



MY FOOD COMMUNITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF EVALUATION REPORT ON THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE COMMUNITY FOOD LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

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Amy Beardmore, Mat Jones, Sarah Hills, and Sanda Ismail



My Food Community Nations Networking Event, Spring 2023, Belville community garden, Greenock
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FEEDBACK FROM **MY FOOD COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS**

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

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

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

OVERVIEW

In the context of a cost-of-living crisis, many activists are working within their communities to promote access to affordable, healthy, and sustainable food. Yet there are very few opportunities to share experiences, ideas, and resources between such community food champions, and to develop the skills needed to create change.

The Soil Association's My Food Community is a community leadership programme intended to create 'a network for good food champions to learn, connect and take action'. My Food Community forms part of Food for Life Get Togethers (FFLGT), a UK-wide National Lottery funded initiative designed to make the 'good food the easy choice for everyone'.

My Food Community (MFC) is run as an online training programme for approximately six months, with opportunity for face-to-face meetings. After the training, participants can apply for a small grant to give them the opportunity to put their newly developed skills into practice by implementing a food-based project in their local area. To date, the programme has run twice starting in September 2021 and in September 2022. This evaluation report covers both programme runs.

Central to the MFC design has been an ethos of 'test and learn', making the programme flexible and adaptive according to feedback during delivery. This iterative design was intended to help the team refine the programme as it develops. In the second year, key revisions to the programme included the presentation of more materials in advance, greater emphasis on the learning objectives and reflection processes, and a focus of the small grant on developing personal leadership skills. Year two also saw the number of enrolled participants almost double from 39 to 77 individuals.

Our evaluation of the MFC programme followed a mixed methods design that was tailored to each delivery. We sought to explore the impacts of the programme on the community food leadership of participants as well as participant perceptions of the delivery and value of the programme.

The findings presented here mainly concern Version 2 of the programme, but we start with a summary of the findings from the initial Version 1.



**GET
TOGETHERS**
Bringing people together through food



My Food Community Nations Networking Event, Spring 2023, An Tobar Wellness Centre & Social Farm C.I.C, Newry © Scott M Salt Photography

MFC Version 1: Summary of the evaluation findings

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

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

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

73% **'strongly agreed' that grant helped them to apply their learning from MFC**

MFC Version 2: Baseline profile of participants

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

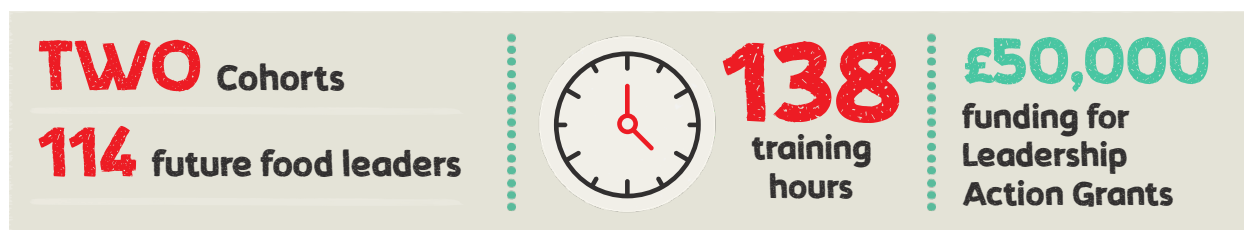
Depending on the type of training, between one third and a half of participants had no prior experience of professional development support

in five years. At the outset, 41% did not perceive themselves to be a leader in food activities. Overall, participation in prior training courses was not statistically associated with better self-perceptions of skills and competencies linked to community food leadership.

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



My Food Community Nations Networking Event, Spring 2023, Manchester © Scott M Salt Photography



MFC Version 2:

Delivery records and profile of the participants at six-month follow-up

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

The team maintained contact to the end point of the online sessions with nearly all individuals enrolling with the programme (75 of 77). Records showed that session attendance varied between 49 to 18 people per session. About half of the cohort attended 25% or more sessions of the programme in real time (participants had the opportunity to catch up with recorded sessions).

Attendance between different types of sessions varied, but there was little overall difference between the leadership component and the learning and inspiration components of the programme. Thirty five members attended one of the face-to-face events, and a small percentage (n=3) had a very high level of overall attendance (75% or more) across the course of the programme. For those taking part in sessions, the feedback was consistently very positive, with the overwhelming majority strongly or very strongly agreeing that they felt they had met specified learning objectives. From the total cohort of 75 completing the training element of the programme, 31 went on to successfully apply for the MFC Leadership Action Grant.





My Food Community Welcome Event, Autumn 2022, Birmingham © Edward Shaw Photography

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

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

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

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

MCF Version 2: Participant perceptions of the programme delivery

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

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

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

- Respondents found the use of Circle (the networking software platform) challenging and would have preferred a more user-friendly virtual platform.

