



# THE BIG LUNCH IMPACT AND LEGACY: THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY EVENTS



eden project  
**COMMUNITIES**

the big lunch

COMMUNITY  
FUND  
eden project

## AUTHORSHIP AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The **Institute for Voluntary Action Research** works with charities, foundations and public agencies to strengthen communities across the UK through action research.

This report has been written by **Dr. Vita Terry, Katie Turner** and **Keeva Rooney**, based on interviews and desk research carried out by the authors with **Houda Davis, Rebecca Moran, Professor Marilyn Taylor** and **Dr. Steve Cinderby**.

Thanks to the **Eden Project Communities team** and **Big Lunch participants** for giving up their time to take part in this project and for sharing their experiences and ideas so freely and openly.

**IVAR** we listen, and  
learn together



# CONTENTS

<b>The Big Lunch Impact and Legacy</b> .....	1	<b>3 Building a sense of social cohesion</b> .....	21
<b>Authorship and Acknowledgements</b> .....	2	3.1 A tapestry of community activity	23
<b>Contents</b> .....	3	3.2 Informal local volunteering	25
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	4	3.3 Building a shared identity and sense of community	27
Introduction	5	3.4 Community preparedness for crisis	29
The Big Lunch as a Catalyst	6	<b>4 An opportunity for collaborative working</b> .....	30
Conclusion	8	4.1 Building community capacity	32
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	9	4.2 A space to practice community leadership	34
1.1 About The Big Lunch	10	<b>5 Challenges</b> .....	36
1.2 Research approach	11	<b>6 Conclusion</b> .....	41
1.3 This report	11	<b>Appendix and references</b> .....	43
<b>2 Place-based connections</b> .....	11	Appendix One: Outline of data collection tools	43
2.1 Encouraging inclusivity	14	Appendix Two: Outline of case study areas	44
2.2 Building Relationships	16	Appendix Three: Outcomes and indicators table	46
2.3 Addressing isolation and loneliness	17	References	47
2.4 Strengthening people's relationship to a place	18		
2.5 Enabling local connections	19		

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) was appointed to work with Eden Project Communities (EPC) to undertake research exploring the legacy of The Big Lunch.

The main research question looked at was:

**TO WHAT EXTENT DOES ATTENDING A BIG LUNCH EVENT CONTRIBUTE TO AN INDIVIDUAL'S AND A COMMUNITY'S LASTING SENSE OF LOCAL COHESION AND, IN TURN, TO THE COMMUNITY WELLBEING OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD?**

Earlier evaluation findings show that The Big Lunch has an immediate, positive impact on connections and relationships within communities. This research looked at what happens on the day of Big Lunch events, but also explored if and how this impact is sustained, embedded or built on beyond the event. Our findings show that Big Lunch events do have an impact beyond the day itself. **Big Lunch events have become**

**an important part of local community calendars, contributing over time to lasting, positive changes in the wellbeing and cohesion of neighbourhoods.**

This executive summary shares what we have learnt about how Big Lunch events are impacting on the cohesion and wellbeing of the communities we studied, and it highlights how it can serve as a catalyst for further collaborative action.

## SPARKING PLACE-BASED CONNECTIONS

The Big Lunch consolidates certain community-based principles and practices within a single event: using food as a vehicle to bring people together; celebrating and strengthening residents' connection to a place; and providing an opportunity for individuals to form new connections and relationships with their neighbours.

### CREATING CONNECTIONS

The Big Lunch is seen as an opportunity to strengthen existing and forge new connections, often between individuals and groups that may be less likely to interact due to differences in age, culture, economic background, etc.

**FOOD... NATURALLY BRINGS US TOGETHER, AS HUMAN BEINGS, TO GIVE US THAT WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE. AT THE SAME TIME IT CAN UNLOCK THAT CONVERSATION ABOUT YOUR PLACE, WHERE THE ISSUES ARE, AND WHERE THE OPPORTUNITIES ARE.**

- LOCAL PARTNER

The Big Lunch is not just about connecting people through food, but about connecting them in a different way with the place in which they live, highlighting the positives in their communities and drawing attention to what needs to be done, e.g. where buildings need repainting or rubbish needs clearing. It is up to the individuals hosting The Big Lunch to define 'place' – it can be as small as a BBQ in a garden or street, or as large as an area of a city. Through participating in Big Lunch events, participants are encouraged to get to know their area and see it in a new and often more positive light.

**THERE'S THAT SENSE OF REBUILDING AND REGENERATING THE AREA... THE BIG LUNCH CAN BE TRIGGERING THAT AS WELL AS CHANGING PEOPLE'S MINDSETS... WE CAN HELP CHANGE THE NARRATIVE... IT'S ALSO A WAY OF... MOVING AWAY FROM OUR INDIVIDUAL, ISOLATIONIST BEHAVIOUR... BUT KNOWING THAT YOU CAN JUST GO BACK IN YOUR FRIEND ZONE 80 YARDS AWAY.**

- CO-ORGANISER



## THE BIG LUNCH AS A CATALYST

The Big Lunch acts as a simple but powerful catalyst for building connections within a community through sharing food and skills – and by harnessing the passion, energy and skills of volunteers who are committed to helping to bring about positive change in their communities.

### VOLUNTEERING

Informal local volunteering<sup>1</sup> is a vital part of The Big Lunch, with many areas relying on volunteers to organise events. Volunteer roles for Big Lunch events are designed based on the talent, interests and skills of the individuals wanting to get involved, empowering people to do so in a more meaningful way. Volunteers felt their work on The Big Lunch gave them a sense of purpose and an understanding of their 'role' in the local community, aided their personal growth, and allowed them to showcase their skills:

“

IT MADE ME GET OUT AND HELP. IT MADE ME FEEL USEFUL KNOWING THAT I HAD HELPED SOMEBODY, EVEN IF IN A SMALL WAY.

- PARTICIPANT

”

Volunteers enjoyed feeling part of something bigger and, since volunteering at The Big Lunch, many have gone on to volunteer for other local initiatives and community groups such as food banks and local charities.<sup>2</sup>





## A SPACE TO PRACTISE SKILLS

The link to Eden Project Communities and the network it provides also gives Big Lunch participants access to support and resources to help them build and hone their community leadership

skills. Our research recognised an additional space<sup>3</sup> created by The Big Lunch to practise community leadership skills learnt and developed during the process. For example:

- How to work with and draw on the community to hold an event
- How to encourage a transparent process by listening and promoting dialogue
- Bringing in different stakeholders and equally valuing their skills, knowledge and expertise
- Delegating roles and responsibilities
- How to avoid over-organising or demanding too much from people
- How to ensure individuals lead on activities, promoting autonomy and a feeling that they have collective ownership over the day

## COLLABORATIVE WORKING

The Big Lunch helps to create the conditions for collaborative working, which can help strengthen existing relationships and build new ones. Local partners joined forces with Big Lunches in a range of ways including:

- Helping with the design and delivery of the event, e.g. helping to engage volunteers through their networks
- Providing venue space
- Hosting a stall or activity
- Helping to fundraise

The Big Lunch also provides an opportunity to address

power dynamics and challenge hierarchical practices within communities. For example, a common theme described by Big Lunch organisers was not knowing who to contact in the local authority about things like road closures.

Seeing local authorities change from working for communities to working with them – e.g. with organisation or providing materials for events – breaks down barriers and misconceptions and helps build stronger relationships. By working together and getting to know each other, volunteers learn who to go to for help when they want to set up an event.

## CONCLUSION

The Big Lunch provides an **accessible** and **inclusive** starting point for residents to meet one another, find out more about their local area, and about other opportunities to get involved. Big Lunch events are often used as a deliberate tool to tackle and overcome local divisions or a lack of cohesion. The Big Lunch provides the ideal mechanism as events can be tailored to, appeal to, and be inclusive of, different age groups, cultures and interests.

**The connection to place is key.** Through their participation in Big Lunch events, residents are encouraged to get to know their area and see it in a new and often more positive light. This has resulted in residents not only getting involved on the day of events but going on to participate in and volunteer for other local initiatives. This has a long-term, cumulative effect on the wellbeing of a place, as residents take greater pride in their local area and so continue to invest in its improvement and develop their skills and expertise. In particular, Big Lunch events provide a safe and inclusive space for residents to practise community leadership skills, such as how to work with and draw on the community to hold an event and how to create spaces for community dialogue.

Our report shows that The Big Lunch plays, and will continue to play, an exciting role in helping to create and sustain thriving communities by harnessing the incredible energy, passion and skills of individuals who want to make a difference within their locality.

**THE BIG LUNCH  
PLAYS AN EXCITING  
ROLE IN HELPING  
TO CREATE AND  
SUSTAIN THRIVING  
COMMUNITIES**





---

# 1. INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) was appointed to work with Eden Project Communities (EPC) to undertake research exploring the legacy of The Big Lunch.

