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RESEARCH NOTE

REVISED **A community-based participatory research approach to understanding social eating for food well-being** [version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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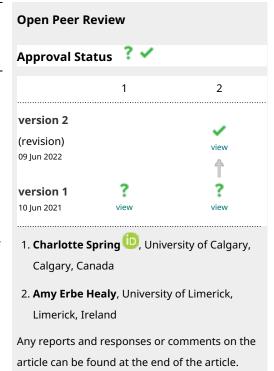
Abstract

'Social eating initiatives' are framed as a specific type of community-based food service that provides opportunities for people to eat together in local spaces using surplus food. These initiatives provide a meal that is fresh, affordable and more environmentally friendly than fast or convenience foods. In this research, we build upon the food well-being model to explore how food consumption is experienced in these community settings and the role of social eating projects in shaping the different dimensions of people's foodscapes. We adopted a community-based participatory approach and engaged in a series of dialogues with staff volunteers and coordinators at four 'social eating initiatives'. We also conducted 45 interviews with service users and volunteers at three sites in the Midlands region.

The role of community-based food initiatives responding to hunger by utilising surplus food to feed local populations is often conceptualised critically. However, closer attention to the experiences of staff, volunteers and customers at these spaces, reveals them as sites where knowledge and experience of food is being developed with this contributing to a sense of well-being beyond nutrition. Shared food practices and eating together contribute to social capital and are important dimensions of food well-being that are significantly restricted by food insecurity. The 'food well-being' model envisages a shift in focus from health, defined as the absence of illness, towards well-being as a positive relationship with food at the individual and societal level. In the concluding remarks of this article, it is suggested that this holistic conception is required to understand the role and function of social eating initiatives.

Keywords

social eating initiatives, community food, food insecurity, food waste, surplus, community-based participatory research, food well-being

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

This article is included in the Sustainable Food Systems gateway.

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Introduction

Food insecurity is a multi-faceted and iniquitous social problem in contemporary UK society (Caplan, 2017). It is described as the inability to access an adequate, healthy diet or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so, as well as having concerns about accessing foods that are socially and culturally appropriate (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015). Against this backdrop, WRAP (2020) estimates that in 2018, 9.5 million tonnes of food were wasted within the UK, 70% of which was intended for consumption. Surplus food aid is positioned as 'the second tier of our food system' (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005: 178), marked by tensions generated by different framings of this resource as both edible food and waste (Midgley, 2014; Midgley, 2020) and with recipients of free food parcels feeling obligated, ashamed, and stigmatised (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012; Garthwaite, 2016; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). Being in receipt of food aid also positions individuals as passive beneficiaries with little agency and choice over the food they consume (Caraher & Furey, 2017) with community food organisations characterised as distributing 'leftover food for left behind people' (Riches & Gerlings, 2019).

Moreover, food insecurity in the UK coexists within a broader foodscape (including space but also socio-cultural, systemic and behavioural aspects of food) (Vonthron *et al*., 2020), where the traditional structuring of mealtimes has undergone a transition to 'culinary plurality', as eating practices continue to diversify and fragment (Mäkelä, 2009: 45). The diminishment or 'de-structuration' of mealtimes characterised by fragmentation of mealtimes, snacking, eating out and 'on the go', (Poulin, 2002) limits the capacity to engage in mealtime reciprocity and has impacts beyond physical sustenance and nutrition, which may be amplified for those experiencing food insecurity.

In response, there has been an unprecedented scaling-up of food-provisioning organisations, one of which are 'social eating' initiatives. These initiatives utilise surplus food to create cheap, public meals, which are eaten at social mealtimes. Generally, these social eating initiatives access surplus food distributed by FareShare (a surplus redistribution charity) and other

organisations including supermarkets. Local volunteers use this surplus resource to cook and provide nutritious meals in a community venue for a suggested donation (such as £2.50) per three course meal for adults and children eating for free (Luca *et al*., 2019a). These initiatives are not well-conceptualised by the current critiques of food aid. Traditionally, the conjoining of food insecurity and surplus food appears to instrumentally feed customers and reduce food wastage, but in ways that are stigmatising, and which position customers as passive recipients of food charity (Arcuri, 2019; Saxena & Tornaghi, 2018). A more sensitive framing which considers the broader dimensions of food may articulate a clearer understanding of the role and function of social eating initiatives, beyond the provision of cheap meals. This also calls for more research to understand consumers' experiences in the context of these initiatives using surplus food.

We build upon the food as well-being model (Block *et al*., 2011; Bublitz *et al*., 2019) to examine the food experience of social eating cafés service users and the role of such initiatives in addressing key dimensions of food well-being. Food well-being is conceptualised as a holistic, multidimensional model which incorporates objective (e.g. food availability), subjective aspects (e.g. food as pleasure; perception of food) and a socially contextualised view on well-being. Food well-being is defined as 'a positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship with food at both individual and societal levels' which is influenced by socialization, literacy, marketing, food availability and policy (Block *et al*., 2011: 5). Food availability is considered in terms of an array of intersections with well-being and particularly around healthy-choice-supportive contexts and food deserts. Socialisation is defined as the process that people use to learn about food through food-based interactions and rituals that foster connections. These processes are embedded in social networks and socio-economic and cultural contexts (Block *et al*., 2011). We continue this research note with a description of the participatory methods, followed by a discussion of the findings in the light of the well-being model used in the study.

