



SHORT REPORT

GOOD FOOD AND BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY THROUGH COOK AND SHARE GRANTS

EVALUATION OF FOOD FOR LIFE GET TOGETHERS

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Food for Life's 'Get Togethers' are regular community activities that connect people from all ages and backgrounds through growing, cooking and eating good food.

In mid-2021 Food for Life asked community groups across the UK to apply for a £150 Cook and Share grant. Groups were invited to deliver cooking and sharing activities that would bring people together from disadvantaged and diverse communities with a view to reducing experiences of loneliness and social isolation. The food-based events were also intended to promote positive attitudes towards ageing and diversity. The focus was on Cook and Share Month (October to November 2021), but organisers were also encouraged to run events on longer-term basis. Our research sought to explore how these microgrants might help build community action and promote the value of good food.

Wider evidence shows that microgrants are often used to support small community initiatives, but there is relatively little research on what happens to the money – particularly where the spending goes towards food-based social activities.

Using a mixed methods study design, we analysed the plans of all 153 successful grant holders. A total of 88 award holders responded to our survey about their funded activity. Of these, 19 leads took part in an in-depth qualitative interview about their small grant.



KEY FINDINGS

- The Cook and Share grant scheme attracted a remarkable range of small-scale organisations and groups serving different communities of place and interest.
- Cook and Share events were often substantial social occasions, with the estimated number of participants at an event, or events, ranging from 10 to 400, with a mean of 39 and mode of 20 participants.
- While most groups of participants involved multiple generations, it was also notable that there was strong engagement with people living with mental health issues, long-term conditions, on low income, or with other forms of social and health disadvantage.
- Small grants benefit organisers differently depending on their experience. First timers stand to gain basic skills in setting up community cooking events. Those with more experience use the opportunity to reach for more ambitious goals. This shows how grant givers can work with community food groups to grow the capabilities of people who get involved.
- Organisers have a wide range of motivations for wanting to run a cook and share activity. Alongside a desire to support good causes, personal benefits (social connections, skills, feelings of achievement and recognition) are important drivers for organisers.
- The majority of organisers feel that their Cook and Share events help improve the quality of life of participants (92%), enhance positive attitudes towards ageing (64%) and diversity (68%), and address loneliness and isolation (83%). Almost everyone believed their event helped people connect with each another (99%).
- Almost all organisers go on to run further activities after the first event. The strong commitments set out in the applications were confirmed at survey three months after the first event. This provides evidence that the grants had benefits that extended beyond the funding of the initial cook and share event. Organisers also learnt from experience, with over 50% intending to make additional changes.
- Organisers report a range of positive developments after the grant period. Groups that were first time recipients of external funding felt an enhanced sense of the status of their group and had a new perspective on what the group could potentially accomplish in the future.
- Some Cook and Share grant recipients used the initial monetary award to attract further cash and in-kind funding. Others used creative means to make the grant funding stretch further.
- Cooking and sharing events appear to be powerful connectors for participants. This was partly because food-based events made social interactions feel less threatening and can encourage those experiencing social anxiety to attend in the first place. Events provided opportunities to make conversation, swap points of view, find out about others, help out in small ways, and generate ideas for other community activities.
- The quality of the food was important for many organisers and participants. For some groups, shared meals were a way to provide nutritious food to those experiencing food poverty in a way that preserved the dignity of recipients. However, grant holders showed many ways to engage with agendas on 'good food' those linked to the environment, learning, local production, culture and celebrations.
- Given sensitivities and different points of view about what makes food 'good', many organisers made it a priority to give participants the opportunity to make decisions about what they wanted to cook and how they wanted to eat together.

BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

THROUGH COOK AND SHARE EVENTS

The Cook and Share scheme attracted a very diverse range of small-scale organisations and groups reflecting community cooking and growing projects; women's, LGBTQ+ and other communities of interest; sports, leisure and arts groups; residents' associations; social clubs, environmental projects; faith-based organisations; and educational bodies. This diversity matched the many plans and objectives of the events. Nevertheless, one unifying theme concerned fortunate timing of Cook and Share month with the relaxation of lockdown rules in different parts of the UK and the chance of a return to in-person activities.

