Your Place at the Table

Understanding the Impacts of Community Dining

These figures show that for many people across the UK, the presence of a market of food goods and services is not enough to guarantee the security of their food; access and affordability are significant factors that also shape the capacity to eat well. The role of not-for-profit food providers has never been more important in ensuring people can access affordable meals.

In conversations about food insecurity, the value of socialising around food is notably absent. Given mealtimes are such an important structure to the day and form a vital part of our social repertoire of behaviour, more thought should be given to how food insecurity intertwines with experiences of loneliness and exclusion. This report shows why eating together is important in sustaining not just the physical body, but in creating the sense of belonging that underpins a healthy society. The report highlights why everyone should be invited to take 'a place at the table', regardless of income or status.

In this report an award-winning 'community dining' model is showcased as an example of how social food impacts can be delivered into communities. One exemplar organisation which showcases this model is FoodCycle, a national charity that connects communities, supports mental health and wellbeing, and reduces loneliness. It aims to nourish the hungry, promote sustainability and inspire social change by bringing people together to share food and conversation. Week in, week out, thousands of volunteers across the country transform surplus food into delicious vegetarian meals for anyone that needs them, no questions asked.

> **At the time of writing this report, there are 64 FoodCycle Projects across England and Wales, serving over 1,400 guests and 650 volunteers every week.**

To better understand the power and impact of the FoodCycle 'community dining' model, research was commissioned from 'social eating' and community food systems expert, Dr Marsha Smith (Coventry University) alongside a survey conducted by 'Vital Research' of 2,000 people. Both the survey and the research were funded and co-commissioned by FoodCycle's corporate partner and market leading vegetarian and vegan food company, Quorn Foods. The report also draws on data collected from annual surveys that were completed by 910 FoodCycle guests and 608 FoodCycle volunteers.

Terms used in this report

'food poverty' - people's inability to afford to feed themselves and their families.

'food insecurity' - encompasses not only hunger but people's anxieties about being able to afford food now, and in the future. This definition needs further extending to cover people's ability to engage in the hugely significant activity of eating with others.

'commensality' - used in discussions about groups eating and refers particularly to the social significance of eating with others.

'anchor organisations' - local spaces where people can go to access resources and services in ways that are valuable to individuals, families and the community.

'community dining' - describes the offer of a free meal, eaten with others.

FoodCycle specific terms

'Project/s' - describes the FoodCycle community meal location.

'guest' - describes a beneficiary who attends and eats a FoodCycle meal.

Introduction

At a time when communities are reeling from the cost-of-living crisis, sobering figures have emerged about the levels of food insecurity in the UK. At the time of writing, 18% of UK households report experiencing worries about being able to afford food within the last month[1], with a rise in newly vulnerable people seeking help from food charities for the first time.

Report Headlines

- Eating together in groups is about more than food - shared mealtimes are social activities that deliver health and environmental benefits.

- FoodCycle Projects offering opportunities to eat with others should be viewed as anchor organisations at the heart of delivering services to communities, and many more of them are needed.

- Community dining services are needed - both currently and as a future food activity that builds community and social resilience, in ways that are enjoyable and destigmatising.

This report is organised in the following way. Firstly, the scene is set, digging deeper into what it means to eat together (and what it means to be excluded from this activity), the value of community dining spaces and the benefits of dining 'out' on surplus foods. Next, the report examines the benefits of the FoodCycle community dining model. Before the report concludes there are recommendations on how local authorities, funding and public health bodies, food suppliers, corporate partners and individuals can support FoodCycle or other community dining projects.

Survey Headlines

Research commissioned by FoodCycle and conducted by 'Vital Research' reveals a number of startling statistics

- A quarter of the nation are solo diners – 24% of people said they eat alone 7 times every week.
- Eating alone is more common from the ages of 36 upwards.
- It is happening most commonly because of different household schedules.
- Eating alone particularly affects women and older men.
- The survey showed that the majority of people recognise that eating together is a way of spending time with family and friends.
- For women especially, cooking for a group was perceived as being more convenient.
- 1 in 2 of us believe eating together benefits our mental health.
- People also understood that eating in a group was cheaper and less likely to create food waste.
- Regardless of age group or gender, almost a quarter of respondents thought that meals could strengthen community ties.
- The majority of people had not heard of community dining projects in their area, but half would attend if there was one.

