

## Case Report 2

# Food for Life Get Togethers and Communities of Practice

## **Food for Life Get Togethers and Communities of Practice**

Citation for this report

Jones, M., Ismail, S.U., Hills. S., 2021. *Food for Life Get Togethers and Communities of Practice*. UWE Bristol.

ISBN 9781860436000

### **“Communities of Practice”**

'Groups of people who share a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis'

## Contents

Executive Summary .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Food for Life Get Togethers Programme .....	5
Context.....	6
Communities of practice.....	6
Communities of practice in the context of social food-based activities.....	7
Methods.....	10
Selection of projects .....	10
Interview process.....	11
Data analysis .....	11
Ethical issues.....	11
Findings .....	11
Overview .....	11
1. Celebrations and marking occasions .....	12
2. Sharing and the gift economy .....	12
3. Commensality and the communal experience .....	13
4. Creative arts and performance .....	14
5. Making, crafting and re-designing places .....	14
6. Embedding spaces for wellbeing .....	15
7. Play, games and competition.....	15
8. Environmental and social activism.....	15
9. Alternative forms of engagement.....	17
Discussion: Communities of Practice and Pathways to Impact .....	17
Learning and implications .....	18
Conclusions .....	19
References .....	19

## Executive Summary

Food for Life Get Togethers is a four year UK programme that runs from 2019 to 2023. This evaluation report, one of three for year two of the programme, is based on research conducted with fourteen Food for Life Get Togethers (FFLGT) projects in the winter and early spring of 2020/21. The research period covered a particularly challenging time for everybody during national lockdowns across the UK. The report focuses on the wide range of interests of participants that are in addition to good food.

The 'communities of practice' perspective draws attention to the concerns and passions of people taking part in FFLGT activities, and how 'practices' form the basis on which groups come together. Participants in FFLGT events share a common purpose in growing, cooking, sharing and eating food together, but it also the case that these activities often take place with wider interests in mind. Get Togethers are rarely just about getting together through food.

In this report we identify eight forms of communities of practice around which FFLGTs are organised. While there is some overlap, each combines specific goals, skills, knowledge and styles of action. The communities of practice are defined as 'celebrations, rites of passage and marking occasions'; 'sharing and the gift economy', 'commensality and the communal experience', 'arts and performance', 'making, crafting and re-designing spaces', 'embedding spaces for wellbeing', 'play, games and competition', and 'green and social activism'.

Each of these has a distinctive relationship with FFLGT's outcomes of interest. For example, participants in arts and performative practices emphasise creative ways to achieve wellbeing, while those taking part in green and social activism concentrate on critical awareness and leveraging change.

There are also overlaps between the communities of practice: some FFLGT projects intentionally hybridise their objectives to appeal to diverse groups and to create new forms of community engagement.

The communities of practice perspective lends itself well to understanding how FFLGT activities can improve social capital and personal and social wellbeing through routes that complement food-related benefits. As influential social networks, communities of practice are in a position to amplify good food messages, often to groups that otherwise might not wish to be engaged.

While projects drew upon innovative applications of practices such as arts or competition, many initiatives were either in an early stage of development or experienced restricted opportunities due to the events of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the foundations in place indicate that many projects are set to expand their activities in the near future.

Learning from the research for Food for Life Get Togethers and other organisations includes:

- Communities of practice, such as arts, faith and sports associations provide ready-made channels to engage interest in how to run good food community activities.
- Many initiatives are often working in isolation and stand to benefit from connecting outside their immediate delivery geographies. FFLGT can provide a platform for support in this respect.
- Good food is not necessarily the uppermost consideration for some communities of practice, representing both a challenge and an opportunity for the programme.

Key recommendations for the development of the programme include:

- Food for Life Get Togethers might develop tailored resources to reflect the different types of aspirations and ways of thinking about good food community activities.
- Further research would be beneficial in relation to communities of practice that have a focus games, sports and competition and, in addition, groups with interests in environmental and social activism.

## Introduction

Food for Life Get Togethers (FFLGT) are regular community activities that connect people from different ages and backgrounds through growing, cooking and eating good food. In this report we explore what motivates people to connect with one another *in addition* to a focus on food. Get Togethers are never just about good food, they are occasions with a variety of other ideas in mind that range from celebration, play and competition to creative expression, faith and activism.

We use the phrase ‘communities of practice’ to draw attention to these concerns and passions of communities taking part in FFLGT activities. Communities of practice are groups that come together through doing and acting together. Their focus mirrors their wider values and outlooks on life. The actions around which individuals coalesce can take many forms, but often lead to distinctive ways of working, skills and benefits to the communities taking part.