Methods

We adopted a community-based participatory approach to support co-creation of the project with the organisations and customers involved in this service context. Food and the sharing of food can facilitate one of the creative kinds of empirical research that are described as 'community-based participatory research' or CBPR (Chun-Chung Chow & Crowe, 2005; Faridi *et al*., 2007; Pettinger *et al*., 2017; Pettinger *et al*., 2019; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). CBPR moves beyond 'traditional research approaches that assume a phenomenon may be separated from its context for purposes of study' (Holkup *et al*., 2004:162). In its commitment to involve communities in the research process, CBPR may employ a diverse and creative methodological approach to better understand complex problems and find solutions or points of intervention for participants, using both logic and systematic thinking, as well as intuition and imagination (Heck *et al*., 2018).

Participatory mapping was used to allow participants to contribute their views of the initiatives, their needs, challenges and impact. This meant we engaged in a series of dialogues with staff volunteers and coordinators at four 'social eating' initiatives. Discussions were facilitated by the researcher and involved using post-it notes and informal conversations with the participants. The data from the participatory mapping helped to identify main issues that needed further exploring and allowed the researcher and participating community groups to define the research questions of the study and how the study may help them.

Meal-centred interviews

One route into understanding the role and function of community food initiatives within communities is through enquiries into the types of commensality (i.e. food sharing) they construct. The 'mingling, observing, and lingering' (Cattell *et al.*, 2008) around informal mealtimes is framed here as an entry-point to deeper understanding of how well-being is constructed and expressed in non-formal ways. Interpersonal sharing of food is a fundamental feature of social life, both as a 'mechanism through which sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social relations' (Davies *et al.*, 2017: 136). Food sharing involves the creation and reinforcement of social relations; fabricating and consolidating social connections (Giacoman, 2016; Masson *et al.*, 2018), and it can also be considered as a means of undertaking research alongside eaters. This approach seeks to make visible and articulate mundane and hitherto concealed activities and expressions that nonetheless provide insights into the role that social eating initiatives play in constructing experiences of well-being.

In this study, eating together meant engaging with research participants to create a focus for, and rhythm to, the research dialogue. Sharing food with participants created convivial conditions which helped the research participants feel comfortable to talk about their broader foodscape. Taking this approach, moved the emphasis away from solely conveying experiences of food insecurity to also encompassing the values of participation, conviviality and pleasure (which also form key aspects of the social eating initiative's organisational remits) (Björgvinsson *et al.*, 2010; DiSalvo *et al.*, 2012).

Practically, the interviews referenced were recorded in-situ, or in meal-centred settings but in order to capture the participants' voice effectively (and not capture co-diners' conversations), the interviews were conducted at a side table on the edge of each dining space and the recording device was positioned right in front of the diner rather than on the middle of the dining table. The research occurring in these spaces afforded everyone involved an opportunity to understand how citizens can become 'beneficiaries and co-creators of value' (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) as the descriptions provided by customers were reported back to the organisers to help shape the services of local social eating initiatives. Grassroots commensality-activism can be understood here in terms of progressive possibilities, articulating newly emerging and not-yet-formed responses to broader social challenges around the access, availability and affordability of food (Blake, 2019a; Blake, 2019b; Marovelli, 2019; Smith, 2020).

We conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with service users and volunteers at three sites in the Midlands region in order to understand how the role and function of community food services fit within their wider foodscapes (see Table 1 for the interview guide). These are briefly described in Table 2, which contextualise the research topic and the social eating initiatives participating in this research in an attempt to both 'bring life to research [and] bring research to life' (Ellis, 1998: 4). The interview length ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. Two researchers visited the social eating venues during mealtimes and invited volunteers and service users to participate in the study. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and the data were inductively and deductively coded and organised thematically. The authors iteratively reviewed the coding framework and emerging themes at team meetings. The study received approval from the University Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent for participation in this research was obtained from all participants.

Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities and the research sites are anonymised.

Table 2 provides more detail about each of the social eating initiative included in the study. All initiatives were located in the East Midlands region, England and exhibited a similar model of meal provision but a different composition of their customer range.

Findings

Our emerging findings support other studies regarding the positive role of community-based surplus food initiatives (Blake, 2019a; Blake, 2019b). In the UK, community-based initiatives such as social eating initiatives use surplus food to provide an integrated model for recovering and using surplus food, localising food and providing spaces for interaction that can contribute to alleviating food insecurity and support health and well-being. In this research note, we briefly present one of the key findings of our study:

Social eating initiatives go beyond supporting community food availability. They play a key role in facilitating social connections and addressing social isolation.

Improving access to homemade nutritious food

Our findings show that these initiatives serve people from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Service users range from older people to people who cannot work, people with mental health conditions and local residents who simply appreciate the good food which is served in these spaces. These initiatives provide opportunities for people to access a homemade nutritious meal once a week:

'*I think it has a very important role in that, some people may not be able to have a substantial meal during the day or whatever, and this is one where they know they'll get*

Table 1. Interview topic guide (service user and volunteers).

