

Social Connectivity and diet:

A quantitative study of how social connections, including community group connections, correlate to self-reported diets and wellbeing in Whitley (Reading)

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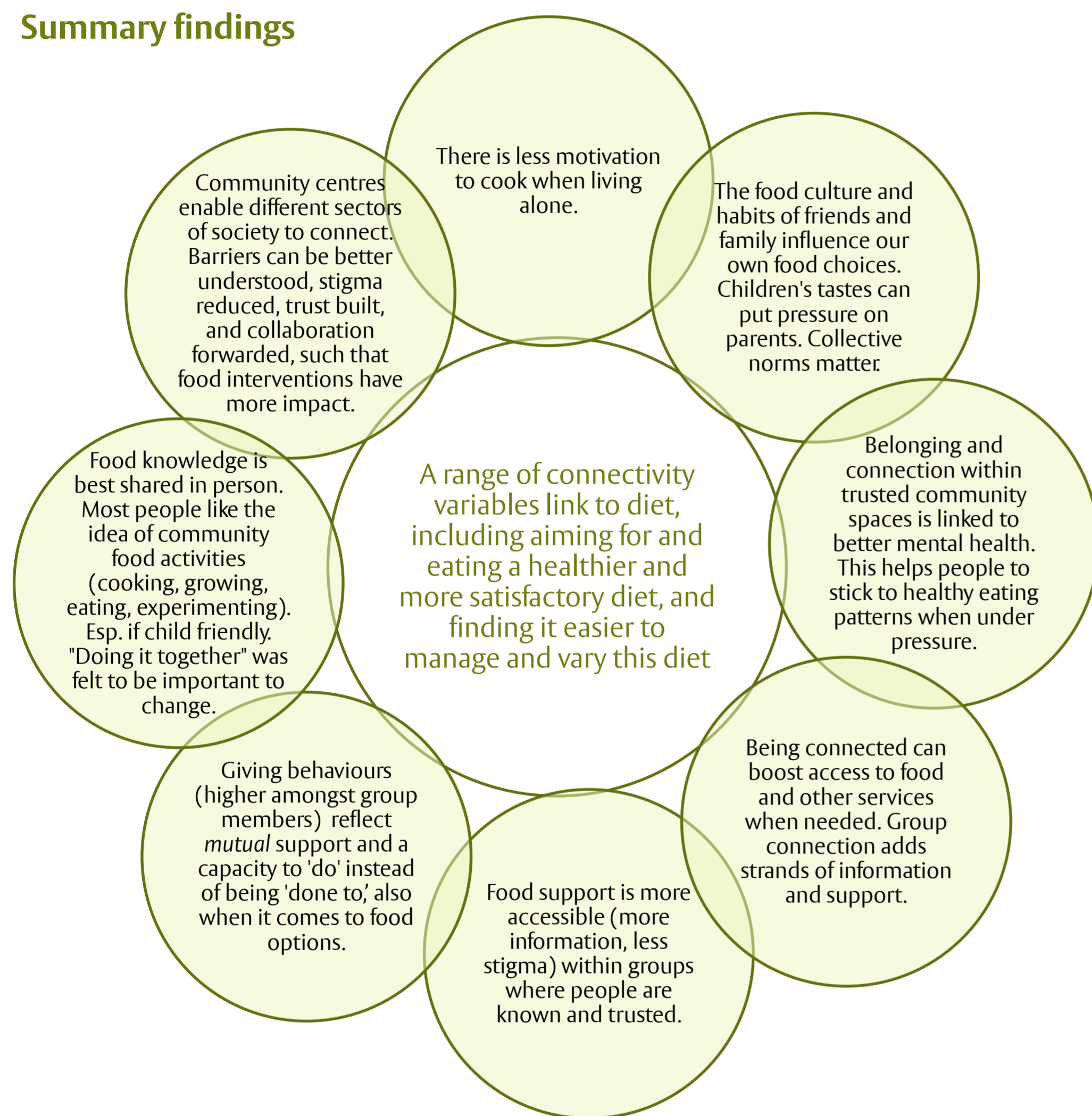
Why consider social intervention?