Cook and Share events were often substantial social occasions, with the estimated number of participants at an event, or events, ranging from 10 to 400, with a mean of 39 and mode of 20 participants. To help the money stretch, many applicants set out detailed costings for the expenditure of the grant. In one exceptional case, the organiser calculated the cost of each ingredient from olive oil (£1.89) down to vinegar (29p). Applicants also used the funds to help them beyond the initial event for example with costs allocated for cooking and serving equipment, volunteer food hygiene training, and insurance liability cover.



CELEBRATING COMING TOGETHER AFTER LOCKDOWN

There was the sense of celebration and of a nice opportunity for parents to do something with their kids, enjoy themselves and forget about all the difficulties of the last couple of years.

Food in Community, Devon

It was a really nice way to reintroduce people that have still [been] feeling a bit nervous about going back into groups.

Friendly Faces of Kent

The many aspirations of Cook and Share events

ASPIRATION	COOK AND SHARE EVENT
Sharing affordable recipes for people on low incomes	Our cookery tutor uses a microwave and single ring hob to demonstrate how to make 4 cheap and nutritious meals for under 35p a portion (*microwave porridge, macaroni cheese, chilli and banana & chocolate dessert). All ingredients are easy to source, quick to cook, healthy and use minimal amount of kitchen utensils. Wirral¹
Bringing older people together with home comfort food	We are a local older people's charity with a focus on those living on low incomes. We are committed to user-led activities. Four Community Breakfast benefits are older people living alone, have some physical disability which makes getting to a social activity particularly challenging. We use local bacon, tomatoes and mushrooms, Northumbrian eggs, with home-made baked beans and a veggie sausage option. South Tyne
Bridging different groups of people together	Our aim is to bring together different Africans, Eastern Europeans and Asylum-Seekers living in Bolton, and neighbouring communities. Each of these groups have skills that can be of benefit to the wider community. We bring these groups together by serving hot cooked meals from different nationalities and drinks. The food items and ingredients are from world recipes to accommodate different cultures. Bolton
Sharing the love of cooking with LGBTQ+ young people	We have started a new LGBTQ+ youth club. Participating in the Cook and Share month not only increases the young people's life skills but also encourages them to give back to the community through the love of cooking and sharing. We use locally sourced, fresh, seasonal foods, that the young people plan themselves, cook and deliver, creating heart-warming meals that they will remember and continue to cook in the future. Northampton
Tackling food waste	This event inspires behaviour change around food choices and decreasing food waste. Participants are placed into teams. The food items are pooled together for the team and each team additionally selects a maximum of 4 items from the general table with all then being used to create the best dish they can within 45mins. Each team then presents their dish for tasting and marking out of 10. Sunderland
Having a variety of goals	Our purpose is to achieve multiple objectives to bring people together to socialise and avoid loneliness or isolation; raise awareness on healthy eating and healthy living; create contacts and enable service users to build strong community; provide platform for new ideas to sustain these events. We choose healthy and accessible recipes based on seasonal locally available and culturally acceptable products. Barking and Dagenham

While a majority of groups of participants sought to involve multiple generations (older people, children and younger people, and families), it was notable that there was strong engagement with people living with mental health issues, long-term conditions, on low income, or with other forms of social and health disadvantage.

With 35% of groups working in the top 20% of Index of Multiple Deprivation areas this focus on addressing inequalities reflected priorities in the immediate localities.

¹ These accounts are abridged from Cook and Share event plans.

Diverse groups of people taking part in Cook and Share events



Treemap of event participants. Survey respondents (n=88) provided multiple options

Backgrounds, motivations and experiences of event organisers

The people who put their energy into running community events are often overlooked in evaluations. The survey responses showed that Cook and Share event organisers were mainly female (83%) and in the age bracket of 40–69 years old. Seventy-eight percent identified themselves as White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, or British, a similar percentage to the national population. Organisers described several routes by which they had become involved in community food work:

- A long period of interest prior to becoming organisers based upon family, friendship, or neighbourhood experiences.
- Life transitions, for example moving from paid employment to retirement, or moving to a new area.
- A desire to make good use of work and life skills: for example, cooking, administrative and people skills.
- A chance to express personal values and ideological outlook: for example, a desire to help others or to address social and environmental problems.
- Experience of having personally benefited in the past from community food activities.