Topic	Examples of guiding questions
Perceptions of the café and its operations	• Can you tell me about the community food café that you visit? • What things are done at your cafe to make people feel welcome? • Why do you volunteer at this place?
The value of surplus	• What role do you think your community café/group has in providing foods to people in the community? • How would you characterise the food surplus received? • How does this project work? • What kinds of initiatives or strategies have been used at your community cafe to influence the nutritional quality of food provided?
Food practices, nutrition and perceptions about the idea of food made with surplus	• How much time do you spend cooking and preparing your meals? • What is your typical meal? • What percentage of your household income do you believe is spent on food? • How is the food offered in this outlet? • Have you tried any new foods since you've started coming here? • What do you think of this idea to use food surplus in this way? • Do you normally eat with other people or on your own?
Food and social connections	• Why do you come to this place? • Have you met other people or have you made any friends since you started coming to this place? • Do you feel that you learned anything since you've been involved with this community group? • Can you talk a little bit about your social life? • Could you describe the community here?
Awareness of food issues; the experience of food insecurity	• What do you think there are some problems around food in today's society? • Have you heard of the term 'food insecurity' or food poverty? • Do you think something is missing in terms of the food provision in your community? • How would you describe the local food culture?
Perception of impact	• What are the changes generated by this project in the community? • How well is the programme engaging with intended beneficiaries? • What would you change about this project?

quite a lot of different food and it's for low-cost...' (Janis, service user).

Social eating spaces as social hubs to support community belonging

Our findings emphasise the social dimension of eating and food more broadly. The social eating initiatives emerged as 'social hubs', which can facilitate community belonging and address social isolation by emphasising the commensal qualities of food. These initiatives add to the body of evidence that food insecurity means not only hunger but also limited ability to participate in a range of food practices (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015). They enable social-ising spaces and create opportunities for people to contribute to their community. Some of the service users choose to

volunteer and support the social eating café showing the potential for these initiatives to stimulate participation:

'...*you [through this initiative] give volunteers a sense of belonging to something and a sense of usefulness.*' (Matt, volunteer).

Bella reflects on how her experience with the social eating café and seeing other people help each other made her see things in a more positive way and volunteer:

'...*I've been on my own for about three years. I suppose it were just me on my own, and I'd got used to that, and then I'd come to have a meal here and that changed my outlook on [life]...[...] I do help out here now and again, yes.' (Brenda, service user and volunteer).*

Table 2. Social Eating initiatives.

Organisation	Site/venue	Food, cost and set up	Types of diners/numbers
Cool Café[1] A church-run social eating initiative that runs a number of surplus food-based and community services from a church. They have a mixture of paid staff and volunteers.	Located in a deprived, inner city and predominantly black and ethnic minority area in the East Midlands, this social eating space runs a weekly free food parcel and a paid-for social eating service. It also runs art classes, cooking sessions and church-based social activities.	It offers a mixture of ethnic and traditional UK cuisines from a church hall space where a £2 lunch is served in a well-lit, open hall with greeters and volunteers who help to serve food and manage diners. Diners queue at a hatch and serve themselves with extra food stuffs from a side table.	The lunch offer attracts a diverse array of around 30 customers including students, local residents, food bank attendees, the church congregation and members of a local arts hub.
Orange Café A charity-run social eating initiative that runs a community meal service but also provides surplus catering to a number of other community activities such as children's holiday clubs. They have a mixture of paid staff and volunteers.	Located in a small church on a side street in a predominantly white, deprived, ex-mining village in the East Midlands. The café has revivified a church hall space that was due to close because of dwindling church attendance. A food bank runs from the same space on different days and the space is used for community and family engagement activities, often during holidays.	A small but busy kitchen serves a free weekly soup made from surplus alongside a £2.50 two or three-course meal which volunteers serve to diners at the table. There is a fruit and veg 'stall' at the side of the space where customers can leave a donation and take fresh foods. The organisation is planning to open a community pantry.	Volunteer greeters welcome around 30 diners each week, predominantly white families, elders and a few lone male diners.
Participate Community Centre Located in a small residential area, adjunct to a large council estate in the south of a city in the East Midlands area. The social eating initiative is run by a local community group with a mixture of paid staff and volunteers. The borough is a predominantly white, working-class area and this is reflected in the make-up of the diners.	The café offers a weekly, served at the table meal, as well as a pay-as-you-feel food shop. Staffed by a team of long-standing, dedicated volunteers, this social eating space primarily caters for families and elders. The community centre has engaged widely with local supermarkets and food retailers to augment their FareShare delivery to produce a three-course meal each Friday lunchtime.	The café serves traditional meals at lunch time for £3 and £1.75 for children. Within the community centre, a friendship group also operates in the same venue at the same time to encourage isolated people to socialise	Approximately 55-60 people come for a meal each week at this social eating venue. Diners are predominantly white with a mix of elders and families with young children. Many elders travel in with carers or relatives. A number of diners are disabled or have mental health issues.

[1]All research sites have been anonymised and social eating initiatives have been given fictive names.

Social eating spaces improve access to vulnerable members of the community

The communal meal offered at these social eating spaces becomes a reason for people to visit in their community and to escape their routine. This is also an opportunity for reaching those who may experience consumer vulnerability due to not being able to access food, and those with mental health conditions who may not have access to community services. This is illustrated by Rachel's reflections on the benefits of the social eating café:

> '*Just coming out, because I do struggle coming out. That's a big importance in my life because I struggle getting out, and obviously meeting my friends. I love meeting my friends here and having this dinner together. […] It's just done so much for me because if I didn't come here, I'd just be at home in bed…'* (Rachel, service user).

