



SHORT REPORT

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

EVALUATION OF FOOD FOR LIFE GET TOGETHERS

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## **From the outset, Food for Life's 'Get Togethers' has sought to build a learning community of Get Togethers organisers.**

Towards the end of Year 2 of the four-year programme, the team launched a national network event series and explored other mechanisms to use the power of networks to promote community-scale good food citizenship and facilitate greater peer directed work in regions and localities.

Our research sought to explore the delivery and benefits gained for Network Event participants and facilitators. We also investigated Get Together participants' engagement with wider programme activities.

Networks are integral to social movements and wider evidence shows that networks are being used increasingly to build capacity and foster the collective impact of civil society organisations and programmes. 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. There has been less focus, however, on networks in the context of grass roots food initiatives.

Using a mixed methods study design, the research involved analysis of network activity programme records, a survey of Network Event participants and telephone interviews with Network Event participants and facilitators. We received 97 survey responses and carried out 19 in-depth interviews.



## KEY POINTS

- Work to strengthen networks at a local and national level has evolved as a strategic focus for Get Togethers. The key elements of Get Togethers work to support networks include support through local partnerships, the hosting of national Network Events, communications newsletters and campaigns and training.
- 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 given impetus by the Covid-19 pandemic. 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.
- The Get Togethers Network Event series launched in May 2021 and over twelve months hosted fourteen online 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.
- Get Togethers' Network 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 Network Events.
- 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.
- Participants reported a wide variety of benefits linked to Network Events including practical ideas and the courage to implement them, affirmation of others, and the value of a shared space to talk.
- 69% of survey respondents used ideas, knowledge, and contacts from events to help organise food activities and 61% said that sessions had strengthened their capacity to run food activities.
- 37% of survey respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that their engagement with Network Events helped them lead their own peer networks.
- 52% of survey respondents said that the Network Events helped them to feel more connected to the Get Togethers programme.
- 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.
- 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 giving the impetus for the development of ongoing meaningful relationships.
- Positive feedback on Network Events was statistically significantly associated with making connections after events and willingness to take action on community food issues. These links lend plausibility to the idea that national networking events help stimulate activities at local level.
- Presenters of Network Events and local organisations commissioned through Get Togethers to deliver them also benefit through the opportunity to broaden their audience. In some cases, this has been the catalyst for new collaborations on special topics and new working partnerships.

# GET TOGETHERS APPROACH

## TO NETWORK BUILDING

**Work to strengthen networks at a local and national level 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.

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

Local and national commissioned partners are an important part of the programme delivery infrastructure. They play a vital networking role by promoting Get Togethers events, resources and funding through their networks. In the earlier stages of the programme, several Locally Commissioned Partners (Denbighshire Voluntary Services Council [DVSC] and PAVO/ Cultivate in Wales, SPA Care Homes in Northern Ireland and Edinburgh Food Social in Scotland) ran face to face and online events to promote local networks.

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

The increased emphasis on network building in the programme coincided with and was also given impetus by the Covid-19 pandemic. Changes in social engagement behaviours 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.



Figure 1: Food for Life Get Togethers Theory of Change<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Version 6, 2022. Summary of activities, learning and challenges June 2021–November 2021. Online [https://www.fflgettogethers.org/media/vfcno1b0/sa\_gt\_6monthreport\_2022.pdf].

## ENGAGEMENT WITH

# GET TOGETHERS

Get Togethers network participants had found out about the programme 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 a Locally Commissioned Partner,
- previous involvement with the Soil Association Food for Life programme,
- membership of the Soil Association.