- Diet is a leading cause of preventable illnesses, and low-income households are disproportionately affected [1].
- Barriers to healthy eating prevent major change when left to the individual, even though knowledge and interest in healthy foods are not lacking. This points to a need for change in the food environment.
- Food Systems Equality (FoodSEqual) research into this matter was co-developed with community researchers and engaged over 500 participants in Whitley, Reading (2021-2025). One policy priority identified by community participants was the need for trusted community spaces offering social connections.
- This accords with the findings in literature [2] which highlight the importance of community groups as nodes that hold food, communities and places together in caring relationships of solidarity, mutual aid and connection.
- Workshops and questionnaires in Whitley suggested that community group connections make it easier for their members to access healthy foods, and that healthy relationships foster resilience. We began to map these linkages, as illustrated in the summary findings.
- But is this enough evidence to support investment into place-based initiatives that strengthen community assets and social infrastructure?

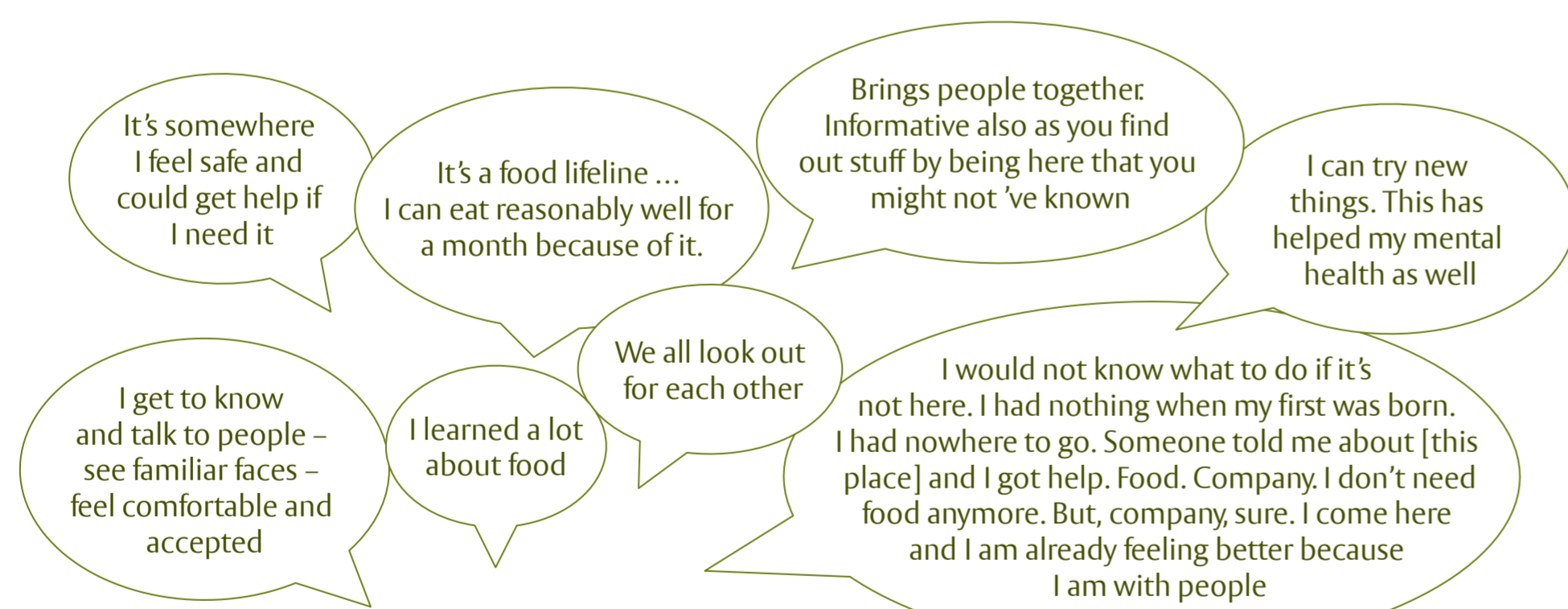
Testing the link between diet and social connections

