

# **FOOD4FAMILIES**

## **INDEPENDENT EVALUATION REPORT**



**University of Reading & Whitley Researchers**

November 2018

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# Foreword

We are pleased to present this evaluation report, independently organised and carried out by staff and researchers at the University of Reading and the Whitley Researchers – not forgetting the tremendous support and assistance from staff, volunteers, tutors and users at our 26 community garden facilities.

The report clearly shows how our gardens are making a real difference to people’s lives with a positive contribution to our local communities. It enables us to drill down into the impact the project has had on individuals and the local communities involved in the project. And be able to identify what we do well and what we do less well and why this is the case.

One key outcome for us is the insight it gives us on how we can engage more of our users and prospective users in developing gardens that are useful, active, beautiful spaces that reflect their diverse needs and dreams.

It will also be a great help as we prepare proposals and plans for prospective funding to help ensure that the good work presented here continues into the future.

There are positive messages here and a clear set of recommendations that will encourage us to make the changes required – most of all to help us to better help those individuals and communities around Reading who will benefit most from growing, harvesting and eating fresh fruit, herbs and vegetables

Sharon Fitton

Food4Families Project Co-ordinator



# Executive summary

This report presents an evaluation of the Food4Families twenty six community garden sites covering the period from September 2017 to November 2018. It is an independent analysis conducted by the University of Reading and its partner researchers – the community based Whitley Researchers.

The evaluation aimed to use a variety of methods to collect data to help judge the value, quality and direction of the Food4Families project and to make recommendations to better manage and improve the project and to assist in plans for sustaining future programmes.

World Education Berkshire, also known as Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC) has been running the Food4Families urban community garden and food growing project since 2009. Project locations include community garden main sites, smaller veg patches and several school spaces. The main aim of the project is to encourage everyone young and old to sustainably garden and grow organic fruit and vegetables – thereby helping communities reconnect food consumption with the process of food production.

The research included both quantitative (presenting data in largely numerical form) and qualitative (for views of experiences) methods. The former involved a questionnaire survey of 62 garden users, volunteers and tutors who completed responses in face-to-face interviews conducted across all 26 Food4Families locations in Reading. The latter approach involved conducting in-depth interviews with 10 community garden users – again from a mix of garden locations using a pre-designed schedule which allowed for additional questions to encourage a richer understanding of user experiences.

The quantitative evaluation addressed basic user characteristics, degree of connection with garden centres such as motivation to join and good/not so good aspects of gardening. Additionally, project impact was reviewed in terms of food growing skills and mental/emotional well-being. A key factor in positive gains such as healthier eating, food growing capability, improved social networks and support and greater influence over the ‘greening’ of the local community all correlated strongly with spending a longer time in the project.

The interviews with community garden participants provided experiential and illustrative details to support the quantitative study. A two-part interview schedule focused firstly on the impact of the garden project on users and secondly on broader aspects of community leadership and perceptions of ‘neighbourhood’. Some general conclusions point to the varied popularity of different garden centres, the positive influence of gardens on eating habits and physical and mental well-being, and a clear orientation to community involvement.

In terms of overall conclusions and recommendations the report follows the Big Lottery evaluation guidance via three key questions: ‘How well you did’; ‘What lessons were learnt’; ‘What needs to be changed for future sustainability’. Key achievements include users feeling that the garden made a difference to their mental health and helped bring the community together. Some lessons learnt were: the need to find new ways of increasing community use of these valuable green spaces and reviewing how best to retain users. Finally, there was recognition of the need to make changes ahead including addressing the imbalance in user profile and strengthening local community links.

# Evaluation

This evaluation report uses monitoring data and other gathered information. The former addresses numbers associated with the on-going process of collecting continuous and regular key information about the Food4Families project including garden site attendance, user access data and base line information for longitudinal analysis. The latter focuses on quantitative survey interviews with garden site users and volunteers and a set of qualitative in-depth interviews with a selection of current users.

Accompanying this report are two further relevant research exercises; the first is a survey of health impact factors associated with community use of the Food4Families garden centres entitled 'Way to Health'. This was commissioned by Food4Families. (*The report has been forwarded to Big Lottery*) The second is a University of Reading student dissertation summarising findings from primary fieldwork addressing health outcomes in local garden centres. (*Main conclusions will be offered to Big Lottery*). The student concerned kindly offered the report to Food4Families as an addition to our evaluation report. Both reports help to underpin and enhance the impact of community based garden provision in Reading.

The definition of evaluation presented here derives from the Big Lottery funded 'A Guide to Evaluation' namely:

*'Evaluation involves collecting and using data to answer our own questions about the quality, value and direction of our work and to help improve and better manage what we do'*

The priority here is to place emphasis on understanding what impact the project makes and why it is making a difference and how lessons learnt can be incorporated into future plans .



# Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present an independent evaluation of a range of community garden sites in Reading from September 2017 to October 2018. It includes a range of on-going monitoring data and the findings from interviews with 62 users and volunteers at 26 community garden locations plus 10 in-depth interviews with a selection of garden site users.

Questions were raised about impact in the following areas:

1. Increasing the food growing skills of people with limited access to fresh fruit and vegetables. Also encouraging healthy eating;
2. Improving mental/emotional wellbeing (which includes the improvement of connections between people in the neighbourhood) as well as improvement of physical fitness;
3. Improving confidence and skills to take on responsibility in the community (e.g. through upskilling, practical experience and group encouragement);
4. Improving the sense of influence over one's own local environment. It could be that people feel the gardens themselves add to the attraction of their locality.

The evaluation was carried out by university staff including field work and analysis and also the Whitley Researchers – a resident based collective of community based researchers who include university staff and student interns in one collaborative team.

In co-operation with Food4Families staff the researcher team worked together to plan, organise and complete the key research tasks from field work to report conclusions and recommendations. Food4Families supplied the monitoring data which was analysed by the research team. The interviews covered qualitative and quantitative methods – the former using a questionnaire administered by the researcher team members and the latter a set of in-depth interviews using a semi-structured tool again led by a researcher and making use of a digital recording process. All research methods followed the University of Reading Ethical Research protocols.

The report structure presents firstly a brief description of Food4Families followed by an account of developments and key events since the last evaluation. This is followed by a section profiling the respondents we interviewed. A further section outlines the research methods used. The report then presents the conclusions and findings from the research activities including an analysis of the monitoring data. The final section outlines the recommendations and the lessons learnt and what needs to be changed for future improvement and development.

# Food4Families

World Education Berkshire also known as Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC) has been running an urban community gardening and food-growing project (*Food4Families*) at a number of locations in Reading since the year 2009.

The main purpose of Food4Families is to encourage everyone young and old to sustainably garden and grow organic fruit and vegetables. The main aim of the project is to help communities reconnect food consumption with the process of food production and also to facilitate education and training on sustainable food production methods within urban environments. However, the project organisers and managers have envisioned other social benefits as part of the project outcomes, such as helping to build relationships within the local community and enhancement of community cohesion.

Food4Families works in a variety of settings.

**Community Gardens** - since 2011 Food4Families has developed several larger sites that are community-based, i.e., open to all residents of neighbouring communities and have been purposely established in areas inhabited by less affluent and ethnic minority groups.

1. Southcote GrowAllot, off Cornation Square, Southcote RG30 3GQ
2. Whitley GrowAllot, off Meavy Gardens, Whitley RG2 7RD
3. The Weller Centre, Amerhsam Road, Caversham, RG4 5NA
4. Erleigh Road Community Garden, Erleigh Rd, RG1 5QY
5. Gosbrook Rd Growers, St John's Church, Gosbrook Rd, Caversham RG4 8EB
6. Coley Park Community Centre, Wensley Rd, Coley Park RG1 6DW
7. Katesgrove Community Allotment, Elgar Road South, Katesgrove
8. Lavender Place, Queens Walk, Reading RG1 7UA

Users of these gardens are mostly families with young children or older individuals. Some of the adults attending these gardens often lack the basic knowledge and skills of gardening and have limited opportunities to do it in their own homes. Though any resident from neighbouring communities can become a member of the gardens, granting them unrestricted access to the premises and facilities, non-members can use the garden during scheduled weekly opening hours. At 7 of the gardens all the open sessions are run by experienced tutors who, as paid garden leaders, pass on skills, encourage and generally facilitate activities, and allocate project resources to targeted areas of most need. At the same time, there are some users who are experienced gardeners and who have their own gardens or allotments. They contribute to staff expertise, sharing their knowledge and experience and providing invaluable support to the paid tutors. And at one garden two sessions a week are now run by volunteers.

The main crops grown in these gardens are generally potatoes, tomatoes, lettuce, courgettes, beans, radishes and strawberries, but different types of herbs as well as onions, leeks, spinach and chard are also grown. This provides the basic fruits and vegetables to which participants can most easily relate, and are most likely to prepare and consume at home. The focus of these gardens has been on growing food organically, including methods of creating good quality compost and its value for soil maintenance. Also, consideration of common garden pests and methods of combating them are discussed regularly to ensure maximum useable yield. Even though the actual quantity of produce harvested from each garden is not measured, the yield appears to be in proportion with garden sizes. All the users share fruits and vegetables harvested from each garden on the days of harvesting.

**Schools** – during 2018 Food4Families has been working with 7 schools that often serve the communities where the larger gardens are based.