The main research question was:

**TO WHAT EXTENT DOES ATTENDING A BIG LUNCH EVENT CONTRIBUTE TO AN INDIVIDUAL'S AND A COMMUNITY'S SENSE OF LOCAL COHESION AND, IN TURN, TO THE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD?**

This report outlines findings from the research on the long-term impact of The Big Lunch on individuals and communities and highlights the implications for The Big Lunch moving forward.



## 1.1 ABOUT THE BIG LUNCH

The Big Lunch was set up in 2009 and is the UK's annual get-together for neighbours across the four nations. It runs every June in communities across the UK to bring neighbours together in a nationwide act of community and friendship. The Big Lunch is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and sits alongside a range of other

EPC community-focused activities, including Community Camps and free online workshops, and support for its wider community network. The Big Lunch has extensive reach: in 2021 nine million people took part in a Big Lunch and a further six million took part in partner activities as part of the Month of Community.



## 1.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

IVAR worked collaboratively with EPC to collect data and evidence to:

1. Learn about the transformative effect of The Big Lunch programme
2. Learn about the range of factors that contribute to making this impact possible
3. Contribute data and evidence to EPC's growing body of research

This report draws on findings from the following data collection activities conducted between May 2020 and June 2021 (see Appendix One for detailed methods and sample):

- **A desk-based review**
- **Eight interviews** with key members of staff from across the EPC team
- **Facilitated workshops** (including a theory of change workshop)
- Co-designed an **online survey** with EPC that went out to all Big Lunch Organisers (total n=211; Legacy question response n=73)
- **Eight in-depth case studies** of local communities running Big Lunches; we spoke to 34 participants (see Appendix Two for an outline of Big Lunch areas and activities)
- **A 'share and build workshop'** held with Big Lunch organisers and the EPC team to share findings and shape the key messages

The research was conducted during Covid 19, a period of heightened uncertainty for individuals and organisations. In 2020, The Big Lunch, which is normally delivered in-person, supported communities to move activities online or hold socially

distant events for the first ever 'Big Virtual Lunch'. During this time, we have seen a growing recognition of communities stepping up to support their neighbours during the pandemic and the community power generated from coming together.

## 1.3 THIS REPORT

Earlier evaluation findings<sup>4</sup> show that The Big Lunch has an immediate, positive impact on connections and relationships within communities. This research looked at what happens on the day of Big Lunch events, but also explored if and how this impact is sustained, embedded or built on beyond the event. Our findings show that Big Lunch events do have an impact beyond the day itself, for example, providing opportunities to bring together and involve communities in the design

and planning process. Big Lunch events have become an important part of local community calendars, contributing over time to lasting, positive changes in the wellbeing and cohesion of neighbourhoods. This report will outline what we have learnt about how Big Lunch events are impacting on the cohesion and wellbeing of the communities we studied, and it highlights how it can serve as a catalyst for further collaborative action.

This report is set out under the following chapters:

- **INTRODUCTION**
- **PLACE-BASED CONNECTIONS**
- **BUILDING A SENSE OF SOCIAL COHESION**
- **THE BIG LUNCH AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COLLABORATIVE WORKING**
- **CHALLENGES**
- **CONCLUSION**



---

## 2. PLACE-BASED CONNECTIONS

# PLACE-BASED CONNECTIONS



Food and the principle of coming together to share food or a meal is something everyone can relate to, regardless of age, ethnicity, culture, class or religion. The Big Lunch uses food as the starting point to create shared community spaces that bridge real or perceived divides within communities and bring together people that would not otherwise meet. The survey of Big Lunch organisers supports this, with 96% saying that sharing food is a great way to encourage people to take part and 98% agreeing that food helps to foster connections/start conversations.

**“ FOOD... NATURALLY BRINGS US TOGETHER, AS HUMAN BEINGS, TO GIVE US THAT WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE. AT THE SAME TIME IT CAN UNLOCK THAT CONVERSATION ABOUT YOUR PLACE, WHERE THE ISSUES ARE, AND WHERE THE OPPORTUNITIES ARE. ”**  
- LOCAL PARTNER

## 2.1 ENCOURAGING INCLUSIVITY

The Big Lunch reaches people from different ethnicities, age groups, culture and socio-economic backgrounds; in 2021, 27% of Big Lunch pack requests came from the most deprived parts of the UK. The Big Lunch is seen as an opportunity to forge connections between individuals and groups that may not otherwise take place:

“ HOUSEHOLDS OF TWO TOTALLY DIFFERENT TYPES OF PEOPLE COULD SIT ALMOST SIDE BY SIDE... AND SAY, 'WELL TRY THIS... THIS IS A REALLY NICE CHOCOLATE CAKE... TRY THAT'... AND ALL OF A SUDDEN, THE BARRIERS ARE BEING BROKEN, THEY'RE COMMUNICATING WHERE PREVIOUSLY THEY WOULDN'T. IT'S JUST A SIMPLE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE OVER FOOD.  
- PARTICIPANT ”

“ PEOPLE DON'T GET THE INTERGENERATIONAL OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT AS MUCH THESE DAYS. PEOPLE AREN'T LIVING WITH/ NEAR THEIR GRANDPARENTS ANYMORE.  
- PARTICIPANT ”



The Big Lunch events in this study took place on a street or streets where community events might not normally happen: for example, in a local park that residents want to turn into more of a community hub; on an estate that struggles with inter-estate divides.

Three factors help make Big Lunch events inclusive and accessible to all community members:

1. **Where the event takes place.** Careful thought goes into the physical space in which a Big Lunch event is hosted: for example, hosting it in an open, visible, accessible and neutral space that allows people to watch and observe before committing:

“ THE SQUARE, IT'S [NEXT TO] A VERY BUSY ROAD. SO... YOU'LL SEE FOLKS IN THE CARS LOOKING IN AND SEEING WHAT'S GOING ON... YOU'LL USUALLY SEE THEM GO ROUND THE SQUARE, PARK, AND COME IN... [ASKING] 'WHAT'S ALL THIS?', THEN YOU'LL HAVE THE CONVERSATION.  
- PARTICIPANT ”

2. **Free or affordable food and activities** encourage people to take part regardless of income.
3. **Activities that appeal to different ages and cultural interests.** Farland Way's 2020 Big Lunch included some house-to-house food deliveries. They realised from doing this that there are residents who do want to get involved but are not able, or don't feel comfortable enough, to engage in the larger event on the day.



In one area of Peckham in south-east London, the residents that The Big Lunch organiser works with are predominantly housed within high-rise flats and come from a range of different cultural backgrounds. They saw The Big Lunch as an opportunity to **'bring all these different groups together'**, through providing free food and family activities. Although people were encouraged to bring their own food if they wanted to, organisers also provided free chicken and pizza for everyone that wanted it. Making sure that everyone had access to some of the same food, regardless of tastes or income, was a way of encouraging everyone to attend:

***'Come help and get some free chicken and pizza or get your bike fixed'.***

A general principle of The Big Lunch is to encourage people to bring and share food. It is recognised by many organisers as an important part of bringing people together and enabling them to connect with others:

“ IN EDINBURGH AN OLD GUY WHO HAD A BIT OF A REPUTATION OF BEING A BIT OF A THORNY PERSON FINALLY CAME OUT OF HIS HOUSE AND ASKED WHAT WAS GOING ON IN A GRUFF VOICE. AND WHEN IT WAS EXPLAINED TO HIM HE SAYS, ‘HANG ON, I’LL BE BACK’, GOES AWAY TO HIS HOUSE AND COMES BACK WITH THIS BIG POT OF SOUP (HIS OWN RECIPE). AND FOR A COUPLE YEARS... HIS THING NOW WAS THE SOUP AND BRINGING THAT OUT FOR THE BIG LUNCH... AGAIN, THAT PERCEPTION, ASSUMPTIONS WE HAVE ABOUT PEOPLE BECAUSE WE DON’T KNOW THEIR STORY... HERE’S A SAFE SPACE AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO UNLOCK, HIS GIFT WAS THE SOUP AND BRINGING THAT SOUP, AND THAT HELPS HIM CONNECT.

- PARTICIPANT

## 2.2 BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Big Lunch events help to instigate longer-term shifts in residents’ relationships with each other in a community. The Big Lunch builds social capital, which means access to knowledge, skills and resources. The Big Lunch gives people the confidence to build relationships with neighbours and cuts across differences in age, culture, etc. Nearly **three quarters (74%)** of Big Lunch organisers agree that The Big Lunch helps to bring different generations together.

“ PEOPLE HAVE GOTTEN TO KNOW THEIR NEIGHBOURS BETTER, AND ARE CONNECTING BETTER, AND HELP FOR ONE ANOTHER IS MORE INTERGENERATIONAL.

