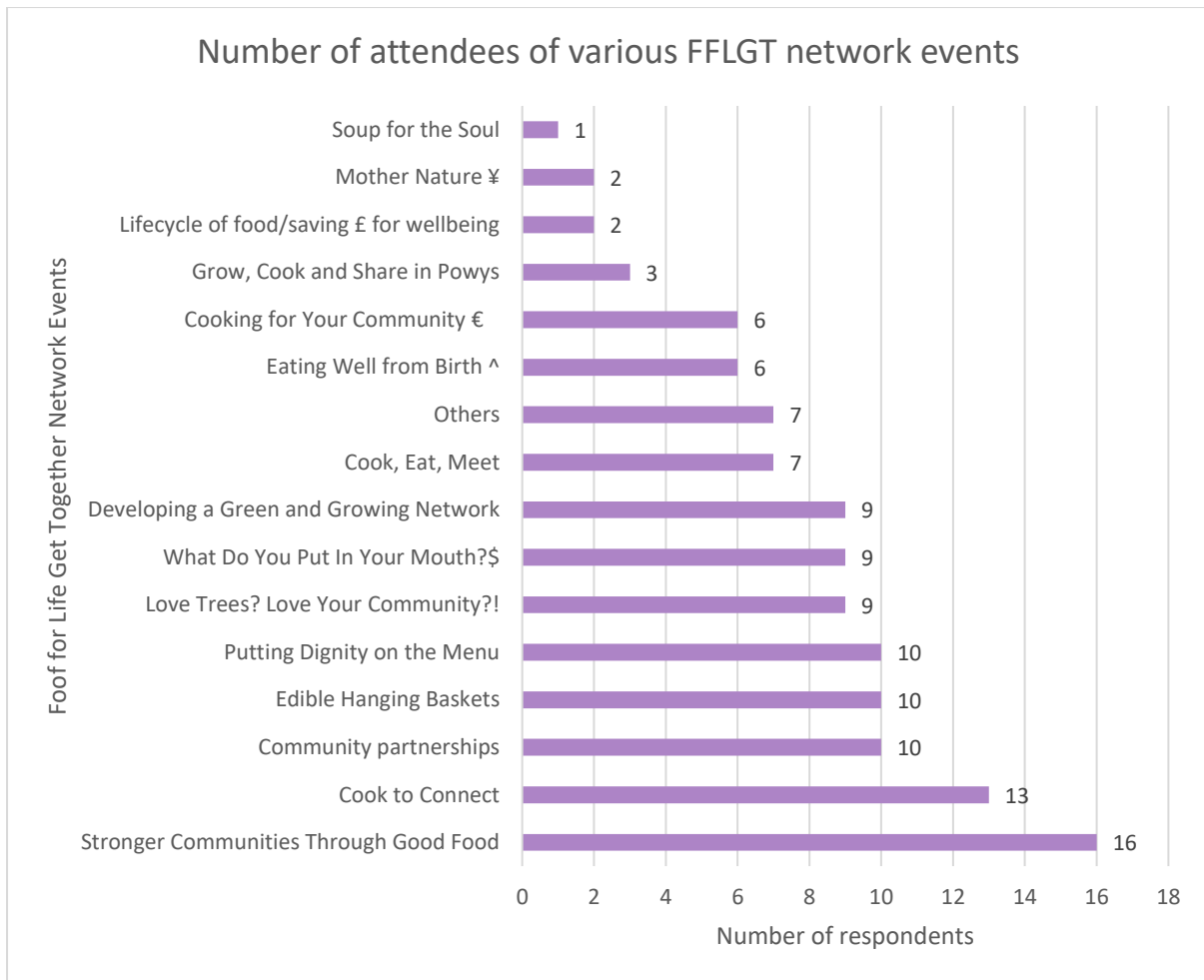
Figure 13: A bar graph showing the number of attendees of various FFLGT Network Events

!: Love Trees? Love Your Community?- Community Orchards Network Session +
$: What Do You Put In Your Mouth? "Engaging young people with good food" ++
^: Eating Well from Birth: Good food work with early years, children and families +++
¥: Mother Nature – Her Mechanisms and Magic at An Tobar ++++
€: Cooking for Your Community: A Recipe for Success +++++

7.3 Interactions among groups who attended the FFLGT Network Events

We asked respondents the extent to which they felt the FFLGT Network Events fostered interactions among attendees of these events. Figure 14 illustrates respondents' responses to this question.

Sixty-two percent (37/60) of respondents felt the events foster interactions very to extremely well among attendees.
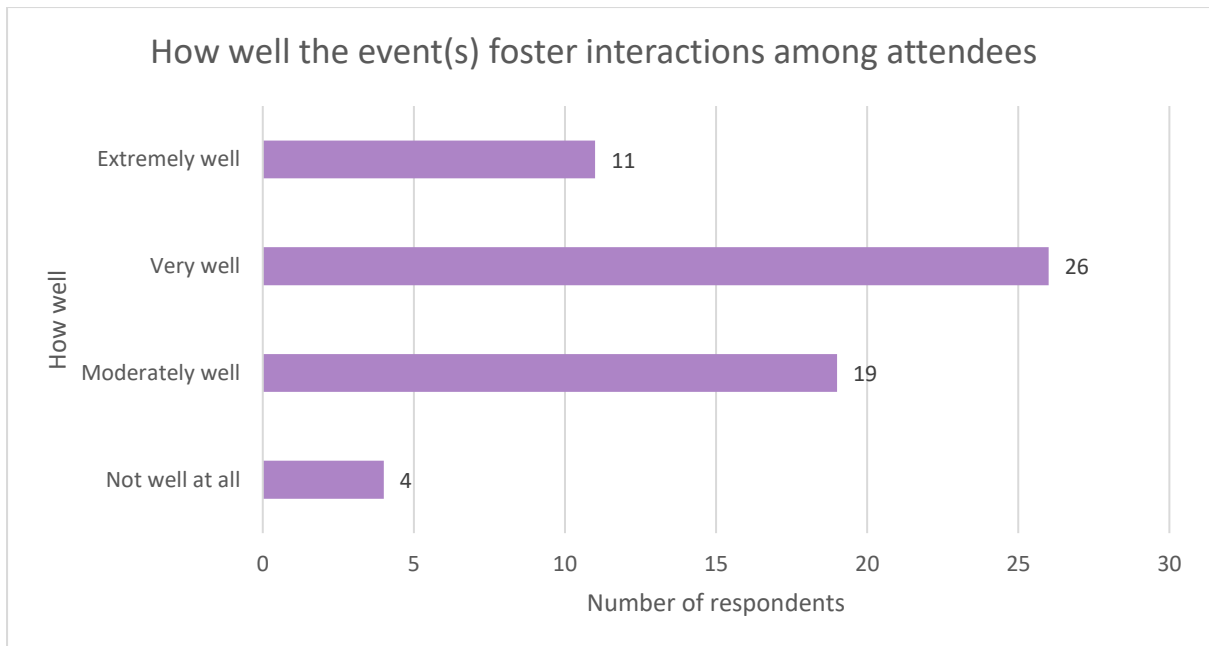
Figure 14: A bar chart showing the extent to which the FFLGT Network Events fostered interactions among attendees

7.4 Engaging with materials shared after the FFLT GT Network Events

For the 20 respondents who did not attend any of the FFLGT Network Events, we were interested in whether they engaged with materials from the events as registered FFLGT network members. Majority of these respondents (65%, n= 13) did not engage with materials outside the events (Figure 15). It was also not clear how these thirteen participants had engaged with any networking activities organised by FFLGTs.
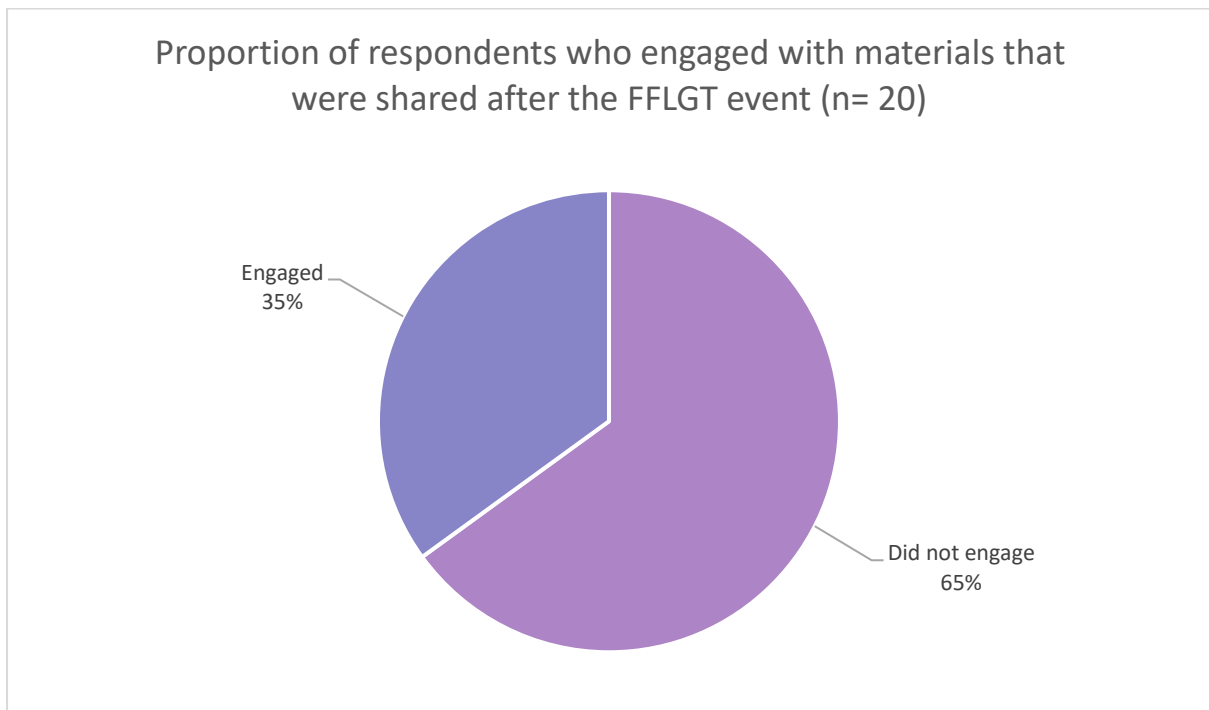

Figure 15: A pie chart showing the proportion of respondents who engaged with materials that were shared after the FFLGT Network Events