1. Micklands Primary School, Caversham
2. Thameside Primary School, Caversham
3. NewChristChurch Primary School
4. Whitley Park Primary School
5. Newtown Primary School
6. John Madjeski Academy
7. Deenway Montessori School

The majority of Food4Families support at the school gardens is with children during the school day or as an afterschool gardening club providing opportunities for the whole school or just one class to be involved. Where possible these sessions are linked into the curriculum being covered by that year group. At two of the schools the afterschool clubs encourage parents and carers to attend with their children. Crops grown are shared out amongst those children who have grown them or used in school cooking. Two schools have more of a horticultural therapy focus to their sessions where the tutor is working one to one or with small groups of children who the school feel will benefit emotionally, socially or behaviourally from the gardening activities.

**Veg Patches** - Since 2015 Food4Families has been constructing veg patches – up to 4 raised beds within gardens of residential flats, sheltered/ residential housing, day/ community centres, or on any spare land near residential areas where groups of residents are interested in growing fruit and veg. These sites are supported by Food4Families tutors for up to two years who provide guidance, advice, equipment and resources. The residents maintain the beds together, deciding what to grow and sharing out any harvest.

In addition to these main activities Food4Families also:

- runs cookery courses with a focus on cooking meals using seasonal fruit and vegetables
- delivers taster sessions to formal or informal groups, where participants can plant up a container with seasonal vegetables that they can take away to grow on at home
- runs ‘Get Growing’ – a introduction to food growing course
- recruits and trains volunteers who help with the general maintenance of the gardens and propagating of plants to go out to the sites

Food4families collect monitoring data throughout the growing season using the following methods:

- All participants sign in when they attend any session, which is used to track numbers involved
- When joining an activity participants are asked to complete a baseline questionnaire. This will be followed up at the end of the activity/session/course/year as appropriate to measure any impact.
- Informal feedback is collected during ‘tea & chat’ section of regular sessions so adjustments can be made based on participant’s feedback as we go along.
- At the end of the growing season an independent evaluation such as this one is carried out covering all areas of the project focusing on the impact the project is having in relation to the main project outcomes.
- All monitoring data is kept securely and with the participant’s permission.

# Last year key developments

The main developments during the last year from September 2017 to November 2018 include the following:

- Throughout the year a total of 1672 people have got involved in at least one activity that we have run
- 319 growing sessions have been organised at 9 sites with 726 participants including seasonal trails, pumpkin carving, apple pressing, potato days, sunflower competitions, mini-beast hunts, community picnics and BBQ's, bring and share meals.
- Running taster session at a variety of events where 700+ participants have been sowing mixed salad seeds in recycled fruit punnets to take home to grow on their window sill. Locations have varied from a drop in at Reading Refugee Support Group to the garden of block of council flats to Forbury Fiesta event in a park in central Reading.
- Setting up 6 new veg patches and supporting 80 residents in growing in them once a month. This year they have been in a wider variety of location such as a children's home, sheltered housing accommodation, community centre & primary school.
- 21 participants have attended 3 cookery courses, cooking with seasonal veg, from scratch.
- In partnership with Thames Valley Police creating a temporary community garden on the site of former Civic Offices until they are re-developed in 5 years, Lavender Place. Work commenced in June, with an area being mown, raised beds constructed by Activate Learning from Reading College, and a herb garden laid out by Deenway Montessori School, with help from members of Reading Food Growing Network.
- Organising trip to Wisley for training on fruit tree pruning for user group members.
- Working with approximately 80 volunteers from The Conservation Volunteers and 5 corporate volunteer teams who created tool tidies, a pot store area, constructed fencing around a pond with a pallet gate, painted a shed, sorted and enlarged compost area and moved tons of top soil.
- Taking 15 students from Reading College out for at least 4 weeks of work experience completing a variety of horticultural tasks such as raised bed construction, mulching, using petrol mowers /strimmers and plant propagation.
- Working with partners from Reading Voluntary Action, Reading Borough Council, Age UK, 4 local Community Associations, Catalyst & Radion Housing Association, Connect Reading, University of Reading and Nature Nurture.

# Method

The research adopted a multi-method approach (following University of Reading Ethical Research protocols) that included both quantitative and qualitative techniques including:

- A questionnaire survey of 62 community garden users, volunteers and tutors (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the questionnaire). This represents around two thirds of the project's current regular participants. The questionnaire instrument was devised in consultation with Food4Families staff. It was administered by our researchers who completed responses in one-to-one interviews with interviewees.
- The interviews took place in 26 Food4Families locations across Reading including main community garden sites, school garden locations and a range of veg patches in mixed locations including adult disability centres. (See Appendix 2 for a list of locations)
- The qualitative approach involved conducting a series of in-depth interviews to complement and explore in more detail the key priorities in the quantitative research survey. A two-part interview schedule (Appendix 3) was developed. The core of the interview focused on the impact of participation in the garden projects on the individual. The second part explored broader aspects of community leadership and perceptions of 'neighbourhood'. The interview schedule was used as a broad guide, but conversations were led by respondents to allow them to contribute to the areas they wanted to discuss. It offered a chance to develop a richer understanding by generating more detailed information and the exploration of main priorities in greater depth.
- Each respondent also completed a background form (see Appendix 4)
- 8 interviews took place over a period of 2 weeks at the end of the growing season, with a further 2 captured via email. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was recorded on a password-protected mobile phone.
- To save time, only the respondent's contribution to each interview was transcribed. Occasionally, off-topic elements were also omitted. Interviewer questions were noted only when it was important to preserve the flow of the conversation. None of the interruptions or side conversations were transcribed.