Food for Life Get Togethers programme records show that by May 2022 a total of 2912 groups had registered with the programme – a figure that exceeded planned targets. Of these:

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

### Building an effective network

Learning from research on how to develop networks for change in social movements and civil society programmes

Get Togethers has increasingly focused on the potential to use a network approach to scale up and scale out its impact. In the context of social movements and civil society change programmes, networks can be thought of as a group of actors who share knowledge, resources and learning to effect change around a common social or environmental cause. Research in this area highlights how through capitalising on network relationships groups can amplify their impact through sharing and collective mobilisation of assets and learning. Effective networks are often highly intentional with clear aims as well as robust strategies for developing and supporting the network. They also need to provide clarity to members about the value of the network in achieving shared aims and provide effective governance and mechanisms for sharing resources, learning and the delivery of interventions for change.

#### FIND OUT MORE

- Chandler, J. and Scott-Kennedy, K. (2015) A Network approach to capacity building. [online] <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/network-approach-capacity-building>.
- Grantmakers for Effective Organisations (2014) Working Better Together: Building nonprofit collaborative capacity. [online] <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/working-better-together-building-nonprofit-collaborative-capacity-694>.
- Raynor, J. (2018) Thinking Strategically About Networks for Change. Rockefeller Foundation. [online] <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/thinking-strategically-networks-change/>
- Searce, D. (2011) Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide, produced for Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. [online] [https://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Catalyzing\\_Networks\\_for\\_Social\\_Change.pdf](https://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Catalyzing_Networks_for_Social_Change.pdf)

Reflecting the growing maturity of the programme, a Network Event series was launched in May 2021 where Get Togethers Commissioned Partners shared knowledge, ideas, and inspiration about connecting communities through good food. These were originally planned to be local and face-to-face, but Covid necessitated the switch to an online format. One of the upsides to this was that the events were accessible to a national audience and enabled community food organisers from across the UK to share best practice. In 2022 the session recordings were also made available via the Get Togethers website. This made event resources accessible to a wider audience.

## SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS THROUGH NETWORK EVENTS

### Watch previous Network Events

We've saved our online webinars here so you can watch them back.

#### 'What Do You Put In Your Mouth?' Engaging young people with good food

Food for Life Get Togethers teamed up with Hull Food Partnership, The Warren and Rooted in Hull to bring you an inspirational tool kit and reflections on initiatives that have helped young people explore their relationship with food.



#### Developing a Green and Growing Network

A virtual event led by our local partner, [Incredible Education](#), on the lived experiences of starting a Green & Growing Group for a local community.



Figure 2: Get Togethers Network Events webpage

## Between June 2021 – May 2022 the programme hosted fourteen online events presenting a wide variety of themes and showcasing community food initiatives