Overall, the survey responses indicate that eating together remains a key social activity, despite increasing financial hardships, difficulties in juggling multiple responsibilities, and the challenges people have in getting to know their neighbours. People value the chance to eat together, even if they cannot do it as regularly as they would like.

The FoodCycle community dining model consists of three important elements - people, places and food. At FoodCycle Projects people are invited to come together in a warm, safe space to share and enjoy a nutritious, three-course meal. These community dining projects also offer people the opportunity to volunteer, learn new cooking skills and represent a dignified addition to the current offer of free emergency food parcels. As there are no eligibility criteria the mealtimes are open to anyone, ensuring maximum opportunities for inclusion.

FoodCycle's own evaluations identified that whilst 43% of their guests live alone, 87% stated that FoodCycle meals made them feel part of their community and 86% stated that they felt happier after attending a meal.

"This FoodCycle evening is fantastic. It's warm, friendly and the food is really good. There is always a variety of food and it's always very tasty. It's the best meal of the week."
FoodCycle guest, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire.

Food is a reason for people to gather together and a three-course meal is a reason to linger and mingle. These services offer a limited menu, but emphasis is placed on producing and serving a fresh, homemade meal.

This model is designed to create a space where guests feel welcome, comfortable and receive respite from their challenging everyday lives, bringing the benefits of domestic mealtimes into public places. People are made to feel welcome and cared for, experiences which may be missing in their day to day lives. These 'social eating' services provide both guests and volunteers with the opportunity to make and meet friends, activities which are vital to health and wellbeing,

"It's good to come not just to receive, but to support others."
FoodCycle guest, King's Cross, London.

The FoodCycle model seeks to mobilize more than the nutrient, calorie and commercial aspects of food by also using food in 'its capacity to bring people together to foster shared understanding and collaboration'[3].

"I think FoodCycle is a lifesaver. A safe and relaxing environment and an opportunity to meet others."
FoodCycle guest, King's Cross, London.

Crucially, in the current cost-of-living crisis, centralising efforts to cook, heat and eat together make sense.

FoodCycle's evaluation identified that 82% of their guests were concerned about the cost of heating their home and 88% of them appreciated the warm space that the project offered.

Currently, people are having to decide between heating and eating, so eating meals together cooked at scale supports people in this challenging situation. In providing a national network of community dining spaces, FoodCycle is providing much more than food. It is building anchor points that embed resilience into communities.

'In the face of complex issues, these initiatives … stimulate moments of social dialogue …, with cooking and eating together explicitly employed as strategies to create spaces of encounter, facilitating communal ways of thinking and acting'[4].

The FoodCycle Community Dining Model

'These initiatives have the capacity to embrace social differences and to facilitate the circulation of ideas and practices of care and hospitality. They operate as a bridging mechanism between people, communities, projects and services, providing the connective tissue in ways which are hard to measure'[2].

The Significance of Eating Together

> **"I enjoy not only the food but the socialising with the community."**
> FoodCycle guest, Wandsworth Road, London.

One of world's longest and largest studies of adult development stated that 'good genes are nice, but joy is better'[5]. Its results showed that people live longer and enjoy better health into older age when they have strong social relationships and networks of people they can rely on. Eating together is one of the best activities that people can undertake to make new connections and cement existing friendships. Humans have evolved eating together as a way of creating social bonds[6].

> **"Gives me the chance to meet and be around others in a social setting. As times are hard it takes away all the worries and problems of everyday life."** FoodCycle guest, Breckon Hill, Middlesborough.