Communal meals as a catalyst for community spaces that facilitate access to other services

Social eating spaces facilitate conversations and connections, but also act as hubs where people can 'establish, receive, or be signposted to other services.' (Luca *et al.*, 2019a). More than food, often these initiatives facilitate access to other resources such as health and well-being services, cooking classes and holiday clubs for children, as well as arts and crafts. Service users can access support to deal with paperwork and health and hygiene training:

> '*Somebody was bringing in a laptop where you could do Food and Hygiene Certificate.* […] *Whether it's training as in cooking skills, or whether it's training as in quali-fications, there's quite a bit of scope for that, or just building confidence, building self-confidence, self-esteem.*' (Dan, service user and volunteer).

Tensions around the nature of surplus

Our findings indicate that there are tensions around access to, and the availability of, surplus foods, but community groups show resilience and creativity in making the most of the surplus received. However, issues around access, collection-times, storage and short-date and food-suitability remain a challenge to the use of surpluses.

> '*Nine times out of ten it's good because I think they know that they've got to see is when they get there, so they don't want to give us anything bad, but sometimes from FareShare they'll give us fresh stuff that we're not going to be able to use, so we have to give that out straightaway.*' (Becka, volunteer)

Discussion and conclusion

Our summary findings highlight the key role that such community groups promoting social eating could play in supporting health and well-being, and the role of food in community development. Our research indicates that surplus food is revalued through these initiatives and employed to facilitate the delivery of services concerned with sustenance, as well as those designed to enhance health and well-being (Luca *et al.*, 2019a). We briefly discuss here some implications of our findings for a different framing of food surplus and how social eating initiatives can support health and well-being policies.

Our study suggests that these initiatives improve food availability but also contribute to other dimensions of food well-being (e.g. socialisation as creating new rituals and positive experiences that are facilitated by eating with others) as they have potential to support both social capital (Edmondson, 2003) and community development. Government promoted healthy eating programmes would benefit from collaborating with social eating initiatives in accessing harder to reach populations and reframing the issue of 'healthy diets' to account for the social, emotional and experiential nature of food and eating. Social eating initiatives could complement existing community-based programmes that aim to support healthy eating. Such programmes can also learn from the experiences shared in these spaces to consider 'behaviour in context' (Luca *et al.*, 2019b) and how food insecurity shapes individuals' perception of healthy food, ability and motivation to adopt a healthy diet (Luca *et al.*, 2019a). As previously seen, surplus distribution practices are often driven by donors' needs rather by the charity/users' needs (Garrone *et al.*, 2014). This means that surplus food does not always provide sufficient resources to make a complete healthy menu with community groups having to improvise and/or purchase additional ingredients to sustain a complete menu. Future co-created community action research is needed to investigate how the use of this inconsistent food resource is negotiated by service providers and identifying ways to improve access and redistribution.

A community-based participatory approach to researching these social eating initiatives affords us an opportunity to understand the social values expressed by people who may be 'below the level of consumption adequacy…' but who are nonetheless 'beneficiaries and co-creators of value' (Baron *et al.*, 2018). Social eating initiatives and their focus on group eating, or commensality, food sharing and mealtime inclusion, participation and contribution can be viewed as expressions of a food well-being-oriented approach, which seeks to prioritise food as a means of developing and sustaining both physical and social capital. These initiatives therefore operate contra to the individualising and instrumental provision of free food parcels by embedding the social value of commensality into their eating services.

Our research points towards the need to reframe these initiatives as an alternative form of community provision, which is more than aid to tackle food insecurity and food waste. De-stigmatising these projects by showing they provide good food, support socialising, and a sense of community has the potential to broaden participation, expand community food capacity (Dunbar, 2017; Kneafsey *et al.*, 2017) and avoid a 'two-tier' food culture that creates further social inequality (Caplan, 2017; Luca *et al.*, 2019a). Partnerships with local authorities can enhance the legitimacy of such initiatives and enable community groups to access additional funding to support expanding their reach. Furthermore, these emergent findings argue for a more sensitive means of articulating the experiences of both food insecure and broader 'social eaters', and their foodscapes being mindful of the different dimensions that affect food consumption.

Adopting a 'food as well-being' approach shows potential for understanding the different dimensions that influence eating behaviours and diets in order to better contextualise efforts to tackle obesity and food insecurity. It is proposed that further analysis using this framework would form the next stage of scholarship beyond this Research Note.

Data availability

Underlying data cannot be shared owing to anonymity and ethics approval considerations. University of York researchers interested in the data should contact The Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee of the University of York (elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk) to inquire about the research ethics application process. Each application will be assessed on a case by case basis. More information about data sharing policies at the University of York can be found here: https://www.york.ac.uk/library/info-for/researchers/data/sharing/#tab-1.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ❓ ✔️

Version 2

Reviewer Report 23 June 2022

https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.15809.r28208

✔️ **Amy Erbe Healy**

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

I have reviewed the updates to the paper. I feel that the organisation of the paper is much improved, making the paper clearer. I still think that the authors have quite a bit more work to do with their data, but they have stated that this article is simply an introduction to their research with more to come. As such, I accept their revisions.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: food poverty and social exclusion

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 30 July 2021

https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.15153.r27558

❓ **Amy Erbe Healy**

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

This research note introduces a project that is investigating 'social eating initiatives' - community-

based services that use surplus food to provide opportunities for people to eat together. The authors are specifically interested in "how food consumption is experienced" in these settings and how these initiatives shape "dimensions of people's foodscapes". The authors highlight the benefit of commensality for those who may be experiencing food poverty coupled with benefit of reduction in food waste. While the authors acknowledge that some community-based initiatives have been criticised for stigmatising service users; they believe that the findings from their study supports a "food well-being model" that not only promotes a positive relationship between the user and food but also, more broadly, to a sense of overall well-being.