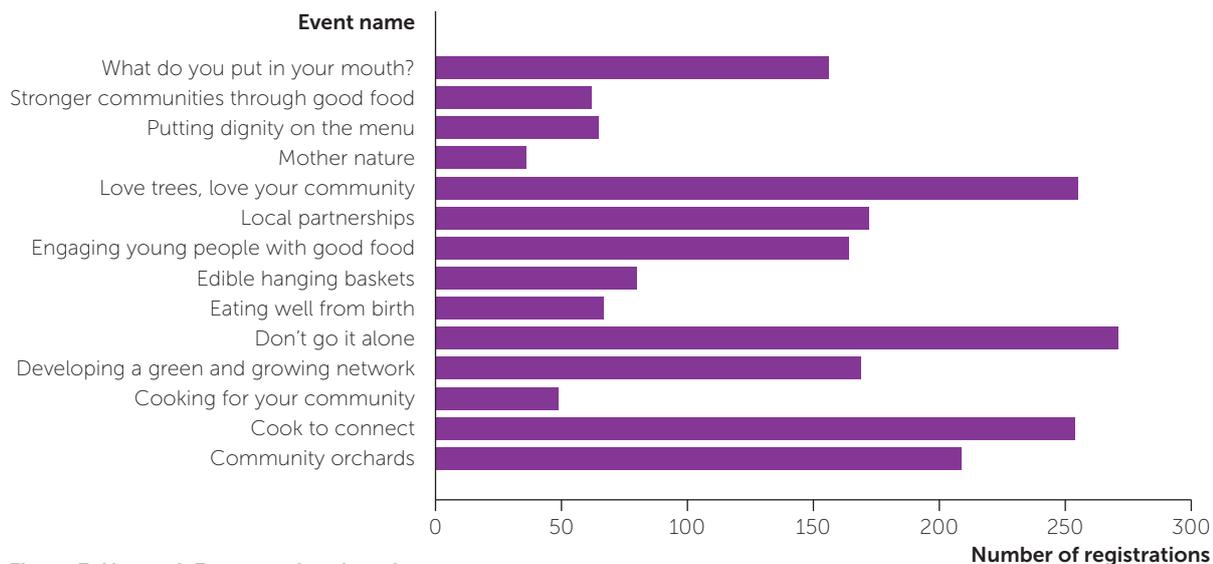


Figure 3: Network Event total registrations

### Capitalising on the benefits of an online format

Participants highly valued the Network Events. Many were 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.

### Personal value of events for participants

Reflecting on the value of the Network Events, participants reported a wide variety of benefits including:

- Picking up ideas and practical knowledge that they could take back into their own settings
- The courage to implement a new community food activity
- Feeling affirmed by hearing about others working on similar issues
- The value of having a space to talk about community food.

### ACCESSIBLE AND FLEXIBLE FORMAT

You can talk if you want to talk. But [sometimes] I just want to hear what other people have done. It's more relevant than turning the radio on sometimes... Listening to a podcast is not interactive enough. [Network Events are] more in between than that.

### HAVING A SPACE TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS ABOUT COMMUNITY FOOD

It's just nice to hear those stories and the different approaches. Even if I don't agree with how somebody would do it, it does feel very nice to have that space.

Survey participants reported that Network Events had a strong positive impact on taking inspiration and knowledge from the session to take action in their own community. For example, 69% of 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.

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

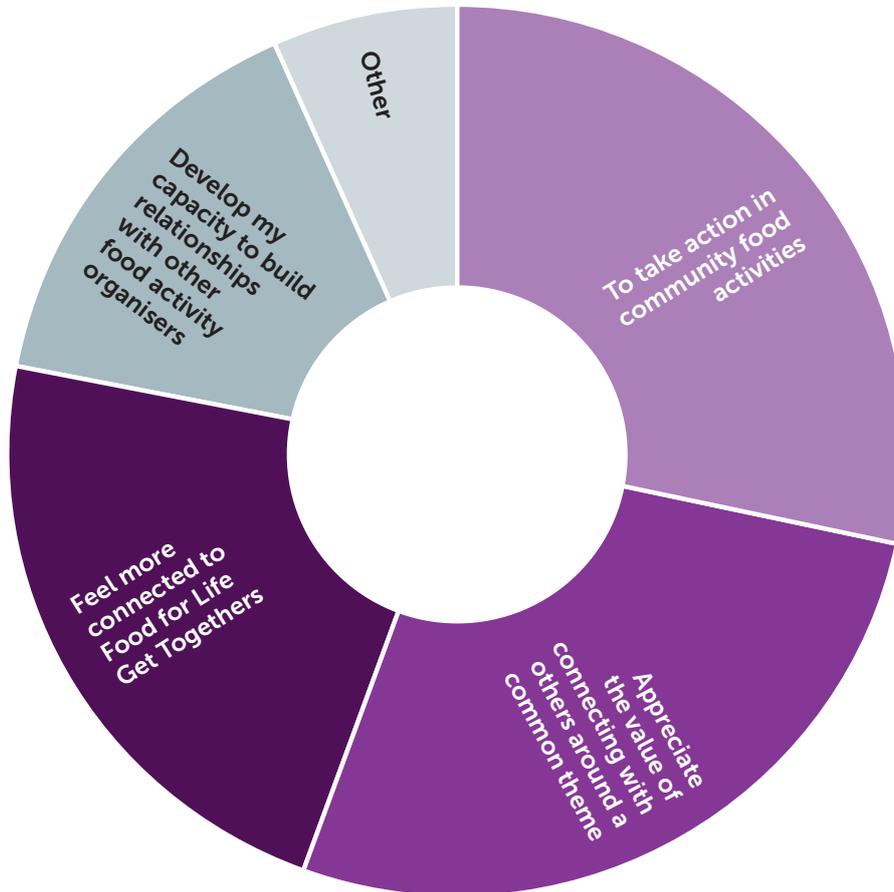


Figure 4: Sunburst chart of benefits for Network Event participants (n=66) Multiple options