In fact, those positive feelings experienced around coming together; of belonging and of being cared for through food are also hardwired into our bodies. Eating together raises endorphin levels, the feel-good chemical. A recent UK study[7] stated that:

'In these increasingly fraught times when community cohesion is becoming ever more important, making time for and joining in communal meals is perhaps the single most important thing we could do – both for our own health and wellbeing and for community cohesion.'

Eating together in a group; commensality, is one of the most widespread examples of human cooperation, collaboration and creativity, regarded as a core activity in all societies, irrespective of time, place and culture. 'The patterning and complexity of food sharing among humans is truly unique'[8]. Eating in groups is characterised as a fundamental biological need that simultaneously strengthens social bonds and produces a shared social identity. Commensality is often seen as the social 'glue' that strengthens family and group bonds. It is also a powerful symbol of everyday life - its structure, rhythms and routines are used to mark some of our most important life transitions such as birthdays, marriages or funerals.

> **"I think FoodCycle is an excellent service which is valuable and supports many people who can live a better life and attend weekly   sit-down meals which enhances their wellbeing and even mental state of mind."**
> FoodCycle guest, Cambridge.

The social aspect of eating together also creates a setting where behaviours, rules and values can be transmitted and reinforced. As one researcher states:

'communal eating, whether in feasts or everyday meals with family or friends, is a human universal… Eating with others provides both social and individual benefits… Those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support'[9].

Eating with others is also a means to transmit the social skills that people rely on, usually unconsciously, to navigate everyday life - helping out, engaging in conversations, showing care and interest in others.

FoodCycle's evaluation revealed that 91% of their guests reported meeting people from backgrounds different to their own during mealtimes, with 84% stating that they had made new friends at these meals.

Commensality is not just good for forming and strengthening social bonds, it also allows people to learn about food, extend the range of foods they are familiar with and able to utilise. It also demonstrates new ways of storing, preparing and cooking foods. Tasting new foods is a popular way of extending our knowledge of other cultures and groups.

FoodCycle's survey identified that 84% of their guests had tried new foods during a community meal and 81% ate more fruit and vegetables. Commensality, then, can be understood as a way of us building up a social vocabulary, skills sets, tastes and social networks. There are two components to this - food socialisation, where the behaviours and values of society get transmitted through commensality, and food literacy which describes the skills sets and forms of practical know-how that are required to eat and eat well. Taken together, these two terms can be described as a form of food 'social capital'. One study described it as

'Group eating, or commensality, food sharing and mealtime inclusion, participation and contribution can be viewed as expressions of … developing and sustaining both physical and social capital'[10].

So, eating together is far more important than might first be realised. People not only need calories, they also need social contact, and others to learn from and share knowledge with around the table. Engaging in commensal activities builds our social repertoire and practical knowledge. Having high levels of social capital is a major factor linked to how long and how well people live[11].

The power of food to build bridges between individuals and support networks, has also been researched. Their findings show how engaging in meal-centred activities can act as a 'lifestyle motivator'[12]. People experience benefits to their health, their self-esteem, social skills and confidence when they are involved with, contribute to, and participate in, commensality. Food in these settings is also meaningful giving people something to look forward to and feel hopeful about.

> **FoodCycle's evaluation showed that 93% of guests looked forward to attending the weekly community meals.**

Instrumental food provision (such as food parcels) may be necessary for people experiencing food insecurity, but these services are often lacking the element of social contact and support that people crave during times of crisis.

Looking at the UK currently, it has been evidenced that there are rising numbers of people who want access to affordable food. They also need access to the social wealth that is created around a dinner table, but are currently being excluded from the market of food goods and services due to lack of income. Whilst it is an incredible feat of modern society to be able to feed millions of people every day in the UK, there is a place for more socially aligned food services which focus on inclusion, participation and the wellbeing of those that use the services. There is something significant that happens when people eat in groups as participants and contributors. Eating together helps to create our social world, one shared meal at a time.

Community dining is not 'just' about eating together. It is now evidenced that commensality is actually an incredibly significant aspect of everyday life. FoodCycle also creates spaces and places for people to go, and to be which are important for a number of reasons.