- LEAD ORGANISER

Some Big Lunches achieve this by hosting events in a local community hub or community centre, run by their staff and volunteers. After attending a Big Lunch at these locations, people often sign up to participate in other groups and activities in the community:

“ THERE AEE SOME LADIES WHO ARE PART OF THE AFRICAN COMMUNITY ASYLUM SEEKER FAMILIES. THE BIG LUNCH... WAS A LOVELY WAY FOR THEM TO COME AND CONNECT WITH THEIR FAMILY AND THE CHILDREN MORE. AND AFTER THAT, THEY STARTED TO CONNECT WITH MORE THINGS... ONE OF THEM SPECIFICALLY STARTED BEING PART OF THAT LITTLE PLANNING GROUP IN THE HUB. MOM WAS REALLY BRINGING SOME OF HER IDEAS AND HELPING US THINK ABOUT HOW WE CAN ENGAGE WITH THAT COMMUNITY IN A BETTER WAY.

- CO-ORGANISER

The connections made at The Big Lunch are often lasting, with **59%** in the survey saying they have ongoing connections with their neighbours and **64%** saying they have attended follow-up events.

## 2.3 CONTRIBUTES TO ADDRESSING ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

**In recent years, the cohesiveness of UK society has been drawn into question, with increasing numbers of people experiencing loneliness and isolation.<sup>56</sup> This isolation and loneliness has been exacerbated by Covid 19.<sup>7</sup>**

Big Lunch organisers work to engage with groups or individuals that might be experiencing isolation (e.g. young people or lone parents) and make events inclusive for them. 74% of Big Lunch attendees in EPC's recent audience survey agreed that participating in The Big Lunch made them feel less lonely.

Big Lunch organisers also introduce residents to other people/activities in their community and broker relationships. In one area, a newly arrived resident from India asked The Big Lunch organiser if she could help them host a Diwali-themed Big Lunch. She was a young mother and had found it challenging to find opportunities to meet other community members. The Big Lunch organiser introduced her to local neighbours:

**I KNEW MOST OF THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE, THEY WERE MOSTLY PEOPLE WHO WERE BORN AND BROUGHT UP HERE. AND SHE'D [NEWLY ARRIVED RESIDENT] NEVER REALLY HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK TO THEM... WE WERE JUST STANDING ON THE CORNER, YOU KNOW, PEOPLE WOULD PASS BY AND I WOULD SAY, OH, THIS IS [NAME OF RESIDENT], SHE LIVES ON YOUR OWN ROAD... PEOPLE ARE SHY. AND YOU KNOW, THEY DON'T WANT TO COME TO KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR WITHOUT INVITATION TO.**  
- LEAD ORGANISER

The Big Lunch also facilitates **integration** within the community.

**IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO GET THAT INDIAN TOUCH IN NORTH WALES BECAUSE IT IS COMPLETELY REMOTE AND ISOLATED. IN THE SENSE LIKE IN ENGLAND, YOU GET THAT EXPOSURE. BUT HERE I WAS FEELING VERY LONELY. AND THEN EVERYBODY CAME TOGETHER. AND THEN WE ORGANISED LUNCH AND EVERYBODY BROUGHT THEIR SOMETHING FROM HOME LIKE IT WAS POTLUCK. AND IT WAS NICE - I REALLY FELT LIKE I'M HOME.**  
- PARTICIPANT

There are also several examples of how Big Lunches help to address loneliness and isolation for older residents:

**THERE IS A LADY WHO LOST HER HUSBAND RECENTLY... SHE WAS QUITE ISOLATED... [SHE] HAD MOVED INTO THE VILLAGE IN THE LAST 10 YEARS BUT, BECAUSE SHE WAS CARING FOR HER HUSBAND, SHE DIDN'T HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO MEET ANYBODY. I TOOK HER TO THE BIG LUNCH. AND THROUGH THAT SHE'S MADE LOTS OF CONNECTIONS, AND NOW HAS... FRIENDS TO GO FOR COFFEE WITH AND STUFF AND SHE'LL HELP OUT IN THE CHARITY SHOP.**  
- CO-ORGANISER



## 2.4 STRENGTHENING PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIP TO A PLACE

The Big Lunch is not just about connecting people through food, but about connecting people in their communities. How 'place' is defined is up to the individuals hosting The Big Lunch. It can be as small as a BBQ in a garden or street or as large as an area of a city. The Big Lunch provides the opportunity for individuals to connect in a different way with the place in which they live: ***'It helps to quietly build relationships and partnerships and make people more aware of what their local place has or doesn't have'*** – Local partner. This happens informally, through conversations with neighbours, as well as formally at Big Lunch events that have information stalls for residents to find out more about local services and activities.

Big Lunch events often involve decorating the place where they are held. Big Lunch organisers explained that this helps people see the place where they live in a different light and pay more attention to the environment around them. For example, when one Big Lunch closed the road for their 2018 event, residents commented on things they had previously paid little attention to:

“  
**PEOPLE NOTICED THE TREES LINING THE STREET AND THE ARCHITECTURE AND RED BRICKS OF THE HOUSES, THINGS THAT THEY WOULD NORMALLY NOT GIVE A SECOND GLANCE TO.**  
– LEAD ORGANISER  
”

For the more established and larger Big Lunches, a great deal of thought goes into how to help instil pride in the local area among residents. The simple act of choosing where to host a Big Lunch celebration achieves this, along with: inviting key local figures to attend and meet residents; local radio stations hosting shows from the event and interviewing residents; external organisations setting up stalls; and showcasing local talent. All of these activities are about residents and their area being seen and promoted in a positive light:

“  
**BRINGING LOCAL PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES AND ESTATES TOGETHER INCREASES THAT INCLUSIVENESS, BUT ALSO SHOWS THE WEALTH OF TALENT THAT THEY HAD.**  
– LEAD ORGANISER  
”

“  
**SHOWCASING THE CREATIVITY WITHIN OUR AREA. AND THE FACT THAT JUST BECAUSE IT'S A DEPRIVED AREA DOESN'T MEAN THAT WE DON'T HAVE PEOPLE WHO WANT TO WORK TOGETHER.**  
– LEAD ORGANISER  
”

Building a sense of responsibility and helping residents to want to give something back to their community are key objectives for all the case study organisers.

“  
**THERE'S THAT SENSE OF REBUILDING AND REGENERATING THE AREA ... THE BIG LUNCH CAN BE TRIGGERING THAT AS WELL AS CHANGING PEOPLE'S MINDSETS ... WE CAN HELP CHANGE THE NARRATIVE ... IT'S ALSO A WAY OF ... MOVING AWAY FROM OUR INDIVIDUAL, ISOLATIONIST BEHAVIOUR ... BUT KNOWING THAT YOU CAN JUST GO BACK IN YOUR FRIEND ZONE 80 YARDS AWAY.**  
– CO-ORGANISER  
”



Sandringham Park is a local green space (previously a quarry) in Wetherby, West Yorkshire, with a large grass field, wooded area, children's play park and adult gym equipment. Big Lunch events have been held here every year between 2012 and 2019. They are used as a way to build intergenerational connections and establish some ground rules around using the space. This has really helped reduce antisocial behaviour by building positive perceptions on both sides. ***'It's all about getting local people into the park, and really linked to health and wellbeing ... especially during this current pandemic, when parks have been the places that people have gone to, because it's one of the few places that they've been allowed to go to for their daily exercise'***. - Lead organiser

Since hosting The Big Lunch in the park, ***'it has gone from being the black spot to being one of the jewels in the crown'*** - Volunteer, and teenagers now take responsibility for keeping the park clean. The Big Lunch showcases why these spaces are important and increases pride in community spaces and builds a stronger sense of community.

## 2.5 NATIONAL CAMPAIGN HELPS TO ENABLE A LOCAL CONNECTION

The connection of The Big Lunch to a national campaign makes it different to many other community events. The national connection is recognised and appreciated: 79% of participants in the 2020 audience survey saw it as a national event and 89% said it is open/welcoming to all communities. For some areas, the national connection helped to provide a neutrality to the event, as it is not connected to a specific religion, or political or other agenda, but simply about forming connections in a place. This was particularly important in Northern Ireland, where there is high sensitivity towards events that are perceived to be connected to a particular political agenda:

“ IT WASN'T SORT OF SPECIFICALLY AROUND CELEBRATING SOME BATTLE OVER 400 YEARS AGO, YOU KNOW, IT WAS TOTALLY APOLITICAL, AND EVEN, YOU KNOW, A NON-RELIGIOUS EVENT AS WELL, THAT, I THINK THAT'S IMPORTANT TOO, BECAUSE IT WAS AN EVENT TO CELEBRATE WHO WE ARE AS HUMAN BEINGS AS WELL.  
- CO-ORGANISER ”

The connection to a national campaign also helps give status to local events. It makes residents feel special on the day, knowing that they are part of something bigger than their local area. Some organisers also felt that it made

it easier to knock on people's doors and invite them to a Big Lunch:

“ IT IS ALMOST LIKE A CERTAIN ALIBI, CERTAINLY A CATALYST. IT IS EASY TO NOT GET AROUND TO THINGS WHEN THERE IS NOT A SPECIFIC DATE, AND IF IT IS PART OF A NATIONAL INITIATIVE, IT IS LIKE YEAH WE ARE ALL DOING IT – WHICH NORMALIZES IT, ENCOURAGES IT AND REALLY SUPPORTS IT.  
- LEAD ORGANISER ”