Food for Life Get Togethers is a four-year programme running from 2019 to 2023. This report is one of three concerned with Year 2 of the programme. The focus in this report is on what participants do: their backgrounds, activities and aspirations. It shows how Get Togethers often complement the wider interests and passions of participants. It builds on research with a diverse range of project groups taking part in the Food for Life Get Togethers programme. The fieldwork took place during the course of ‘second lockdown’ in the winter of 2020-21 and, as such, represented a highly unusual moment for community-based initiatives. The report reflects this situation, while it also draws upon the prior context for projects and their future directions in the post-covid environment.

## Food for Life Get Togethers Programme

Food for Life Get Togethers is a UK wide programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and delivered with the support of six national partners (see <https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/get-togethers>). The programme is part the wider Food for Life initiative led by the Soil Association with an overarching goal “to make good food the easy choice for everyone. Food for Life provide the following definition of Get Togethers:

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

The three key elements of Get Togethers are (1) the importance of good food in a broad sense of the term, (2) multiple generations coming together, and (3) the creation of meaningful social interactions. These elements illustrate the close relationship the programme has with a wide

range of food events that take place in community settings. Often overlooked in policy debates, community food activities touch upon many areas of life and may have an important role in wellbeing, health and wider social benefits, including for disadvantaged groups.

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

## Context

### Communities of practice

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder define communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (2002, p. 4). Originally applied in educational and business organisation contexts, communities of practice is an evolving concept (Li et al., 2009) and can be found in many situations where groups associate including in civil society settings. Communities of practice learn – in the broadest sense of the term – through practical hands-on experience and from one another, often in interactions between novices and experts. They thrive on mutual exchange, trust and informality - thus providing a rich environment for individuals to share and apply experiential knowledge.

Wenger et al. (2002) set out three characteristics of communities of practice, naming them 'domain,' 'community,' and 'practice':

The *domain* creates the common ground (i.e., the minimal competence that differentiates members from non-members) and outlines the boundaries that enable members to decide what is worth sharing and how to present their ideas.

The *community* creates the social structure that facilitates learning through interactions and relationships with others.

The *practice* is a set of shared repertoires of resources that include ideas, experiences, information, and ways of addressing recurring problems. In essence, the practice is the specific knowledge the community shares, develops, and maintains.

Wenger et al. (2002) also introduced the roles of leaders/champions and facilitators. Typically, the leader/champion is someone who is well respected within a group or organisation, and often holds a leadership position. He/she is responsible for spreading the word about the group, recruiting members, and providing resources for group activities. The facilitator, on the other hand, is responsible for the group's day-to-day activities. However, communities of practice also tend to

---

<sup>1</sup> Programme records up to 31 May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Based on FFLGT registration data

<sup>3</sup> Based on Year 2 data.

have flexibility such that leadership or facilitation roles can move around depending upon circumstances.

### **Communities of practice in the context of social food-based activities**

Food-based activities form a point of connection for a wide range of groups. Leading examples are the relationships between food and the social practices of faith-based groups. Food provides a rich source of symbolism for spirituality, moral action and ways of thinking about the world. As Wirzba (2018) argues food provides a material on which to build faith. Acts of growing, sharing food, eating together offer experiences and metaphors for connectedness and interdependence: 'Eating is the regular and visceral reminder that we belong in this world, depend of it daily and could not possibly live without it. Of all things that people do, nothing communicates as clearly as eating the intense intimacy of our need for each other, and our need for a nourishing world (Wirzba,2018, p14). Food practices give opportunities to express gratitude, worship and make commitments to others.

Not only does food have a role in defining faith identities and belonging, it forms a basis for dialogue and exchange both between different faith communities and between faith and secular groups. For instance, Teiman and Hassan (2015) highlight shared ideals for food systems across major world religions. Dahlan-Taylor (2015) argues that there is common ground between secular and faith traditions on what constitutes good food. Faith traditions have an extensive experience in promoting commensality, or eating together. They provide customary purposes, calendar schedules of when to come together as well as rules, conventions and norms for how to act. The repertoire of faith-based knowledge provides a platform for organising commensal activities in secular contexts.

Marovelli's study of secular food sharing initiatives in London shows how commensal practices 'attempt to nurture spaces of collective encounter' (2019, p.190) and in so doing address isolation and loneliness. She argues that these initiatives have capacity to 'embrace social differences and to facilitate the circulation of ideas and practices of care and hospitality' (ibid.) – experiences particularly vital in urban contexts in times of austerity.

More widely, food-based activities form an important channel for activism on matters of social justice and alternative economics. Thygesen's study (2019) in Denmark focuses on the place of food in stimulating the local economy. Food is a material well suited to gifting and bartering, particularly where there are opportunities to connect producers holding a surplus to consumers who face financial barriers to access. As Schanes and Stagl (2019) point out, alternative food exchanges are as much about building a sense of shared community as they are a matter of food system solutions.