The Value of Social Spaces and Places

Entering a new space can feel intimidating to newcomers. Exemplar projects such as FoodCycle take care when scoping venues to ensure they are accessible, that they don't impinge upon local services, and that guests eat in a safe, bright and pleasant environment, at a table, with a plate, knife and fork.

"When I first come here, I had not eaten hot cooked food for over one year. Eating from a plate, at a table, I felt almost human again. The volunteers are wonderful - treating people with decency goes a long, long way. Eternally grateful!" FoodCycle guest, Norwich.

A shared meal in a social setting gives us something in common to talk about, providing a dignified and contributory space, where people are encouraged to offer their skills, conversations and company. This creates a friendly and convivial atmosphere.

"The guests are a mixture of people from various backgrounds and cultures, yet I haven't seen an argument between anyone here. Everyone benefits in different ways whether it's getting a meal, surplus, socialising, keeping warm or making new friends."
FoodCycle guest, Birmingham.

Far from being insignificant, ordinary places where people can go and socialise in easy, informal ways are crucial to our sense of health and wellbeing. This research shows that people use public spaces, as opportunities to connect, converse and commune:

'People derive a sense of wellbeing from diverse sources. Some appreciate a chance for reflection in public spaces, others derive satisfaction from belonging, from perceptions of safety and attachment to place… supportive, bonding ties through interaction in public spaces is important, but so too is the opportunity to make loose, and bridging ties, while some gain benefit simply from the impromptu nods and smiles of other users. Yet others seek out places where, at ease with their surroundings, they feel free to be themselves'[13].

There has been a diminishment in public spaces over the last decade or so in the UK. Many libraries, marketplaces, youth clubs and community centres have closed through cuts to funding. The 'capital' of communities is also under threat when there are limited spaces and places where people can congregate and share meals.

"I am finding it difficult to adjust to a normal life after my mental health suffered from being locked down alone, but I am finding that the weekly FoodCycle meal is a definite help with this."
FoodCycle guest, Felling, Newcastle.

During the pandemic, research showed that customers sought out trusted brands and ambassadors, valuing the security that these brands offered in a time of crisis[14]. Community dining projects are 'anchor organisations' embedded into communities and forming a web of support that goes beyond their service-offer. They uphold the fabric of society in important ways.

'Social interaction in spaces can provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people's sense of community, opportunities for sustaining bonding ties or making bridges and can influence tolerance and raise people's spirits[15].

Sitting and eating a nutritious hot meal and having time to digest food in a relaxed, warm and comfortable setting is something everyone cherishes, but even more so for people experiencing hardship. These settings are also ideal for signposting guests to other services potentially helping to prevent and address the reasons why people are experiencing hardships. As researchers note

'for most people … public spaces that brought people together and where friendships and support networks were made and maintained were key to a general sense of well-being. Informants tended to describe public open spaces in terms of their interaction with other people. Both fleeting and more meaningful encounters in public spaces were beneficial, they could provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people's sense of community, and alleviate tensions at home or in a neighbourhood'[16].

The capacity of FoodCycle to create 'moments of commensality' shows that they are responding to people's need to socialise in warm, welcoming, social spaces. Providing a meal rather than a food parcel means that that these spaces offer much more than food. They are vital to maintaining a sense of place, purpose and community - something everybody benefits from.

Dining 'Out' on Surplus Food

'Value does not exist apart from our cultural and economic sphere. It is created through a combination of material resources, work and energy. Discarding safe food items implies ignoring or depreciating any other value that has been built into the object'[17].

FoodCycle's meals are made fresh from supermarket surpluses. Surplus food is simply food that producers and supermarkets cannot sell. For example, if it is raining on a bank holiday weekend, people do not buy all the BBQ items in store, or there might simply be a glut of seasonal food such as sprouts and cabbages in winter. So these items may end up as surplus.

> **"Very impressive an often inventive match that normally would not be my choice yet surprised by the enjoyment of flavour."**
> FoodCycle guest, Bow Road, London.

This food becomes waste if it is wasted - and at a time of food poverty and accelerating climate change, all available food resources should be being utilised, where possible. The community dining model is an example of how everyone can ensure they do their part to make the most of our food.

