



## Eating Together: exploring the role of lunch clubs and shared meals in Brighton & Hove

### SUMMARY REPORT

This report is an attempt to better understand the role that shared meals play in the social and nutritional fabric of Brighton & Hove, and to look at the gaps and opportunities. We suspected projects such as lunch clubs were doing something amazing but often quite hidden in our city. Even we were astounded by the sheer scale and variety of activity.

Our survey showed that **1,265 shared meals take place every day, or almost half a million a year (462,334)**. This was based on the 68 projects that responded to our survey and which serve a shared meal (out of 86 total responses). We estimate that in total there are around 85 'shared meal' settings in the city.

There is currently relatively little research into lunch clubs and other shared meals both nationally and locally. They seem to have a low profile which could affect their ability to thrive or to argue the case if they are competing for funding. This report started out as part of the Food Partnership's work to understand **food poverty** and food access in the city. It was part of a conscious effort to move the food poverty agenda away from the current focus on food banks – which are meant for short-term, emergency use – to understanding more about 'long term' or 'chronic' food poverty and whether community projects such as lunch clubs play a role in reducing this.

However the final report looks much wider, as this research uncovered the role of shared meals in **bringing people together**: reducing isolation; contributing to good nutrition and health; offering formal or informal advice; and as a gateway to other services. The report seeks to celebrate the amazing variety and vibrancy of meals being shared in the city; but it also highlights gaps in provision; support needs that groups themselves identify, and the opportunities which may exist for future work.

### Types of project:

Initially this research started by looking at the role of lunch clubs in the city. The basic model for a 'lunch club' is **"the opportunity to have a meal, often an affordably priced meal, outside of the home and the opportunity to meet with others in a social setting."** It quickly became clear that we should include breakfast and supper clubs, which are less common but do exist – especially in sheltered housing. We then realised that shared meals play a role in a number of other community settings, so research was broadened to include activities such as gardening projects, day centres or residential settings which are open to non-residents. We have not included private or small informal settings.





- Many projects are aimed at a community of interest, from older people to people living with HIV. Some run at specific times in order to target an audience eg offering lunch to children/families during school holidays.
- Many projects are run by faith organisations; and even those which are secular are often based in church halls.
- Other projects serve meals as part of a wider offer – eg community garden projects or homelessness services.
- A new model focusing on using surplus food and open to the whole community (often on a pay-as-you-feel basis) is typified by the Real Junk Food Project.

## Who attends?

Shared meals are happening in a variety of contexts, supporting a much wider range of people, and a wider range of age groups, than we expected to find:

- 48% of settings serve mainly older people. Looking only at lunch clubs 59% are aimed at older people.
- 43% of settings serve mainly working age people
- 60% of settings say they mainly or often serve people on low or insecure income
- 52% of settings say they mainly or often serve unemployed people

Alongside these groups, many others are served often or occasionally:

- people with mental health issues (61% of settings )
- people with physical health issues (60% of settings)
- people with learning disabilities (47% of settings)
- younger people (46% of settings) or children and families (34% of settings)

## What food is served?

We were interested in understanding more about how the different projects sourced their food, and how they chose what to cook:

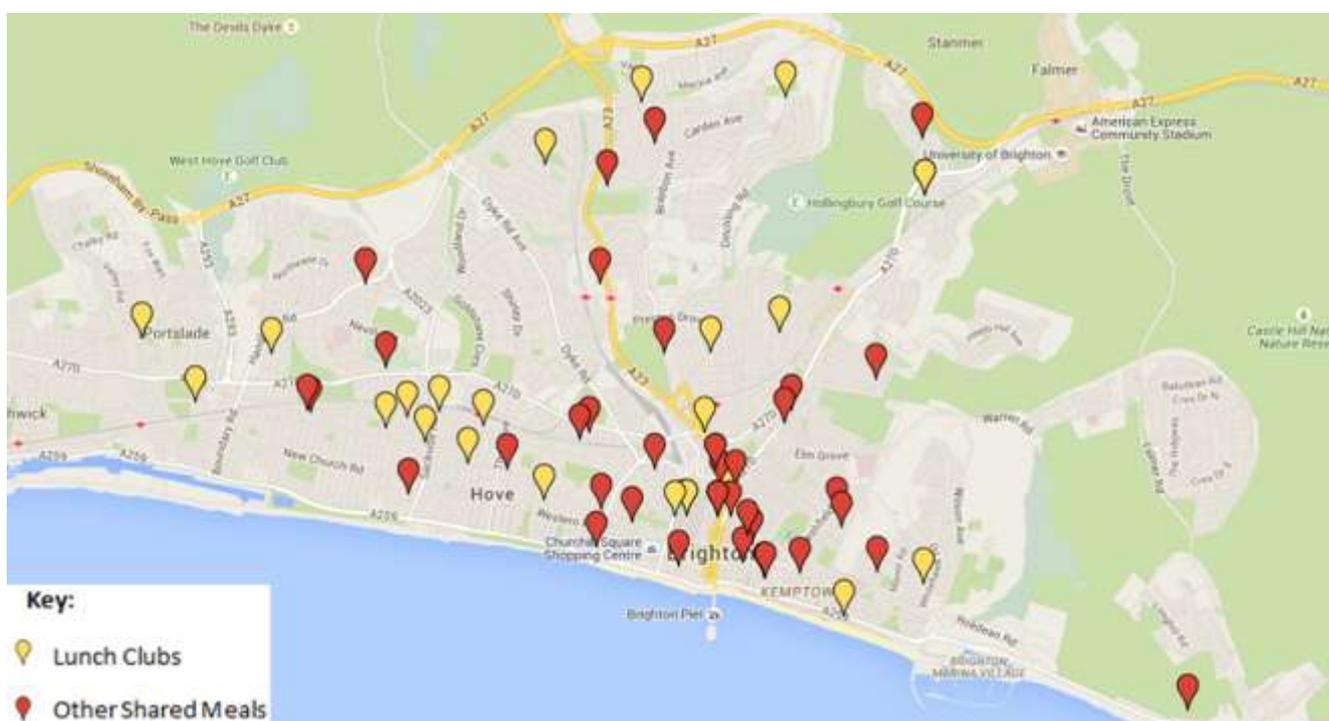
- 96% of projects emphasise **nutritional balance** as very or quite important in the foods they serve.
- Over 90% of projects offer meals for one or more special dietary requirements (vegetarian, gluten-free, halal, diabetes etc.)
- 50% of projects serving meals use **surplus food** from FareShare or the Food Waste Collective. 17% grew some of their own food, 41% source from a wholesaler and a large majority of 78% bought at least some of their food from shops and supermarkets.
- The type of food served was often 'traditional English' (e.g. meat and two veg), but some settings offer more varied options, particularly if reliant on donated surplus food. We did hear that the desire of clients for comfortable, familiar food could be a barrier to more creative options/ using surplus, but some settings are offering tastings or menus/ choices of food which enable them to experiment more.





## When and where are meals offered?

- Tuesdays and Thursdays offer the largest number of shared meals (particularly lunches), whereas Saturday and Sunday fewer meals are offered (28 different projects on a Thursday, compared to 11 on a Saturday).
- The majority of weekend provision takes place in residential settings such as sheltered housing and care homes. There is a **significant gap in provision at weekends** by community/ neighbourhood groups, gardening projects, church groups and lunch clubs. All have at least 50% more weekday meals than weekend.
- The majority of shared meals are in the West and centre of Brighton & Hove. **There is a significant lack of projects in outlying areas - especially the East of the city**, where there may also be less access to food from local shops. As we found that 76% of people accessing shared meals live nearby, this is likely to be a barrier to access.



## Changes to demand:

- **60% of projects reported either a big or small increase in demand** (25% a big increase, particularly concentrated in community settings, with smaller increases in day centres, care homes and housing.)
- Only 34% reported demand has stayed the same
- 0% report a decrease in demand
- "We've reached capacity, there isn't any space for more people" / "The limiting factor is more on the supply side, with getting enough volunteers".
- Some project coordinators anticipate further increases in the near future, due to issues such as the ageing population or universal credit / benefits changes.