7.5 FFLGT training sessions completed after the Network Events

For those participants who attended a FFLGT Network Event, they were asked whether they proceeded to attend any of the FFLGT training events. The most popular event attended was the GT Growing online training, followed by the GT Cooking online training and then the GT expert by experience training (Figure 16). Twelve respondents did not attend any of the FFLGT training sessions and only one attended another network session called 'Weekly sessions Cohort 1'.
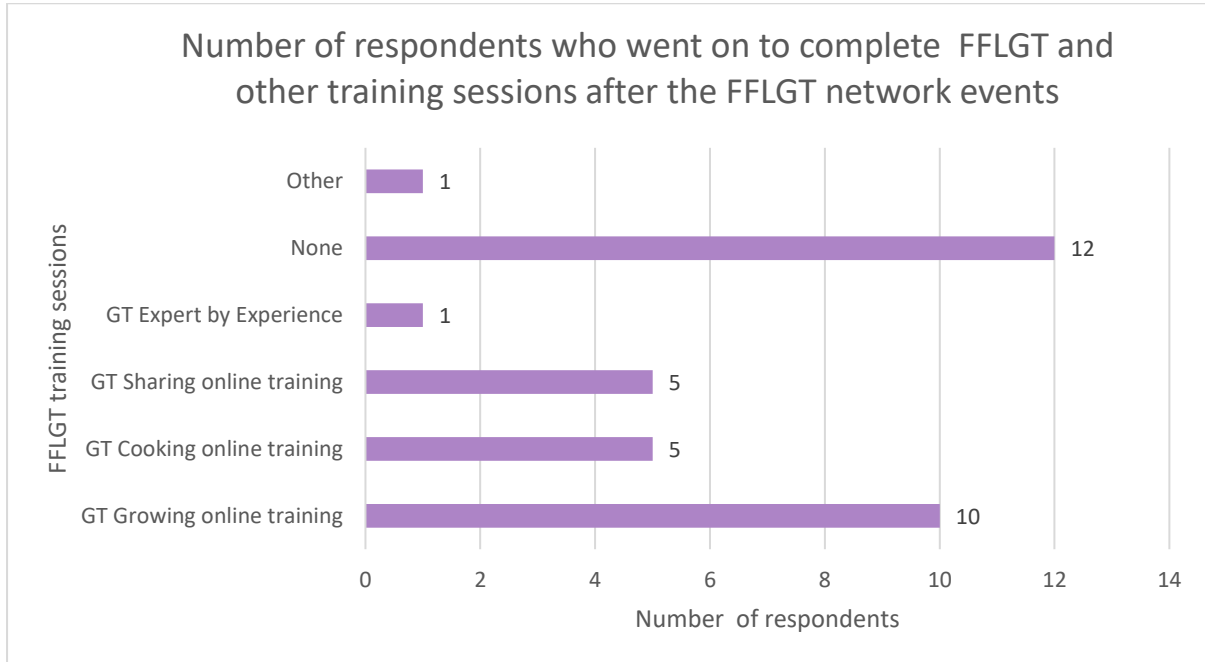

Figure 16: A bar graph showing the number of respondents who completed various network training events

7.6 Outputs of the FFLGT Network Events/ materials from the events

In terms of what network registrants got out of the FFLGT Network Events, three-quarters (n= 43) of participants felt that the events helped them to take action in community food activities while 72% (n= 41) appreciated the value of connecting with others around a common theme as a result of the events. Sixty percent (n= 34) felt more connected to Food for Life Get Togethers programme itself and 40% (n= 23) perceived the events to help develop their capacity to build relationships with other food activity organisers. Some other benefits attendees of the Network Events or those who engaged with the materials from the events (n= 10) included fostering connections with other groups and partners.

> *"Encourage me to connect people through food with my organisation"*

> *"Connect with other partnership to build relationship with other food activity organisers"*

Some indicated that they shared knowledge that was relevant to their group activities.

> *"share [t]he knowledge I gained with my Early Year Settings"*

> *"support a tutor to deliver a Grow your Garden course linked into the Community Fridge on the same site"*

Others felt they gained more ideas for their group activities.

"Hear more ideas discussed"

For some, the events promised a sense of belonging to a network, even if this was a slow process of engagement:

"I belong to a cooperative and a number of growing communities, I would hope to become involved at a later date with support."

For others, it boosted their confidence to carry out their group activities

"I feel more confident to challenge things."

"Not as overwhelmed knowing others have set up projects that are working"
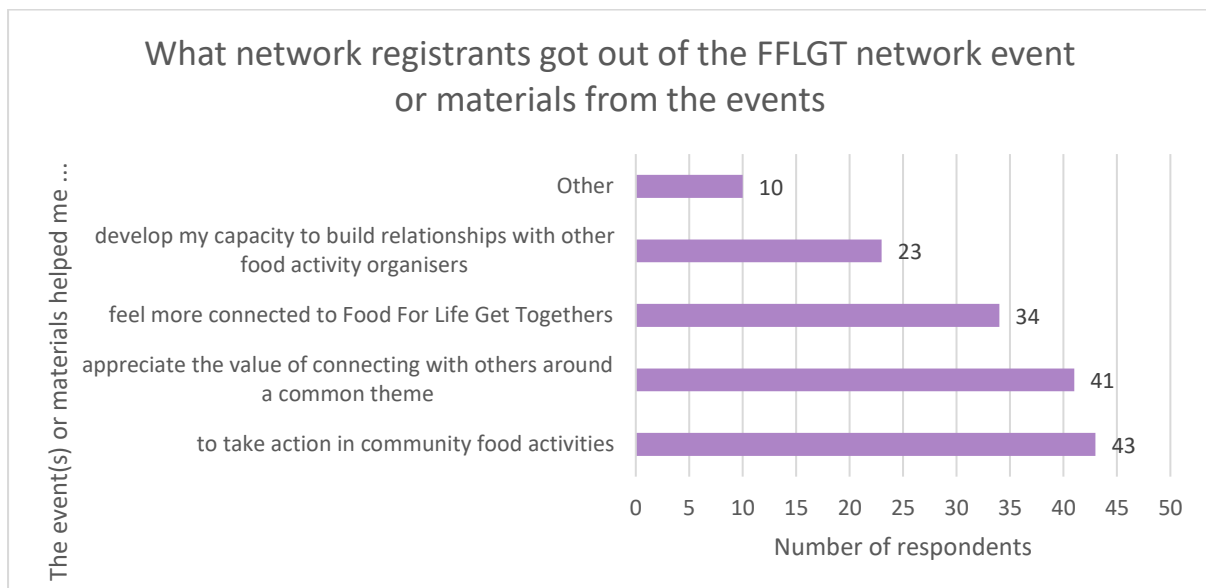

Figure 17: A bar chart showing frequency of various outputs from the FFLGT Network Events or materials from the events

7.7 Connecting with other groups following the FFLGT Network Events

Sixty people indicated whether they made connections in the form of sharing ideas, contacts, resources (funding, equipment, personnel) or working together on activities after they attended or engaged with materials from the FFLGT Network Events. In total, 50% (30/60) stated that they made connections with others following FFLGT Network Events.

In further analysis of this data, it is interesting to note the distinction between the 'average networking' (70% of respondents) activity of 1-5 new connections and the smaller (though not insignificant) proportion of 'super networkers' (13%) who made more than 16 connections following the event.

7.8 Outcomes of the FFLGT Network Events

We asked participants about various ways that they have implemented outputs derived from the FFLGT Network Events. They were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed/ disagreed to various statements regarding this.

Sixty-nine percent somewhat or strongly agreed to the statement that they "used ideas, knowledge and contacts from the events to help organise food activities". Fewer of them (9%) strongly disagreed to this statement and fewer still (7%) somewhat disagreed.
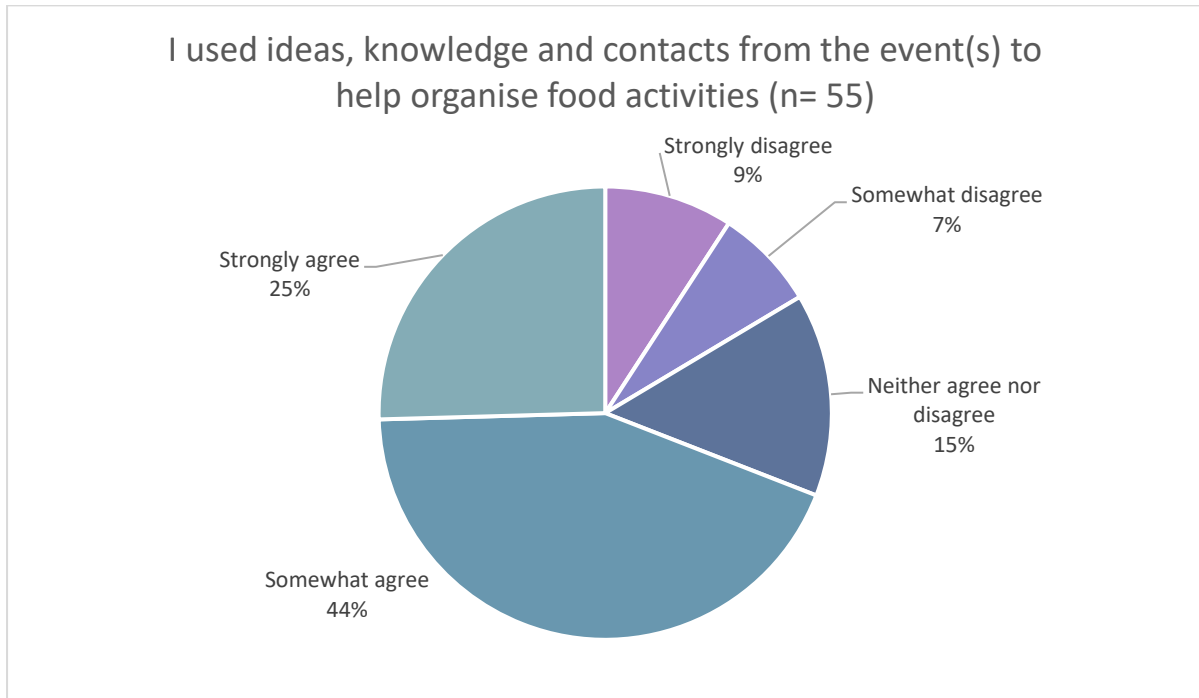

Figure 18: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I used ideas, knowledge and contacts from the event(s) to help organise food activities"

When it came to the statement, "I shared ideas and knowledge around food activities with others", almost 90% at least agreed to this statement and only 2% somewhat disagreed. None strongly disagreed with this statement.

I shared ideas and knowledge around food activities with others (n= 54)

Somewhat disagree 2%

Neither agree nor disagree 9%

Strongly agree 31%

Somewhat agree 58%
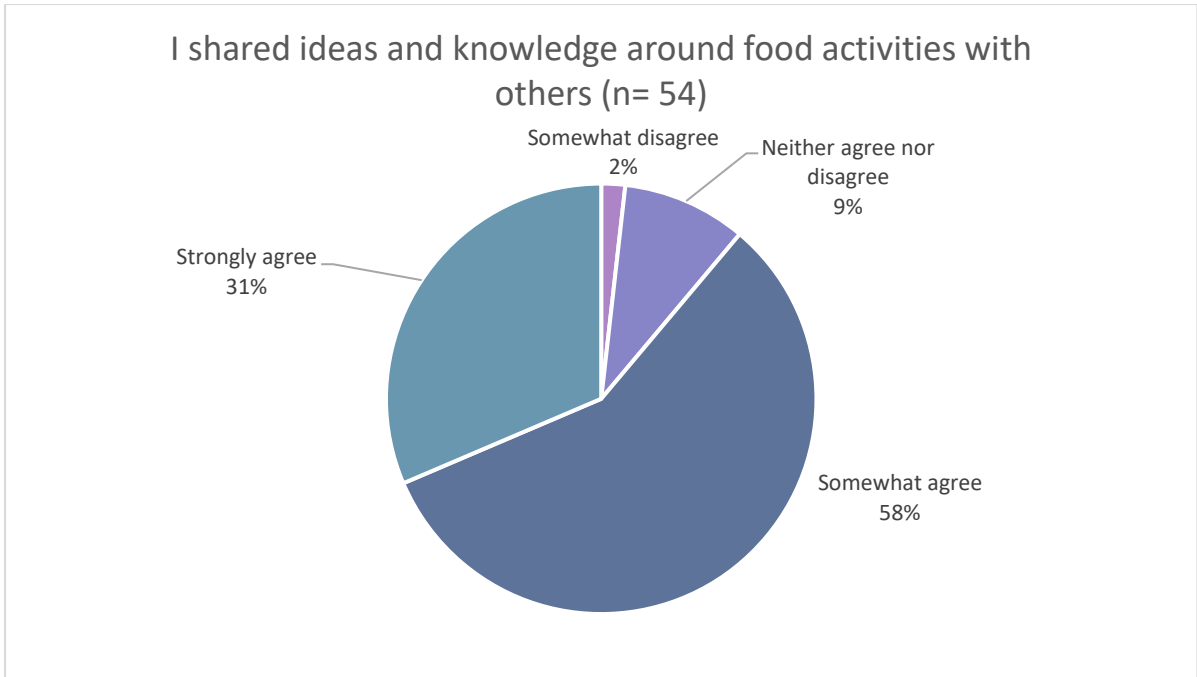
Figure 19: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I shared ideas and knowledge around food activities with others"

Over one-third of respondents (39%) somewhat or strongly disagreed that they were able to acquire funding to run food activities as a result of what they got from the Network Events and 29% somewhat or strongly agreed to this.