**How did participants use the events to take action?**



Figure 5: Treemap of event participant post-event actions. Survey respondents (n=66) multiple options available

## Roles that people play in networks

### Learning from Social Network Analysis

It is useful to appreciate the different ways in which people work through networks to create change. Malcolm Gladwell 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, and the **Salesperson**: a charismatic person with skills of persuasion.

Many other social network analysts (SNAs) have observed similar patterns. For example, Patti Anklam 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 have found that clusters of networks can themselves adopt different roles as part of 'assemblages' for social change.

#### FIND OUT MORE

- Anklam, P. (2007) *A practical guide to creating and sustaining networks at work and in the world*. Burlington, MA.
- Gladwell, M. (2006) *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. Little, Brown.
- Santo, R. and Moragues-Faus, A. (2019) Towards a trans-local food governance: Exploring the transformative capacity of food policy assemblages in the US and UK. *Geoforum*, 98, pp.75–87.

## Value for network event presenters

As well as reported benefits for participants, it was also the case that presenters found value in the events in terms of:

- Broadening their audience and attracting new stakeholders
- The opportunity to develop a new network
- The push to disseminate their work more widely

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.

For one community environmental organisation, presenting at a Network Event had given their organisation the opportunity to expand their reach and increase uptake of their services. Following the event, the presenter had received a significant number of 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. 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.

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 children with good food through creativity and storytelling in the form of a book or similar resource.



Figure 6: Create your own edible hanging basket Network Event led by Groundwork Wales. April 2022

## Practical knowledge and the courage to plunge in

Whether working in a professional context or as a volunteer, several interviewees referred to the practical value of the information shared at Network Events. For two school caterers Events served as a form of Continuing Professional Development. These individuals who were working at the forefront of taking a whole systems approach to healthy school food, experienced a lack of formal training opportunities to support their work. The chance to gain a national perspective on their work and to hear from others who were working at the cutting edge was invaluable. One catering lead who had responsibility for several schools within their academy trust also encouraged her managers to attend relevant Network Events.

For a volunteer in a community setting the Network Events provided a practical programme that they could use to develop a community container gardening event. Hearing from others working on similar projects also validated their own knowledge and instincts about how to proceed.

### SHOWCASING OUR WORK

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

### NEW COLLABORATIONS

It's become a mini network in its own right

### INSIGHTS FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

The presenter really 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 the policies and all of that.

### THE COURAGE TO PLUNGE IN

Other people's stories.... gave me more confidence to kind of plough on with what I was trying or envisaged to do.

## Brokering and banking

The fact that 89% of event participants went on to share knowledge gained from the event with others gives an indication of the quality and ongoing value of Network Event learning and resources. 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. Two interviewees held multifaceted community development roles that required them to work across many domains. They 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.

### SPREADING THE WORD

*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.*

*I downloaded all the presentation to work through them. I went on to different websites. At the end of the day... I'm a facilitator, so we might be approached by primary teachers [for example], so it's passing on that information and saying, here's a couple of ideas'*