> **"I couldn't possibly get this quality of food in restaurants."**
> FoodCycle guest, Peckham, London.

All meals are made from scratch (and only knowing on the day what you have to cook with). This challenge means that volunteers work together creatively to devise a nutritious meal in a short space of time – adding further social value to the meals. Meat-free meals mean they are suitable for all diners, regardless of culture or religion. This approach is more inclusive, food-safe and environmentally-sustainable. Guests are also able to take away surplus meals and ingredients that are left over.

These opportunities build and extend food social capital. Food going into landfill is a significant environmental problem releasing methane, a potent greenhouse gas that is contributing to climate change. The 'food waste hierarchy'[18] which shows how excess food should be used, places eating it as the top recommendation.

> **Saving edible food from entering landfill could produce the equivalent of over 15 billion meals in one year (enough to feed the entire UK population 3 meals a day for 11 weeks)[19].**

Many people struggle to afford to go 'out' to eat, yet it is known that this activity, 'oils the wheels of familial and friendship interaction'[20]. Not everyone wants to cook, and it is likely humans evolved to split roles amongst community members. Currently individuals are often expected to do everything - budget, shop, store, plan, prepare, cook and serve meals alongside an array of other tasks individuals have to know about and complete. This can be exhausting and stressful, and as noted in the discussion on food insecurity can mean missing out on a vital part of social life.

> **"I enjoy my Monday nights out and look forward to a warm meal each week which is healthy."**
> FoodCycle guest, Hartlepool.

> **"I really do look forward to coming along weekly to FoodCycle as it gives me a little respite from my caring role."**
> FoodCycle guest, Salford.

Humans evolved to eat in groups, and we shouldn't feel guilty about letting someone else make us dinner! People may be increasingly reaching for ready meals - but a community-based alternative is both convenient as well as healthy and sociable.

> **"I am very short of time for food shopping and cooking and value this service as it gives us a healthy home cooked meal mid-week."**
> FoodCycle guest, Bath.

To summarise, aside from the social, environmental and physical benefits of being able to access a nutritious and affordable meal, 'engaging with the food surplus is understood as far more normal when consumers see other people like them doing it, and when it is positioned within a community'[21].

Food Insecurity and Social Isolation in the UK

> **"Gives me the chance to meet and be around others in a social setting. As times are hard it takes away all the worries and problems of everyday life."** FoodCycle guest, Middlesborough.

Currently in the UK, the barriers to people eating together include lack of income or time. Eating together is not just something linked to food insecurity, but the FoodCycle commissioned research shows that most people don't know what community dining is, or where to go to take part in a social mealtime:

> - **A staggering 96% of the population have not heard of community dining projects.**
> - **Yet, near to 1 in 2 would attend if a project was available in their area.**

Community dining is a practical response to some of the UK's current challenges - rising levels of social isolation, food poverty, and a cost-of-living crisis. 'The local systems in place to support food insecure households vary hugely across the UK but local food partnerships involving local authorities and civil society groups are now active in 80 cities and towns across the UK'[22].

> **"I think FoodCycle is a very good service as it gets you out of the house and the food is a big help if you are struggling with money and paying the bills"** FoodCycle guest, Hartlepool.

Food is one of the most flexible areas of household spending. It is often the first place where people will seek to make savings when finances are reduced. According to the Food Foundation's latest research[23], in the UK:

- Some of the lowest priced food items such as own-brand beans and pasta have increased by more than 40% since September 2021. (Office National Statistics - ONS)
- Food Insecure households are cutting back more on purchasing on healthy foods (fruit and vegetables) than food secure households
- Over two thirds of UK households (68.1%) are worried about increasing energy prices meaning they have less money to buy enough food for their household's needs.

This gloomy picture is accompanied by a rise in loneliness and social anxiety[24]. The era of austerity policies, where public services have had their funding radically reduced, has been identified as one of the factors increasing social isolation, especially of vulnerable populations[25].