Food-based practices can form very visible enactments of neighbourhood renewal. New community gardens, farms, cafes, eating areas, markets, processing and distribution outlets all demonstrate a wider effort to renovate and revive a local area. Food-focused activities can be relatively quick to establish and are usually well understood by diverse stakeholders as a commitment to build community. In turn, new public spaces for public participation provides an essential basis for engagement on sustainable food systems issues (Feenstra, 2002). Area-based food practices are commonly a channel through which activism on environmental concerns are expressed. Food practices give a demonstration, experience and connection to, often, abstract issues of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss or long-term sustainability.

While social justice and environmental activism often finds an experiential basis in place-based food activities, activists increasingly connect to those with shared concerns in a digital space. The events of the pandemic appear to have accelerated digitally based connections as mutual aid groups,

volunteers and neighbourhood helpers have sought to connect and coordinate food support for vulnerable groups (Jones et al., 2020).

Social food activities also have close connections with groups who are primarily motivated by creative expression. Many arts-based organisations have interests that cross-over with food issues. Food practices may be interwoven with established performing arts events and celebrations of cultural identity. They also find a role in a variety of alternative arts events such as in experimental public theatre. Community centre and adult learning programmes commonly host social groups that combine an arts and crafts focus with routine and celebratory food activities. Gray et al. suggest that creative expression combined with food-focused activities have the potential to engage individuals in personal-level and community-level change through reflection, empowerment and connectedness (Gray et al., 2010). Pettinger et al. (2019) make the case that creative and informal participatory food events are a positive route for engaging harder to reach groups given that arts-based methods provide a set of tools which can reveal, and give voice to, perspectives on food issues which remain otherwise absent from research and policy debates (Flint et al., 2017).

Alongside the arts, multi-purpose community hubs and clubs also demonstrate the links between food, sports and games, in which eating together is often the matter of routine and celebration. Often such social gatherings combine multiple purposes from competing to eating together, or from creativity and having fun. The multiplicity of purpose with no goal taking primacy can be part of the broad appeal and durability of these groups over time.

Given the diversity of the communities of practice referred to here, it is appropriate to note the distinctive character of each form and their specific relationship to food practices. However, the notion of a community practice draws attention to some common themes to do with the benefits of group belonging and connectedness, informal social learning, and personal wellbeing obtained through practices and performance of doing something well. From the perspective of Food for Life Get Togethers, these communities of practice offer social platforms on which to engage in dialogue about the meaning and practicalities of good food. In the context of civil society, communities of practice form a diverse range of cultural and nuanced settings –they are the lived environments in which the programme operates. Communities of practice are the routes to engagement. They are the ready-made social networks often for engagement with individuals and groups who would not otherwise engage in the FFLGT good food debate. To provide a diagrammatic summary of leading areas of interest, Figure 1 shows the practice areas of focus that form a conceptual framework for the current research.

Two potential problems are associated social food activities and communities of practice. The first relates to the ‘social’ and the second concerns ‘food’. The social problem is the potential for communities of practice to turn inwards and exclude those outside the sphere of practice. Faith, sporting or activist groups, for instance, can become insular, fail to reach outside their sphere or interest, or intentionally exclude those who lack the cultural capital to participate. In addition, dynamics within groups can cause issues, where for example dominant members restrict opportunities for new or vulnerable members. Such situations can constrain individual growth and creativity or fail to accommodate change (Wenger et al., 2002). The leading question on food is that the food itself can be a peripheral concern or may be deployed with little regard for nutritional health or environmental and social justice. A context that has been researched in this respect is celebratory events in school and nursery settings where, for example, birthdays are marked with the sharing of ultra-processed foods such as sweets, cakes and crisps (Isoldi et al., 2012; Caparosa et al., 2014).



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Communities of Practice and Food for Life Get Togethers**



This section has considered communities of practice and their application in the context of social food activities. Evidence of the diversity of initiatives helps provide the conceptual framework that we used for the research with Food for Life Get Togethers projects.

## Methods

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

**What role do communities of practice have in the impacts created through Food for Life Get Together activities?**

The report therefore examines the evaluation overarching research questions through a communities of practice perspective:

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

### Selection of projects

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

**Table 1: Projects taking part in FFLGT Year 2 evaluation**

Project number	Type of organisation	Number of years established		Interviews / Written responses
Project 1	Community of interest organisation	Over 5	Volunteer run	5
Project 2	Youth arts organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	3
Project 3	Neighbourhood community centre	Over 5	Paid staff	3
Project 4	Older persons care home group	Over 5	Paid staff	3
Project 5	Outdoors community organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	5
Project 6	Outdoors community organisation	Over 5	Paid staff	3
Project 7	Voluntary sector infrastructure organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	2