I was able to acquire funding to run food activities (n= 52)

Strongly agree 17%

Strongly disagree 21%

Somewhat agree 12%

Somewhat disagree 15%

Neither agree nor disagree 35%

Figure 20: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I was able to acquire funding to run food activities"

Only a minority (11%) disagreed with the statement that they strengthened their capacity to run food activities following the Network Events. Most respondents (61%) at least agreed to this statement.

I strengthened my capacity to run food activities (n= 54)

- Strongly disagree 4%
- Somewhat disagree 7%
- Neither agree nor disagree 28%
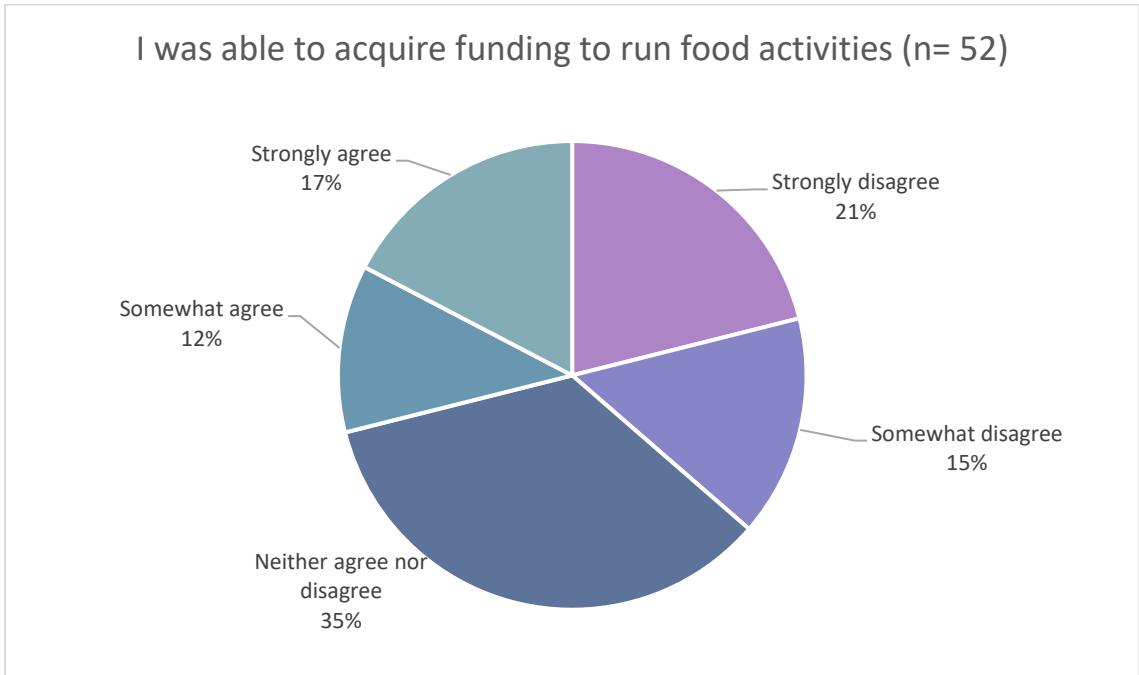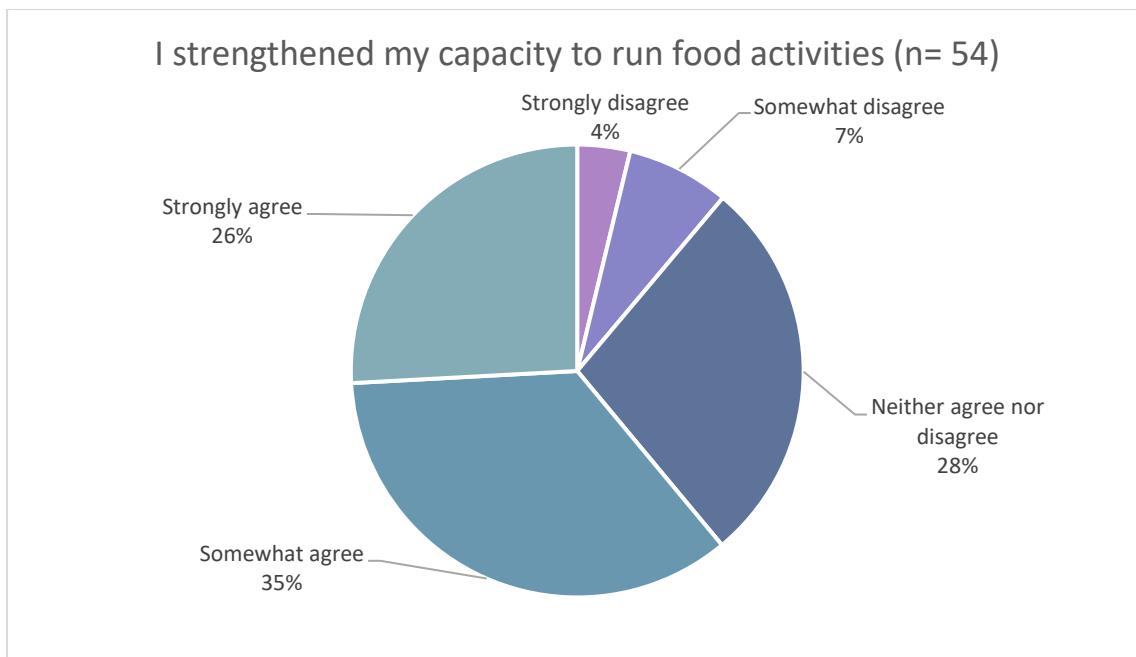- Somewhat agree 35%
- Somewhat agree 35%
- Strongly agree 26%

Figure 21: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I strengthened my capacity to run food activities"

Three-quarters of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed they have been inspired by others to organise food activities from engaging with the Network Events. Only a few (8%) felt otherwise, they somewhat or strongly did not feel so.

I have been inspired by others to organise food activities (n= 53)

- Strongly disagree 2%
- Somewhat disagree 6%
- Neither agree nor disagree 17%
- Somewhat agree 43%
- Strongly agree 32%

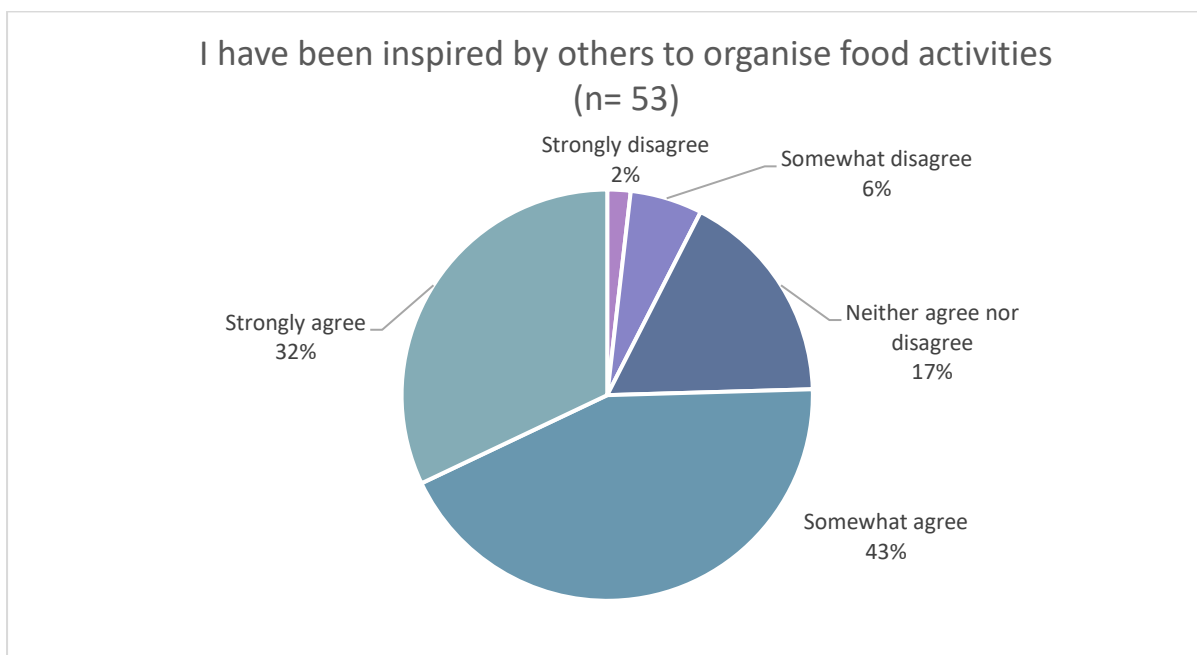**Figure 22: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I have been inspired by others to organise food activities"**

Just above half (52%) of the survey respondents agreed that engagement with the FFLGT Network Events enabled them to find solutions to problems in relation to organising food activities. Thirty-seven percent were not sure about this while 11% somewhat or strongly disagreed to this.