> **"FoodCycle is an opportunity for me to meet other people and makes me feel less isolated"** FoodCycle guest, Liverpool.
>
> **"Gives me the chance to meet and be around others in a social setting. As times are hard it takes away all the worries and problems of everyday life."** FoodCycle guest, Middlesborough.

Research shows that social isolation and loneliness are viewed as contributing to poorer general health and being closely linked with food insecurity[26]. Loneliness 'can be understood as an individual's personal, subjective sense of lacking desired affection, closeness, and social interaction with others,'[27] with social isolation defined as 'a lack of contact with family or friends, community involvement, or access to services'[28].

> **I appreciate the meals. I live alone and cook almost every meal I eat. To have a meal cooked and washed up after is a treat. Thank You."** FoodCycle guest, Wythenshawe.

According to the ONS, 'social participation decreases with age, along with the increasing likelihood of ill health, living alone and bereavement'[29]. Tragically, about 5 million elderly people in the UK say that the television is their main form of company, while 9% report that they feel cut off from society[30]. Social isolation is not only recognized as a significant issue among the elderly but also as an emerging crisis among young people and new parents[31]. Almost half of all adults in the UK report feeling lonely, either occasionally or often[22] and one-third of adults eat their meals alone[23].

Recent research shows that the capacity for people to reciprocate around meals might also be added to the definition of food insecurity[34]. Being 'food secure' extends to people's 'ability to participate in customary activities associated with food'[35]. Researchers use a term called 'alimentary participation'[36] to describe people's ability to afford to have family or friends over for a drink or for food. Alimentary participation refers to the social function of food and recognizes the ability to afford to eat 'out,' or together with others. Low-income households are significantly excluded from these experiences adding further to their social exclusion as well as food insecurity.

Studies reveal that to get a 'true sense of the prevalence of food poverty … those who experience social exclusion vis-à-vis food also need to be included in official estimates. Low-income households could not afford to socialize regularly with food … either through eating out or entertaining friends at home with food'[37]. Studies also confirm that 'special occasions such as birthdays become a particularly difficult endeavour under tight financial restrictions'[38].

> **"It is a handy place to come because it helps me get out of the house and to socialise."** FoodCycle guest, Clacton.

Even if the social aspects of eating are not necessary for nutritional wellbeing, 'the possibility to eat with others, offering hospitality, and being able to share

'We believe that everyone should have access to nourishing, tasty, and sustainable meals in the company of their wider communities, by sharing great food and good conversation. That is why Quorn Foods is proud and humbled to be working together for a future where food poverty does not exist, and to create new places where we can all come together to share the joy of a meal and human connection more often.'
– Marco Bertacca, CEO Quorn Foods.

Against the backdrop of a perceived breakdown or diminishment of shared mealtimes, FoodCycle is championing their community dining model as a way of getting people back around the table again. Whether people are able to engage in group eating activities or not, their research shows that up and down the UK, people still see eating together as something that they should do more of.

"FoodCycle is a lovely place to come. I wish it was on more often"
FoodCycle guest, Birmingham.

Through the community dining model, the age-old tradition of commensality is being reinvigorated as more and more people see the practical advantages of cooking and eating in larger groups. It is a fantastic way of making connections to people so that their voices, opinions, and needs shape their community. In short, the network of FoodCycle Projects needs to be expanded to bring community dining to greater numbers across the UK. However:

- almost 2/3rds of the survey respondents agreed that not enough is being done by local councils to promote community dining projects.

Progress is being made though, with local authorities such as **Nottingham City** and **Nottinghamshire County Council** integrating community dining models and activities into their strategic plans and research from **Coventry University** and the **University of Nottingham** have identified the following impacts that this approach can have.

food outside the home, appear to be regarded as an essential and significant part of people's lives at every age'[39]. Studies show that social networks are a crucial facet of overall health[40] and resilience[41], but instead of being shared enjoyment, mealtimes become an 'additional burden for those suffering from nutritional poverty in that they have little to offer in return, and thus cannot meet social obligations, from which they eventually withdraw'[42]. FoodCycle's evaluation revealed that 73% of their guests could not afford the cost of social activities.