The paper's introduction begins by reviewing literature that suggests that community-based initiatives can be stigmatising. However, later in the paper, there is more literature within a section called 'meal-centred interviews' that supports social eating and commensality. More literature is sprinkled throughout their findings; one article is cited that represents some of the positive studies done on social eating initiatives. It would be helpful to have a more clearly defined literature section that includes all of this information. Additionally, this section should include citations and summaries of these other studies that are alluded to, but not specifically cited, that provide a positive perspective on social eating initiatives.

Data was collected from service users and volunteers at 3 sites and coordinators/volunteers at 4 sites. It is not clear whether these are the same sites or different. Within the paper, three sites are described. While there is a short summary of each of these sites, it is not clear how they differ on some important aspects. Do they have the same purpose? How do members of their broader communities know about the service that they provide? Are these initiatives specifically to feed the hungry or are they community centres providing many services to different segments of their communities? Certainly, it would be interesting to know what type of initiatives are more successful at impacting the "foodscapes" of those who are socially excluded, but all of the data has been grouped and presented together at the end of the research note – there is no differentiation (or discussion) about differences in initiatives.

Similarly, within the findings section, while there are a few quotes that seem to suggest that users appreciate getting food and meeting up with their friends, these are mixed in with a few quotes from volunteers; 'Matt' simply states how great it is to do volunteer work. It may have made more sense to present findings from users and volunteers separately - presumably they are participating in these initiatives for different reasons.

However, another quote is labelled as coming from someone who is both a user and a volunteer (though another quote by a user suggests that she is also both a user and a volunteer; it is only labelled as coming from a user) – is this important? If someone has been sitting alone at home and then becomes a service user and then becomes a service provider/helper, that seems life changing. According to 'Brenda,' coming to eat at the initiative has changed her outlook – she even helps out occasionally. Why? How did she make that transition? Do these initiatives reach out to users and provide training so that users can become volunteers? A quote from 'Dan' begins to suggest that there is much more than food provision going on at his hub, but we are not given much more information. Given that this data was collected qualitatively during meals at these initiatives, presumably follow-up questions were asked. However, none of that data is presented. Also, as said before, it would be useful to know if 'Brenda' and 'Dan' are at places that are simply social eating initiatives or if there is a lot more going on at the centre.

Ultimately, the reader is left a bit 'hungry' after the findings section – for more data; for better analysis of the data; for a clearer focus on commensality, food insecurity and stigma attached to using food surplus. While the abstract had suggested that the findings would highlight how food consumption is experienced in these settings and how they shape participants' foodscapes, the quotes we are shown don't go much beyond indicating that a few people who use the sites and volunteer at the sites think they are a good idea. Also, while the paper introduced the issue of food surplus and stigma (and had also included questions on food surplus in the interview schedule), there is nothing mentioned about food surplus or stigma at all in the findings.

In conclusion, this study plants itself squarely in the positive camp – there is no discussion of stigma or indeed of anything negative at all in the findings. The authors state that their initial findings only highlight one specific "key finding" – that community-based social eating initiatives address social isolation. However, the aims of their study went well beyond that. Presumably, as the authors dig deeper into their findings and try to explain why certain initiatives work and who seems to benefit the most/least from these, this research will add more to the literature on food insecurity and commensality. I look forward to that.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?
Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?
Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?
Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: food poverty and social exclusion

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 13 May 2022
Nadina Luca, University of York, UK, York, United Kingdom

Reviewer 2
This research note introduces a project that is investigating 'social eating initiatives' - community-based services that use surplus food to provide opportunities for people to eat together. The authors are specifically interested in "how food consumption is experienced" in these settings and how these initiatives shape "dimensions of people's foodscapes". The authors highlight the benefit of commensality for those who may be experiencing food poverty coupled with benefit of reduction in food waste. While the authors acknowledge that some community-based initiatives have been criticised for stigmatising service users; they believe that the findings from their study supports a "food well-being model" that not only promotes a positive relationship between the user and food but also, more broadly, to a sense of overall well-being.

The paper's introduction begins by reviewing literature that suggests that community-based initiatives can be stigmatising. However, later in the paper, there is more literature within a section called 'meal-centred interviews' that supports social eating and commensality. More literature is sprinkled throughout their findings; one article is cited that represents some of the positive studies done on social eating initiatives. It would be helpful to have a more clearly defined literature section that includes all of this information. Additionally, this section should include citations and summaries of these other studies that are alluded to, but not specifically cited, that provide a positive perspective on social eating initiatives.