I was able to find solutions to problems in relation to organising food activities (n= 54)

Strongly disagree
2%

Somewhat disagree
9%

Strongly agree
17%

Neither agree nor disagree
37%

Somewhat agree
35%
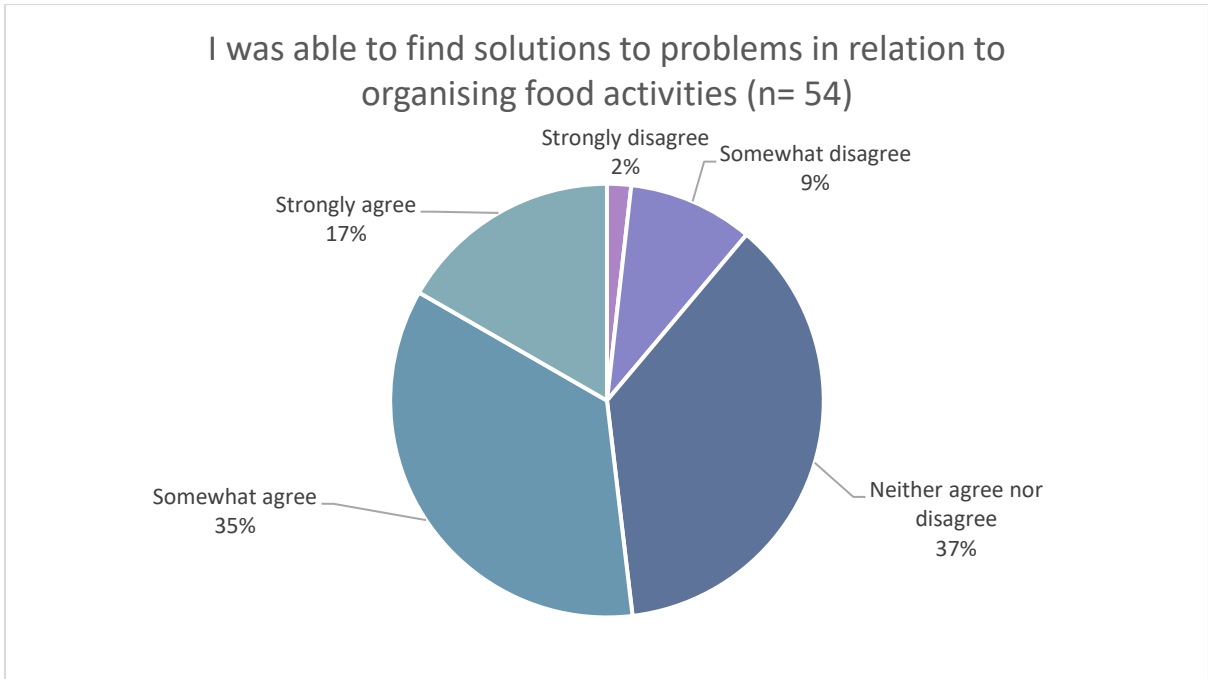
Figure 23: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I was able to find solutions to problems in relation to organising food activities"

We were interested in examining how connected network registrants felt with other community organisers as a result of the FFLGT Network Events. Forty-five percent somewhat agreed that this was the case; 21% strongly agreed; 6% somewhat disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed.

I felt better connected with other community food organisers (n= 53)

Strongly disagree
5%

Somewhat disagree
6%

Strongly agree
21%

Neither agree nor disagree
23%

Somewhat agree
45%

Figure 24: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I felt better connected with other community food organisers"

In terms of whether engagement with the FFLGT networks helped respondents to lead their own peer networks, 37% were in favour of this statement by somewhat or strongly agreeing to it while 32% opposed this by somewhat or strongly disagreeing to it.
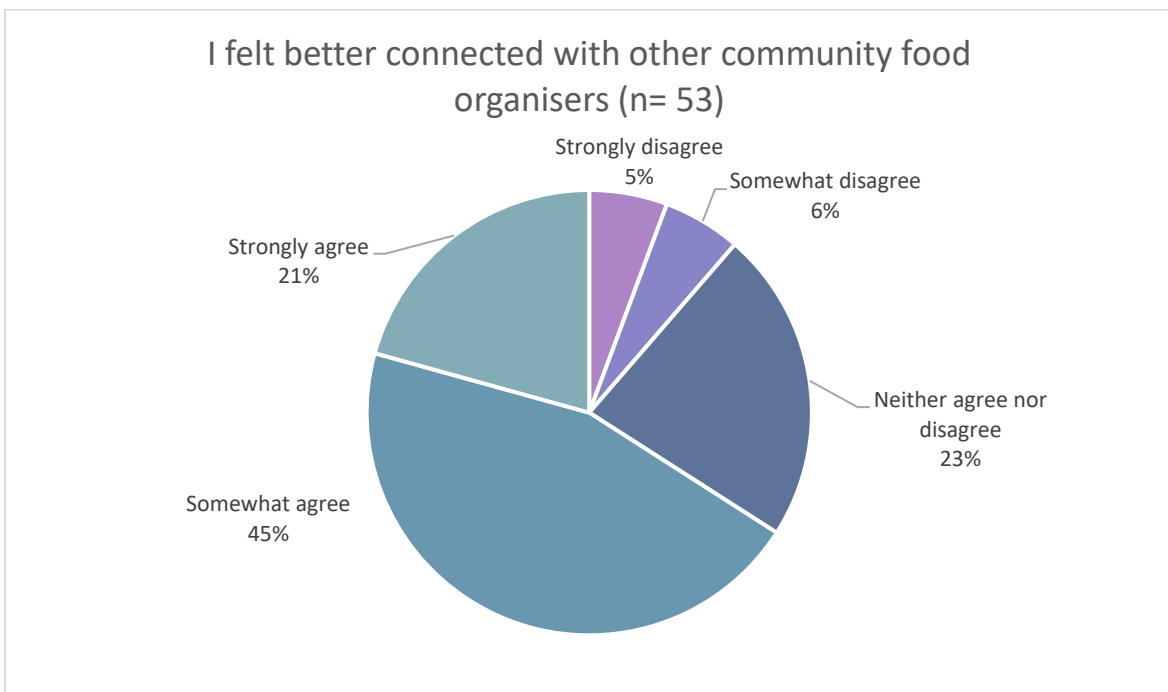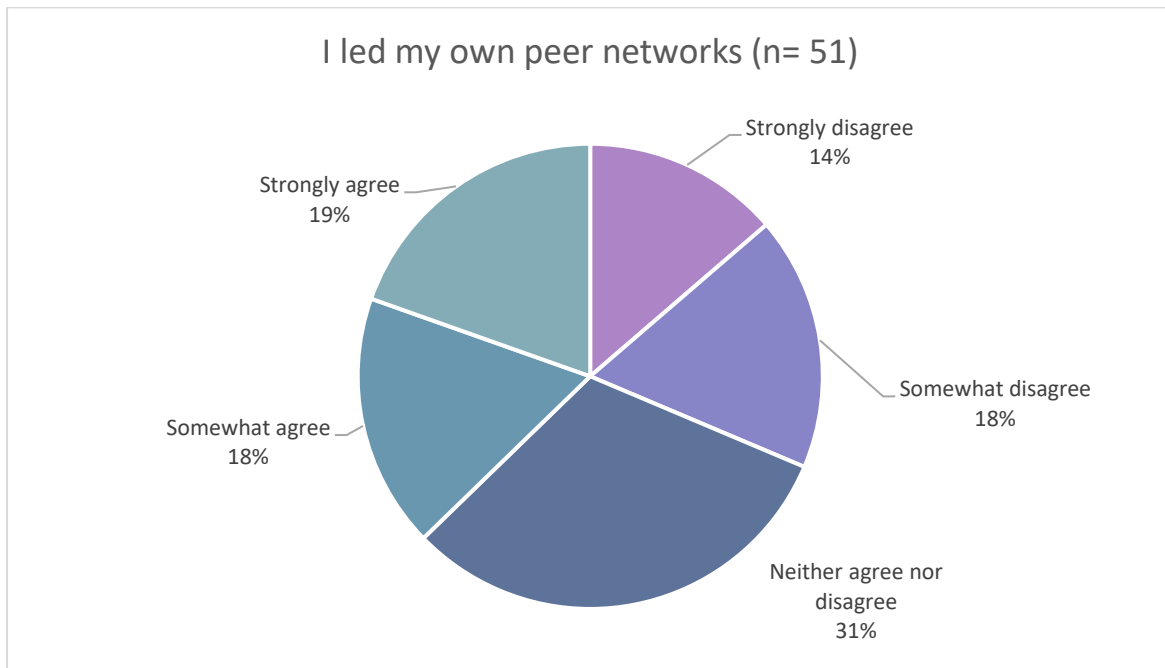

Figure 25: A pie chart illustrating the level of agreement to the statement, "I led my own peer networks"

7.9 Connecting with others before and after taking part in FFLGTs

We asked survey participants to rate how active they were in connecting with others before taking part in FFLGTs and also how they think the FFLGTs Network Events or materials will affect their involvement in connecting with others in the future. Figure 26 is a cluster bar graph showing how responses to these two questions mapped onto to each other.

Participants felt that FFLGT Network Events helped them become more active than before. This experience applied both to those who felt themselves to already be very active and those who defined themselves as not at all active prior to their engagement with FFLGT.

Thus, among those who indicated that they were not at all active in connecting with others before taking part in FFLGTs, 79% (n= 11) said they will want to get more involved in connecting with other groups due to their participation in the events; whereas 21% (n= 3) said they will continue to connect with others the same as ever. For those who perceived that they were quite active in connecting with others before the FFLGTs, more than half (53%, n= 17) showed they will want to get more involved in connecting with others because of their engagement in the FFLGTs Network Events; 44% (n= 14) indicated they will continue to connect as ever and only one participant (0.03%) felt they will be les involved. Among the very active cohorts in connecting with others before the FFLGTs, 67% (n= 6) expressed their willingness to get more involved in connecting with other people as a result of taking part in the FFLGTs Network Events and the rest one-third (n= 3) indicated they will continue as ever.
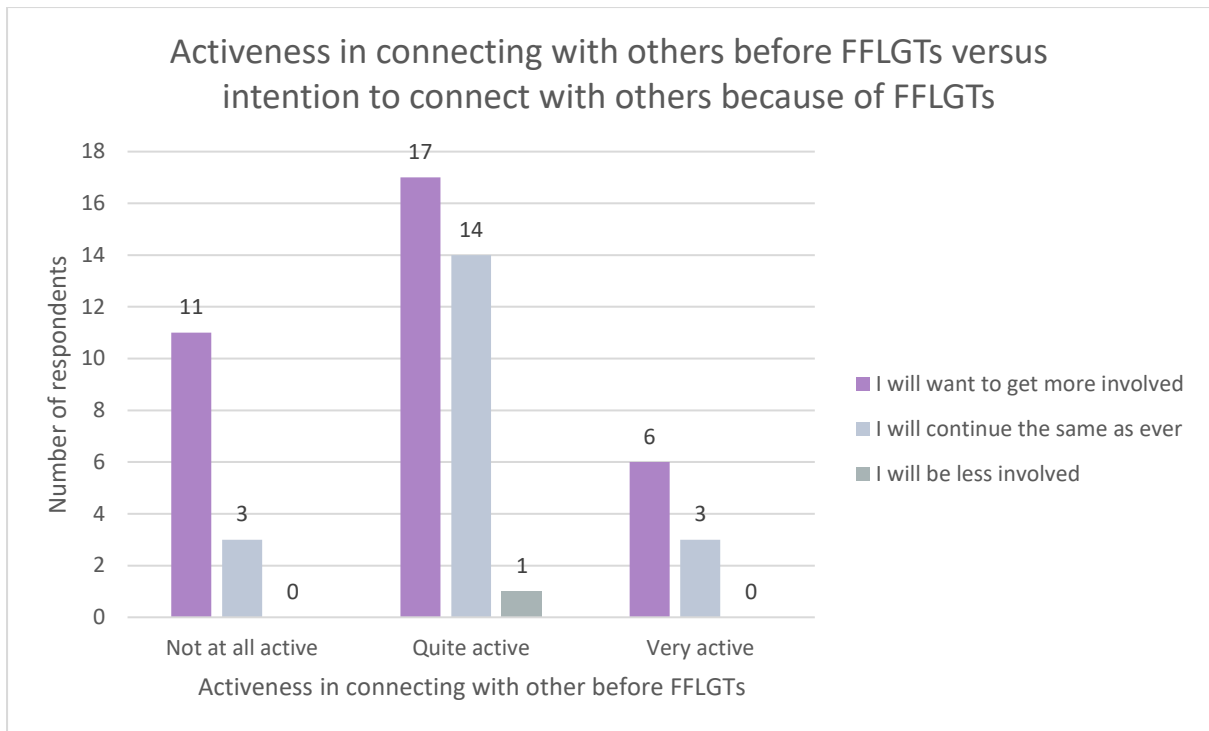
Figure 26: A cluster bar graph comparing how active respondents were in connecting with others before taking part in FFLGTs and how they think the FFLGTs will affect their involvement in connecting with others in the future

7.10   Interactions between attendees and post-event connections

We wanted to find out whether network participants' perception of how well the events fostered interactions among attendees was significantly associated with their tendency of making connections with other groups after the events.