# The profile of the volunteers/gardeners we interviewed

	Questionnaire survey	In-depth interviews
Under 20	0	0
20-29	13	0
30-39	42	40
40-49	23	10
50-59	10	40
60-69	6	10
70+	6	0

	Questionnaire survey	In-depth interviews
male	21	17
female	68	40

	Questionnaire survey	In-depth interviews
Studying	21	17
Paid job	68	40
Poor health limits activities	11	33
Caring responsibilities	61	90
Financially struggling	21	20
Live with partner	73	80

- 79% were 'white' (mostly White British) and 21% were from minority backgrounds or refused to answer (6%)
- An enormous 56% were highly educated (to degree level or above) whilst 26% had minimal qualifications.
- 71% had lived in the UK all their life, 14.5% had not spent their whole life in the UK but had been here more than 10 years, and 14.5% had lived in the UK 10 years or less.
- The ages of people interviewed ranged from those their twenties to those over 70. However the majority (65% of interviewees) were in the thirties and forties age bracket.

Compared to the monitoring data collected from all attendees, this was found to be a highly representative sample of the whole. The only group not monitored for this research was children - 45% of garden users are children.

## How long people had been involved in the project

The length of time that people had been involved in these gardens ranged from one week to 10 years! Around half of those interviewed had been involved for a year or less and almost 80% had been involved for three years or less. Average time involved was about two years, slightly less for veg patches and slightly more for school plots.

Nearly everyone we interviewed were regular attenders of the gardens. 77% said they came once a week or more, and almost all of them came at least once a month. The school plots were the most regularly attended and the veg patches the least regularly attended.



# Quantitative research

## FINDINGS

### Veg patches vs communal gardens vs school gardens

Out of the 62 people interviewed, almost 60% were attached to a communally run allotment, 20% were involved with smaller 'veg patches' and the remaining 20% were involved with school gardens.

If terms of satisfaction with the project, most satisfaction was expressed over the school gardens and least was expressed over the small vegetable patches. This exactly matches the project manager's thoughts on how well the projects are going – the school gardens were thought to be doing best, followed by the community gardens and less so the small veg patches. It has also been noted above that attendance at school gardens was most consistent, followed by the communal gardens with attendance at the veg patches being the most erratic and short-lived.

In spite of the seeming lower satisfaction with the veg patches, a more careful analysis of the data revealed that these veg patches were, however, the form of gardening most likely to reach needy people. The veg patches were predominantly attended by older people who had spent most of their lives in the UK. These were found to be the least qualified of the interviewees, the most likely to face financial struggles, the least likely to be in a job and the least likely to have a partner. People who attended the veg patches were also the least likely to attend any other community group. Taking all these things into account, satisfaction levels are just as high for the veg patches as they are for the communal gardens.

The school plots on the other hand predominantly benefited children, and the adult attenders (and interviewees) tended to be white women, with partners, who looked after these children. These were most likely to be in jobs, in good health, well qualified, and they were least likely to face financial struggles. However, only a third of them were connected to other community groups and (as will be seen later) the opportunities given by the garden to connect with others was a particular point of appreciation.

The profile of people attending community gardens tended to fall somewhere between the above two extremes. Furthermore, community gardens were more likely to be attended by men, by people who were studying, and by people with ill-health compared to those the other gardens. 70% of people attending community gardens attended another community group as well, making these people the most well-connected to their local community.

### Satisfaction with the project

Interviewees were asked to rate their satisfaction with the gardening project on a scale of 1 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). These are their ratings:

*How satisfied are you with the gardening project?*

1=not at all satisfied	1.64
2	4.92
3	6.56
4	19.67
5=extremely satisfied	67.21

The vast majority of persons are satisfied or extremely satisfied, and particularly in the school gardens (as previously discussed) - suggesting that the project has wide appeal. People short or long-term in the UK, sick or well, studying or not, people of all qualifications, in paid work or not, struggling financially or not – all were found to be equally satisfied with the gardening project. Likewise, people in the project for a long or a short time, and people attending more or less frequently did not express significantly different levels of satisfaction. Women were somewhat more satisfied with the project than men, and white people more than non-whites, whilst people who were studying were less satisfied with the project. However, these differences disappeared when controlling for other factors. The gardens *were* particularly satisfying to people living with a partner, whilst people over 50 and people with children were marginally *less* satisfied, which open questions suggesting that this may have to do with their heightened desire for creature comforts (mentioned later).