Big Lunch template materials provided by EPC made the process of producing leaflets or banners easier for organisers. The EPC and Big Lunch brands give credibility to promotional materials, while still allowing areas to personalise them. The EPC brand has helped some to get the support of local residents and organisations, and attract future funding:

“ OTHERWISE, THERE IS TOO MUCH ICE TO BREAK, IT IS LIKE AN EXCUSE. I GAVE UP SMOKING WHEN IT WAS A QUIT WEEK, BECAUSE YOU ARE ON A WAVE, IT IS THE ENERGY OF THE TIME. SAME WITH EDEN PROJECT YOU HAVE GOT THIS WAVE. IT IS INTENTIONAL, LET'S MEET OUR NEIGHBOURS, IT IS OUT THERE, PEOPLE ARE THINKING AND TALKING ABOUT IT. YOU ARE NOT A CRANK GOING FROM DOOR TO DOOR SAYING LET'S GET TOGETHER. IT IS A PUBLIC INVITATION THAT CROSSES ALL KINDS OF BOUNDARIES, IT IS MUCH EASIER TO USE A VEHICLE LIKE THAT.  
- LEAD ORGANISER ”





---

### **3. BUILDING A SENSE OF SOCIAL COHESION**

# BUILDING A SENSE OF SOCIAL COHESION

Meeting new people and building connections is an integral part of social cohesion and wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> The Big Lunch enables this by acting as a catalyst for other community action and initiatives, and by complementing existing activity:

“

**OTHER ORGANISATIONS HAVE BEEN CONNECTED TOO – THEY CAN CONNECT AND HELP EACH OTHER. WE ONLY TEND TO KNOW OF THOSE THAT WE’RE INVOLVED IN, SO THE BIG LUNCH CONNECTED ORGANISATIONS AND HELPED US REALISE THE TAPESTRY OF ALL THE COMMUNITY GROUPS.**

- PARTICIPANT

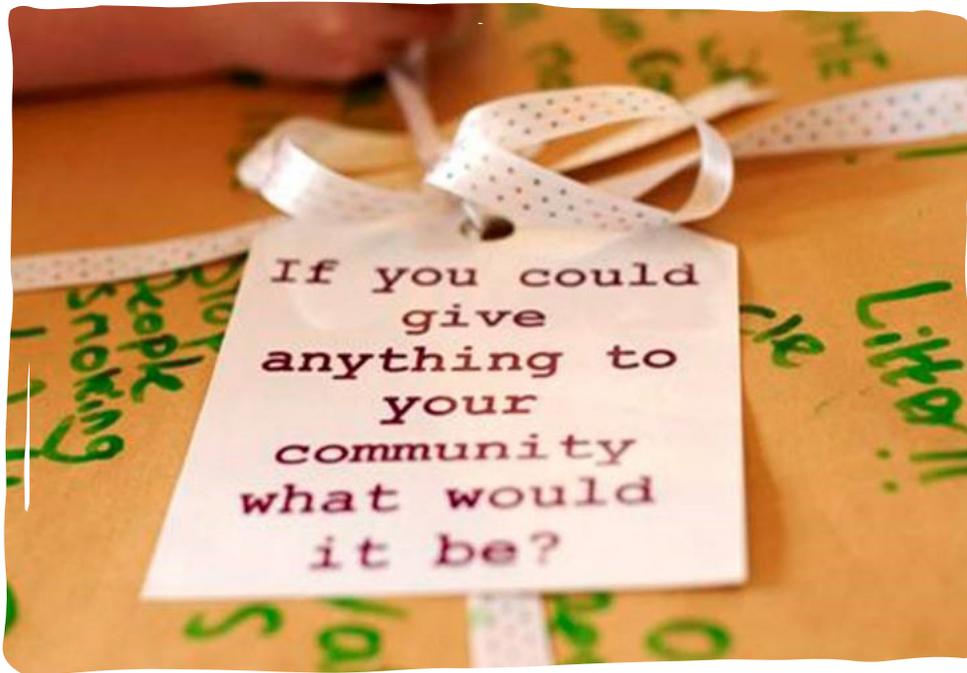
”



### 3.1 A TAPESTRY OF COMMUNITY ACTIVITY

Residents that are involved in local community action are more invested in their community and develop a stronger sense of belonging. When residents attend a Big Lunch they often find out about, and sign up to volunteer for, other community initiatives, as well as meeting and building relationships with community leaders:

“ ...THE MEN'S SHED. THAT'S BEEN GOOD BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE AWARE OF, YOU KNOW, MAYBE THINK 'I'VE HEARD OF THE MEN'S SHED, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS OR WHAT THEY DID'... AN AWARENESS OF 'OH, I DIDN'T KNOW SO AND SO OR THE CLUB HAD A MARQUEE', OR WHO TO CONTACT FOR FACE PAINTING, OR WHO TO CONTACT IF YOU WANT TO JOIN THE MEN'S SHED?  
- LEAD ORGANISER ”



Many residents go on to get involved in other community activity. The National Representative survey (2021) showed that 75% of attendees were more likely to get more involved in their community as a result of The Big Lunch and 72% said it encouraged people to get more involved in voluntary work.

Information stalls at Big Lunch events also help raise awareness of community activity by promoting local community groups, statutory services and businesses. Organisers in one area went a step further: they involved stallholders in a treasure hunt for local families where each stallholder held a clue. This actively drew people to the information stalls:

“ IF SOMEBODY TOOK IN EVEN JUST ONE OF THE STALLS, BECAUSE I THINK THERE WAS ABOUT 10 IN TOTAL, TO TAKE IN JUST ONE, YOU KNEW THAT EDUCATION OR INFORMATION WAS BEING PASSED ON.  
- PARTICIPANT ”



The Big Lunch in Peckham was used to inform local people about, and connect them to, services and amenities in the area. This helped **'families learning about organisations they'd never heard of'**. It was **'a prime opportunity to provide information, so we invited churches, mosques and other organisations... it became a community day. The Children's Centre were involved and others hosted stalls, local businesses were able to promote their services'**. Others like The Smoking Cessation Service and Diabetes UK were invited in response to a perceived need in the community. Local businesses were invited to support the event and in return their logos were placed on banners. This effort to link people to local services led to an increase in the number of people using the local library and 'more young book lovers', and new volunteers at the Children and Families Centre.



### 3.2 INFORMAL LOCAL VOLUNTEERING

**Informal local volunteering<sup>9</sup> is a vital part of The Big Lunch; many areas rely on volunteers to organise events. Volunteering often increases during and after Big Lunch events. This is echoed in findings from the audience survey where 43% of participants had taken up new volunteering opportunities because of The Big Lunch.**

The Big Lunch volunteers in this study had gone on to volunteer for other local initiatives and community groups:

**“WELL, IF YOU THINK ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL INVOLVED IN THE BIG LUNCH, THEY DON'T JUST STOP AT THE BIG LUNCH – THEY INVOLVE THEMSELVES IN SO MANY OTHER THINGS. SO THEY FEEL THEY'RE PART OF THE COMMUNITY IN THEIR ROLE, AND WHAT THEY IDENTIFY THEIR ROLE AS.”**  
- PARTICIPANT

**“WE INVITED THEM TO COME ALONG AND GIVE US A HAND IN RETURN FOR FREE CHICKEN AND GETTING THEIR BIKES FIXED... YOUNG PEOPLE COULD MEET THEIR FRIENDS, HAVE A LAUGH, EVERYONE LEFT WITH A SMILE ON THEIR FACES.”**  
- LEAD ORGANISER

Most people volunteer because they want to help people in their community.<sup>10</sup> The same motivation applies to Big Lunch volunteers who are keen to help improve issues in their own locality.

Volunteering with The Big Lunch helped create a sense of belonging to the community and feeling a part of something bigger:

**“THAT'S WHAT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IS ALL ABOUT... FEELING LIKE YOU'RE MAKING A CONTRIBUTION, YOU REALLY HELP MAKE THIS HAPPEN BY DOING WHATEVER IT WAS YOU DID.”**  
- LOCAL PARTNER

**“IT MADE ME GET OUT AND HELP. IT MADE ME FEEL USEFUL KNOWING THAT I HAD HELPED SOMEBODY, EVEN IF IN A SMALL WAY.”**  
- PARTICIPANT

Volunteers said their work on The Big Lunch gave them a sense of purpose and an understanding of their 'role' in the local community by aiding their personal growth and allowing them to showcase their skills. It also helped improve wellbeing:

**“WE HAVE QUITE A FEW VOLUNTEERS THAT HAVE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES, AND WE KNOW THAT VOLUNTEERING HAS HAD A REALLY POSITIVE IMPACT ON THEM... WE ALWAYS SAY THAT A LOT OF THE ACTIVITIES WE DO, THE BENEFIT IS JUST AS MUCH FOR THE VOLUNTEERS AS IT CAN BE FOR THE PERSON COMING ALONG AND USING THE SERVICE.”**  
- LOCAL PARTNER



Big Lunch volunteers also have a key role to play in bringing people together. In 2017, Holylands Big Lunch included volunteers representing multiple nationalities, who in turn invited other members of their community to get involved on the day. For example, one volunteer from the Roma community was approached by several children from that community asking if they could join in with The Big Lunch celebrations and activities. She described how often children from the Roma community are accustomed to 'being chased away' from similar events. Instead, she was able to encourage them to take part. More broadly,

the National Representative survey (2021) found that 80% of attendees say that The Big Lunch helps to bring people from different ethnic backgrounds together.