People and organisations have been coming together to counter and address some of these deep-seated and widespread problems. During the pandemic, record numbers of people were setting up neighbourhood mutual aid groups and volunteered for local charities[43]. Charities such as the **Nottingham Social Eating Network**, **FoodWorks** in Sheffield and the **Falmouth Food Coop** worked with local partners and authorities

to get meals to people at their doorsteps, demonstrating that people want to help, and get involved in local initiatives that provides connection to their neighbours.

The food industry is also supporting the efforts of food charities and local initiatives by providing funding, expert advice and food resources. This is helping to ensure that these initiatives can successfully deliver impacts and remain sustainable. By partnering with community dining projects, food businesses also benefit from being able to create, measure and communicate their contributions to food social capital, sustainable food systems, and local food security. They may also better engage their workforce in these issues through volunteering and fundraising initiatives, and raise their profile within local authorities, community settings and with prospective employees.

Impacts of Expanding the Community Dining Network

Increasing access to affordable, nutritious meals

- This service enables people to access affordable pre-cooked meals at a time when food, energy and heating costs are high. This will positively impact upon food insecure groups and those currently struggling with high living costs.

- Increasing access to affordable and nutritious meals in a social setting can beneficially impact food socialisation and food literacy among eaters and increase food-wellbeing.

- FoodCycle's model is 'normalising' and destigmatising the consumption of surplus-made meals and this is necessary for all available food resources to be consumed by a variety of eaters for a range of reasons.

- Macro and micronutrient insecurity experienced by people in food poverty is an emergent area of concern for public health[44]. The FoodCycle model offers a complete, freshly cooked meal that has been made from nutritious ingredients, impacting positively on physical health.

- Food insecurity measures should be broadened to include the capacity to engage in social and community dining. For example, these indicators could be included in the 2024 update of the UK Food Security Report[45].


Building resilience and capacity in community groups

- Investing in infrastructure such as kitchens, processing, logistics and distribution resources is key if the impacts of community dining are to be realised. Building capacity in local projects to receive, process and serve at-scale meal services can create efficient, centralised systems which can be sustained due to their economies-of-scale approach.

Environmental impacts

- Utilising all available food resources is crucial. Processing ever higher volumes of surplus food into meals prevents edible food from entering landfill.

- At-scale, community dining network can impact upon regional and national food carbon neutrality and food waste disposal targets.

- Community dining is a cost-effective tactic to support delivery of the UK Net Zero 2030 strategy.

- The community dining model supports the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The model delivers against six of the UN Sustainable Development Goals: No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-being, Reduced Inequalities, Responsible Consumption and Production and Climate Action.
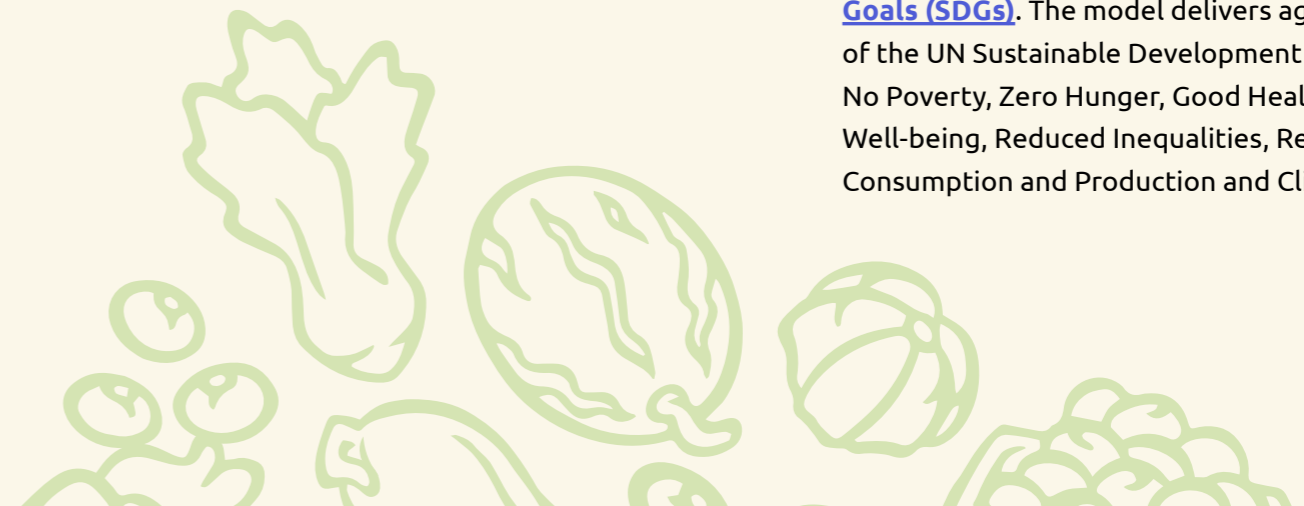
How You Can Support Community Dining Projects