## BUILDING CONNECTIONS THROUGH

# NETWORK EVENTS

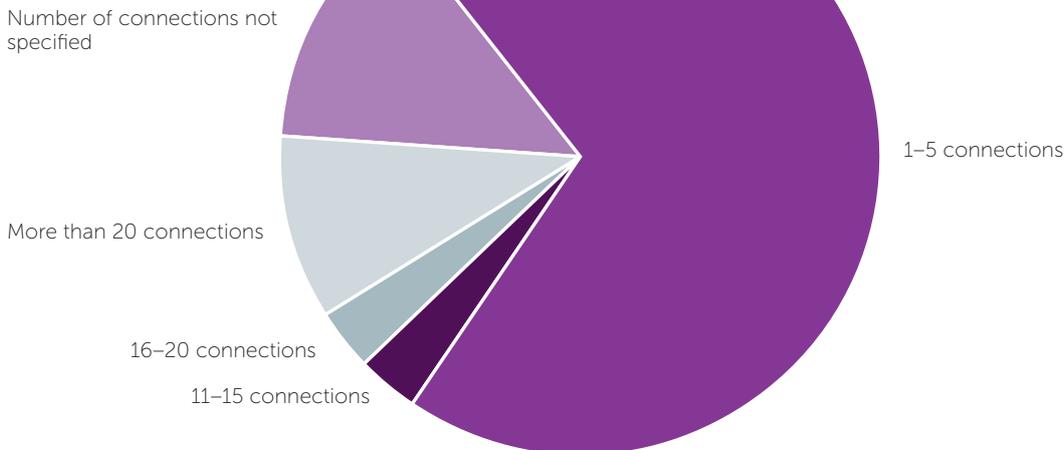
Get Togethers Network Events are conducive settings for connecting with others and are a catalyst for further networking. Feedback from interviewees indicated the range of relational and relationship-building benefits experienced by participants:

- Helping participants to feel less isolated
- The validation of seeing their work in a broader context
- The valuable connector role played by the Network Coordinator
- Banking contacts for potential future use
- Contact followed up immediately for further information and support
- Contacts made at the session leading to active collaboration or engagement.

The majority (62%) of survey respondents felt that the events fostered connections between participants either very or extremely well. A further third said that the Events had fostered connections moderately well.

A significant proportion (50%) said that they went on to connect with others after the event. 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.

**What is the extent of post-event networking?**



**Figure 7: Post-event networking: number of connections made by participants (n=30)**

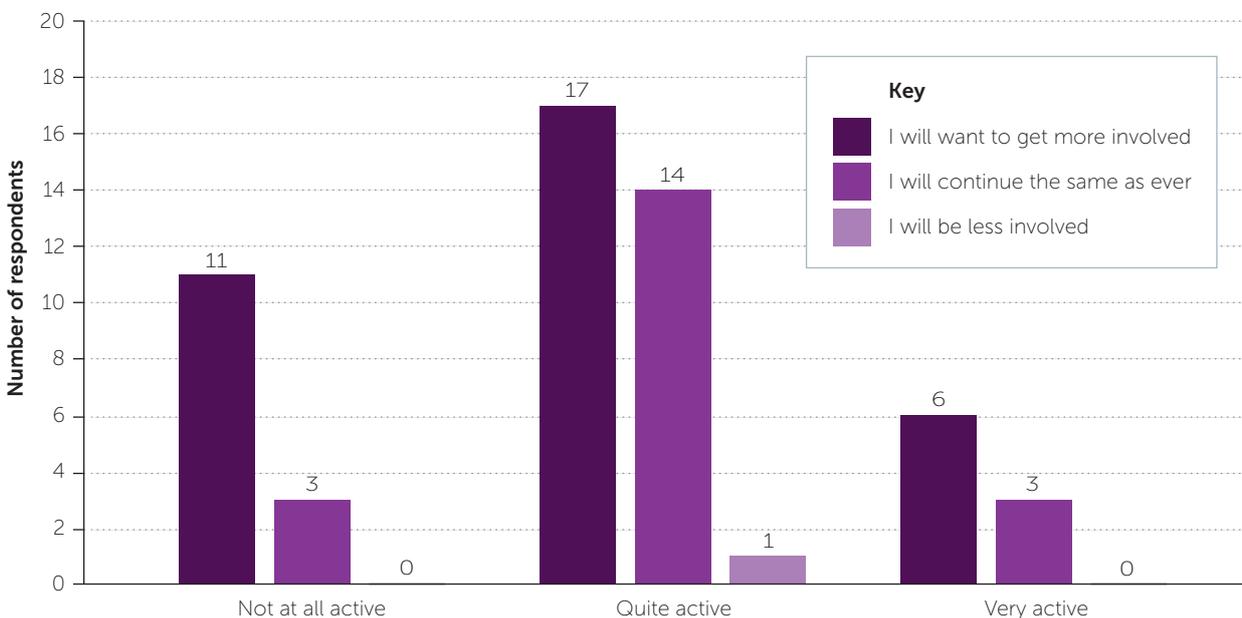
Participants felt that Get Togethers Network Events helped them become more actively engaged in networking than before. This experience applied both to those who felt themselves already very active as to those who defined themselves as not at all active prior to attending a Network Event.