Response:

Thank you for this comment. We followed the format for research notes as suggested by Emerald Open, hence the focus on methods and the inclusion of literature in the introduction section. We added some further titles to the introduction section and throughout the discussion.
https://emeraldopenresearch.com/for-authors/article-guidelines/research-notes

Data was collected from service users and volunteers at 3 sites and coordinators/volunteers at 4 sites. It is not clear whether these are the same sites or different. Within the paper, three sites are described. While there is a short summary of each of these sites, it is not clear how they differ on some important aspects. Do they have the same purpose? How do members of their broader communities know about the service that they provide? Are these

initiatives specifically to feed the hungry or are they community centres providing many services to different segments of their communities? Certainly, it would be interesting to know what type of initiatives are more successful at impacting the "foodscapes" of those who are socially excluded, but all of the data has been grouped and presented together at the end of the research note – there is no differentiation (or discussion) about differences in initiatives.

Response:
Thank you for this suggestion. We added some further clarification to the initiatives, description. However, it is beyond the scope of this brief research note to compare different initiatives and to present their impact.

Similarly, within the findings section, while there are a few quotes that seem to suggest that users appreciate getting food and meeting up with their friends, these are mixed in with a few quotes from volunteers; 'Matt' simply states how great it is to do volunteer work. It may have made more sense to present findings from users and volunteers separately - presumably they are participating in these initiatives for different reasons.

Response:
Thank you for this suggestion. Given the space limitations and the focus of this research note on the methods we opted for a more blended format for presenting the findings.

However, another quote is labelled as coming from someone who is both a user and a volunteer (though another quote by a user suggests that she is also both a user and a volunteer; it is only labelled as coming from a user) – is this important? If someone has been sitting alone at home and then becomes a service user and then becomes a service provider/helper, that seems life changing. According to 'Brenda,' coming to eat at the initiative has changed her outlook – she even helps out occasionally. Why? How did she make that transition? Do these initiatives reach out to users and provide training so that users can become volunteers? A quote from 'Dan' begins to suggest that there is much more than food provision going on at his hub, but we are not given much more information. Given that this data was collected qualitatively during meals at these initiatives, presumably follow-up questions were asked. However, none of that data is presented. Also, as said before, it would be useful to know if 'Brenda' and 'Dan' are at places that are simply social eating initiatives or if there is a lot more going on at the centre.

Response:
Thank you for this comment. The aim of this research note was to give a flavour of the emerging findings of this project, hence the sense that there might be more going on at these spaces. Some further detail has been added to capture the polyvalent nature of the social eating sites, however, given the scope and space of this note, we could not go into more depth.

Ultimately, the reader is left a bit 'hungry' after the findings section – for more data; for better analysis of the data; for a clearer focus on commensality, food insecurity and stigma attached to using food surplus. While the abstract had suggested that the findings would highlight how food consumption is experienced in these settings and how they shape

participants' foodscapes, the quotes we are shown don't go much beyond indicating that a few people who use the sites and volunteer at the sites think they are a good idea. Also, while the paper introduced the issue of food surplus and stigma (and had also included questions on food surplus in the interview schedule), there is nothing mentioned about food surplus or stigma at all in the findings.

Response:
Thank you for this observation. There is a robust and credible corpus of scholarship which conveys how food banks for example, are sites of stigma. We do not refute this scholarship per se, but instead sought to offer alternative and additional viewpoints which conveyed the convivial and commensal values organisations and diners attached to their social eating activities.

In conclusion, this study plants itself squarely in the positive camp – there is no discussion of stigma or indeed of anything negative at all in the findings. The authors state that their initial findings only highlight one specific "key finding" – that community-based social eating initiatives address social isolation. However, the aims of their study went well beyond that. Presumably, as the authors dig deeper into their findings and try to explain why certain initiatives work and who seems to benefit the most/least from these, this research will add more to the literature on food insecurity and commensality. I look forward to that.

Response:
Thank you. Indeed, the aim of this research note was to present meal-centred interviews as a method for community research and highlight one of our key findings. We plan to publish all our findings in an additional research paper.

Competing Interests: No competing interests.

Reviewer Report 05 July 2021

?   **Charlotte Spring** (iD)

Department of Geography, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

Summary: the article draws on fieldwork with social eating initiatives in the UK to ask what might be concluded about their potential to bring about benefits to health/wellbeing and community cohesion beyond their characterisation as efforts to alleviate food waste and hunger

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
  ○ Introduction could do with some signposting as to how the paper is structured and how the

argument will proceed

○ Some re-structuring would improve clarity of the methods section. Findings could also benefit from some sub-headings to really draw out themes

○ There is some description in the abstract that should be brought into the intro eg. the discursive conjoining of hunger/waste and critiques of eg Arcuri 2019

○ There is certainly additional literature that could be added here, less if you're keeping to a strictly UK context but have added some suggestions in the PDF comments

○ Discussion section could do with some clear signposting for the reader as to how the argument is unfolding. Paragraphs seem somewhat isolated from each other and could be woven together more tightly (perhaps aided by more explication of the food well being model?)

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

○ Explanation of the 'food well being' model a little thin in the intro. Could give some more details of this theory e.g. what's meant by 'wellbeing', plus later you imply that it's conceptualised in terms of capitals theory; more elaboration of this could support the drawing of conclusions from your observations/findings. You could also show how you used the food well-being model in your analysis, again to give theoretical weight to the conclusions (e.g. in 'findings' you could be explicit about how various observations/participant narratives express different forms of capital, if this is a central plank of the model, and then link back to this in the conclusions. However I'm not familiar with the food well-being model, and I recognise that you state that further elaboration will come in later research).