We went on to test the falsifiable hypothesis that there is a link between social connectivity and diet. We surveyed and interviewed 137 people in Whitley, half via community hubs, and half outside, and capturing the views of many who found finances a big consideration. The data revealed ways in which a variety of connectivity markers, including community group involvement, correlated to self-reported diets and wellbeing. Linear regressions, statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval, were used to trace linkages in the data.

Summary findings



A selection of quotes from community group members on connecting over food



In Conclusion

Delivering place-based initiatives in collaboration with community partners and designing them to support positive social connection is likely to help advance food system transformation.

But note: Third sector engagement does not negate the role of the state:

- Delivery of affordable food services by the third sector can be uneven, which leads to an accentuation of inequalities. Some areas benefit from external input more than others.
- As the 'finances and connection' graph suggests, connectivity is important, but it does not substitute for the need to address wealth inequalities.
- Local authorities do well to identify, build on and invest in existing community assets (buildings and people). Diversity is helpful, as everyone needs a place where they can identify with others.
- It is also important to invest in healthy and cooperative links *between* the social groups. Conflicts of interest are inevitable, so training, communication, and network building is needed to support a cohesive community sector.
- Community groups are not for everyone, and other meeting points such as shops, parks, eating places etc. also require investment. Workplaces provide another structured, reciprocating environment, although relational connection appeared to be stronger in community groups.

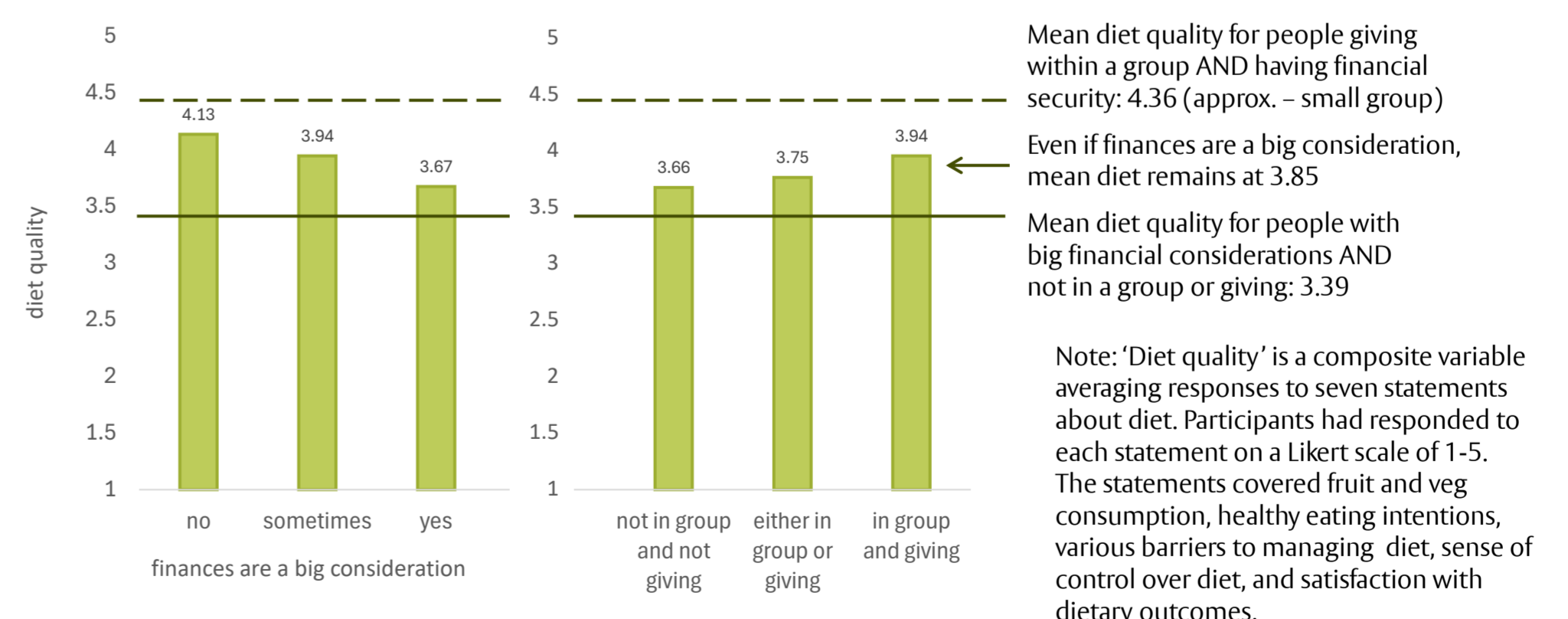
Survey evidence of the links between connectivity and diet