Figure 27 shows that those participants who felt the Network Events fostered interactions (very to extremely well) among people had the tendency of going ahead to make connections with other groups after taking part in the events. Thus, the likelihood of connecting with others post the network events was four times more for those who felt the events fostered interactions among people compared to those who did not perceive the events to foster interactions (not so well) among attendees (OR = 3.9, 95%CI 1.3, 12.3, p= 0.016).
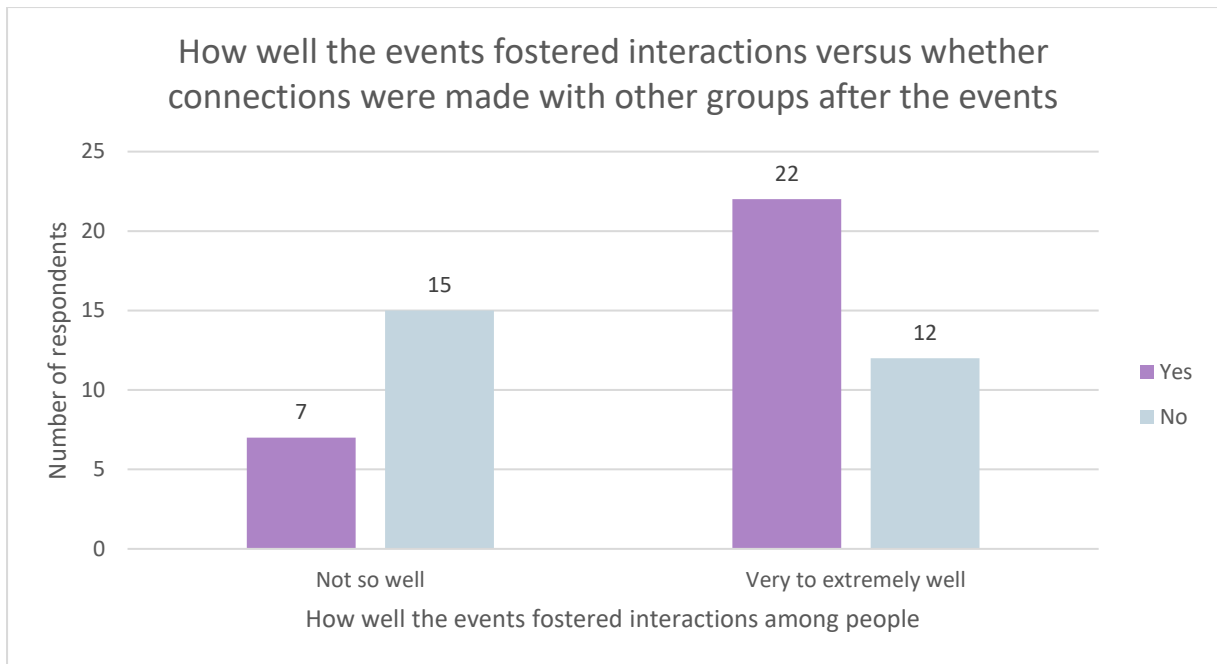
Figure 27: A cluster bar graph showing the association between how well the FFLGTs Network Events fostered interactions among attendees and attendees connecting with other groups after the events

7.11   Action on food activities and connecting with other groups after Network Events

Figure 28 illustrates the likelihood of making connections with other groups following the network events based on whether or not Network Event participants felt the events helped them to take action in community food activities. Respondents who felt the events helped them to take action in community food activities were five times more likely to make connections with others after the event compared to those who felt the events did not help them to take action in community food activities (OR= 4.9, 95CI 1.4, 17.8, p= 0.010). Thus, taking action in community food activities is linked to greater network involvement.

Figure 28: A cluster bar graph showing the relationship between output of Network Events in taking action in community food activities and making connections with other groups after taking part in the FFLGTs Network Events

7.12 Connections with groups after events and putting into practice learning from events

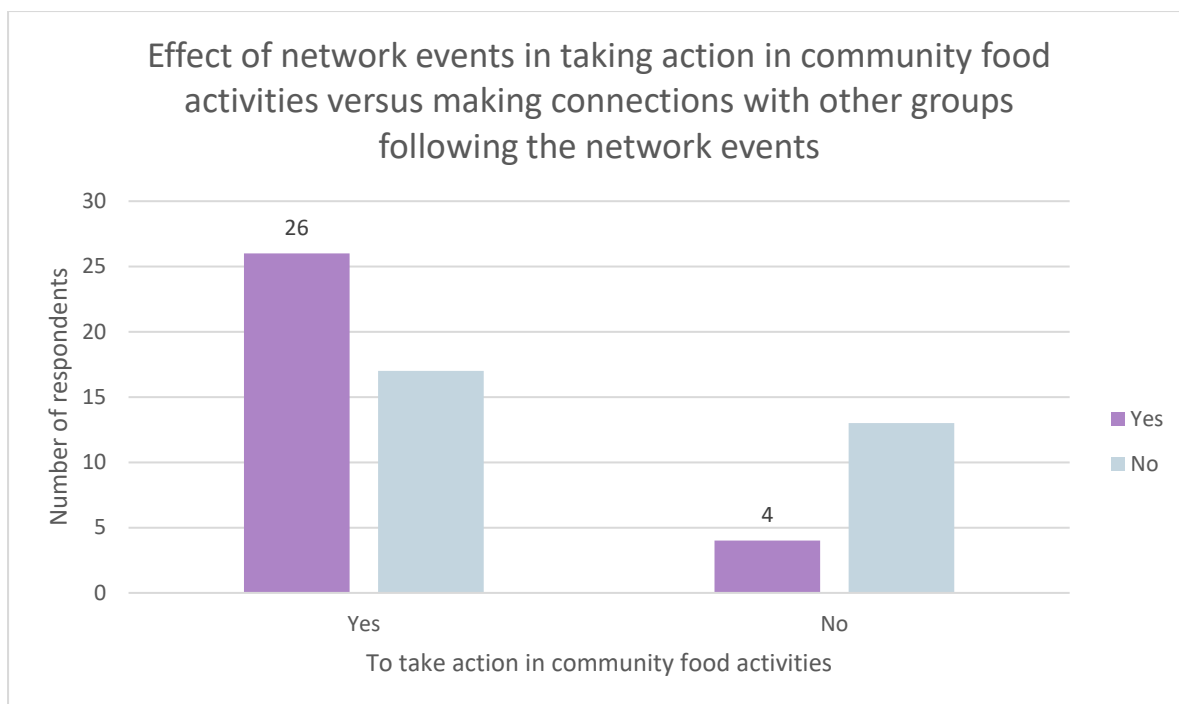**Table 3:** T-tests of differences in various outcomes of the FFLGTs events between those who made connections with other groups after the events and those who did not

What was done after the Network Events (outcomes)	N	Post event connections		No post event connections		t	p	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD			
Used ideas, knowledge and contacts to help organise food activities	54	33.85	1.32	33.52	1.09	1.012	0.316	0.28
Shared ideas and knowledge around food activities with others	53	34.26	0.86	34.12	0.43	0.766	0.447	0.21
Able to acquire funding to run food activities	51	33.28	1.37	32.46	1.24	2.238	0.030*	0.63
Strengthened capacity to run food activities	53	33.96	0.98	33.46	1.10	1.751	0.086	0.48
Inspired by others to organise food activities	52	34.04	1.04	33.92	0.89	0.430	0.669	0.12
Able to find solutions to problems in relation to organising food activities	53	33.96	0.81	33.12	0.91	3.592	<0.001*	0.99
I felt better connected with other community food organisers	52	34.23	0.65	33.15	1.12	4.237	<0.001*	1.18
I led my own peer networks	51	33.64	1.15	32.62	1.27	3.019	0.004*	0.85

*p< 0.05

There were statistically significant differences in favour of those who made connections with other groups following the events relative to those who did not on being able to acquire funding to run food activities (t (51) = 2.238, p= 0.030); being able to find solutions to problems in relation to organising food activities (t (53) = 3.592, p< 0.001); feeling better connected with other community food organisers (t (52) = 4.237, p< 0.001); leading own peer networks (t (51) = 3.019, p< 0.004).

8. Findings from networks interviews

This section presents the cross-cutting themes from interviews that we conducted with 19 individuals representing five Get Togethers Commissioned Partners and 14 individuals who had participated in Get Togethers Network Events. In some cases these individuals had also been involved with the programme through other mechanisms such as the small grant schemes. Interviewees were from England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and represented a wide range of community initiatives and settings.

The interviews analysis should be read in conjunction with Section 10. This sets out a typology of network relationship archetypes that represent the variety of ways in which individuals and their groups/organisations engaged with and benefitted from the Get Togethers network.

8.1 Overview

 Interviews focussed on participant and presenter experiences of Network Events. They also explored the extent to which people felt part of a wider Get Togethers network and the value they attributed to this.

Interviewees had found out about and come to be engaged with Get Togethers through a variety of routes. The main avenues were:

- online research (including Eventbrite and Facebook channels) to find resources to support their work,
- recommendations from contacts in their network,
- acting as Commissioned Partners,
- previous involvement with the Soil Association Food for Life programme,
- membership of the Soil Association.

Overall, the interviewees were very positive about the Network Events. There was much greater variation when it came to their recognition of, need for and sense of affiliation with Get Togethers as a national network and of Get Togethers as an avenue for broadening their project or work-related network.

Whilst many interviewees identified with the programme's aims and values, many (particularly the individuals who were not Commissioned Partners) engaged with the programme in a selective manner. This involved attending Events, following up specific contacts or using online resources as the need arose, but generally not identifying with or participating in the wider network in an intensive manner.

The focus for the non-Commissioned Partners was generally more on their local networks or networks that were more strongly aligned with their core work. Nevertheless, the Get Togethers Network Events and other resources such as the Newsletter and website had clearly been an important mechanism for enabling people to find out about inspiring and practical examples of community-based food initiatives that they were able to use to inform their own practice. In some

cases, this also led to furthering connections that had been made via Get Togethers, which sometimes led to ongoing support or engagement.

The case was different for Commissioned Partners. Since January 2020, Get Togethers has engaged Commissioned Partners to help catalyse local initiatives, support the development of local community food networks, build the capacity of Get Togethers participants and scale up Get Togethers work at regional and national level. In 2021 Commissioned Partners were also contracted to deliver 12 Network Events over a two-year period.

Due to their more intensive and extensive engagement with the programme, Commissioned Partners were naturally more orientated towards the perspective of Get Togethers as a community of interest. In some cases, their involvement with the programme has led to the development of new mutually supportive relationships or partnerships with other Get Togethers Commissioned Partners.

8.2 Network Events Overview

This section summarises interviewees' experience of Get Togethers Network Events and the ways in which engaging in the Events either as a participant or a presenter benefitted them or their work. The extent to which the Events encouraged or facilitated new relationships or collaborations is presented in Section 9.2.1, which looks at interviewees' relationship to the wider Get Togethers community/network.

Interviewees were overall very positive about the content, format, accessibility, and relaxed nature of the Network Events. The switch to online necessitated by Covid (and largely continued since) was viewed as positive because it gave participants access to contacts, initiatives, and examples of practice from across the UK that they otherwise would not have had access to. At the same time, face-to-face was seen as a more conducive way to make connections and build relationships. A series of events around a particular topic and an intuitive format for hosting resources and discussions were suggested as potential mechanisms for fostering more intensive and ongoing engagement around issues.