### **Courses**

15% of the community gardeners interviewed had been on a course (and none from the veg patches or school gardens). The courses mentioned included tool shaping, first aid, an RHS course (horticulture), a course on people with disabilities, a course on fruit trees and mowing safety. It was rather those who rated their gardening skills and knowledge poorly who had attended a course. Correlations in the data revealed that having attended a course made no difference to the way that attendees rated change in their skills and confidence, and did not impact how satisfied they were with the project.

Through means of open questions we discovered that people expressed a definite *desire* to learn, and they saw learning opportunities as one key benefit of the project. However, suggestions for learning rather centred around having more special speakers come in to talk about a subject to the whole group.

### **How people found out about the gardening project (open question):**

- The most common way that people got to hear about the gardening project was through personal invitation. This was particularly via other community groups (including schools), but also friend to friend. Having a personal invite via trusted social networks is very important.
- Besides these, 20% were reached directly by RISC – by letters/emails of invitation, notices put in public places or door-knocking initiatives.
- A further 12% of people said they got to hear about (or find out more about) the project online.
- **Initial reasons to attend (open question):**

Once people had heard about the project, there were a variety of things which first make them want to join up:

- *Green issues:* In first place, attenders liked the idea of growing their own produce and eating it, along with the ethos of sustainability. There were many mentions that people just like gardening – they like the space, being outdoors in the fresh air. 47% of respondents mentioned one or another of these things.
- *Child friendly:* Secondly, and particularly with the school plots, 35% of interviewees mentioned being attracted by the fact that this was something which they could do together with their children.
- *Learning:* 22% of interviewees mentioned that they were attracted to having the chance to learn and gain experience.

- *Community*: 15% of interviews mentioned being drawn by the opportunity to connect with the community or with friends. It was interesting to discover that although this was not necessarily the feature of the project that first drew people in, it was one of the biggest things that people appreciated about the project once they were there.
- *Persuasion*: A minority of persons (10%) said they only joined because of being persuaded by other people.

**The best thing about attending the gardening project (open question):**

- *Community*: 55% of interviewees mentioned appreciation for the fact that the project brought different people in the community together. People appreciated this community aspect and the sense that they were doing something positive within their community (especially where they felt that the garden was making their community look good). The community aspect was rather a bonus felt by people after they had gotten involved; it was not necessarily what attracted them to the garden in the first place.
- *In touch with nature*: Another major draw (mentioned by 48% of interviewees) was being outdoors, involved with outdoor materials, planting things and seeing them grow, and then getting to eat the produce. Gardening gives all this.
- *Child friendly*: 23% of people also mentioned the fact that this was an activity they could get involved in together with their children. Moreover, they felt gardening and green issues were important for their children to learn about.
- *Opportunities to learn*: The opportunity to learn new things /gain new skills was appreciated generally.
- The quality (niceness) of leaders also made a difference to how people felt about the project.

**Why people stop coming (open opinion question):**

- The foremost reason why people stop coming was thought to be that gardening is not for everyone. People may discover that the programme was not what they expected, or, if they are impatient, they may just lose interest. The weather is another big reason why people might get put off. The programme cannot continue all year round, and the sessions can get quite unpleasant if it is cold or rainy.
- Closely following this reason is the fact of other commitments or changing circumstances. Perhaps to do with children, work or health, meaning that people no longer have the time. Sometimes people even move away.
- A few persons mentioned that some people stop coming because of poor group dynamics. Perhaps people falling out, or not enough people coming along, or simply because some people don't like to share. It can also happen that people drop off because they are not aware enough of when the next meetings are, and what is going on.

**What people would like to see more of in their locality in terms of social, physical and cultural characteristics (open question):**

In the responses to this question, we find out what is important to people and can determine to what degree the Food4Families project addresses these aspirations.

**1. The people (social characteristics).**

- 73% of respondents emphasised the importance of person-to-person friendliness and community spirit. Respondents see the need to come together and get involved with one another. This includes providing community projects (like Food4Families) which give people an opportunity to meet up. Including people from different backgrounds, being respectful, providing for children, tackling loneliness and being committed to the good of the community were all mentioned.

Other points included:

- People becoming more understanding of green issues; and
- Reducing poverty. People should also take more pride in where they live. Avoid the benefits culture. Tackle crime, bringing in more policing where necessary.

2. *The way the place looks (physical characteristics)*

- The primary point, mentioned by 36% of respondents, was to extend and improve green spaces;
- Cleaning up and reducing litter was a close second. People need to respect their surroundings; no graffiti;
- 11% of respondents also mentioned wanting a bright, dynamic living environment with colour, good lighting, well maintained buildings and art;
- Traffic and crowding were further problems mentioned.