○ I'm not sure the word 'vignette' is quite right for what are actually descriptions of the research sites (I was expecting snapshots from field encounters to set the tone); I'd suggest re-naming them something like 'Social eating initiatives' or 'site descriptions', or expand them into more vignette-like evocative descriptions. Some of the sites are described in more detail than others e.g. giving more demographic context. You could consider putting these descriptions in a table with comparable columns, equally.

○ Findings lack some depth e.g. mentions health but you could elaborate how this institutional setting (charitable/social enterprise) complements/interacts with formal/statutory health provision. Engaging critically with the differences between these sectors would make for some theoretical richness (e.g. what shortcomings in existing provision are being met by these initiatives, and are there any key challenges regarding the sustainability of the latter that should be borne in mind when drawing conclusions)

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

○ Explain 'participatory mapping'; a little more detail regarding the 'co-creation' aspect would be useful in terms of positionality (how were the participating organisations involved in study design; what was researchers' role in initiatives?)

○ Some typos in table 1 e.g. 'What do you think there are some problems around food in today's society?'

○ p/4 'FareShare' is mentioned with no explanation

○ 'Meal-centred interviews'- the start of this section dives deeper into CBPR rather than the specific technique; perhaps divide into a separate section? Sentence 'This approach seeks to make visible and articulate mundane and hitherto concealed activities and expressions that nonetheless provide insights into the role that social eating initiatives play in constructing experiences of well-being.'- rather than being specific to CBPR (and ethnography/participant observation more generally), this sentence would make more sense closer to/just after your description of eating together as research tool; when discussing CBPR I would expect to see a little more on the 'community' aspect of the research (which seems to come later in the section starting 'The research occurring in these spaces…'. Organisationally, I'd suggest moving this section on interview approach to before the 'vignette' section to keep the strictly methodological sections together.

○ 'Taking this approach, moved the emphasis away from solely conveying experiences of food insecurity towards drawing upon the varying organisational emphases and remits in a spirit of mutualism'- not clear what you mean here

○ 'It immersed us in the foodscape of the initiative and enabled us to draw upon the foodscapes of both the organisers and customers in situ.'- needs definition of what you mean by foodscape here- what does it mean to 'draw upon' a foodscape in situ? HOW did eating together immerse you in the organisational foodscape- needs unpacking/clarifying.

○ In 'results', not clear whether the quotes came from interviews or during shared mealtimes or were all interviews 'meal-centred'? Some sense of how eating together might have affected participant narratives or provided triangulation opportunity could be useful e.g. if recording elicitations during meals, what were implications for confidentiality?

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
○ Authors note that they intend to more fully draw out conclusions in future writing; more detailed elaboration of the food wellbeing model would go someway to linking the observations to the conclusions, which authors do note are provisional given the complexity of the subject matter at hand

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?
○ Some terms throughout could do with explaining ('destructuration', 'foodscapes', -first time you mention 'commensality' it's not explained, 'commensurate qualities of food'- do you mean 'commensal'?, 'consumer vulnerability').

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?
Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?
○ The paragraph ending 'these emergent findings argue for a more sensitive means of articulating the experiences of both food insecure and broader 'social eaters', and their foodscapes' could go further in arguing what those sensitive means might look like, and be more explicit in articulating what 'destigmatising' and 'reframing' these initiatives would look like, and how these reframings might be put into action (beyond academia).

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Partly

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Not applicable

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Not applicable

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: My own research has explored comparable food support initiatives in the UK although I am unfamiliar with the food wellbeing model used in analysis.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 13 May 2022
Nadina Luca, University of York, UK, York, United Kingdom

Reviewer 1
  ○ Introduction could do with some signposting as to how the paper is structured and how the argument will proceed
Thank you for this suggestion. We added a couple of sentences to signpost how the paper is

structured.

- ○ Some re-structuring would improve clarity of the methods section. Findings could also benefit from some sub-headings to really draw out themes.

Thank you. We edited these sections, including adding sub-headings to the findings to indicate sub-themes and improve the structure of the argument.

- ○ There is some description in the abstract that should be brought into the intro eg. the discursive conjoining of hunger/waste and critiques of eg Arcuri 2019

Thank you. This has been moved to the introduction as suggested (please see page 2).

- ○ There is certainly additional literature that could be added here, less if you're keeping to a strictly UK context but have added some suggestions in the PDF comments

Thank you for these useful suggestions. We added some of these to the introduction. However, given this is a research note and the wordcount limitations we were not able to include here a full literature review.

- ○ Discussion section could do with some clear signposting for the reader as to how the argument is unfolding. Paragraphs seem somewhat isolated from each other and could be woven together more tightly (perhaps aided by more explication of the food well being model?)

Thank you. This section has been edited to improve the narrative flow.

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

- ○ Explanation of the 'food well being' model a little thin in the intro. Could give some more details of this theory e.g. what's meant by 'wellbeing', plus later you imply that it's conceptualised in terms of capitals theory; more elaboration of this could support the drawing of conclusions from your observations/findings. You could also show how you used the food well-being model in your analysis, again to give theoretical weight to the conclusions (e.g. in 'findings' you could be explicit about how various observations/participant narratives express different forms of capital, if this is a central plank of the model, and then link back to this in the conclusions. However I'm not familiar with the food well-being model, and I recognise that you state that further elaboration will come in later research).