8.3 Accessible ad welcoming

Interviewees liked the flexibility and informality of the Network Events. Some welcomed the fact that they could pick and choose the events that were of most interest without being committed to a series and that they could also catch up via the recordings if need be. Two interviewees also appreciated that it was possible to engage in the events with differing levels of intensity.

> *"For me, it's just nice to hear those stories and the different approaches, and even if I don't agree with how somebody would do it. It does feel very nice to have that space. To talk, if you want to talk. I mean, there's a lot of the time I will put my microphone on and talk to them. But I just want to hear what other people have done. It's more relevant than turning the radio on sometimes. That is sometimes the capacity that I will listen to it. Listening to a podcast is not interactive enough. This is more in between than that, I suppose.*

One Event presenter referred to the experience as empowering. They had had limited public speaking experience and the relaxed format meant it was not intimidating to speak about their work in front of a group. In fact, for this interviewee, the Get Togethers Event had been the springboard for them to get back into hosting talks and conferences.

> *It gave me that kind of ability and confidence, but in a really nice setting with really nice people.*

8.4 New ideas and practical knowledge

For two interviewees who worked in school catering, the Network Events represented a rare and important opportunity to gather new ideas and information in a specialist area. For them it was particularly valuable to gain insight into what others across the UK were doing and to gain insight into transferable approaches that were being used by the voluntary sector. One of the interviewees; an academy catering lead also encouraged her team of school catering managers to attend.

> *"I want to know, as much as possible about what's going on in the industry, and what other schools are doing, and maybe get ideas. And so that's why I like to attend. And also, my managers attend as well."*

Many participants spoke about the value of the very practical and specific nature of the knowledge gained at Network Events. One participant, for example, used the information and guidance that she had picked up at the container gardening session to plan a community planting session.

> *"It gave me a good kind of programme or a structure of how to go and I based that on the event that I had done online with Get Togethers and I was quite pleased with that."*

> *"I think the [community cooking Network Event] was the one that really hit home for me, because… the presenter really understood, she'd obviously, worked in community kitchens and she was facilitating quite a few. So, she kind of understood the whole process of community cooking right from scratch, and what you need to do… Not just actually the cooking, but the logistics and the paperwork, and, you know, the sort of policies and all of that. So that was interesting. Getting that point of view."*

In addition to knowledge gained, for some participants the events were a confidence boost that gave them the courage to take action on something that they had been thinking about for a while.

> *"Other people's stories…. Gave me more confidence to kind of plough on with what I was trying or envisaged to do."*

8.5 Banking and brokering knowledge gained

As well as putting knowledge gained into action straight away, some participants said that they had 'banked' the learning from a session to help them with the implementation of a planned future project.

Others had multifaceted roles within their communities and tapped into the Network Events to gather knowledge that could be applied in various areas of their work and shared more widely with their networks.

> *"I think she's putting together quite a good booklet and she had quite a good slideshow. So all of that information, I've sort of taken on board, because then I can then spread the word, you know, so it's interesting."*

> *"I downloaded all the presentation to work through them. I went on to different websites. I basically use that for ideas on some of the presentations. Or then because at the end of the day…I'm a facilitator. So we might be approached, as I mentioned, by primary teachers, so it's passing on that information and saying, 'here's a couple of ideas'."*

8.6 Benefits and impacts for presenters

The Events had a number of benefits for the presenters themselves. For one of the Commissioned Partners presenting at a Network Event had given their organisation the opportunity to expand their reach and increase uptake of their services.

"Oh, it's been phenomenal. We widen our network, sharing with lots of other organisations, and sort of showcasing what we do."

Following the event, the presenter had received many positive responses to their session with local schools requesting to visit their site, people coming forward to volunteer and also feedback that the event on planting had inspired them to do something similar in their own garden.

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

Since the session, 30 children from a school that the organisation had not worked with before came for a day to do a planting workshop. Based on the success of this, the school now wants to make this a monthly activity.

Another presenter reported that the event had helped raise her awareness of and make contact with others who were doing a similar kind of project in other areas of the country and more locally. This has become a source of ideas, inspiration and mutual support.

"It's become a mini network in its own right."

In another case, participant interest in and positive feedback about the work that the presenter was doing inspired a new project. Participants encouraged the presenter to capture her learning and experience about engaging kids with good food through creativity and storytelling in the form of a book or similar resource.

TREASURE HUNT FOR INGREDIENTS WE TASTE AND EXPLORE

We start with a treasure hunt to find mystery ingredients (we lost our boxes of ingredients. they look like this can you help us find them)
We try to choose unusual things/ things in season and things used for the recipe; e.g. things we have used include Seaweed, Chia/Citron Seeds, Nettles, Passion Fruit, Petals, dates, Fresh herbs, cockles, wheat)

Figure 29: Eating Well from Birth. Food for Life Get Togethers Network Event led by B Arts and Stoke-on-Trent Mothers Support Network in April 2022

8.7 The Get Togethers network

Interviews explored the extent to which participation in the Network Events had supported participants to build or develop new relationships and collaborations with other Get Together organisers. Interviewees were also asked about the degree to which they were aware of, engaged with, and valued the wider Get Togethers community.

8.7.1   The role of the Network Events in relationship building

> *"Through having the Get Togethers Network Coordinator, you've got a name, you've got a number, you've got an email…if I need a contact and I asked [the Network Coordinator] that question. I don't have any sort of hesitation to do that. The kind of networking feel by being part of those sessions was positive. It's left me with that, well, yeah, I've got somebody I can speak to. Whether I would need to network with a greater network, I'm not quite sure if I would at this particular stage."*

The role that the Network Events played in helping participants to make new connections and build working relationships with other members of Get Togethers was varied. In part this reflected the extent to which participants needed and wanted to develop relationships with other Get Togethers members and/or be part of a broader network to progress their core area of work. In part, it reflected the national and one-off nature of the events. For example, some interviewees said that they would have been more inclined to pursue local contacts or to develop relationships if there had been ongoing activity around a specific issue. One participant also said that while an online format had many benefits, participants might have been more inclined to follow-up connections made at a face-to-face event.

Where this occurred, the relational and relationship building impact of the Network Events took a variety of forms:

- helping participants to feel less isolated
- validating to see their work in a broader context
- valuing the Network Coordinator role and the network as something that they could 'tap into' at a later date if needed
- 'banking' contacts for potential future use
- following up through email exchanges, requests for further information and support
- leading to the development of a new working relationship such as attendees becoming volunteers or service users for one of the presenting organisations

8.7.2   Opportunities for events to strengthen and capitalise on the network

In terms of capitalising on the Network Events to further support relationship building and the development of a more engaged network (or series of mini themed-focus networks) interviewees suggestions fell into four broad categories:

1. Signposting and access to post-event resources and online discussions could be more obvious and intuitive. For example, many interviewees were not aware of the existence of the Trello Board and those that were found it quite a challenging and confusing format.
2. Some interviewees felt that they would be more likely to have more use for and engage more intensively with Get Togethers as a community or network if there was more ongoing focus and support around specific themes. For example, there could be several events per

year that take people through the whole growing cycle or that focus on different aspects of key themes such as engaging kids with food.

3. Linked to the above, interviewees were also keen to have a way to access people and groups in their local area and/or who were working on similar issues. The Get Togethers data base could be a valuable resource for this purpose with the development of a 'matching' scheme involving consenting participants to deal with GDPR requirements.

4. For both Commissioned Partners and other Get Togethers participants, going online because of Covid has had a mixed impact on the Get Togethers network. On the one hand it has given participants exposure and access to groups and activities at a national level that would have been less likely with the original plan for events to be face-to-face and more localised. On the other hand, this may have been at the expense of more local community activity and relationship building. Many Get Together participants are locally focussed and more engaged with networks where face-to-face and regular interactions take place.

8.7.3   Identification with a wider Get Togethers Network

Interviewees' sense of affiliation with – and the value that they placed on – the wider Get Togethers network was varied. There was a broad distinction between the perception of Commissioned Partners who were funded by the Soil Association and in receipt of staff support over a sustained period and participants who had had much more limited engagement with the programme.

For Commissioned Partners, the benefits of being part of the network included:

- Expanding their reach
- Ongoing sharing of good practice
- A multiplier effect whereby they could use themselves and disseminate to their networks resources made by other members of Get Togethers
- Inspiring and supporting new strands of work that will be sustained after the programme
- Catalysing new partnerships
- The validation and motivational value of seeing their work in a national context
- Access to a sustained and well-tuned source of support and inspiration through the challenges of Covid and beyond
- The value of being associated with the Soil Association

"I think the difference was an invitation to see what you were doing in a national context. Even if it's just a community fridge, and how that joins up. I think that's been a real different mindset for us as an organisation, and for some of the other organisations involved, and I think what I've most liked. …Hearing those different examples and at all different levels, from cities, who, have got together to do a Sustainable Food Network to just edible hanging baskets and even just knowing these things exist."

There are a few instances where Get Togethers has initiated and supported a partnership, collaboration or mutually supportive relationship between Commissioned Partners. These collaborations have enabled the groups involved to capitalise on each other's expertise and networks and has led to the co-delivery of Network Events and a programme of site visits. This is something that the groups involved hope will continue after the Get Togethers programme finishes.

"We talked about what we could do together because we are a third sector umbrella organisation. So, we don't have so many links with people in wellingtons on the ground. But we do have the organisational and the contacts across [our area] that would make it

possible. So, we sort of fed in that bit and [community food initiative] fed in their growing expertise."

Two Local Commissioned Partners first made contact with each other (encouraged by a member of the GT team) when they were first won their Get Togethers contracts. They have provided an ongoing source of mutual support and inspiration. This was particularly important during the early stages of the pandemic when both organisations needed to change from face-to-face to online delivery.

> *"So just sort of sharing what was working. I'm not very good at digital. And I don't think they had that much confidence then. All of us were very face to face organisations. I think that peer support actually did enable us to do a lot. And we kept delivering right through the programme. And I think getting those ideas and just a bit of energy from what other people were doing and the Network Events was really helpful. Of the stuff I was involved in over COVID I think this has been one of the most positive and most in tune with where we're feeling. So, for me, it was one of the anchor points of keeping work going and just feeling a bit less isolated."*

The 14 Non-Commissioned Partners that we interviewed were generally less aware of and less able to articulate a need for or sense of relationship to the wider Get Togethers community. In some cases, these participants had a stronger sense of relationship to the original schools-focussed strand of Food for Life and the associated network.

For the two interviewees who were able to articulate value in the national network, the main benefits were:

- Tapping into the Soil Association; particularly its resources and its lobbying role at a national level
- Source of mutual support and information on a variety of community cooking and growing issues

> *"So I linked in with the, Get Togethers, because obviously, it's a great platform to know other people and what they're doing and how I can get that help for my role, and also sort of linking in and just trying to sort of support each other. So it's really important at the moment with all the growing, I think, because obviously, where we are, there's not that many people growing food. So we're trying to look at how we can use community projects to help support things like food banks, and community fridges all that kind of thing."*

8.7.4 Barriers and challenges to engaging with the Get Togethers network

For many of the interviewees, their main affiliations and sources of resourcing and guidance were outside of Get Togethers. They very much appreciated the interactions that they had with Get Togethers (e.g. small grant, Network Events, newsletter etc) and their work often aligns well with the programme's overall goals and values. Nevertheless, they did not have much sense of or feel much affiliation with Get Togethers as a network or something that was connected to a broader 'Good Food Movement'.