3. *Things to do, facilities and services (cultural characteristics)*

- The main point was the provision of community centre activities which bring people together. Social connections are so important;
- Providing spaces for children to play and family friendly activities were again emphasised. Also, activities for youth;
- Public facilities such as swimming pools and libraries were also mentioned;
- It may be necessary to advertise better what *is* available, and work on making these things more accessible (e.g. to the disabled, or to people on low incomes).
- From these aspirations we can see that Food4Families makes a valuable contribution. Firstly, in terms of bringing different members of the community together (including different age groups), but also in terms of making the most of green spaces. Ensuring that these spaces are tidy, bright and pleasant for onlookers would seem to be important.

**Suggestions to attract more people (open question):**

Over half the interviewees suggested that publicity and awareness-raising are key to attracting more people to the gardens:

- Making links to more community groups was strongly suggested. This could be good for increasing clientele and improving the dynamics of the programme, but care needs to be taken to reach the right target group; the most disadvantaged being those who are *not* already part of a community group. It would be important therefore to target community groups where the widest possible range of people come – the school gate being one good example.
- Another suggestion was to make bigger signs so that people can find the gardens.
- Not only publicity initiated by RISC is important, but there is a role for garden users themselves in taking the initiative to invite new people, and to make new people feel welcome when they come.
- It might also be possible to make the garden project itself more attractive and accessible. Interviewees mentioned several ways of doing this, which also links to the question, ‘How could the gardening project make more of a difference to you/your neighbourhood?’ The following bullet points describe the different ways people suggested to make the project more attractive and accessible. Firstly, the points that had multiple mentions:
  - Put on more fun events (music, games, special activities, refreshments);
  - Offer more learning opportunities/special events/special speakers on a regular basis.

- Produce more for the *community* (for non-members) – special events and freebies can be shared with them too. Bringing more people together to become friends, and helping more people to understand how valuable the natural environment is;
- Have more hours available when people can go along;
- Have covered spaces in case of bad weather; Also, older people or parents (currently marginally less satisfied with the project than the young and the child-free) may need the gardens to have sheltered areas that are comfortable and pleasant for sitting;
- Grow attractive things that people want (e.g. pumpkins for Halloween or sweet potatoes). Also make the garden itself look more attractive (less weeds, more beauty, cultivating beautiful green spaces for everyone to enjoy).

Other ideas (each mentioned by one person only) included:

- Have more space for gardening;
- Make the environment safer for children;
- Provide sensory support for people with low ability;
- Provide a 'ladies only' session;
- Provide a 'man shed';
- Provide a composting toilet;
- Beginning an online forum to chat about gardening;
- The importance of a welcoming and encouraging group (and especially the leaders) was again mentioned.

### **Links to other groups**

47% of the people we interviewed who attended the gardens had not attended any other community group.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, even out of those who did attend other groups, 27% only started attending another community group *after* having joined the garden. This point shows the importance of the gardens in helping to connect to others in the community. Potentially, up to 60% of attendees would have much weaker access to community connections without the gardens. This applies particularly to veg plot and school garden attendees, where only 17% of all users had attended a different community group before attending the garden.

There was no evidence from the data to suggest that people whose only or primary community connection point was with the garden derived more benefit from the gardens than anyone else (they were not more satisfied than others, and they were not more likely to say that the project made a difference to them). It would rather be true to say that the more different things people can engage with, the better.

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<sup>1</sup> Of those who *did* attend other community groups, examples given included an allotment, environmental group, arts group, church or other faith group, book club, toddler group, school related club, political party, choir, disability group, adoption project, community action group, resident committee, and a few unspecified community groups.

## Attitudes

Next people were given an array of statements to do with the desired outcomes of the project, and were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement (scale 1-10).

The responses people gave to each statement are recorded below. Note that not all percentages add up to 100% because not everyone responded to every question. The responses are ordered in terms of the impact that interviewees felt the project had on outcomes, from greatest impact to least impact.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Has being part of the gardening project made a positive difference to your response?	
						No	Yes
I have the skills to grow fruit and vegetables on my own	26%	52%	8%	11%	3%	19%	65%
I am, on the whole, satisfied with life	27%	55%	11%	1.5%	0%	34%	47%
I usually feel calm and relaxed	11%	53%	15%	10%	5%	32%	45%
I think my neighbourhood is an attractive place to live	14.5%	50%	19%	13%	1.5%	42%	42%
I eat my 'five a day'	26%	55%	9.5%	8%	1.5%	42%	40%
I know plenty of people in my neighbourhood	16%	51.5%	5%	22.5%	5%	44%	40%
I have supportive friends in my neighbourhood	21%	52%	10%	14.5%	1.5%	44%	40%
My level of personal fitness is adequate for good health	20%	61%	11%	5%	1.5%	44%	39%
I have influence over the attractiveness of my neighbourhood	6%	47%	16%	24%	5%	42%	37%
I feel confident about taking on extra responsibilities within my neighbourhood	13%	48%	19%	18%	0%	45%	37%

## Relative influence of the project on attitudes

**Relative to one another, respondents were most positive about the impact of the project on their fruit and vegetable growing skills** (which is also the point most directly linked to project activities).