## Benefits of shared meals:

### Tackling isolation

- 100% of projects said companionship/friendship/socialising was very or quite important for service-users attending the project
- 74% of projects reported people come because of a change of scene/opportunity to get out
- 52% of projects say they mainly serve lonely/ isolated people (at least 75% for gardening projects, groups for people with specific mental/physical disabilities, homeless shelters, housing, and day centres)

### Access to food

- 42% of project managers said that their service-users **rely on the projects for food**. Another 23% said 'for some it's vital, some can access food in other ways'.
- Comments from the survey included "the service is 2 days a week, so they can't wholly rely on it but we do know that a lot experience food poverty", and "some people say it is the only healthy meal they eat in the week".
- We also heard from people attending that they would not go to the effort of making as many food options/ as much food if just cooking for themselves. This reflects national research which shows that eating with others may encourage people to eat who are undernourished, alongside benefits of not having to cook for oneself, and being exposed to new foods in a communal setting. So shared meals may encourage people to **eat more nutritionally**.
- As well as the meal, 66% of projects give any leftover food to volunteers or clients to take away.

### Advice & signposting

The survey highlighted a surprisingly high level (90%) of additional support on top of affordable, nutritious shared meals: informal advice from staff or volunteers; support and advice from peers (other services users) or advice from professionals. Crucially many projects also acted as gateways to further support. Examples of advice and signposting include financial or debt advice, information on how to access resources, cooking advice and advice on nutritional needs.

### Volunteer roles

Key to the functioning of many of these projects is the volunteer support. 89% of projects reported that volunteers are involved in running their activities. There are different levels of participation of volunteers; at some settings the service users are also volunteers. Many people reported high levels of personal satisfaction related to volunteering. Some enjoyed being able to give to the community in a very practical way. Most settings also offered volunteers a free meal.

## Barriers to access:

Even with thousands of meals served each week, we know there are more people who could benefit.

- **Transport:** 61% of projects find 'transport' a major barrier to people accessing the project
- **Accessibility:** 32% of projects find 'accessibility' a major barrier to people using the project, with many mentioning steep hills or lack of public transport alongside physical access issues at their venue. 39% of





groups requested information about the Federation of Disabled People's improved Shopmobility scheme, offering delivery of electric scooters to convenient locations.

- **Information:** Many users of lunch clubs reported that they did not use the online directories which hold information on these services, and that they had heard about the meals through word-of-mouth. We suspect that many isolated people in our city may not be aware of the services available.
- **Isolation:** Many coordinators of older people's projects such as lunch clubs and day centres picked up on what one called 'entrenched isolation' as a barrier. We heard several stories of people who were 'found' by chance having had no contact with services or other people, sometimes for years.
- **Preconceptions:** Anecdotal reports suggested that preconceptions might prevent some people from using lunch clubs ('it's not for me'). New celebratory and community models like the Real Junk Food Project may reach out to new groups of people. Current projects looking to attract more people may benefit from changing the way they promote themselves even if just through small changes in wording, eg 'shared meal' not 'lunch club'.
- **Cost:**
  - We found a big variation in costs: some meals are free or donation only; others cost £2 including travel, whereas others cost £6 for a basic meal. The variation in price seemed to be explained by whether or not projects were operated by paid staff or volunteers; and whether the project sought to cover the full costs of the meal through the charge or subsidised these costs through other funding, food donations, free venues etc.
  - 39% of projects that charge for meals find cost a major barrier to more people using the project. Many groups (72%) offered free or reduced price meals if someone finds it difficult to pay.
  - 42% of projects serve meals that are free for all.

## Challenges for projects:

Coordinators raised concerns about capacity of their projects, in particular whether it has room space, and/or volunteers to offer support. This is particularly important given the recent increases in demand.

- Having a team of **volunteers** is essential to many settings providing a meal. In some cases there is a thriving team of volunteers ready to support the group. Many projects report a high turnover of volunteers. Some projects find it difficult to maintain a continuous service because of the drop-off of volunteers (often as a result of finding work or – particularly with older volunteers – becoming ill or passing on). We even heard how some projects, otherwise successful, have closed due to the lack of volunteers. 63% of projects wanted help finding or managing volunteers.
- 70% of projects are interested in **food safety/hygiene training** or advice.
- 33% of projects are interested in training/advice on **nutrition**, menu planning etc. On visits, some groups reported that they would like to share/learn from other groups eg on skills in cooking with surplus.
- 30% of projects are interested in training/support around finance, **fundraising** or management issues. With the issues around pricing of meals noted above, there are clear concerns about the sustainability of groups which depend on donations or grants to subsidise the cost of meals.