Project 8	Faith-based food sharing organisation	Under 5	Volunteer run	2
Project 9	Volunteer food aid organisation	Over 5	Volunteer run	2
Project 10	Youth performing arts organisation	Under 5	Paid staff	3
Project 11	Participatory arts organisation	Over 5	Paid staff	6
Project 12	Faith-based food sharing organisation	Under 5	Volunteer run	4
Project 13	Outdoors community organisation	Over 5	Paid staff	2
Project 14	Neighbourhood community centre	Over 5	Paid staff	1
				44

### Interview process

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

### Data analysis

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

### Ethical issues

Participants were requested by email to take part in an interview. Written information about the research and participants were asked to provide written or recorded verbal consent to take part in the interview. Ethical approval for this research was obtained through the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), Health and Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Reference HAS.20.11.034.

## Findings

### Overview

Interviewees taking part in the research were from a very diverse range of projects. All of the projects were located in areas either of high social deprivation (according to the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation), or in areas of low service provision (notably in rural areas). From a communities of practice perspective, some projects included those with a clear orientation towards faith, social and environmental activism, personal growth and development, creative expression, heritage, cultural identity, and area regeneration. The majority, however, had a multiplicity of goals and were either bringing these together in the context of one project, or separating them out through focused activities.

Given the highly social character of the projects, it was hardly surprising that all projects had experienced major disruptions during the lockdowns and coronavirus restriction periods. Most had had to scale back or suspend their in-person work entirely and increase their digital or outreach

work. A minority, particularly those that pivoted towards emergency food relief work, had re-orientated and scaled-up their activities considerably.

All project interviewees were able to articulate the connections between the Food for Life Get Togethers programme and the focus of aspects of their work. The use of the funding – on a scale ranging from £10,000 to £100 was straightforward for project leads to articulate and aligned well with how project leads expected to use the grants. It was evident that most projects brought a stock of experience of running Get Together type activities aside from those linked to FFLGT programme. This reflected the co-development ethos of the programme based upon an expectation of top-down and bottom-up dialogue between national and local leads.

### **1. Celebrations and marking occasions**

Given the social character of Get Together events, it followed that many were rooted in celebrations, rites of passage and other occasions to mark personal and public events. Some agencies organised their work around these events as a basis for creating social interactions. While some drew upon established events in the calendar – such as Christmas and Valentine’s Day – others re-worked the conventional formats.

What we try and do each month is have a slightly different focus. We’ve run a Healthy Halloween, which is all about how to make healthy Halloween snacks. 13.2

October half term we have the pumpkins that we've grown, and we made that into a pumpkin soup and had an awesome celebration. So this was our autumn celebration. And then we also try and do a summer solstice. It's always very much about sharing food around the campfire and the food is all seasonal. 6.1

A project focusing on alleviating food poverty felt that it helped lighten the mood, and focus on what everyone might enjoy, rather than on the difficulties faced by participants.

Throughout the year we do themes. Whether it’s Halloween night or Valentine's or birthdays for service users or volunteers. We always have an evening when there’s something going on. So for us it’s just like an ‘all year carnival’ ...All sorts of stuff that raises the spirits of volunteers and people [who take part]. 9.1

A common theme was of adjusting these events to make them relevant to the values and aims of the project. So for example on project ran an online event to show and discuss how to prepare vegetarian Christmas food and to celebrate in style but at a low budget.

### **2. Sharing and the gift economy**

An important feature of many Get Together activities was the clear emphasis on sharing and giving, and efforts to minimise monetary exchange for food.

We’ve worked with disaffected young people and their families who don’t have much cash [We all have very close relationships]. So we thought we’d send round freshly baked cakes to families– a little gift –everyone can eat them at the same time of the day even if they are not together in one place. 10.1

The same project organised members to nominate someone for a Valentines gift and the volunteers sent out chocolate cake and a red rose to over 40 people. One person who had been quite isolated said:

Last week I got nice Valentine's box with cookies and cakes and chocolate strawberries. I was just so delighted and, you know, I sent back a message back to say ‘thank, you you’ve no idea how much

you've cheered me up.' You don't know how much you've made my day. I was so down this morning. 10.2

Under lockdown conditions, one area-based community project team found that local residents had increasingly turned to fast food takeaways – food that was both poor nutritional quality and also a costly addition to the weekly budget. They run a 'make your own takeaway' activity which involved sending out packages of raw ingredients to participant homes then running a group Zoom cook along event with the help of an experienced chef.

Usually when you think you get a takeaway and everybody in the family has it. So it was a good place to try to get people to meet together online. To enjoy it together and do it how much cheaper and healthier than if you'd done the usual thing. 3.2

A consideration for gifts was to do so in a manner that avoided the stigma of being seen as a charity beneficiary.