- **Wanting change:** Those living alone were found to eat the poorest quality diets of all household compositions (less motivation to cook). Respondents who knew of others making an effort to eat a healthy diet were significantly more likely to say they were making an effort themselves (collective norms matter).
- **Facing change:** A sense of belonging and connection was linked to answering questions on mental health more favourably. A good state of mental health underpins resilience [3]. Without it, our wider research in Whitley suggests it is harder to stick to healthy patterns or make dietary changes in the face of difficulty [4].
- **Equipping for and organising change:** Respondents talked of groups offering points of contact and activities of mutual interest. More directly related to food, they facilitated cooking, food growing, learning opportunities, affordable food access, aid in accessing benefits, crisis support, and healthy lifestyle support. Community groups were seen to provide *structure* through which people can connect with one another and make these things happen:
 - Community groups were named, (even by about half of those *not* interviewed at community centres) as a top point of connection. Food, friendliness, having a place to go, mutual interests, and being there for one another to were top-rated draws. Engaging with food support in community centres was found to bring otherwise isolated people into meaningful contact with others, some of whom went on to get more involved and engaged with the collective. People who attended community groups were found to be more likely to eat and drink with friends than those outside of groups (indicative of having formed connections with a certain degree of intimacy).
 - Those who were part of a community group expressed higher levels of wellbeing (resilience) than those who were not. Wellbeing was partly associated with the positive feelings of belonging, connection, trust, and engagement in common interests that arise from being part of a group. It was also influenced by the information and resources that groups channel. (Note re support services: Although needing food support was *negatively* associated with wellbeing, just amongst those skipping meals for financial reasons or lack of access, wellbeing was found to be higher amongst those enabled by their group connections to access help).
 - Community group attendees felt significantly better informed than those outside of groups. They were also more likely to feel they could access local help if needed, and more likely to feel they could access this help without judgement (thus reducing the stigma barrier to access).
 - Those attending community groups were more likely than non-attendees to give time and/or money for the benefit of the collective. The actions and engagement of 'giving' citizens enable trusted services to be delivered via the third sector. Giving behaviours also reflect 'doing' instead of being 'done to', and was linked to having a higher sense of control over diet.
 - Community groups potentially provide channels through which people can speak and act on their own behalf. In the context of FoodSEqual, the social networks that community groups had built enabled outside partners to connect and co-create research with local residents. Such cooperation between different groups is necessary to bring about changes to the wider food environment.

Community group connections, even of light touch, were found to play a role over and above that of social connection more generally. They provide structures through which people can physically connect, and link them to outside resources and information. They also draw people into trusting, cooperative, reciprocating (give-take) relationships that add to wellbeing and empowerment. Overall, people who attended community groups were *eating better and feeling better* than those who were not.

Finances and connection

Finances play a key role in accessing a healthy diet. Social connections play a separate role (significant even controlling for finances). But addressed together, their interaction with diet appears to be multiplied.



References

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