## Recommendations:

### Policy makers, commissioners, funders and large organisations with in-kind resources should:

1. Recognise the major but largely unrecognised role that shared meals are playing in improving the health, nutrition and mental health of the city **for people of all ages** – tackling isolation, food poverty and acting as a gateway to advice and support.
2. Recognise that whilst “shared meals” cannot take the place of “community meals” (“*meals on wheels*”) there is potential for them to take a bigger role in helping **vulnerable people** access healthy food.
3. Use opportunities to share information with people about shared meals for example as part of **care assessments** or **hospital discharge**.
4. Consider investing in **micro-finance or pilot funding for innovations** within the shared meal sector in order to test new models of provision which can meet gaps or increase sustainability (e.g. provision in new geographical areas, at evenings and weekends, attracting vulnerable people who are not currently attending, testing new funding models etc) in order to support the long-term benefits and preventative effects of these projects.
5. Consider ways to provide or coordinate **in-kind support** for shared meal providers, e.g. premises, storage space etc. Where groups already receive in-kind support (e.g. free use of church halls), this should be recognised as a vital part of their operating model, without which many groups would cease to function sustainably or would need further support to continue.
6. Recognise that support for core costs or in-kind resources (e.g. use of premises) for organisations which distribute **surplus food**, such as FareShare and the Food Waste Collective, is an effective way of underpinning shared meal activities and helping to keep costs low.
7. Note that support for community **transport**, as well as for less formal methods of providing transport (e.g. volunteer drivers) can help overcome the crucial barrier of transport in helping people to access services. Befriending groups, personal budgets, direct payments and personal health budgets will also play a vital role in supporting isolated people or those with higher needs to **access** shared meals.
8. Consider investing in targeted **infrastructure, development work and promotion support** for the shared meals sector to help increase and maintain its reach and capacity to deliver and help realise the potential of shared meals.

### Lunch clubs and others providing shared meals should:

9. Consider using posters or flyers to **promote** their services if they do not already; and engage with the wider discussion about whether paper-based sources and/or other channels such as radio, signposting by health professionals and information prescriptions, could be used.
10. Refer to the Federation of Disabled People's 'Out and About' guide for information about **informal shared transport options** and other useful examples and guidance on ensuring effective (free) insurance provision for volunteer drivers: <http://www.thefedonline.org.uk/citywide-connect>.





11. Consider new ways to reach **isolated people**, eg via working with befriending groups, and refer to the useful guidance on reaching isolated people in the 'Out and About' guide at: <http://www.thefedonline.org.uk/citywide-connect>.
12. Consider long-term **sustainability** when assessing costs and charges, and recognise the value of any in-kind contributions such as free venues, volunteer labour or donated food.

### **The Food Partnership and other voluntary sector infrastructure / community development organisations should:**

13. Develop plans for **promotion** of the shared meals sector, and deliver if funded. This could include a public campaign alongside promotion of meal options with key services in the city, promotion of volunteering opportunities to members of the public, updating & producing resources (including paper resources if appropriate) and working with the Fed of Disabled People to simplify the categories for the online 'It's Local Actually' directory to make it easier for more people to find options for shared meals.
14. Develop plans for **infrastructure support** for the shared meals sector, and deliver if funded. This would include support for groups with recruiting and managing volunteers and advice for groups on issues such as funding models and fundraising.
15. Develop plans for **training & networking** for the shared meals sector, and deliver if funded. This would include food hygiene, training for volunteers on cooking for large groups with a limited budget including creative use of surplus foods, and opportunities to visit others' projects.

### **Method:**

The report is informed by desk research, an online and telephone survey (86 responses), and a series of project visits, widely publicized by partner organisations, which the Food Partnership estimate reached approximately 80% of organizations serving a shared meal in the city. This report does not cover institutional meals, for example, in schools and nurseries; and meals taking place in residential settings such as care homes, unless these are open to non-residents. It is not an attempt to capture one-to-one activities e.g. where neighbours cook for each other; and small-scale informal get-togethers. The survey which informs this report was developed in partnership with a range of other organisations: The Federation of Disabled People, Community Works, FareShare and the Food Waste Collective.

### **About the Food Partnership:**

The Brighton & Hove Food Partnership is a non-profit organisation that helps people learn to cook, to eat a healthy diet, to grow their own and to waste less food. We drive forward progress on the city's food strategy, campaign on local and national food issues and deliver a range of community-based cookery, nutrition and growing projects. [www.bhfood.org.uk](http://www.bhfood.org.uk)

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