A lot of our discussion is around how we help those people in a way that nobody feels that they have to embarrass themselves going asking for food. They're not people that have been on benefits or anything like that so people that are newly out because of Covid, and people that have lost work and people that are home and they're absolutely not used to, and don't even know where to go to look for help. 5.2

The giving of food went alongside reducing food waste and learning to economise on food costs within their organisation:

[It's about] just being a good steward of what's been given and trying not to have a lot of waste. We'll freeze any leftovers and then do some fresh vegetables and potatoes serve that at some. [The cook's] been very adaptable: they won't know what they're going to get but like to show we're using food well. 8.2

Projects took a thrifty approach to their running costs, sometimes being prepared to continue working even when grant funding had run out:

We've [been running food outreach events] even when we had no money left. We're doing it because it's way to offer some social contact with someone by going out to their house...

When the weather was bad, one of our team went out to a lady who lives on her own. [Our team member] posted some letters for her, got her some bread, milk in the shop. So there's that kind of thing going on. It's more than just meals. 5.2

### **3. Commensality and the communal experience**

Some Get Together events were directed towards fostering a sense of shared communal experience. This was particularly the case, but not exclusively, for groups that had their origins faith-based organisations. One participant in an urban church led project described the monthly event:

Once a month we have a community meal. We'll get all the ingredients and prepare the meal together. It's a lot of fun because as we're cooking we'll share ideas about how to boost the community and what we're doing next. Then others arrives we serve the meal, chat and make a collection towards our charity. 12.4

Another faith-based organisation had to switch from meals on their premises to home deliveries during the lockdown. The project lead described how the cook created meals as an act of spiritual duty to others, mindful that he was preparing meals to be shared but to be served separately:

It's like a spiritual call. He cooks dinners like chicken, Sunday roasts, pork stews with all made with fresh ingredients like we always do. Everything is like personal and everyone knows they're sort of eating together, even though their alone. 8.2

One secular community centre explained how they had a window of opportunity before Christmas to organise a meal. The idea was to create the experience of eating together for those who had had no chance to do so for several months. Coming together and the feeling of community spirit was felt to be a defining goal of a neighbourhood community centre project. The food was served 'restaurant style' to give the guests a sense of a special occasion.

We wanted to make a meal that is prepared for you and you don't have to do the dishes afterwards. It's like a little treat just turn up you get your food. It's like going to a restaurant, a really special occasion that people don't get here. It was amazing to have so many people back, just like a really good buzz and you could, just, you could feel the energy in all the conversations all over the room and that was like the whole place came alive again. 3.2

#### **4. Creative arts and performance**

Food based activities were strongly connected to creative initiatives in a number of instances. This was particularly the case for organisations that had a pathway into community engagement through arts-based activities.

Our work 'wanders' between arts and culture and food. As it moves between these areas we find points of connection [...] There's something about us realising that food is such a great thing to unite people. Sometimes when you say 'This is an art space' people are like, 'Oh, what does that mean?' But if we say we're doing a baking project, a lot more people know what we're about. There was that kind of thinking around [our arts and food project]. 2.3

One agency saw its food-based work clearly in terms of its wider aspirations to promote community self-expression through performing arts. The arts based organisation lead explained their approach to harnessing the creativity of groups.

We have particular skills in coming up with creative solutions to the challenges that we face in our lives... we use that expertise to work collaboratively with people to maximise their own potential. We're very keen on working with what groups of people want to achieve, rather than the expertise or brilliance of one particular individual. We make a space where everyone's safe and comfortable sharing and feeling like they're equal to other people. 11.2

While food focused activities such as baking lent themselves well to creative group processes, the organisation had previously run groups with other focal concerns such as local heritage, personal biographies, and storytelling. A participant felt that the project had improved her confidence and mental health

[The events have] been extremely helpful in allowing me to regain confidence after a mental health breakdown and re-learn cooking skills as well as gently expanding an increasingly restricted comfort zone. There is a wonderful community and creative element to all of the events. They make [the area] seem a less deprived. I believe this fosters hope and connection. 11.6

#### **5. Making, crafting and re-designing places**

Some Get Togethers projects had their origins in craft-based activities as part of area-based regeneration, community capacity building and adult leisure and learning work. One project is part of the international men's shed movement and through Food for Life Get Togethers extended its

practice into a community garden area. Volunteers turned their practical skills to restoring a community garden area with a view to making it more accessible for local events and creating more social contacts:

Gardens, particularly vegetable gardens require lots of things that need building. So that suited us, it's what we do! But, at the same time gave us a great space and food as a way to talk to local people. Our main thing with the shed is that people can work on their own projects or they can share projects, and it basically provides a space to talk about life, and talk about sharing problems. Just find friendship, and the garden is an extension of that. 1.4

Another project found that growing projects formed a good basis to connect together different social groups. While there were strict limits on what could be done during coronavirus restrictions the project leads found a way to involve different generations sequentially.