Volunteering is a key part of The Big Lunch model because it also embodies the same principle of coming together to share something. In areas where Big Lunches have grown to accommodate large numbers of residents, we saw a move from sharing food to instead providing catering. The focus is still on everyone coming together around food, but the focus on everyone having something to share has shifted to volunteering:

“ I COULD SEE THE POTENTIAL FOR VOLUNTEERING AND ALL SORTS OF GETTING INVOLVED IN ALL SORTS OF WAYS WITH SOMETHING LIKE THAT, BECAUSE THERE WAS SO MUCH THAT NEEDED TO BE DONE... BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IS ALL ABOUT REALLY, YOU KNOW... FEELING LIKE YOU'RE PART OF IT, FEELING LIKE YOU'RE MAKING A CONTRIBUTION... BY DOING WHATEVER IT WAS YOU DID. ”  
- LOCAL PARTNER

### 3.3 BUILDING A SHARED IDENTITY AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The Big Lunch brings together people who would not usually interact and helps inform residents about their local area and community activity. This combination helps to create a '**a feeling of connectedness, belonging and pride**' that is shared by all residents:

“  
**GIVING PEOPLE A TASTE OF WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO FIND A COMMON GOAL.**  
- CO-ORGANISER  
”

Creating a shared identity helps to build a stronger sense of community. By celebrating the community, The Big Lunch helps to 'build community solidarity and cohesion', and enables areas to 'focus on the remaking of collective memory of a community and increase a sense of belonging'.<sup>11</sup>



The Big Lunch helps people to feel more connected to their community:

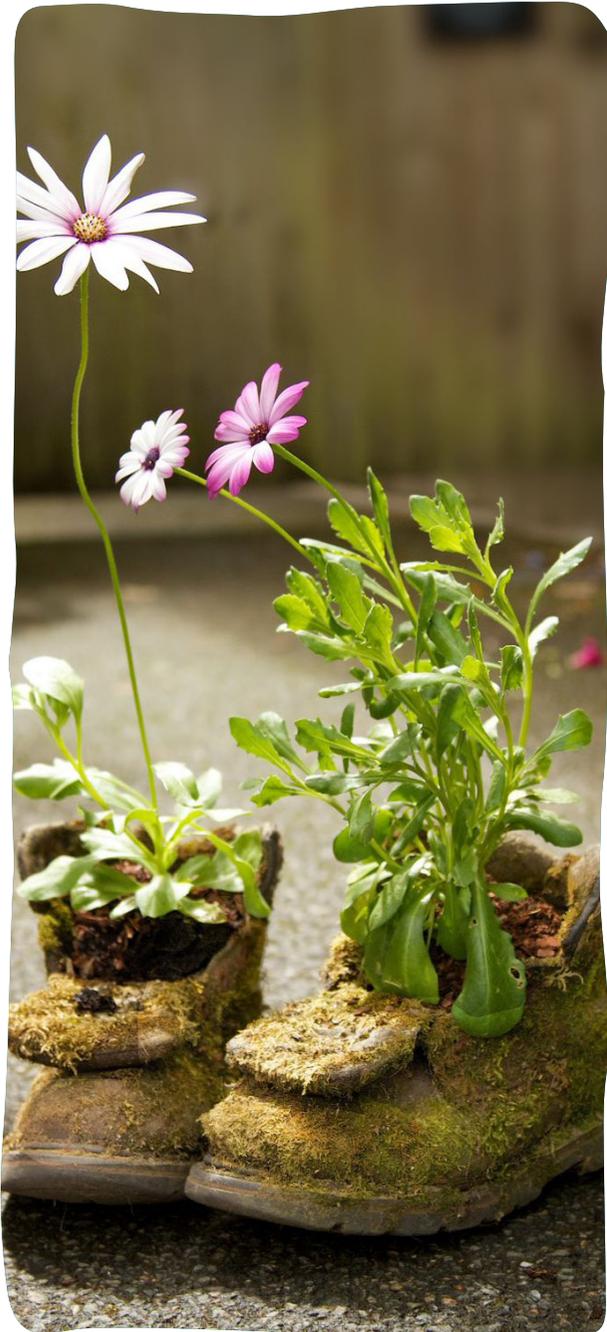
“  
**AFTERWARDS, RESIDENTS REPORTED TO THE COUNCIL THERE IS A REALLY STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY HERE. IT DIDN'T VISIBLY CHANGE THINGS THAT MUCH, BUT IT DID GIVE PEOPLE THAT SENSE OF BELONGING AND THAT THERE IS A COMMUNITY HERE.**  
- LEAD ORGANISER  
”

This sentiment was shared in the survey, where 87% agreed or strongly agreed that '**It made me feel a part of something bigger**' and '**I feel a stronger sense of community**':

“  
**IT'S TAUGHT ME YOU HAVE TO PUT INTO A COMMUNITY, YOU CAN'T JUST EXPECT THE COMMUNITY TO GIVE YOU KNOW. YOU HAVE TO BE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN MAKING THAT COMMUNITY AND THEN BREAKING DOWN THOSE BARRIERS.**  
- CO-ORGANISER  
”



Big Lunch organisers in Peckham were motivated **'to make the community a better place to live'** and tackle the **'narrow, limited views of Peckham'** as a troubled area with lots of antisocial behaviour. In one of the most deprived wards in the area, organisers wanted to **'encourage and empower young people to be more than just a stereotype'** and help them connect with positive role models in the community. Young people were also encouraged to help on the day, so it became a way of doing something together. The Big Lunch was also about **'showcasing local talent'** and **'help[ing] the community feel better about themselves'**, and **'to come together'**. It was **'a celebration of community'** and **'an acknowledgement that Peckham wasn't crime ridden and full of families that let their children run riot'**. Although organisers were particularly interested in attracting young people and their families, they wanted The Big Lunch to be for the whole of the community as an opportunity to **'unify and provide a positive experience'**.



### 3.4 COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS FOR CRISIS

A community with strong neighbourhood links is likely to be more resilient in the face of external shocks such as Covid 19.<sup>12</sup> This resilience is seen in the way that many Big Lunch areas established effective and rapid responses to Covid 19, such as setting up WhatsApp groups to connect neighbours, arranging groceries for quarantining residents, and picking up prescriptions for shielding neighbours. This was particularly evident in Big Lunches held in streets rather than larger community events, as these Big Lunches were more close-knit and had formed more trusting relationships.

The pandemic affected different people in different ways (and varied in terms of Covid 19 restrictions across the four nations), heightening existing social issues and inequalities. Some local residents, who had started to become engaged in their local area through The Big Lunch and other community activities, found lockdown worsened their mental health and severed connections to the community:

**THERE ARE A LOT OF RESIDENTS THAT WERE ALREADY STRUGGLING WITH SOME ELEMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH, PHYSICAL DISABILITY, OR ISOLATION BEFORE THE PANDEMIC... SO FOR THOSE PEOPLE, SOME OF THEM WERE STARTING TO TAKE SOME STEPS INTO MAKING SOME CONNECTIONS AND NOW THERE'S NO OPTIONS... THAT FEELING OF ISOLATION IS MORE ACUTE. AND THEY'RE MORE AWARE OF THAT. AND IT FEELS LIKE THEY'VE TAKEN MANY STEPS BACKWARDS.**

- LOCAL AUTHORITY MEMBER

One challenge for Big Lunch areas during the pandemic was to reconnect with isolated residents. Some Big Lunch organisers set up their own initiatives to help with this, while others co-ordinated efforts from street networks. This community response was seen in our survey findings, with three-quarters of respondents agreeing/strongly agreeing that 'I have felt supported by others in my community throughout the Coronavirus pandemic'. A further 83% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'Without informal volunteering, the community responses to Covid 19 would have failed'.

The Big Lunch was instrumental in some areas to alleviate social isolation during Covid 19. In 2020, two-thirds (64%) attended a virtual or socially distanced Big Lunch because: 'I thought it would be a good event for lifting the spirits of people who have been feeling lonely as a result of the lockdown'.