After taking part in MFC

85% made several connections

41% had 'extremely strong' knowledge of the food citizenship

68% regarded themselves as a community leader in food activities.

46% developed 'extremely strong' skills to create change in food system

27% developed 'extremely high' confidence in community leadership around food systems

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

Three evaluation case studies provide an in-depth account of participant's experiences of the programme and its role in changing outlooks and aspirations.



SUMMARY OF THE MAIN LEARNING OUTCOMES

Using quantitative measures, baseline and follow-up evaluation showed that members of MFC Version 2 reported significant improvements in the following areas:

- Developing knowledge and understanding of food citizenship and local food system issues
- Applying specific leadership skills to work on food issues with diverse communities and situations
- Raising awareness and supporting other community members take action on food issues
- Influencing local policies and programmes on food issues

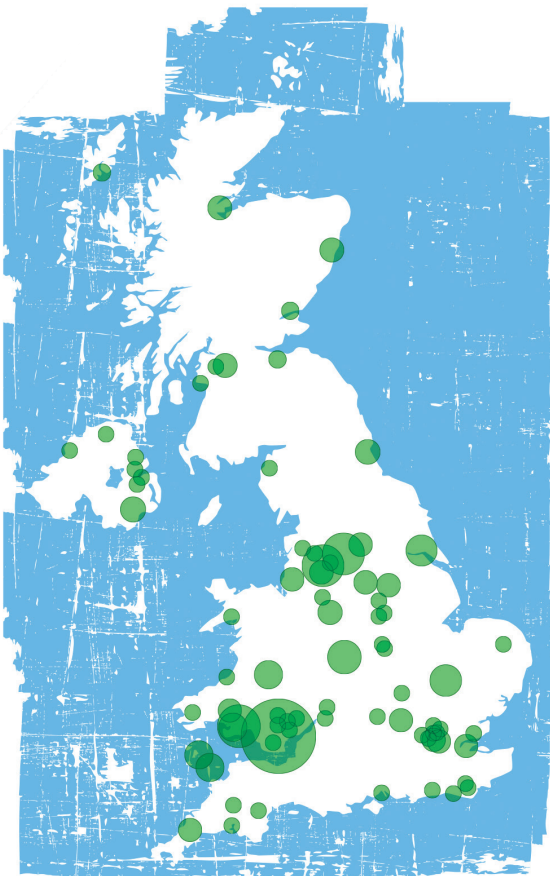
- Developing actions beyond their own community of interest or place
- Reflecting upon their personal journey and developing strategies for personal growth as leaders on community food issues.

These findings mirror results from first run of the programme. The positive outcomes indicate that MFC achieved many of its programme ambitions after six months of training. After the training period, initial feedback those taking up the Leadership Action Grant indicates that participants were able to put their learning into practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation findings of Version 1 of the programme helped shape the evaluation focus for Version 2. Both waves of the evaluation indicate that the programme had beneficial impacts on the knowledge, competencies and skills of participants in the broad field of community food leadership.

The quantitative outcome evidence was very consistent with the qualitative evidence, suggesting that many of the self-reported changes could be attributed to participation in MFC, rather than other factors. As with many voluntary training courses that run over a six to twelve month duration, levels of participation fluctuated. For both deliveries of the programme, roughly one half were heavily engaged, one quarter were moderately engaged, and one quarter were lightly engaged or disengaged. For the positive outcomes, the evidence is most visible for those that had strong engagement with the process, which is to be expected from a participatory programme. With its earlier inception, for Version 1 there is longitudinal data based upon participant's use of the small grant. This provides good evidence that participants continue to derive value from MFC many months after they completed the online training. Indeed, there is significant potential for participants to continue to benefit over time with the delivery of further programme run and the growth a network of MFC alumni.



Location of My Food Community participants



My Food Community Nations Networking Event, Spring 2023, Manchester © Scott M Salt Photography

FEEDBACK FROM **MY FOOD COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS**

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

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

Authors

Amy Beardmore, *Senior Lecturer in Public Health*¹

Mat Jones, *Professor of Public Health and
Community Development*¹

Sarah Hills, *Senior Lecturer in Sustainability*²

Sanda Ismail, *Senior Lecturer in Public Health*¹

¹ Centre for Public Health and Wellbeing, UWE Bristol

² Department of Geography and Environmental Management

Contacts

UWE: Mat Jones matthew.jones@uwe.ac.uk

Food for Life Get Togethers: Chandra Pankhania,
Food Leadership and Network Manager
cpankhania@soilassociation.org

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My Food Community Nations
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Belville community garden, Greenock
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