The teenagers would come in and do all the heavy work. Then we would have a group of old people, older ladies, to come in and sow the seeds, so they were able to do something appropriate to what they were able to do. And then our people with learning disabilities would they would be coming in and maintaining it on a day-to-day basis. 5.2

'Making' 'building' and 'designing' were seen to provide a basis to bring together groups. The practical emphasis allowed diverse groups to feel that they were contributing to a project and not simply consuming a service

## **6. Embedding spaces for wellbeing**

Several Get Together projects combine growing and eating activities with other health and wellbeing activities such as yoga, stress relaxation, outdoor exercise.

There are whole host of wellbeing classes that we run through the site so from yoga, meditation, massage, counselling therapy, sound baths all sorts of things going along. We work quite closely with a woodland trust, and [the local wildlife group] on outdoor activities for people with dementia. We're running a local heritage project. All these things link to our food projects. 13.1

In some instances food events provided the initial starting point for a programme of health and wellbeing activities, on the basis that food offered a casual and informal basis to gather interest. Such occasion also formed a platform to invite professionals from local agencies to talk about health issues, benefits or welfare services.

## **7. Play, games and competition**

Games, sports and competitive activities were occasionally an adjunct to Get Together occasions. Some followed established models such as bingo after a lunch club. Others incorporated elements of friendly competition into the food activities themselves. Food growers competed to produce the best chillies and or greatest weight of potatoes. Some participants had attended or engaged in cook offs and cake competitions. However, the reports of these activities were quite peripheral to the main focus of project participants that formed our research sample. This might be because of the sampling approach in our fieldwork, or the focus of Food for Life Get Togethers engagement with community organisations. Given the range and extent of community sporting associations it is likely that Get Together-type activities are a widespread feature in this sphere.

## **8. Environmental and social activism**

The connections between food growing and the natural world were important particularly for outdoor community projects.

The growing side of things last year just kicked off. I think because the summer was so lovely and people connected to nature. Everybody was not doing as much travelling so people maybe a bit more time to play in the garden. It's a great leveller, you can do with someone's who's 3 years old right the way through to somebody who's 93, from somebody who has stability issues to somebody who runs marathons. It's something that everybody can engage with. 13.2

During the pandemic, the project expanded its scope to take on a much wider concern with environmental engagement and personal growth.

We broadened out from just growing your fruit and vegetables into more like the whole connection to nature - into health and wellbeing and benefits of being outdoors. 5.1

Some Get Togethers were framed mainly in relationship to environmental issues, for instance one project was primarily directed towards reducing food waste as part of a wider organisational goal to conserve, re-use and reduce carbon footprints:

We started looking at how to reduce waste through the community garden. Like making soups out of cabbage leaves and the other produce that might otherwise have been thrown away. So a lot of our work went that direction. 1.2

Food-based activities were a core focus for some of the agencies already working on matters of social justice and inequalities issues. The food based work often helped these organisations form much closer connections with their local communities than if the focus had been on more abstract issue. One agency compared its grass roots food activism based to large voluntary sector organisations that had little direct community connection.

We've got the audience, but we don't have the infrastructure. Funders might have bought into the infrastructure, but that doesn't mean they have the ear of the community. But we've got that connection...

We provide rice and chicken curry. So for some people [our project] is about having a normal nice meal when they're struggling. But it's also about talking to somebody, it's a social gathering. A lot of the feedback we get is 'We just come to have a chat with you guys and tell it like it is [for us]'. 9.1

This project drew upon its depth of community engagement to direct the focus of local authority and larger voluntary sector agencies. While this pattern had been in place in previous years, events of the lockdowns amplified the scale and intensity of social activism, much of which was propelled through the emergency food support work.

One project focused its attention on bringing young people together to talk and reflect on their experiences of the food system and society. At weekly Zoom meetings, they invited artists and activists to speak, run discussions and workshops with young people.

We're thinking about how you can start conversations through food. How you can change your thinking about community and the bigger social structure. The young people we're working with have got so much more politicised around the ideas of food, especially because of the coronavirus. [They're] working with local food banks and seeing a lot of new things...We explore topics like solidarity and mutual aid, creating empathy between people and cultural exchange. We explore ideas like food utopia, thinking about the future, and how we imagine what's going to happen to the food system. It was something like really freeing. Just to realise the power of your imagination. 2.2

The virtual Get Togethers instigated conversations about large social issues and changes needed in the food system. They illustrate how for some projects social food projects are more than a matter of the food on offer at the events.