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.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A CENTRAL POINT OF CONTACT**

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 [the feeling that] I've got somebody I can speak to.

**Activeness in networking before Network Event**



**Figure 8: Desire to actively engage in networking after participating in a Network Event (n=55)**

## Building on the success of the Network Events

Get Togethers event participants and facilitators made a range of suggestions for how this mechanism for fostering learning and connections could be further developed.

**Table 1:**  
Participant and facilitator suggestions for developing the Get Togethers Network Events

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Signposting and access to post-event resources</b> | Explore options to make resources more obvious, accessible, and intuitive to navigate.            |
| <b>Theme building</b>                                 | Develop ongoing focus and support around specific themes.   |
| <b>Matching service</b>                               | Offer an online platform for consenting participants to find and connect with others.             |
| <b>Multi-format events</b>                            | Provide a mix of face-to-face/online events and daytime/evening events.                           |
| <b>Topicality</b>                                     | Identify hot topics based upon network feedback, news, and social media trends.                   |
| <b>Community spirit</b>                               | Support mini-campaigns, competitions, collaborations, and stories to foster a sense of belonging. |

## Community Orchards 30 Sep 2021

"Has given me the necessary tools to confidently consider starting up a local community project."

"We're right at the start of our Community Orchard project, so it was uplifting to see success stories."

"Very informative and well organised."

"It was inspirational."

"I thought it was a very local thing when I signed up. To be able to speak to someone from the Highlands of Scotland and from Northern Ireland was unexpected and interesting."

"I really liked the break out room but being able to build connections with the people I spoke to would have been nice. (if they wanted to) They looked at things from very different perspectives."

"It was a very enjoyable and valuable session. I gained some great insights and have already had a lot of 'thoughts' as to progression etc. Thank you."

"Already run community orchards so used session to look for new ideas and sanity checking own projects"






Figure 9: Food for Life Get Togethers Team ask participants to evaluate all Network Events

## Connecting with a wider Get Togethers community

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 and its national reach and influence.

For some Commissioned Partners, involvement with the Get Togethers programme has been the catalyst for the development of new working partnerships that were unlikely to have come about otherwise. One of the interesting dimensions of these partnerships is the way it has brought together community food initiatives with other types of third sector organisations. This has helped food projects to expand their reach and non-food groups to bring cooking and growing more centrally into their programmes of work. These collaborations have enabled the groups involved to capitalise on each other's expertise and networks and has led in one case to the co-delivery of Network Events and a programme of site visits that is helping to build a new local network around good food.

### SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

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 other organisations involved.