Organisers had a wide range of motivations for wanting to run a cook and share activity. While the desire to support good causes was important, it was notable that personal connections, personal skills and personal satisfaction were also important motivational influences. This helps to explain the high volunteer commitment and attention that went into many events.

At the outset a majority (81%) of award holders sought to run their events on more than one occasion. The post event survey lent further support to this intention, with 98% reporting that they had decided to continue or grow their community food activities.

Reflecting on their event, 51% of organisers stated that they intended to make changes to social food activities in future. Some of these changes included getting more diverse groups of people involved, involving new partners such as local businesses, training up volunteers and growing ambitions to use new foods or cook new dishes.

THE PERSONAL REWARDS FOR ORGANISERS OF COMMUNITY MEALS

Many of the volunteers live by themselves. Like myself – my husband died six years ago. We get more out of it than we put in really. We thoroughly enjoy it.

Balforn Lunch Club

COMMUNICATING THROUGH FOOD

Even though people have a language barrier or a different economic and political agenda, it doesn't matter when it comes to food...we can easily communicate through the food.

Women's Cultural Arena CIC, Buckinghamshire

What inspires organisers to run Cook and Share events?



Treemap of organiser motivations. Survey respondents (n=88) provided multiple options

It was notable that for 47% of those taking part in the survey, this was the first occasion on which they had specifically organized a 'cook and share' activity. Through statistical analysis, we compared the motivations and other outcomes between first time organisers of food activities and more experienced organisers.

- First timers were more likely to report that they developed their skills to organise food activities²
- Compared to first timers, more experienced organisers significantly reported...

DIVERSE GROUPS AND DIFFERENT INTERESTS

While some people are experiencing food inequality, [other] people want to play their part in reducing food waste. So, it's a really diverse group of people.

Middle of the Hill Community Group, Stroud

- a greater desire to contribute to addressing food and environmental issues³
- a greater likelihood to be inspired by addressing food security⁴
- There were no significant differences between these two groups in terms of their...
 - likelihood of keeping momentum after the food activity
 - making additional changes to their groups as a result of the food activity
 - use of particular aspects of "good food"
 - perceived benefits that participants derived from the food activities

Put together, these findings indicate that the grants benefit organisers differently depending on their experience. First timers stand to gain basic skills in setting up community cooking events. Those with more experience use the opportunity to reach for more ambitious goals. This shows how grant givers can work with community food groups to grow the capabilities of people who get involved.

How community groups grow event organisers



² $X^2(1, 31) = 6.764, p = 0.009$

³ $X^2(1, 27) = 7.292, p = 0.007$

⁴ $X^2(1, 30) = 5.580, p = 0.018$



THE SMALL GRANT AS A CONFIDENCE BOOST

On one hand the £150 wasn't much, but on the other it was. This was a way of us being able to go "Oh look, we've managed to get a little grant!" It gave us the drive to think, "We've done this, we can fundraise."

Live Active Unst, Shetland

The value of the Cook and Share grant for community groups

Aside from the financial benefit, an important aspect of the learning from across our sources of evidence was the symbolic importance of the grant: the grant affirmed the ideas of organisers, helped them extend their ambitions and feel connected to other groups engaged in community cooking. While the monetary value of the Cook and Share grant was small, event organisers described how the award helped them and their group.

Firstly, the grant acted as a catalyst for new opportunities and a chance to extend their social networks. For example, **Middle of the Hill Group** used the small grant to enable the group to move from distributing ambient food to cooking and sharing food. **Silver Road Community Centre** were able to pilot a well-being café. Some groups such as **Friendly Faces of Kent** used a portion of the grant to create 'legacy' resources such as recipe cards or plant give-aways. The community organisation **Live Active Unst** brought new people to the project and wider facilities at the venue.