## 9. Alternative forms of engagement

There were a number of alternative lenses through which interviewees talked about their interests and social connections to Get Together activities. Some of the leading themes were around caring, nurturing, helping, education, leisure and respite. These reflected the organisational remit or practice backgrounds of interviewees. For example, a care home participant interpreted the purpose of their Get Together events primarily in terms of maintaining contacts with the outside world for older residents. This diversity indicates that Get Together type activities inhabit an extensive 'social space' and that our research only captured some leading connections with communities of practice.

## Discussion: Communities of Practice and Pathways to Impact

This study explored fourteen Food for Life Get Togethers sponsored projects and their associated agencies from the perspectives of a range of interviewees. We used a communities of practice lens to consider projects from the stance of the driving concerns aside from food as a social activity. The communities of practice perspective draws attention to the concerns and passions of people taking part in FFLGT activities, and how 'practices' form the basis through which groups come together. While FFLGTs share a focus on growing, cooking, sharing and eating food together, these activities are often brought together with wider interests in mind. Get Togethers are rarely just about getting together with food.

We identify eight forms of communities of practice around which FFLGTs are organised. While there is some overlap, each combines specific goals, skills, knowledge and styles of action. The communities of practice are defined as 'celebrations, rites of passage and marking occasions'; 'sharing and the gift economy', 'commensality and the communal experience', 'arts and performance', 'making, crafting and re-designing spaces', 'embedding spaces for wellbeing', 'play, games and competition', and 'environmental and social activism'.

Each of these has a distinctive relationship with FFLGT's outcomes of interest. For example, participants in arts and performative practices emphasise inner expression and creativity while those taking part in green and social activism concentrate on critical awareness and leveraging change. There are also overlaps between the communities of practice: some FFLGT projects intentionally hybridise their objectives to appeal to diverse groups and to create new forms of community engagement. In Wenger et al.'s (2002) terms the 'domain' of the community of practice expanded and blended with other domains, with the consequence of creating expansive and more socially diverse networks.

The communities of practice perspective lends itself well to understanding how FFLGT activities can improve social capital and personal and social wellbeing. Using Putnam's model, clearly FFLGT activities can reinforce 'bonding social capital, strengthening links within groups. Food-based activities may enable connections between individuals not otherwise connected through groups (bridging capital) or support 'linking social capital', or the relationships between groups of different scales. Some of the learning maps on to influential psycho-social models of how group activities create a positive sense of wellbeing. For instance, Csikszentmihalyi's (2013) concept of flow draws attention to feeling of personal accomplishment when engaged in practical creative activities that require the development and exercise of skills. Antonovsky's concept of sense of coherence as a basis for salutogenesis (or 'creation of health') highlights the importance of engagement of meaningful activities that produce a sense of order and predictability in the world (Lindström and Eriksson, 2005).

While projects drew upon innovative applications of practices such as arts or competition, many initiatives were either in an early stage of development, experienced restricted opportunities due to limited funding, or experienced disruptions due to the pandemic. As a consequence, at this point of the evaluation, it was not always possible to gauge the impact of activities on the lives of participants. The majority of the project lead agencies intended to continue to run their activities and reported that they would be in a better position to articulate their outcomes at a point in the future.

The communities of practice perspective draws attention to the development of roles and responsibilities within groups. For example, as Wenger et al point out within groups there are frequently distinctions between leaders/champions and facilitators, and between experts and novices. This was often the case for the groups taking part in the evaluation, where members were able to adopt different roles based on their inclinations and where there were combinations of longer term, more experienced members and those who were new to the groups. For well-functioning groups, this diversity brought energy and new ideas. However, there were occasions where there were tensions among group members sometimes due to the informality and fluidity of the organisation of activities.

The evaluation identified a range of forms of communities of practice. Given the breadth of the field it is likely that there are many other forms of community engagement with food. A particular area where we hoped to find more illustration concerned community sports, gaming and other competitive activities. Given the scale of this sphere as an environment for informal social activities it is plausible that there is a rich relationship with food-based activities. Moreover, it should be recognised that this research is illustrative rather than exhaustive of the variety of food related activities that occur in community of practice domains. For example, there are many forms of faith-based forms of food engagement that were not revealed as part of this research.

## Learning and implications

- The domains in which communities of practice operate provide important routes to communicate and engage agencies in the Get Togethers approach. For instance, arts, faith and sports associations provide ready-made channels to engage interest in how to run good food community activities.
- The communities of practice perspective draws attention to the different types of aspirations and ways of thinking about good food community activities. Food for Life Get Togethers might develop tailored resources to reflect these diverse interests.
- Good food is not necessarily the uppermost consideration for some communities of practice (whose interests may lie primarily with creative arts, activism, faith and so forth). This represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the Food for Life Get Togethers programme. Engagement, insight and skills are required to articulate ideas of good food in ways that resonate with these target audiences. However, as influential social networks, communities of practice are in a position to amplify good food messages, often to groups that might otherwise not be engaged.
- Circumstances over the last year produced many innovations, however communities of practice all benefit from building up a sustained body of momentum over time and participants often

reported that initiatives had been delayed in Year 2 of the programme. It is likely that many projects will be in a better place to articulate their outcomes in Years 3 and 4 of the programme.