**[THE BIG LUNCH] GIVES PEOPLE A PURPOSE AND CONNECTION. I KNOW THAT PEOPLE ARE DESPERATE TO GET BACK TO IT [AFTER COVID] – THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE.**

- PARTICIPANT



---

## 4. AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COLLABORATIVE WORKING

# AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COLLABORATIVE WORKING

Some areas worked with local organisations and councils to find a space to host The Big Lunch, such as a town square or hall. Partnership working through Big Lunches occurred in a number of ways, including:

- External organisations, such as churches and village halls, hosting Big Lunches at their premises
- Drawing on a variety of groups and organisations to contribute and lead on activities
- Distributing roles and responsibilities equally between external stakeholders to set up and organise an event

The Big Lunch provides an opportunity to promote and establish local collaborative working. This also has the potential to influence future initiatives and further contributions within the local community. The next section explores collaborative working through Big Lunch and the potential long-term impact of this.



## 4.1 BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

The Big Lunch is shaped by the needs, interests and issues of local areas. When planning an event, Big Lunch organisers start by focusing on the local community and identifying relevant issues, bringing individuals, groups and organisations together around a shared goal. For example, in Sandringham Park one of their objectives was to tackle anti-social behaviour. The organiser made a concerted effort to work with the local youth club, local schools, and community groups such as Scout clubs to hold conversations with young people about their needs and concerns. The Big Lunch provided an opportunity to bring young people and older residents together to create a dialogue and listen to each other's perspective in an inclusive and welcoming space. In turn, this led to an informal agreement to make the park a place that everyone can enjoy, and improved intergenerational relationships locally.

The Big Lunch helps to create the conditions for collaborative working, which can help to strengthen existing relationships and build new ones:

**“BIG LUNCH PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRING IN OTHER PROFESSIONALS. WE WERE ABLE TO MAKE NEW CONNECTIONS AND STRENGTHEN EXISTING ONES.”**  
- LOCAL PARTNER

A broad range of stakeholders play a role in setting up and organising Big Lunch events, including faith organisations, schools, local charities, community groups, local councils and local businesses, some of which may not otherwise get involved in community activities. In one area, The Big Lunch gave organisers a reason to approach a school that had previously been reluctant to get involved with community activities. There were also examples of Big Lunch organisers working with local businesses who were keen to contribute to local community activity but had previously had little opportunity to do so:

**“THE SHOPS, BUSINESSES HAVE BEEN SO SUPPORTIVE IN TERMS OF THE COMMUNITY COMPETITION THAT WE'VE HAD, AND THEY'RE ALWAYS, 'OH, YES, BUT THAT'S NO PROBLEM'. WE'VE HAD SUPERMARKETS DONATING TEA BAGS, BISCUITS, JUICE, COFFEE, SUGAR, YOU NAME IT.”**  
- LEAD ORGANISER

The Big Lunch also provides an opportunity to address power dynamics and challenge hierarchical practices within communities. For example, a common theme described by Big Lunch organisers was not knowing who was the right person in the local authority to contact about road closures.

The EPC staff played a connector role, linking the organisers with the appropriate local authority member:

**“I HAD TO HAVE A BIT OF A LEG UP FROM THE COUNTRY MANAGERS A COUPLE OF TIMES WHEN THAT PERSON WOULD CHANGE OR THERE WOULD BE NO RESPONSE FROM THEM.”**  
- LEAD ORGANISER

This process was described as extremely supportive and started to bridge these divides.

Seeing local authorities change from working for communities to working with them has broken down barriers and misconceptions. Some Big Lunch organisers worked collaboratively with their local council to organise the events and develop the event materials. This process of working together, getting to know individuals from the local authority better, learning where to go and who to work with if they wanted to set up an event, helped to build stronger relationships.

## LEADING TO OTHER INITIATIVES

In one area in Swansea there was concern from the local community about poor social cohesion and anti-social behaviour. Consultations were underway with the local council about how to address this situation. It was thought that having a physical space would be beneficial to bring the community together, to connect and provide additional support focused on local need. Around the same time the community held three different Big Lunch activities across several streets. This brought together a diverse community (including families, asylum seekers and refugees, and students), provided an experience of working collectively to run activities, and built connections between individuals and groups. These events were used as evidence for the local council to support the opening of a community hub in the area.



## 4.2 A SPACE TO PRACTISE COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

The energy and driving force behind a Big Lunch event often comes from one or two individuals who are well-known in the community and embedded within local activity. These trusted individuals hold relationships in their community and are responsible for drumming up community support for, and engagement in, yearly Big Lunch events. We found these 'champions' acted as 'the glue that stuck a lot of this together'.

“ SHE [BIG LUNCH ORGANISER] KNEW THEM ALL BY NAME... KNEW WHO THEIR PARENTS WERE, THEIR SISTERS AND BROTHERS... SHE JUST SEEMED CONNECTED INTO THE COMMUNITY IN A VERY GENTLE WAY.

- LOCAL PARTNER

”



Organising Big Lunch events provides a useful space for these individuals to practise their leadership skills. Several organisers attended EPC community camps and workshops. At one of the community camps, EPC ran a practice session on how to set up and organise a Big Lunch activity. Organisers learnt about the different roles required, how to organise the different parts, and the importance of making it fun. These individuals saw The Big Lunch as a space to apply what they had learnt in a real-life situation and build their self-confidence:

“ WE HAD A PRACTICE ... WE ALL SPLIT UP INTO GROUPS AND EVERYBODY HAD A JOB TO DO TO PREPARE THIS BIG LUNCH. SO, THERE WERE PEOPLE DECORATING, PEOPLE SETTING THE TABLES UP, PEOPLE PREPARING THE BATCHING THINGS. AND THEN THEY HAD TWO CHEFS COOKING IT ... SO YEAH, A LOT OF FUN.

- LEAD ORGANISER

”

These Big Lunch organisers focus on drawing in people and organisations with ideas, motivation and energy, and encouraging them to run their own activities. They draw out the talent within individuals and the community, empowering people to use their skills and assets and be more meaningfully involved:

“ I SEE MYSELF AS LINKING PEOPLE, I DO AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE AND BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER.  
- LEAD ORGANISER ”

“ YOU FIND THE CATALYSTS, FIND THE PEOPLE THAT ARE DOING STUFF, AND HELP THEM DO WHAT THEY ARE DOING. THAT'S WHAT MY FOCUS WAS, MY APPROACH WAS TO SEE WHO WAS UP FOR DOING IT.  
- LEAD ORGANISER ”

“ [BIG LUNCH ORGANISER] GETS EVERYBODY ON BOARD, SHE'S NOT LIKE A DICTATOR OR ANYTHING, [BLO] JUST SAYS THIS IS WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO. AND THEN IT JUST SOMEHOW COMES TOGETHER ... SHE'S NOT LIKE THE HUGE BIG ORGANISER ... IT JUST BRINGS OUT THE TALENT TO EACH PERSON – SHE'S REALLY GOOD AT DOING THAT. WITHOUT KIND OF, YOU KNOW, BOSSING PEOPLE AROUND YOU BECAUSE THAT'S A HUGE IMPORTANT THING BECAUSE PEOPLE LEAVE ORGANIZATIONS BECAUSE OF THAT, THEY NEED TO FEEL EMPOWERED.  
- CO-ORGANISER ”



Our research recognised an additional space<sup>13</sup> created by The Big Lunch to practise skills such as promoting collective decision-making and using a value-led approach to community organising. For example:

- How to work with and draw on the community to hold an event
- How to encourage a transparent process by listening and promoting dialogue
- Bringing in different stakeholders and equally valuing their skills, knowledge and expertise
- Delegating roles and responsibilities
- How to avoid over-organising or demanding too much from people
- How to ensure individuals lead on activities, promoting autonomy and giving them a sense of ownership over the day



---

## 5. CHALLENGES

# CHALLENGES

The following describes some of the challenges Big Lunch areas encounter when running or planning Big Lunch events and how they are responding. Many are likely to be familiar challenges to those involved in community work and/or running a national programme that supports community-based initiatives.

## THE ACT OF SHARING FOOD

While the general principle of bringing and sharing food can be a unifier, there are occasions when it can exclude individuals or groups. For example, individuals from both high and low income households sometimes felt reluctant to participate either because they mistakenly thought The Big Lunch was for people on lower incomes to get free food, or were not able to contribute food.

Bringing people from the community into the decision-making process to tailor events and help think through these sorts of unintended barriers has helped overcome this

challenge. Instilling the principle of sharing and collaborating beyond food has also helped, for example, involving residents in the design and delivery of Big Lunch activities and decorations.

Many areas are also exploring how to ensure Covid-safe sharing of food. They are looking at a range of solutions, including: hiring food trucks to provide affordable food; providing free, catered food for residents in individual portions; and encouraging good hygiene practice among residents to mitigate risks, e.g. sanitising hands.





## BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Building trusting relationships is one of the great successes of Big Lunch events. However, some Big Lunch areas found they had initially faced suspicion or uncertainty when trying to organise an event. Often this was to do with existing concerns about threats to the established community identity.