Microgrants in Context

Learning from research on microgrants, building community capacity and leadership

Food for Life Get Togethers small grants can be thought of as a microgrant initiative intended to build the capacity of communities to find solutions to collective problems. Simple to apply for, microgrants can reach groups with no previous experience of grant funding. They often represent good value because award holders invest substantial voluntary time and other community assets. However, when poorly planned, microgrants can be misdirected towards activities that would have happened anyway or – conversely – set unreasonable expectations that exploit the efforts of community members. Research shows that microgrant funders should communicate clear expectations, advise and support award holders, and use the opportunity create networks and share learning.

FIND OUT MORE

- Ecorys (2020) *Ageing Better Learning Paper No. 5 Microfunding: Empowering Communities to Create Grassroots Change – Existing Evidence Base and Method Note*. Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund
- Chaskin, R.J. (2001) Building community capacity: A definitional framework and case studies from a comprehensive community initiative. *Urban Affairs Review*, 36(3), pp.291–323.
- Chivers, C., Beardmore, A., Jones. (2022) Microgrants as a pathway for community development: understanding impacts, implementation and context. *Community Development*. In press.

Next, the grant provided an opportunity to leverage additional resources. For example, the **Women's Cultural Arena CIC** used Cook and Share and other similar events to communicate the value of their work to funders and local decision-makers, whilst for **Penrose Root Community** the grant was a way to bring in match funding to satisfy the requirements of their core funder.

For several groups the grant was a catalyst to further successful funding bids or to attracting in-kind donations. For example, Cook and Share provided the foundations for **Friendly Faces of Kent** to make a successful £1500 funding application to a national supermarket chain and they have also built a good relationship with another supermarket that is now providing staples such as tea, coffee and sugar for ongoing events. Likewise, **Tidemill Residents Group** who applied for the Cook and Share grant to run a street party, used this as an impetus to bring on

board local businesses to meet the resourcing requirements not covered by the grant. The **Nigerian Catholic Community** were able to multiply the benefits of this and other grants by purchasing at discount through the charity Project Inkind, which enables them to make a grant of £150 translate into £500 buying power.

MAKING A SMALL GRANT GO A LONG WAY

Although it was a very small grant, we managed to make it go a very long way. The money we received didn't only pay for the vegetables on the day, it gave us the resources and the know-how to produce a recipe card and the videos.... We've actually covered I think, 450 members for the recipe card.