- There are some clear similarities between types of projects across the FFLGT programme. However, initiatives are often working in isolation and stand to benefit from connecting outside their immediate delivery geographies. Some project leads and volunteers report that FFLGT has provided a good platform for this.
- Case Report 2 would benefit from some further information on projects undertaking practices in the areas of 'play, games and competition' and 'green and social activism'. Wider data from across the programme will help us understand the scale and generalise-ability of findings.

## Conclusions

This report has focused on the passions and interests that Get Togethers participants have in addition to a concern with food. It shows that food-based activities sit alongside or enhance wider shared interests. These interests are put into practice through practice-based experiences that develop shared understandings, values, skills and goals in mind. This draws attention to the richness and diversity of impacts of participating projects in that they are not limited to food-based elements but encompass a wide range of social benefits that are specific to the milieu of the social practice itself.

## References

- Caparosa, S.L., Shordon, M., Santos, A.T., Pomichowski, M.E., Dzewaltowski, D.A. and Coleman, K.J., 2014. Fundraising, celebrations and classroom rewards are substantial sources of unhealthy foods and beverages on public school campuses. *Public Health Nutrition*, 17(6), pp.1205-1213.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., 2013. *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*. Random House.
- Dahlan-Taylor, M., 2015. 'Good' food: Islamic food ethics beyond religious dietary laws. *Critical Research on Religion*, 3(3), pp.250-265.
- Flint, P., Pettinger, C., Segal, R., Taylor, R., Wheeler, B. and Williams, C., 2017. *Using the arts for food research and dialogue*. Briefing Paper. University of Plymouth. <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/8655>
- Farrier, A., Dooris, M. and Froggett, L., 2019. Five Ways to Wellbeing: holistic narratives of public health programme participants. *Global Health Promotion*, 26(3), pp.71-79.
- Feenstra, G., 2002. Creating space for sustainable food systems: Lessons from the field. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 19(2), pp.99-106.
- Gale, N.K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S. and Redwood, S., 2013. Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 13(1), pp.1-8.
- Isoldi, K.K., Dalton, S., Rodriguez, D.P. and Nestle, M., 2012. Classroom "cupcake" celebrations: observations of foods offered and consumed. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 44(1), pp.71-75.

- Jones, M., Beardmore, A., Biddle, M., Gibson, A., Ismail, S.U., McClean, S. and White, J., 2020. Apart but not Alone? A cross-sectional study of neighbour support in a major UK urban area during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Emerald Open Research*, 2.
- Li, L.C., Grimshaw, J.M., Nielsen, C., Judd, M., Coyte, P.C. and Graham, I.D., 2009. Evolution of Wenger's concept of community of practice. *Implementation Science*, 4(1), pp.1-8.
- Lindström, B. and Eriksson, M., 2005. Salutogenesis. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 59(6), pp.440-442.
- Marovelli, B., 2019. Cooking and eating together in London: Food sharing initiatives as collective spaces of encounter. *Geoforum*, 99, pp.190-201.
- McLaughlin, T.H., 2003. Teaching as a practice and a community of practice: The limits of commonality and the demands of diversity. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37(2), pp.339-352.
- Michellini, L., Principato, L. and Iasevoli, G., 2018. Understanding food sharing models to tackle sustainability challenges. *Ecological Economics*, 145, pp.205-217.
- Nakamura, J. and Csikszentmihalyi, M., 2014. The concept of flow. In *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology* (pp. 239-263). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Pettinger, C., Parsons, J.M., Letherby, G., Cunningham, M., Withers, L. and Whiteford, A., 2019. Participatory food events as collaborative public engagement opportunities. *Methodological Innovations*, 12(2), pp.1-14.
- Putnam, R.D., 2015. *Bowling alone: America's declining social capital*. London: Routledge.
- Schanes, K. and Stagl, S., 2019. Food waste fighters: What motivates people to engage in food sharing? *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 211, pp.1491-1501.
- Tieman, M. and Hassan, F.H., 2015. Convergence of food systems: Kosher, Christian and Halal. *British Food Journal*.
- Thygesen, N., 2019. The gift economy and the development of sustainability. *Local Economy*, 34(6), pp.493-509.
- Wenger E, McDermott RA, Snyder W (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wirzba, N., 2018. *Food and faith: A theology of eating*. Cambridge University Press.