### SUSTAINED THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES BY PEER SUPPORT

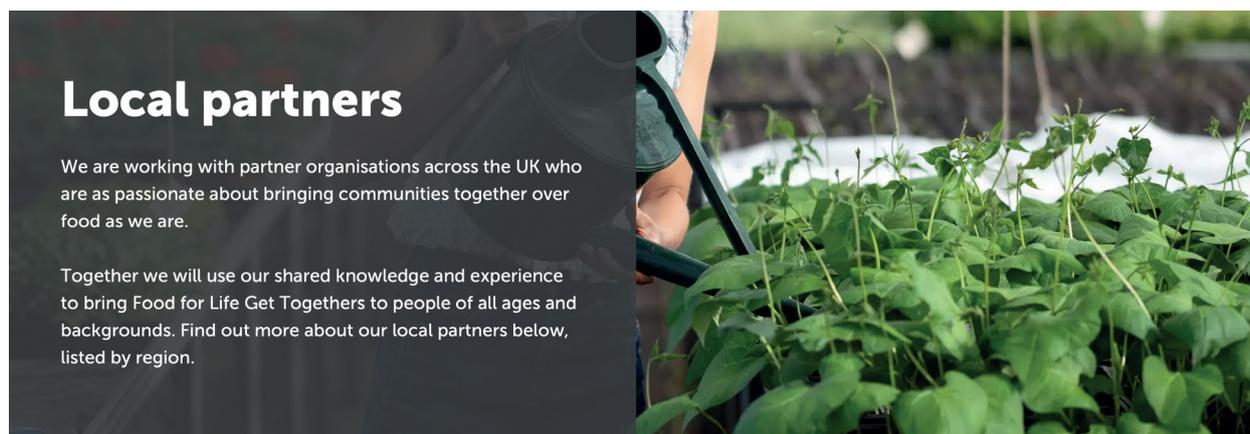
I think that peer support did enable us to do a lot. I think getting those ideas and just a bit of energy from what other people were doing. Of the stuff I was involved in over COVID, I think this has been one of the most positive and most in tune with where we're feeling.

### PRODUCTIVE NEW COLLABORATIONS

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 local area], that would make it possible. So, we sort of fed in that bit and [community food group] fed in their growing expertise.

### AN ANCHOR POINT

For me, it was one of the anchor points of keeping work going and just feeling a bit less isolated.



## Local partners

We are working with partner organisations across the UK who are as passionate about bringing communities together over food as we are.

Together we will use our shared knowledge and experience to bring Food for Life Get Togethers to people of all ages and backgrounds. Find out more about our local partners below, listed by region.

Figure 10: Get Togethers works with a range of local partner organisations across the UK

Evidence from the non-Commissioned Partners suggests that although they were broadly aligned with the values and goals of the Get Togethers programme and valued the resources that they tapped into, they were generally less aware of and affiliated with the wider Get Togethers network.

As Table 2 shows, interviewees and survey respondents illustrated a variety of roles in

relationship to Get Togethers network activities. These archetypes are not mutually exclusive and can shift over time, but they do exemplify how diverse roles bring different forms of value to the network and its interests. 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.

Table 2: Role archetypes in Get Togethers networking activities

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <b>Multiplier</b>     | Has dialogue with other participants and helps create connections that are of interest to the wider programme goals.       |
| <b>Vocal ally</b>     | Feels strongly aligned with the Get Togethers network and introduces others within their own networks.                     |
| <b>Broker</b>         | Searches for project ideas, funding, partners and people then brokers opportunities back through their community networks. |
| <b>Extractor</b>      | Very busy but finds time to extract learning from Get Togethers. Does not feel need for ongoing engagement.                |
| <b>Banker</b>         | Banks resources and contacts for planned or potential future use.  |
| <b>Career builder</b> | Makes use of resources relevant to developing their vocational role and feeds ideas through their professional networks.   |
| <b>Contractor</b>     | Seeks to develop connections as part of a formal or informal role with Get Togethers.                                      |
| <b>Advocate</b>       | Seeks to represent interests that are important to them through Get Together networks.                                     |
| <b>Quiet ally</b>     | Feels positively about Get Togethers and its network but does not communicate further.                                     |
| <b>Casual visitor</b> | Taps into specific resources, but little interest in the wider Get Togethers programme or network.                         |

## 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 11: Eating Well from Birth. Get Togethers Network Event April 2022

# CONCLUSIONS

**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 social engagement behaviours created by the Covid-19 pandemic combined to give much greater focus to the role of networks in community-scale good food citizenship and enable 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 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.

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