**“ THERE IS A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF SUSPICION, ‘WHAT’S JUST GONE ON, AND HAVEN’T WE GOT ENOUGH GOING ON?’. AND ‘IS THIS GOING TO TAKE FROM WHAT WE’VE GOT ALREADY?’. ”**  
- CO-ORGANISER

By holding The Big Lunch events over several years, this area was able to address this suspicion and attract local community members to the event. The Big Lunch provided a neutral space to bring different parts of the community together to build community cohesion:

**“ IT WAS JUST SOMETHING DIFFERENT... TO BRIDGE THAT DIVIDE BETWEEN THE TWO KINDS OF COMMUNITIES THAT LIVE SIDE BY SIDE HERE. ”**  
- CO-ORGANISER

In areas where the Eden Project is less well known, the national connection is potentially less useful in lending credibility and status:

**“ THE BIG LUNCH IS NOT VERY WELL KNOWN HERE IN SCOTLAND ... A LOT OF PEOPLE STILL DON’T KNOW WHAT THE EDEN PROJECT IS AND WHAT IT’S ABOUT. ”**  
- LEAD ORGANISER

In terms of the other national components of The Big Lunch, some areas found these useful, while others found them slightly restrictive. For example, some areas would prefer more flexibility in the time of year to host The Big Lunch, whereas others like the unity of having it at a set time each year.

## VOLUNTEERING

While our case studies show that a wide range of volunteers are getting involved in Big Lunch events, volunteer retention is a challenge for some areas. While not specific to The Big Lunch and something that is perennial to most initiatives reliant upon volunteer resource, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge. For most areas, the challenges in engaging volunteers were closely aligned with the local context and demographics. For example, one area that has a large student population who would normally engage in volunteering found that they struggled to attract student volunteers for The Big Lunch because it takes place at a time in the year when many of them have returned home for the summer. Similarly, one area whose Big Lunch volunteers have tended to be made up of an older population were struggling to find volunteers that could help with some of the more physical tasks such as putting out tables and chairs, putting up banners, setting up gazebos and transporting power generators.

The passion and dedication of Big Lunch organisers are a great success of the campaign. However, if these individuals don't have the time or energy, events may not happen. EPC addresses this by providing information and resources to make it simple and easy for people to join in and take on small local community led events. When events become larger and more established, it can be more challenging for another person to take on this role; the endurance of The Big Lunch depends, therefore, on organisers being able to 'pass the baton' and delegate tasks and responsibilities.

## RESOURCES

Big Lunch organisers sometimes feel pressure on their time and resources. For example, some organisers put their own money into hiring out spaces to host The Big Lunch events, due to feeling uncomfortable asking for financial contributions or thinking it was quicker/easier to contribute costs than to fundraise. While many areas have been successful in generating resources, they were frustrated that there was not more support for these initiatives locally. There was recognition of the lack of public resource available for community activities generally, but Big Lunch areas stressed other ways that local councils could support them, such as lessening the burden of bureaucratic processes and costs for things like road closures, health and safety officers and council fees:

“ **THE COUNCIL MADE IT A BIT MORE DIFFICULT FOR US... THEY STARTED TO CHARGE US... THERE'S JUST BEEN LOTS OF LITTLE THINGS THAT HAVE ALL GONE ON, AND REINVENTING [THE BIG LUNCH] EVERY YEAR IS DIFFICULT.**  
- CO-ORGANISER ”

“ **RISK ASSESSMENTS AND PAPERWORK WAS IMMENSE. I WROTE A RISK ASSESSMENT THAT AMOUNTED TO 17 PAGES... HEALTH AND SAFETY WAS BECOMING MORE IMPORTANT.**  
- LEAD ORGANISER ”

Many of these challenges can be overcome with support from the EPC team but organisers weren't always aware of the support available or how to access it. Big Lunch organisers were keen for support on health and safety information, equality diversity and inclusion practices, and how to make Big Lunches environmentally responsible and accessible.





## COVID-19

Restrictions across the country may have eased but Covid-19 remains and there are varying levels of anxiety around social contact within communities. Big Lunch organisers assess and manage the risks for themselves and are acutely aware that participants/residents assume that those organising the event have assessed and are managing these risks.

Big Lunch organisers are weighing up the risk of doing something against the risk of doing nothing, and the potential impact on their local community of not hosting a Big Lunch event. Some of the additional associated risks linked to Covid 19 are:

- Supporting and managing volunteers who may be vulnerable.
- Potential financial losses due to changes in regulations or spikes in Covid cases, with some areas considering whether they should have insurance in place in order to mitigate the financial risks of late cancellation.
- The exclusion of certain groups. The desire to be inclusive prevented some areas from running a Big Lunch event during 2020/21, knowing that certain people would not be able, or feel comfortable enough, to attend.

Big Lunch organisers are seeking advice on risk assessment templates and considering resource implications, e.g. having a volunteer(s) responsible for keeping the event Covid-safe. Most of all though, their focus is on using their relationships with the community to understand what residents want and feel comfortable with. There is an appetite to continue with The Big Lunch, 'As long as the benefits are greater than the risk'.

“

**DO WE CARRY ON WITH IT THE WAY IT IS? BECAUSE WE DON'T HAVE THE PEOPLE POWER TO SET IT UP AND TO TAKE IT DOWN. WE DON'T HAVE THAT ANYMORE. AND ESPECIALLY COVID NOW AS WELL, I THINK THIS IS A GOOD TIME TO SORT OF ASK OURSELVES THAT QUESTION. WHAT ARE WE DOING WITH IT NOW? I DON'T KNOW IF THERE'S ANY HELP WE CAN RECEIVE FROM VARIOUS ORGANISATIONS? I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT THAT WE ASK OURSELVES HOW WE'RE WANTING TO GO AHEAD WITH IT, AND IF THE COMMUNITY WANTS US TO GO AHEAD WITH IT.**

- LEAD ORGANISER

”



---

## 6. CONCLUSION

# CONCLUSION

The Big Lunch acts as a simple but powerful catalyst for building connections within a community. It does this through enacting the principles of coming together and sharing – in this case sharing food and sharing skills through informal volunteering – and by harnessing the passion, energy and skills of individuals who are committed to helping bring about positive change in their communities.

It provides an accessible and inclusive starting point for residents to meet one another and find out more about their local area and about other opportunities to get involved. Big Lunch events are often used as a deliberate tool to tackle and overcome local divisions or a lack of cohesion. The Big Lunch provides the ideal mechanism as events can be tailored to, appeal to and be inclusive of different age groups, cultures and interests.

The connection to place is key. Through their participation in Big Lunch events, residents are encouraged to get to know their area and see it in a new and often more positive light. This has resulted in residents not only getting involved on the day of events but going on to participate in and volunteer for other local initiatives. This has a long-term, cumulative effect on the wellbeing of a place, as residents take greater pride in their local area and so continue to invest in its improvement and develop their skills and expertise. In particular, Big Lunch events

provide a safe and inclusive space for residents to practise community leadership skills, such as how to work with and draw on the community to hold an event and how to create spaces for community dialogue.

Many areas feel extremely passionate and excited about being able to continue to host events in future. However, there are also those that are committed but will need to be supported by EPC and others in their community to help overcome some ongoing challenges with organising these events, including additional barriers presented by the pandemic. The organisation of these kinds of community events often places a significant burden on a single or a few key individuals within a community. They are faced with a difficult decision, made harder by Covid 19, which is the risk of doing something and the risk of doing nothing – assessing the potential impact on their local community of not hosting a Big Lunch event.

Our report shows that The Big Lunch performs, and will continue to play, an exciting role in helping to create and sustain thriving communities: harnessing and supporting the incredible energy, passion and skills of individuals who want to make a difference within their local community.



# APPENDIX ONE: OUTLINE OF DATA COLLECTION TOOLS



**Scoping interviews:** Eight semi-structured scoping interviews completed during June/July 2020 with key members of staff from across the Eden Project Communities (EPC) team.

**Desk-based review:** Including existing data and data collection processes during May to September 2020. A review of key programme materials, including current evaluation reports, as well as a brief review of literature sources in relation to the topics of local/community cohesion and resilience, community wellbeing, and encouraging environmentally sustainable behaviour.

**Theory of change workshop:** An online facilitated workshop was held in August 2020 with 19 key members of the EPC team. A draft theory of change was developed from discussions at the workshop and scoping interviews.

**Online surveys:** IVAR co-designed an online survey with EPC that went out to all Big Lunch organisers in September 2020. This survey captured insights into the range of ways in which The Big Lunch is contributing to community cohesion, wellbeing and the promotion of environmentally sustainable behaviours across a range of geographies and local contexts. The questions explore the short/medium-term impact as well as the legacy of the programme. IVAR also had access to Big Lunch National Representative survey data.

**Indicator and outcome workshop:** Insights from the survey provided useful indicators of the sorts of questions to then explore in greater depth through the case studies. We held a facilitated workshop with Big Lunch representatives across the four countries to sense check the outcomes and indicators we have developed to understand the long-term impact of The Big Lunch. This developed the outcomes and indicator framework (see Appendix Three) which informed our case study research design and topic guides.