Moreover, correlations in the data showed that being in the project a longer time was linked to significantly higher skills ratings, suggesting that the project indeed makes a difference over time.

78% of people agreed or strongly agreed that they had the skills they needed to grow fruit and vegetables on their own and 65% of people felt that the project had made a difference to these skills. People in the veg patches were the least likely to feel that the project was making any difference to their skills as well as being the least confident of their skills in the first place.

Community garden attenders were the most likely to say that the project made a difference to their skills, although they still did not rate their skills as highly as the school plot attenders did.

**More respondents than not also reported feeling that the project made a difference to their mental health (to life satisfaction and to the feeling of being calm and relaxed).** This is in keeping with wider research findings which report a positive correlation between community group connections (linked to relationships – see below) and improved mental health. Indeed, also in this data it could be seen that people who were connected to various (other) organisations and clubs expressed higher levels of life satisfaction than those who were not so well connected. Greater length of time in the project was not however correlated to ever higher levels of life satisfaction or an increasing sense of relaxation. 82% of responses agreed or strongly agreed that they were, on the whole, satisfied with their life, and 64% agreed or strongly agreed that they usually feel calm and relaxed. People in school gardens, vegetable plots and community gardens all had similar views on how the project impacted their mental health, although the attendees of school plots were the most likely to report high levels of life satisfaction in the first place, and were the least likely to say that the project had any impact on their sense of relaxation.

**Opinion was divided about the impact of the project on the attractiveness of one's neighbourhood;** the same number of people said that the project made a difference as those who said it did not. 'Attractiveness' may be related to community spirit (it is linked with positive social networks) as well as to physical appearance. Correlations showed that length of time in the project was not associated with the way people felt about their neighbourhood over time. Neither was the neighbourhood found to be overwhelmingly attractive in the first place - just over 64% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it was an attractive place to live. Community garden attenders were most enthusiastic about the attractiveness of their neighbourhood and school garden attenders were the least enthusiastic. People who were part of community gardens were also the most likely to feel that the project made a difference to the attractiveness of their neighbourhood.

**Opinion was also pretty much equally divided about the impact of the project on eating one's five a day,** although correlations suggested that being a longer time in the project was associated with being significantly more likely to eat one's five-a-day (once other stress factors were taken into account). Altogether, just over 64% of interviewees agreed or strongly agreed that they ate their five a day. Being part of one garden or another made little difference to these figures, and people in school gardens were the least likely to agree that the project made a difference.

**40% of people felt that the project made a difference to their social connections** (knowing people in the neighbourhood and feeling that they have supportive friends). 44% (very slightly more) felt that the project made no difference. Correlations would suggest that being a longer time in the project was significantly correlated both to knowing people in the neighbourhood and to feeling supported by others. Just over 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they knew plenty of people in their neighbourhood, whilst 73% agreed or strongly agreed that they had supportive friends locally. School garden attenders were the least likely to feel socially connected, and likewise, marginally more likely to feel that the project made a difference. People who were part of veg patches were the least of all likely to feel that the project made a difference to their social connections.

**Slightly more people than not felt that the project made no difference to personal fitness,** although 39% of respondents said it did make a difference. Correlations would suggest that a longer time in the project *was* associated with higher reports of fitness (unless it is just that the

least fit are the first to drop out).<sup>2</sup> 81% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their levels of personal fitness were adequate for good health. School garden attenders were the least likely to feel that the gardens made a difference to their fitness.

**37% of respondents reported that the project made a difference to the influence they had over the attractiveness of their neighbourhood**, and 42% felt that the project made no difference.

Correlations suggested however that a greater time in the project *was* associated with a greater sense of influence, and particularly in the early months of attendance (the increasing sense of influence levelled out over time). Not that one's sense of influence is great generally – of all the statements in the questionnaire, respondents were least likely to agree with this one. Only 53% of respondents altogether agreed or strongly agreed that they had influence over the attractiveness of their neighbourhood. Those in community gardens were most likely to report feeling they have some influence, and they were also the most likely to report that the project made a *difference* to that influence. People in school gardens were the least likely to feel that the project made a difference to their influence.