Friendly Faces of Kent

Capacity Building through Cook and Share

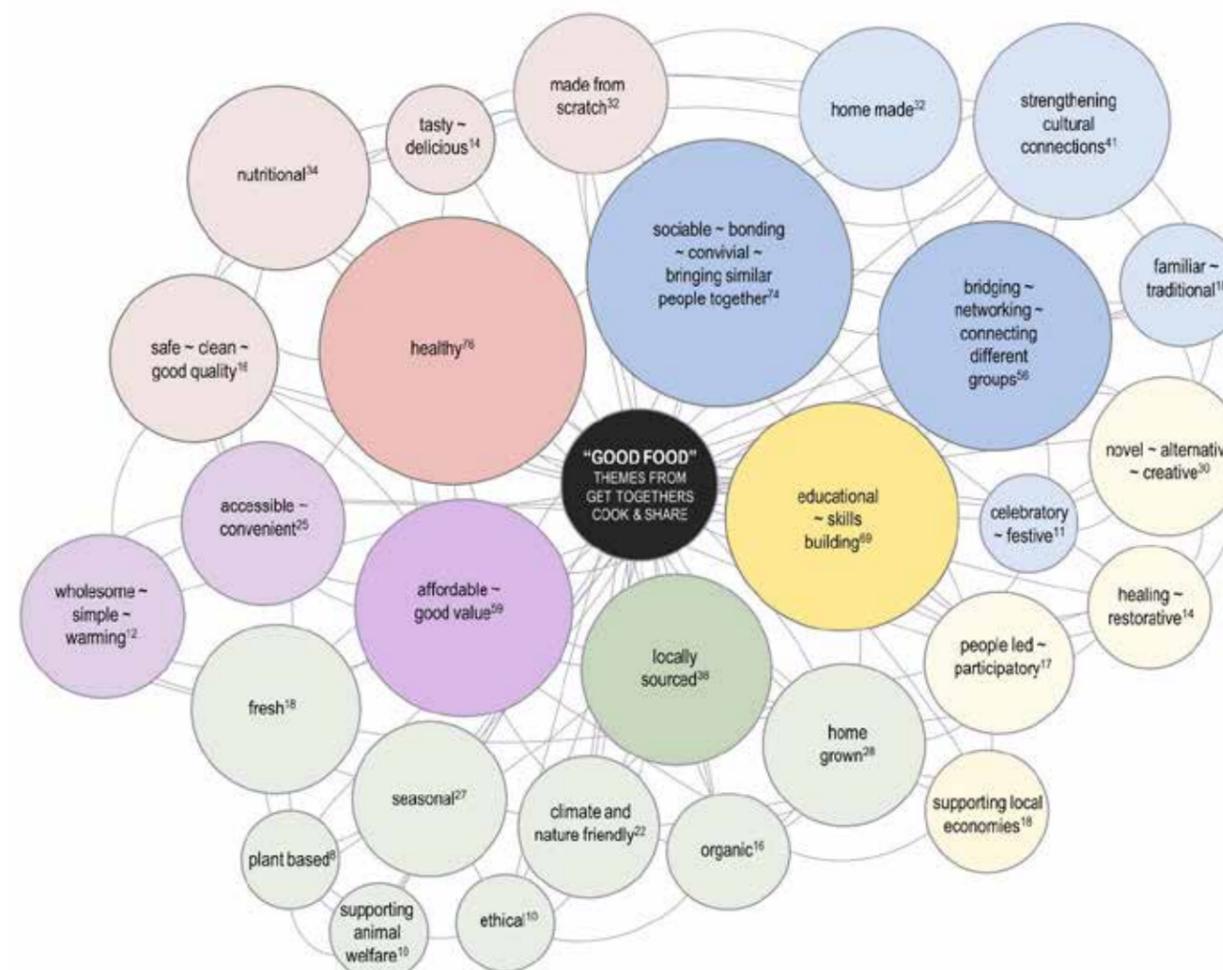
Full case studies can be found in the main report

There wasn't one person who didn't talk to everybody Helping Hooves Derbyshire CIC	The importance of involving participants in decisions about food and format along with the need to be flexible about how events unfold on the day.
Keeping it easy-osey Live Active Unst, Shetland	Making events a highly sociable experience that celebrates all forms of diversity. Avoiding making it into a 'project.'
Influencing decision-makers through food Women's Cultural Arena CIC, Buckinghamshire	Invite funders and local policy makers to food events to help them understand the value of work of the community group.
Drawing everybody back close again Friendly Faces of Kent	Using cook and share events to reconnect with community members, have fun and generate ideas for the future.
Food provides the therapeutic milieu Silver Rd Community Centre, Norwich	A food event is as a safe environment and a productive way to pilot and launch a more regular well-being café.
It's run by neighbours for neighbours Middle of the Hill Community group, Stroud	The success of working with the food interests of local residents and taking careful steps to develop new activities.
Being sensitive to social dynamics Bardney Christian Community Trust, Lincolnshire	Not pressuring people and being attentive to the dynamics in the room are key to making the community teas welcoming and conducive to social interaction.

CREATING AGENDAS FOR GOOD FOOD THROUGH
COOK AND SHARE AWARDS

A focus for our research concerned the food choices and the role organisers wanted food to play in their Cook and Share event. Analysis of the plans and practices of 153 grant holders revealed a rich set of ideas. As the figure below shows the leading themes concerned the health, social and environmental aspects of food.

It was also clear that Cook and Share events were often occasions to use food and cooking to promote informal education or skills building goals. The figure also shows many themes around different aspects of good quality food, often described in terms of the source, the preparation or the context in which the food is used.



Buddle plot to show 'good food themes' in Cook and Share written plans. Bubble area equates to frequency (superscript number). Proximity and colour represent semantic similarity (n=153).

Many survey respondents felt that the grant had helped their group promote the use of healthy food (77%), in-season food (52%), locally produced food (50%), with minorities for sustainably produced food (27%), and food with the highest animal welfare standards (16%)⁵. A number of the case studies illustrate how organisers felt strongly the quality, standard and ethos behind the food they served. This was particularly the case for projects with clear values and a long track record of experience.