The reasons for this were varied. For some individuals, food was just one of the avenues through which they were pursuing a broader social or environmental agenda. Others were interested in horticulture and food system sustainability and did not feel well-aligned with other Get Togethers members who they perceived to be working from a food and social justice angle.

> *'I think the reason for not contacting or networking with other people was that I felt that my exploration was at a slightly different level. I wasn't necessarily thinking of huge community*

engagement that identifies various social areas or concerns like a lot of the events that I've been to. I felt I wasn't at that kind of level.'

Many of the interviewees were unable to identify specific actions they had taken or connections that they had made as a result of attending a Network Event. Several had attended Network Events one or two years ago and could not remember much about them but said they had found it/them useful at the time. One interviewee who turned out to be getting great benefit from being part of My Food Community had not realised the connection between this initiative and the Get Togethers event that she had attended. This individual was involved in multiple community food projects and their case illustrates the busy lives and multiple affiliations that typified many participants. Get Togethers was part of that mix, but not elevated above any of the other sources of connection and support. Similarly, another interviewee who had a community development role was focussed on many issues in addition to food. They used Eventbrite and online research to identify ideas, projects, organisations and people, brokering the learning from these sources back into the local community.

One interviewee questioned whether Get Togethers was primarily engaging individuals and groups who were already engaged with community food to some extent. Particularly in the context of the so-called "cost of living crisis", they wondered what more could be done to involve people in the poorest communities who currently had no connection to good food activities.

Interviewees who had had contact with programme staff were without exception very complementary about the high quality of support that they had received. At the same time, some noted the turnover of staff in the national Get Togethers team, the very broad nature of the programme's aims, and the variety of tactics used to promote community-based food initiatives over the programme's lifetime. Whilst they did not state this explicitly, there was a sense that this lack of clarity and consistency had made Get Togethers a programme that was difficult to track and to build a solid relationship with at times.

8.8 Network role archetypes

In this section we set out ten role archetypes that illustrate the variety of ways in which individuals in the interview sample benefitted from and related to the Get Togethers network and wider programme.

Table 4: Network role archetypes

Archetype	Summary	Example
Multiplier	Has dialogue with other Get Togethers participants and creates connections that are of interest to the wider programme goals.	Get Togethers event presenter. Gained many benefits from this themselves including the confidence to do more public speaking about their initiative. Has been contacted by several of the event participants who were keen to set up a similar project in their area. This group of people have become a mini network in their own right.
Vocal ally	Feels strongly aligned with the Get Togethers network and introduces others within their own networks.	A community food organiser working on multiple projects. Well-connected outside of Get Togethers and tapping into many national and local sources of support and inspiration. Getting great value from My Food Community, but overall Get Togethers programme and the wider Get Togethers network are not their main points of reference.

Broker	Searches for project ideas, funding, partner organisations and people then brokers opportunities back through community networks.	Community development officer. To help support their role they are signed up to several Eventbrite networks, which is how they discovered Get Togethers. As food is just one dimension of their role, they tap into Get Togethers in a targeted and purposeful way. This individual searches online for resources and then passes that learning back into the local community.
Extractor	Very busy but finds time to extract learning from Get Togethers. Does not feel need for ongoing engagement.	An "eco-lead" for their community centre. Keen to address multiple aspects of sustainability including food. Attending a Network Event was enabling and encouraging. It affirmed their own knowledge and capability and also provided practical guidance that has enabled and encouraged this participant to run a community growing event, which they hope to continue in the future. This targeted engagement with Get Togethers has fulfilled their needs for now and they will tap into local resources and sources of advice to take the growing project forward. Good to know that the network is there in the background, but no plans for ongoing engagement with it.
Banker	Banks resources and contacts for planned or potential future use.	This person attends network events as a part of their working role to gather ideas, contacts, and news about development opportunities. The information is collated for another time or relayed to their local networks. Otherwise, they do not contribute towards the FFLGT network.
Career builder	Makes use of resources relevant to developing their vocational role.	Catering lead in a multi-academy trust. Came into Get Togethers via the Food for Life network and catering award scheme. Attended three cooking themed Get Togethers Events and asked their managers to attend as part of their CPD. Valued making connections to others doing similar work nationally. Does not particularly need or identify with the Get Togethers network. They would be more inclined to seek local connections.
Contractor	Seeks to develop connections as part of a formal or informal role with Get Togethers.	Member of staff in a Local Commissioned Partner is committed to Get Togethers programme and national network as part of their work role. Feels they have had huge value from multiple aspects of the programme including the Get Togethers events, meetings and conference, the mutual support that they and another Commissioned Partner have provided for each other and the ongoing support of the Get Togethers team. Values the opportunity to see their work in a strategic and national context.
Advocate	Seeks to represent interests that are important to them through Get Together networks.	An activist with two decades of experience campaigning on issues that affect minority or marginalised groups. Very concerned about social justice issues and has ideas about what needs to change. Uses network opportunities to make sure these issues are reflected in discussions about community food issues.
Quiet ally	Feels positively about Get Togethers and its network but does not communicate further.	A quite private person who enjoys attending online events on a variety of events about food and is quite well informed about Get Togethers. Cautious about expressing views and making commitments that will lead to further engagement but prepared on one occasion to complete a feedback survey (otherwise would not be visible in the network research).
Casual visitor	Taps into specific resources, but little interest in the wider Get Togethers programme or network.	Individual interested in good food from a health perspective. Involved with many local and national contacts, initiatives, and networks on this theme. Attended one Get Togethers Network Event some time age but cannot recall any details about the programme.

9. Discussion and conclusion

9.1 Overview

In this study we explored FFLGT's work to strengthen networks between late 2019 and early 2022. We used a mixed methods study design. We analysed the data from the programme records of engagement and, of 951 contacts we obtained 97 survey responses to a survey on networking in May-June 2022. Of these a total of 19 survey respondents and locally commissioned partners took part in an in-depth qualitative interview about their engagement with FFLGT, food activities and food-related networks. We situated our research in the context of literature on civil society and the role of voluntary sector agencies in strengthening their networks.

9.2 How FFLGT developed its approach to strengthening networks

FFLGT's work reflects broader interests of other community and voluntary sector agencies to stimulate social change through networking initiatives. While this was quite a new area for the programme team, SA and other FFLGT partners all have a track record of membership schemes, campaigning, social media engagement and wider communications work. For the FFL team, FFLGT's emphasis represented a different form of engagement compared to FFL schools and catering mark accreditations. However, as registration evidence shows, routes to engagement often built on connections prior to the FFLGT programme that were developed by FFL and SA, for example with the development of school cook, teacher, and care home practitioner networks.

FFLGTs network was created with the intention of enabling contacts to engage with the programme and its resources. No specific commitments are required at the point of registration. . Outside of specific occasions, registrants do not have access to information about other members. As such, FFLGT's contacts system established an open and loosely linked body of members, with information about the network managed centrally by SA and some devolved management through national and local partners. This contrasts with the design of other initiatives (Raynor, 2018) where commitment and statements of intent are a condition of enrolment and members share personal or organisational information and contacts with one another.

Over the course of the programme, FFLGT's work to build contacts has exceeded planned expectations. A proportion of these contacts was derived through prior networks – FFL, SA, partner agencies, regional and other local networks (e.g., Sustainable Food Places, Sustain, Garden Organic, National Lottery). Nevertheless, there are important novel features of FFLGT network membership, particularly in terms of community group involvement, the forms of interest group diversity that they represent, and the UK-wide breadth of engagement. The contacts represent a novel combination of community organisations, education providers, social care providers, interested individuals, and larger CVS and local government agencies.

The common interests of this diverse body of contacts are not straightforward to discern, partly because a small proportion of members communicate their perspectives through programme social media platforms and programme activities. As such the 'FFLGT network' is currently quite emergent, representing a relatively small core of active members (about 5%), multiple engagers (a further 20%) and a larger group one-off registrant (the remaining 75%). Evidence in similar settings indicate that this is not unusual, with most corresponding to Gladwell's (2006) law of the few in which a small percentage of individuals are most highly active within a social network. However, the pattern of engagement illustrates that the FFLGT contacts list represents an embryonic network at the moment.

FFLGT's work on networks emerged through delivery and learning, especially through the pandemic. In contrast to much relevant theory and examples of intentional network building, FFLGT's network was not 'designed' from the outset. Retrofitting to a revised theory of change has limited the effects of the programme, but helped it better adapt to the post-pandemic landscape of civil enablement. Furthermore, FFLGT have increasingly focused on learning from its network activities through analysis of and reflection on engagement data. This has enabled the programme team to develop priorities for the network activities in the final year of the programme.

Figure 30: The Active Wellbeing Society worked with Food for Life Get Togethers to deliver a Network Event on building effective partnerships in November 2021

9.3 The value of FFLGT networking activities

While our research and the internal programme monitoring and evaluation records have significant limitations, it is clear that Network Events and associated activities are highly valued for those participants providing feedback. A majority of survey respondents felt the events fostered interactions among attendees. Many participants are volunteers or working in community settings and appreciated the welcoming and relaxed style of the events. Online delivery and the ability to catch-up through session recordings and resources made this a highly accessible format for many. One third of participants engaged with presentations, recordings and other resources that were shared after an event. The Network Coordinator role was seen as an important connection into the programme and an easy way for participants to access resources and further contacts.

While identification with the FFLGT brand has not been a primary goal of network activities, a majority survey respondents reported a sense of connection at least with the core message. This was reinforced with feelings of connection and common purpose with other network attendees. Nevertheless, beyond My Food Community and Locally Commissioned Partners leads and grant

holders, it is difficult to gauge the degree to which network members strongly identify with ideas of food citizenship or a good food movement.

Reflecting on the value of the Network Events, participants reported a wide variety of benefits including picking up practical knowledge, affirmation, the space to talk with likeminded people, the impetus to put ideas into practice. Many interviewees also referred to the way in which they had 'banked' the learning from a session to help them with the implementation of a planned future project. Participants felt that FFLGT Network Events helped them become more actively engaged in networking than before. This experience applied both to those who felt themselves already very active as to those who defined themselves as not at all active prior to their engagement with FFLGT.

As other research on networks has found, participants in FFLGT's activities take a variety of forms that correspond to types of roles within networks. Different roles reflect diverse interests in the network activities and how it should be anticipated that there will be very different levels and consequences of engagement.

FFLGT Network Events have not been simply settings in which experts provide briefings to audiences. Presenters also found value in the events in terms of broadening their audience and attracting new stakeholders, the opportunity to develop a new network and the chance to promote their work more widely. Similarly, Locally Commissioned Partners also saw the value of extending their reach and the validation of being linked to the Soil Association and a national programme. Further evaluation in the final stage of the programme will seek to understand the synergy between the networking activities of Locally Commissioned Partners and national networking.

9.4 Strengths and limitations of the study

A strength of this study has been the use of multiple sources of data to provide a rounded picture of FFLGT's network activities. We have also been able to set the evidence alongside theory and practice from other relevant work in this field. A key consideration when interpreting the findings has been the limited available evidence from most individuals or groups registered with the programme. The low response rate for our survey may reflect weak engagement with the programme, but this is difficult to determine. The limited available longitudinal evidence makes it difficult to track the consequences of engagement in the programme. However, the in-depth interviews have been a useful basis from which to understand the role of the programme in the lifeworld of a range of participants.