Local Authorities

- Promote community dining
- Utilise FoodCycle staff, volunteers and guests as local representatives on food security, public health and community cohesion boards and meetings.
- Use FoodCycle research to shape policies and interventions on food insecurity, community cohesion and environmental sustainability.
- Invest in infrastructure such as commercial, large-scale kitchen facilities with suitable equipment.
- Identify new venues.
- Encourage LA representatives to attend meals and volunteer at projects such as FoodCycle.

Public Health

- Connect FoodCycle with Social Prescribing programmes.
- Use FoodCycle research to inform development of programmes and interventions.
- Work with FoodCycle to identify procurement and tendering opportunities.

Funders

- Create specific funding for supporting community dining projects.
- Create funding for community food network development.
- Create funding for infrastructural investment into kitchen or food logistics, for example.
- Identify corporate partners who could work with community groups to upgrade and expand kitchen facilities and make funds available to support this work.

Food producers, suppliers and other corporate supporters or businesses

- Seek opportunities across value chains to divert surplus food into the redistribution networks which support community dining projects such as FoodCycle.
- Support projects directly where possible with food donations, discounted product vouchers, funding, and corporate volunteering.
- Agree partnership terms which provide unrestricted funding to community dining projects (i.e., the charities decide how to spend and direct resources).
- Review the business' strategies, policies and processes for opportunities to educate on, embed, and provide support for community dining initiatives.
- Work with the charity to understand the charities' needs and how your business can help on a case-by-case basis.
- Use your influence and communications to raise awareness of community dining in wider society.

Individuals

- Join your local community dining project as a guest and/or volunteer (a list of the FoodCycle projects and information about volunteering can be found **here**).
- Add a community dining offer to your project (find out more about starting a community dining project in your area **here**).

Report Conclusion

In this report the headline survey results from the FoodCycle-commissioned survey have been presented and linked to evidence which confirms the benefits of their community dining model. The specific features of this model - people, places and food - have been examined for their benefits, not just for individuals, but to society more broadly. The significance of eating together during the current, cost-of-living crisis in the UK, and beyond, has also been considered. With 2,000 respondents, FoodCycle has captured the snapshot of the UK's food-scape that shows that many people recognise the benefits of eating together, whether they are able to engage in it or not. Moreover, this research suggests that people are willing to engage in community dining activities but lack the information or opportunity. If this model is to fulfil its potential for impact across the intersecting challenges of food insecurity, social isolation, food waste reduction and environmental sustainability, further research is needed to better understand the barriers and challenges to accessing community mealtimes and to evidence the benefits of engagement.

The creation of commensality via FoodCycle's model of community dining is hugely powerful and its value cannot be appreciated solely through monetary measures; social cohesion, dignity and conviviality are currencies beyond the reach of the market. FoodCycle is, in its own way, creating 'palaces for the people'[46] and acting as ambassadors for a way of eating together that centres people's needs and value, rather than their financial worth. These mealtimes are 'not about the making the world a better place as much as making a place for better worlds'[47].

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