Thank you for this comment. We added some content to further explain the well-being model in the introduction and discussion. Indeed, since this is a brief research note with more focus on the methods, a full discussion of the links between the well-being model and the findings will follow in further research.

- ○ I'm not sure the word 'vignette' is quite right for what are actually descriptions of the research sites (I was expecting snapshots from field encounters to set the tone); I'd suggest re-naming them something like 'Social eating initiatives' or 'site descriptions', or expand them into more vignette-like evocative descriptions. Some of the sites are described in more detail than others e.g. giving more demographic context. You could consider putting these descriptions in a table with comparable columns, equally.

Thank you for this comment. We have changed the section title and added a table on 'Social Eating Initiatives'.

- ○ Findings lack some depth e.g. mentions health but you could elaborate how this

institutional setting (charitable/social enterprise) complements/interacts with formal/statutory health provision. Engaging critically with the differences between these sectors would make for some theoretical richness (e.g. what shortcomings in existing provision are being met by these initiatives, and are there any key challenges regarding the sustainability of the latter that should be borne in mind when drawing conclusions)

Thank you for this comment. We added some content to reflect our findings around the precarity of the surplus resources and how social eating initiatives could complement existing governmental supported healthy eating programmes.

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

○ Explain 'participatory mapping'; a little more detail regarding the 'co-creation' aspect would be useful in terms of positionality (how were the participating organisations involved in study design; what was researchers' role in initiatives?)

Thank you for this suggestion. We provide further clarification of participatory mapping and co-creation in the methods section.

○ Some typos in table 1 e.g. 'What do you think there are some problems around food in today's society?'

Thank you. We corrected these.

○ p/4 'FareShare' is mentioned with no explanation

Thank you for pointing this out. We added a brief explanation for FareShare.

○ 'Meal-centred interviews'- the start of this section dives deeper into CBPR rather than the specific technique; perhaps divide into a separate section? Sentence 'This approach seeks to make visible and articulate mundane and hitherto concealed activities and expressions that nonetheless provide insights into the role that social eating initiatives play in constructing experiences of well-being.'- rather than being specific to CBPR (and ethnography/participant observation more generally), this sentence would make more sense closer to/just after your description of eating together as research tool; when discussing CBPR I would expect to see a little more on the 'community' aspect of the research (which seems to come later in the section starting 'The research occurring in these spaces...'. Organisationally, I'd suggest moving this section on interview approach to before the 'vignette' section to keep the strictly methodological sections together.

Thank you for this suggestion. We re-organised the methods section to improve the logic and flow of the argument.

○ 'Taking this approach, moved the emphasis away from solely conveying experiences of food insecurity towards drawing upon the varying organisational emphases and remits in a spirit of mutualism'- not clear what you mean here

Thank you for this suggestion. We have re-written this sentence and clarified it.

○ 'It immersed us in the foodscape of the initiative and enabled us to draw upon the foodscapes of both the organisers and customers in situ.'- needs definition of what you mean by foodscape here- what does it mean to 'draw upon' a foodscape in situ? HOW did eating together immerse you in the organisational foodscape- needs

> unpacking/clarifying.
>
> Thank you. We have removed this sentence as it is better explained in the preceding paragraphs.
>
>> ○ In 'results', not clear whether the quotes came from interviews or during shared mealtimes or were all interviews 'meal-centred'? Some sense of how eating together might have affected participant narratives or provided triangulation opportunity could be useful e.g. if recording elicitations during meals, what were implications for confidentiality?
>
> Thank you for this comment. We added further clarification in the results section. All interviews were recorded in-sit, or in meal-centred settings but in order to capture the participants' voice effectively (and not capture co-diners conversations), the interviews were conducted at a side table on the edge of each dining space and the recording device was positioned right in front of the diner rather than on the middle of the dining table.
>
> *Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?*
>> ○ Authors note that they intend to more fully draw out conclusions in future writing; more detailed elaboration of the food wellbeing model would go someway to linking the observations to the conclusions, which authors do note are provisional given the complexity of the subject matter at hand
>
> Thank you for this. We have included some additional detail on the well-being model.
>
> *Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?*
>> ○ Some terms throughout could do with explaining ('destructuration', 'foodscapes', -first time you mention 'commensality' it's not explained, 'commensurate qualities of food'- do you mean 'commensal'?, 'consumer vulnerability').
>
> Thank you for pointing this out. We added further clarification of these terms.
>
> Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?
> Yes
>
> *Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?*
>> ○ The paragraph ending 'these emergent findings argue for a more sensitive means of articulating the experiences of both food insecure and broader 'social eaters', and their foodscapes' could go further in arguing what those sensitive means might look like, and be more explicit in articulating what 'destigmatising' and 'reframing' these initiatives would look like, and how these reframings might be put into action (beyond academia).
>
> Thank you for this comment. We added some further reflection on how de-stigmatising and reframing could be envisaged.
>> ○ Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
>
> Partly
>> ○ Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
>
> Partly
>> ○ Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly
- ○ If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable
- ○ Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

No source data required
- ○ Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Partly
- ○ Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Not applicable
- ○ Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes
- ○ Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes
- ○ Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Not applicable

Competing Interests: No completing interests.