9.5 Implications

The following recommendations pull together advice from event organisers and learning from the evaluation more generally. Get Togethers event participants and facilitators made a range of suggestions for how learning and connections could be further developed. These included further signposting and access to post-event resources; a strong practical focus; developing themes through linking together networking events; opportunities for participants to match with groups with similar interests; mixing formats and timing of events to attract participants with different preferences; identifying hot topics based upon network feedback, news, and social media trends; and supporting mini-campaigns, competitions, collaborations, and stories to foster a sense of belonging.

Learning from theory and practice suggests that FFLGT may be further refined through attention to the needs of target groups, clarity of purpose and strategy, defining the value proposition, resolving individual and organisational interests, and inclusive governance. Wider research also confirms evidence from FFLGT data that there is a need to work with different levels of engagement and a range of archetypal roles that emerge from social networks.

There are specific opportunities to engage small grant awardees, local network members, and key actors through national partners in a wider range of activities relating to the programme goals. While there are potential benefits of growing leadership roles through focusing support on key individuals, there may be wider benefits obtained from investing in an online support platform that is built for peer support.

9.6 Conclusion

Through a mixed methods study drawing on survey data, interviews and programme records, our research has explored the experiences of participants, programme staff and partners in Get Togethers networking activities. The study gives particular focus to years two and three of the programme. This was a period when the strategic focus of Get Togethers and changes in patterns of social engagement created by the Covid-19 pandemic combined to give much greater focus to the role of networks in community-scale good food citizenship and enabled broader scale networking activity among the Food for Life Get Together community.

Overall, the study highlights the way in which the Get Togethers Network Events in particular have fulfilled a latent demand for practical guidance and peer support and collaborations around community-scale action on good food. An overarching theme is the unique and valued space that Get Togethers has occupied in facilitating connections between local and national community-food stakeholders. Furthermore, the study provides an indication of the potential for locally-based food initiatives to gain traction, develop and broaden and deepen their impact through making regional and national connections with others working on similar issues. It also points to the potential for a central facilitating entity to occupy this community food support space into the longer term.

As a programme that was originally designed to promote local level social networks and facilitate the sharing of learning between Get Togethers organisers, Get Togethers has been on a rapid learning curve with its broader networking activities. The programme team has dedicated effort to investigate and learn from patterns of engagement to date. This process of analysis and reflection together with insights from this evaluation have informed the vision and design of the fourth and final year of the programme. The programme team are looking to enhance the approach to network building and create a legacy from which future community-based food initiatives can be supported. They recognise that understanding and supporting ongoing connections between network members, the different Get Togethers initiatives as well as with relevant Soil Association strategic programmes will be a vital plank of this work.

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11. Appendices

11.1 Research Questions

Lead research question

To what extent has FFLGT contributed to a movement for good food through its programme of network activities?

Sub questions

a. How does the FFLGT approach to network activity compare with other third sector approaches to networking? (*This includes theory and practice*)

b. Are FFLGT network activities leading to new and sustained community good food activities?

c. To what extent has the FFLGT programme's network activity led to more people getting more involved in community-based good food activities? *(This might include people who were not active becoming active, and people who were already active doing more or different activities)*

d. To what extent does FFLGT network provide a platform for good food leaders which inspires, motivates and engages others to start or sustain community good food activities? Do other unexpected outcomes occur from participation in FFLGT networks?

e. How have social networks and partnerships of FFLGT Organisers developed through the programme?

f. What are the motivations and perceived benefits of participants in FFLGT networking activities?

g. To what extent has participating in FFLGT networks created a sense of belonging to a wider good food movement?

h. What are the implications for key audiences?

11.2 FFLGTs Network Evaluation Survey Questionnaire

Introduction. You are invited to take part in a survey on the Food for Life Get Togethers (FFLGT). This is part of an evaluation led by the University of the West of England (UWE). We want to know about your experiences and thoughts about **networking activities** that were supported by the **FFLGT.** Your responses will help us to understand how the FFLGT programme works and how best it can be improved.

Data Protection. The personal information collected in this survey will be processed in accordance with the terms and conditions of the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Your responses are confidential so any individual written comments that we report will have all personal details removed, unless we have your permission to use them. We will hold your personal data securely and not make it available to any third party unless permitted or required to do so by law. This study has been given research ethics approval by UWE's Health and Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Reference HAS.20.11.034. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Mat Jones, Professor of Public Health, by email: matthew.jones@uwe.ac.uk   The University Data Controller is the Data Protection Officer who can be contacted by email: dataprotection@uwe.ac.uk

Please check the box below to confirm your agreement for the University to process your personal data as described above.

o   Yes, I agree to the University processing my personal data as described above. (1)

Q1 We would like to offer you a chance to win a £50 voucher as a token for your participation in the survey. Would you like to be entered into the prize draw for this?

o   Yes (1)
o   No (2)

Q2 Thank you. please provide your details:

o   Name (1) _____
o   Email (2) _____

Q3 In addition to completing this survey, would you consider taking part in an interview?

o   Yes (1)
o   No (2)

Q4 Thank you. Please provide your details:

o   Name (1) _____
o   Email or phone number (2) _____

Q5 Do you remember attending a network event organised by Food for Life Get Togethers (FFLGT)?

o   Yes (2)
o   No (4)

Q6 Which of the following event(s) do you remember attending?

☐   Love Trees? Love Your Community?- Community Orchards Network Session (29)
☐   Cook to Connect (27)
☐   Grow, Cook and Share in Powys (36)
☐   Community partnerships (48)
☐   What Do You Put In Your Mouth?' Engaging young people with good food (53)
☐   Developing a Green and Growing Network (33)

- ☐ Soup for the Soul (39)
- ☐ Eating Well from Birth: Good food work with early years, children and families (43)
- ☐ Cook, Eat, Meet (44)
- ☐ Edible Hanging Baskets (54)
- ☐ Putting Dignity on the Menu (46)
- ☐ Lifecycle of food/saving £ for wellbeing (47)
- ☐ Mother Nature - Her Mechanisms and Magic at An Tobar (55)
- ☐ Stronger Communities Through Good Food (58)
- ☐ Cooking for Your Community: A Recipe for Success (59)
- ☐ Other/ Others (Please specify) (60) _____

Q7 How well did the event(s) foster interactions between people?

- o Not well at all (34)
- o Moderately well (36)
- o Very well (37)
- o Extremely well (38)

Q8 Did you engage with materials (e.g. presentations, recordings, documents) that were shared after the event(s)?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

Q9 Did you go on to complete any of the following FFLGT training session(s) after the network event(s)?

- ☐ GT Cooking online training (1)
- ☐ GT Growing online training (2)
- ☐ GT Sharing online training (4)
- ☐ GT Expert by Experience (5)
- ☐ Other/ Others (plese specify) (6) _____

Q10
What did you get out of the event(s) or materials from the event(s)?
The event(s)or materials helped me ...(Select as many that apply).

- ☐ appreciate the value of connecting with others around a common theme (1)
- ☐ develop my capacity to build relationships with other food activity organisers (3)
- ☐ feel more connected to Food For Life Get Togethers (7)
- ☐ to take action in community food activities (8)
- ☐ Other/ Others (please specify) (4) _____

Q11 Have you made any connections with other groups following the event(s)?
By connections we are referring to things such as sharing ideas, contacts, resources (funding, equipment, personnel) or working together on activities.

- o Yes (1)
- o No (3)

Q12 Approximately how many groups have you connected with following the event(s)?

- o 1 to 5 (1)
- o 6 to 10 (2)
- o 11 to 15 (3)
- o 16 to 20 (6)
- o More than 20 (5)
- o Don't know (4)

Q13
Did any of the groups that you connected with include the following? Select as many that apply

- ☐ Early-year setting (2)
- ☐ Primary school (3)

- ☐ Secondary school (4)
- ☐ Care setting (5)
- ☐ Community centre (6)
- ☐ Community development agency (7)
- ☐ Community kitchen and cooking group (8)
- ☐ Community farm (9)
- ☐ Faith/ religious group (10)
- ☐ Arts and creative group (11)
- ☐ Sports group (12)
- ☐ Health focused group (13)
- ☐ Environmental group (14)
- ☐ Housing group (15)
- ☐ Ethnic, national and linguistic cultural group (16)
- ☐ Men's group (17)
- ☐ Women's group (18)
- ☐ Youth group (19)
- ☐ Guides, Scouts and similar group (20)
- ☐ Homeless support group (21)
- ☐ LGBTQI+ community group (22)
- ☐ Transport group (1)
- ☐ Funding bodies (Local authorities, local councillors, local businesses, individuals) (25)
- ☐ Other business and social enterprise (23)
- ☐ Other/ Others (please specify) (27) _____

Q14

Since attending or using materials from the FFLGT event(s), have you done any of the following as a result? Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly disagree (31)	Somewhat disagree (32)	Neither agree nor disagree (33)	Somewhat agree (34)	Strongly agree (35)
I **used** ideas, knowledge and contacts from the event(s) to help organise food activities. (16)	○	○	○	○	○
I **shared** ideas and knowledge around food activities with others. (19)	○	○	○	○	○
I was able to **acquire funding** to run food activities. (20)	○	○	○	○	○
I **strengthened my capacity** to run food activities. (18)	○	○	○	○	○
I have been **inspired by others** to organise food activities. (21)	○	○	○	○	○
I was able **to find solutions to problems** in relation to organising food activities. (13)	○	○	○	○	○
I felt **better connected** with other community food organisers. (22)	○	○	○	○	○
I **led** my own peer networks. (29)	○	○	○	○	○

Q15 How active were you in connecting with others **before** taking part in FFLGTs? Please choose ONE answer.
 By connections we are referring to things such as sharing ideas, resources (funding, equipment, personnel) or working together on activities.

- ○ Not at all active (2)
- ○ Quite active (3)
- ○ Very active (4)

Q16 How do you think the FFLGTs network events or materials will affect your involvement in connecting with others in the **future**? Please choose ONE answer.

o   I will want to get **more** involved (1)
o   I will continue the **same** as ever (2)
o   I will be **less** involved (3)
o   I don't want to get involved (4)

Q17 The following questions are about your group or organisation
Please tell us the name of your group or organisation

_____

Q18
Which category or categories best describe your group or organisation? You can select more than one category

☐   Informal community group (not formally constituted) (1)
☐   Early-year setting (2)
☐   Primary school (3)
☐   Secondary school (4)
☐   Care setting (5)
☐   Community centre (6)
☐   Community development agency (7)
☐   Community kitchen and cooking group (8)
☐   Community farm (9)
☐   Faith/ religious group (10)
☐   Arts and creative group (11)
☐   Sports group (12)
☐   Health focused group (13)
☐   Environmental group (14)
☐   Housing group (15)
☐   Ethnic, national and linguistic cultural group (16)
☐   Men's group (17)
☐   Women's group (18)
☐   Youth group (19)
☐   Guides, Scouts and similar group (20)
☐   Homeless support group (21)
☐   LGBTQI+ community group (22)
☐   Other business and social enterprise (23)

Q19 Which country is your group based?

o   England (1)
o   Northern Ireland (2)
o   Scotland (3)
o   Wales (4)

Q20 These questions are about you. They will be used to categorise your answers by these demographic descriptors.
Please tell us your **gender.**

o   Male (1)
o   Female (2)
o   Prefer not to say (4)
o   Prefer to self-describe: (5) _____

Q21 Please tell us your **age** group.

▼ Under 18 years old (4) ... Prefer not to say (12)

Q22 Please choose ONE option that best describes your ethnic group or background.

▼ White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (4) ... Prefer not to say (24)