**Case studies of eight Big Lunch activities** across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (two in each country). Case studies (see Appendix Two) were selected for the range of activities delivered and what has been achieved. Activities have been running for over three years, and differed by place and location. Overall, we have heard from a total of 34 Big Lunch organisers, partners, volunteers and residents between March and June 2021.

**Share and build workshop** held with 11 Big Lunch organisers and seven EPC team members to share findings, shape the key messages and prompt further discussion.

# APPENDIX TWO: OUTLINE OF CASE STUDY AREAS

AREA	BIG LUNCH ACTIVITY
<p><b>England: Sandringham Park</b></p>	<p>The Big Lunch takes place in Sandringham Park, a local green space. Big Lunch events have been held there every year between 2012 and 2019.</p> <p>The first Big Lunch was held there to tackle anti-social behaviour in the park, and was seen as a way of bridging divides and bringing the community together.</p> <p>Activities include food stalls run by the local Scouts group, a tombola to raise money for the park, bouncy castles and a miniature railway.</p>
<p><b>England: Peckham</b></p>	<p>The Peckham Big Lunch (2015 and 2016) and Bigger Lunch (2017) were held in Leyton Square Park, Ledbury estate. Two key organisers worked with local organisations (including the local authority and businesses) to produce a one-day community festival event with activities aimed at young people and families. It included a catered lunch provided by local businesses and stalls run by local charities and organisations.</p> <p>The main aim of The Big Lunch was to build community connections, showcase local talent and connect the community with local services.</p>
<p><b>Wales: Swansea</b></p>	<p>The Big Lunch takes place in Mount Pleasant, a suburban district of Swansea.</p> <p>Big Lunch events have been held every year between 2017 and 2019.</p> <p>One of the key drivers of holding The Big Lunch was to create a central space that joins different communities.</p> <p>The format of the Big Lunch in Swansea has changed through the years:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 2017: A full day event (mad hatters tea party) across three neighbouring areas including two residential streets and a community park. This helped to ensure that the whole area is included.</li> <li>● 2018: Took place at the 'Hub on the Hill' – a new community space. Activities included face painting, circus tricks and a potluck.</li> <li>● 2019: Took place at 'Hub on the Hill'. Activities included circus tricks, a potluck and tea and coffee.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Wales: Y Felinheli</b></p>	<p>The Big Lunch in Y Felinheli is hosted in the town's Memorial Hall and was started as a way to bring together the Welsh-speaking community and the newer transient communities.</p> <p>There have been four Big Lunch events between 2017 and 2019, which included a Diwali-themed Big Lunch.</p> <p>Activities typically include a potluck and games for children and families.</p>

# APPENDIX TWO: OUTLINE OF CASE STUDY AREAS

AREA	BIG LUNCH ACTIVITY
<p><b>Scotland: Forres</b></p>	<p>The Big Lunch is organised by the Forres Area Community Trust (FACT) which also runs other community events. The Big Lunch takes place every year from 2017 to 2019. The Big Lunch used to be held in the town square but has since been moved to the Town Hall which FACT now owns.</p> <p>The main aim was to bring the community together and regain community spirit.</p> <p>Activities include stalls from local organisations, community groups and businesses, treasure hunts, garden games, music and free food (donated by local businesses and local food banks).</p>
<p><b>Scotland: Breachin</b></p>	<p>The Big Lunch is hosted by the Gardiner Memorial Church and is held on the town square opposite the church. It has taken place from 2011 to 2019.</p> <p>The main aim of The Big Lunch is to bring people together who would not usually meet.</p> <p>Long tables and chairs are put out on the town square for people to sit around and connect.</p> <p>Activities include food donated by local businesses, live music, face painting, fancy dress, garden games, an emcee and stalls from local organisations and businesses.</p>
<p><b>Northern Ireland: Holylands</b></p>	<p>Holylands has held The Big Lunch between 2015 and 2019.</p> <p>It has often been organised in partnership with local organisations such as the Belfast City Church, the Belfast Friendship Club and the Muslim Family Association.</p> <p>Big Lunch venues and activities varied, and included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 2015: The Big Lunch acted as an official opening event for 'Wildflower Alley'; a resident alleyway that became gated and was turned into a community garden and communal safe space for residents.</li> <li>● 2017: A global food theme hosted in the public area in front of the church.</li> <li>● 2018: A street party attended by up to 500 people.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Northern Ireland: Farland Way</b></p>	<p>The Big Lunch takes place at Farland Way, a collection of four cul-de-sacs in the West of Derry.</p> <p>Big Lunches are typically themed and include: Eco-friendly Big Lunch; Independence Day; Mad Hatters Tea Party; A Day at the Races; Disney Day.</p> <p>The connection between food, health and the environment also remains a consistent theme throughout all Big Lunches.</p> <p>In 2020, Farland Way hosted a virtual Big Lunch which included some house-to-house food deliveries.</p>

# APPENDIX THREE: OUTCOMES AND INDICATORS TABLE

OUTCOME	SHORT/MEDIUM-TERM IMPACT	LONGER-TERM IMPACT
<b>People feel valued, connected and less isolated, and empowered across a wide range of communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals met new people whom they would like to stay in touch with</li> <li>● Individuals felt a stronger sense of community</li> <li>● Individuals are more likely to help each other out, e.g. with small favours (such as DIY) or when someone needs support (such as during the Covid 19 pandemic)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals have a stronger sense of belonging to their neighbourhood</li> <li>● Individuals are more likely to undertake a Big Lunch in their neighbourhood in the future</li> <li>● There is a growing sense of pride in the neighbourhood Individuals feel supported by their local community</li> </ul>
<b>Increase in participation: relationships, strong networks and trust forged and maintained</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● It opened up the possibility for more conversations with their neighbours</li> <li>● Individuals felt closer to their neighbours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Neighbourhood feels like a friendlier place to live</li> <li>● Individuals have arranged/attended one or more follow-up (social) events with people they met at The Big Lunch</li> <li>● Individuals have ongoing connections with their neighbours, e.g. through social media</li> </ul>
<b>People solving problems together – increase in initiatives for positive change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals have gained confidence to try new things in their community/neighbourhood</li> <li>● Individuals have gained knowledge and skills that can be applied to benefit their community/neighbourhood</li> <li>● Individuals feel more invested in their local area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals have since worked with their neighbours (and/or local community groups) to improve the local community</li> <li>● Community groups and/or initiatives have been set up/created based on the connections made at a Big Lunch</li> <li>● Individuals are getting involved in local community initiatives/social action</li> </ul>
<b>The Big Lunch as a national movement – people are part of something bigger</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● It made individuals feel like they are part of something bigger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals are continuing to take part and/or organise a Big Lunch in their local area</li> </ul>

# REFERENCES

- 1 Definition of informal volunteering: *'Giving unpaid help as an individual to people that are not a relative'*, taken from Community Life Covid 19 Re-contact survey 2020: Gov.UK.
- 2 This was also found in The Big Lunch survey which found two-fifths (43%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *'I have taken up a new volunteering opportunity in my local community/area'*.
- 3 Eden Project Communities report, *'Closing the distance between us'*, highlights the range of spaces The Big lunch generates such as to connect; to share; to build community; and to *'bump'*.
- 4 Phar (2019) *'Big Lunch 2019: Awareness, attendance and impact summary'*, unpublished; Phar (2020) *'Big (Virtual) Lunch 2020'*, unpublished.
- 5 Campaign to End Loneliness (2020) *'The facts on loneliness'*.
- 6 The National Representative survey (2021) study showed 38.38% of the UK feels lonely some of the time or always (11.59% always). This is mostly evident among the younger generation, with 58% of 16–24-year-olds saying they feel lonely either always or some of the time, compared to 18% of the 65+. In addition to this, EPC's research also found that 73% of people feel *'the UK is a more divided nation than ten years ago'*, and 32% *'never see their neighbours'*.
- 7 Groarke J.M., Berry E., Graham-Wisener L., McKenna-Plumley P.E., McGlinchey E. et al. (2020) *'Loneliness in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional results from the COVID-19 Psychological Wellbeing Study'*, PLOS ONE 15 (9).
- 8 Local Government Association (2004) *Community Cohesion – an action guide*, London: LGA Publications.
- 9 Definition of informal volunteering, *'Giving unpaid help as an individual to people that are not a relative'*, taken from Community Life Covid 19 Re-contact survey 2020: Gov.UK.
- 10 Time Well Spent findings show that of recent volunteers, 42% got involved in volunteering because they wanted to improve things and help people, and 28% volunteered because they felt there was a need in their community.
- 11 Hustedde, R. and King, B. (2002) *'Rituals: emotions, community faith in soul and the messiness of life'*, *Community Development*, 37 (4), 338–348.
- 12 McCabe, A., Wilson, M. and Macmillan, R. (2020) *Community resilience or resourcefulness? Briefing 2*, London: Local Trust.
- 13 Eden Project Communities report, *'Closing the distance between us'*, highlights the range of spaces The Big Lunch generates such as to connect; to share; to build community; and to *'bump'*.