It is important to note that there were many contrasts and differences of emphasis in the ways that community groups made use of food. While some groups prioritised affordable, comforting and familiar meals others directed their efforts towards innovative menus, for example those that used foraged, surplus,

and nutritionally or culturally novel (to some participants) ingredients and styles of preparation or dining. Some of these contrasts may reflect the differences between 'traditional groups' (such as senior citizen lunch clubs) and 'newcomer groups' (such as pay-as-you-feel cafes) in today's ecosystem of community food projects.

Food, cooking and activities associated with the events were reported to produce a number of social benefits. The majority respondents felt that their Cook and Share events helped improve the quality of life of participants (92%⁶), enhance positive attitudes towards ageing (64%) and diversity (68%), and address loneliness and isolation (83%). Almost all felt that the event helped participants connect with one another (99%), indicating a positive effect for social cohesion.

THE QUALITY OF THE FOOD MATTERS

I buy from our local butcher because his meat is quite obviously superb and I know where it comes from...We have fish once a month and I often buy the fish from a place on Loch Fyne because they do beautiful smoked haddock and smoked salmon. I haven't come across fish like it for the flavour.

Balfron Lunch Club, Stirling

We don't take any food from supermarkets, we take it all from box scheme farms, community supported agriculture, and local farms and orchards. It's all really good quality food that supports biodiversity and the environment.

I think if you're providing food for people that are on low incomes or have health conditions, it's even more important to have a strong quality standard...People having a hard time deserve good quality food.

Food in Community, Devon

MEALS HELP PEOPLE COMMUNICATE

A lot of what we do is very hands on and busy. I think what having the meal was good for was just people relaxing, and actually coming together and talking about what they've been doing.... There wasn't one person around that fire who didn't talk to everybody.

Helping Hooves Derbyshire CIC

LETTING PEOPLE BE THEMSELVES

We have some really interesting people and I think it's nice for them to be able to 'be them' and not just be some 'Old dear' or 'Granny'. We like to celebrate people's lives: whether they're 4 or 93 years old.

Live Active Unst

THE BENEFITS OF COOKING, SHARING AND CONVERSATION FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

The meal was an opportunity for conversation and talking about the food. Just the physicality of holding a scone that's warm led to talking about their baking experience and stimulated more conversation.

CrossReach care home, Edinburgh

Good Food in Context

Understanding 'Good Food' and the 'Good Food Movement'

In the context of UK food activism, the term 'good food' came into being in the early noughties. Good food came to stand as a shorthand for food that supports sustainable development, human health, social justice, and local economies. The idea has grown to encompass additional goals such as those concerned with enhancing culinary traditions and promoting biodiversity. The UK network of **Sustainable Food Places** seek to foster a 'Good Food Movement' that reflects grass roots activists from many different backgrounds who come together to transform the food system. The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill – due to become an act in 2022 – sets the way for the first appearance of the term good food to appear in UK statute.

Cook and Share community events highlight the **social meanings of good food**, notably for those directed towards building social cohesion, citizen participation, personal and collective learning.

FIND OUT MORE

- Scottish Government (2021) *Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill*. Available at: <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/legislation/bills/s6-bills/good-food-nation-scotland-bill/introduced/bill-as-introduced.pdf>
- Sustain (2013) *The Sustain Guide to Good Food: How to help make our food and farming system fit for the future*. Available at: https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/the_sustain_guide_to_good_food/
- Jones, M., Hills, S. and Beardmore, A. (2022). *The Value of Local Food Partnerships: Covid and beyond*. UWE Bristol <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/9228014/the-value-of-local-food-partnerships-covid-and-beyond>

Good Food through Cook and Share

Full case studies can be found in the main report

Don't try to do everything yourself Balfron Lunch Club, near Glasgow	Maintaining good links with local high quality food supplier and having an organised team of volunteers.
Holding a warm scone Cross care home, Edinburgh	The value of simple pleasures of making and baking at a care home for residents with dementia.
People having a hard time deserve good quality food Food in Community, Totnes, Devon	A strong and holistic vision for the social and environmental quality of the food used.
Miss, I really loved that Kirkby Church of England Primary School, Liverpool	The self-esteem and mental wellbeing benefits for children through fully involving them in the planning and delivery of an outdoor meal.
Creative ways for healthy and sustainable food The Nigerian Catholic Community, Enfield	Welcoming the challenge of supply gluts and surplus fresh food to make culturally appropriate meals.
Take every opportunity to empower Penrose Root Community, Bedfordshire	Giving members the opportunity to make decisions about what they want to cook and the format of the event.
Communication is key SVP Chorley Buddies Conference, Lancashire	Understanding the tastes of everyone involved, finding out what they make of the meals, taking the care and attention to make good quality popular dishes.
Getting the neighbours together Tidemill Residents Group, Depford	A simple menu with few options helps keep the focus on bringing people together.

⁵ Survey respondents: "Yes/No" N=88

⁶ Survey respondents: "Strongly agree/somewhat agree". N=74–76

ADVICE FROM EVENT ORGANISERS ON
HOW TO USE SMALL GRANTS FOR

COMMUNITY FOOD EVENTS

Cook and Share event organisers had many ideas about how to run community food events and bring together people from diverse backgrounds. Some of their key advice for small organisations included:

Setting up get together events

1. Understand needs and whether there is a demand in the target communities
2. Put time aside to communicate and build relationships with potential participants and partner organisations before the event
3. Be prepared to invest a lot of time at the outset to promote events
4. Plan for transport, assistance, and any access issues for the venue
5. Be organised and, with permission, use contact details and registers to keep in touch
6. Have an umbrella organisation to provide support for insurance, training, and safeguarding

Delivering and maintaining get together events

1. Allow plenty of time around, during and after the event
2. Always try to involve more people to help than the minimum necessary
3. Try to delegate and distribute the roles between different helpers
4. Give it a go and try not to worry if everything does not go to plan
5. Ask for participants to give honest feedback
6. Try not to settle for the same people coming to events – keep reaching out for new people

DON'T DO IT ALONE

First of all, you need enthusiasm, and you need a heart for what you're doing. Then the thing is to get a team... I would say to anybody taking it on "don't do it alone". Make sure you have other people who are doing it with you. But in lots of ways you do need somebody at the top with the expertise to delegate to the right people and encourage them. If you have three or four people all helping to run [things at the same time], the communication can fail.

Balfron Lunch Club, near Glasgow

ACT GENTLY

We recognise that for people who are lonely, it's hard for them to turn up to something. When you're somewhere you don't know I suppose you can get defensive. The more alone you get, the harder it is to go out and meet people. So we encourage people to come but not make them feel under any pressure.

Bardney Christian Community Trust, Lincolnshire

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Keep it simple. Really the costs of doing [a social event] is next to nothing. We've had some board games, we hired the hall, we bought some tea, coffee, milk and sugar. You know, that's negligible. A lot of intergenerational things are based around a project and ours was very much just come along, drop in. Don't scare people away with a structured project.

Live Active Unst, Shetland



The focus of our research has been on the Food for Life Get Togethers' Cook and Share small grants. It has provided a window into a rich field of community and voluntary action across the UK.

The Cook and Share small grant scheme has been popular with a wide variety of community groups seeking to run many types of activities.

The aspirations and solutions for Cook and Share event organisers help validate previous research and learning for the Food for Life Get Togethers programme⁷. Small grants for community food activities provide opportunities for funders and organisers to think creatively and try new ideas. Despite the small scale of the funding, award holders demonstrated a wide range of achievements both around how to use food in social activities and how to create wider benefits for the communities they serve. Some areas for further research include understanding the longer-term effects of small grants, how they sit alongside other opportunities and provide a platform for networking between good food event organisers.

⁷ See <https://www.fflgettogethers.org/about/our-impact-and-research/understanding-participation-in-community-food-activities/> <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/9238856> | <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/9238864> <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/9238872>

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For the Full Report see:

https://www.flgettogethers.org/media/ytdbrz2a/uwe_longrep.pdf