**Finally, 37% of interviewees felt that the project made a difference to their confidence in taking on extra responsibilities in the neighbourhood**, whilst 45% did not feel that the project made a difference. There is no evidence from correlations that the project made any difference to confidence. 61% of people altogether agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident about taking on extra responsibilities – more in the community gardens, less in the vegetable plots. People in vegetable plots were also the least likely to feel that the project made a difference to their confidence.

### **Influence of the project by type of garden**

Overall, it may be noted that community gardens appeared to have the biggest impact on people, followed by school gardens and then the veg patches.

- **School gardens** were attended by people who were in several ways better off in the first place, and perhaps for this reason they were the least likely of all groups to feel that the project made a difference to them in terms of eating their five-a-day, keeping fit, gaining confidence and influence in their community, or becoming more relaxed. However, they were more positive about how the project helped them to connect with others in the community (something this group was particularly lacking in). Moreover, as was seen earlier, school garden attenders expressed the highest levels of satisfaction with the project.
- **Veg patch** users tended to be slightly worse off than others in some ways, *and* they were the least likely to feel that the project made a difference to them in terms of upskilling, helping them influence the attractiveness of their neighbourhood, and improving their social connections. There were no areas in which this group of people were the *most* likely to feel that the project made a difference. Project impact appears to be least for the veg plot users, although veg patches reach a particularly vulnerable sector of the community, and controlling for person profile, the impact of the project was not significantly less for veg plot users than for other gardeners, except in the domain of social networks (veg plot users were still less likely than other gardeners to say that the project influenced who they know and how supported

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<sup>2</sup> Even if we only consider people who made it through a whole year of attendance however, it is still the case that a longer time in the project is associated with increased fitness.

they feel). Moreover, veg plot users were pretty much as satisfied with the project as community gardeners.

- **Community gardeners** were most positive of all groups about the impact of the project on making supportive friends, on upskilling, on the attractiveness of the neighbourhood, on confidence to get involved and on the feeling of influence in the community. There was no area in which community gardeners were less likely than others to feel that the project made an impact. It would appear then that of the three forms of gardening project, it is the community gardens which have the biggest impact, although attenders did not express as much satisfaction with the project as the school gardeners.

#### **How person profile interacts with attitudes:**

- White people, tended to rate their gardening skills higher than non-whites. They were also more likely to know plenty of people in the neighbourhood, and to feel that they have supported friends in the neighbourhood.
- People in paid work also experienced these advantages (higher gardening skills, better social contact). They are also more likely to feel they have influence over the community than those not in paid employment.
- The highly-qualified rated their gardening skills higher than the lesser-qualified, they were more likely to eat their five-a-day, and they were more likely to feel they have influence over the attractiveness of the community.
- Care-givers experienced less life-satisfaction.
- Those who struggled financially were significantly less calm and relaxed than those who did not. However, they *were* more likely to feel they had influence over the attractiveness of their community than others.
- Older people were more likely to feel the neighbourhood is attractive.
- By correlating the relative impact of the project to the person profile, it could be observed that both men and women, the qualified and the unqualified, people with and without jobs, the sick and the healthy, those with and without care responsibilities, those struggling financially and those doing fine, those living with a partner and those without, people of all ages and ethnicities were equally likely to benefit from the project in one way or another. However in several ways, those studying appeared to gain less benefit from the project than others. People in studies may not be the target group for Food4Families then.

The project impacted the life satisfaction of women more than men. People groups who felt that the project made the most difference to their social networks were women, people with partners, and younger people. The project was deemed particularly beneficial in terms of increasing support structures of younger people. No group felt more confident to take on extra responsibilities than any other (not even the leaders).

Volunteer leaders were sometimes better placed than followers. For example, higher skills in gardening, more supportive social networks. The project has less of an impact on *their* attitudes compared to the attitudes of the people they are serving (for instance, the likelihood of eating their five-a-day, and their support networks and their gardening skills were less likely to change than was the case for other group members). Interestingly, leaders were no more confident about taking on extra responsibilities in the neighbourhood than other interviewees, and neither did they feel they had more influence over the attractiveness of the neighbourhood than anyone else.

## Conclusions

62 interviews were conducted amongst people attending the Food4Families project, which represents about two thirds of all persons regularly involved. Over half of these interviewees were part of a community garden/allotment, and the rest attended either school gardens or small 'veg patches'. All but one person we interviewed attended the gardens at least once a month, with 77% attending at least once a week. This is what we could discover about project impact, by domain.

### 1. **Impact on food growing skills and on healthy eating**

There was a significant correlation between length of time in the project and self-reported food growing skills. Moreover, when reporting on the impact of the project, respondents were far more likely to agree than not that the project made a difference to their skills. Community gardeners were particularly positive about project impact.

Spending more time in the project was also correlated to an increased likelihood of eating one's five-a-day, although the personal opinions of respondents were divided on this one with around half saying the project made a difference and half saying it did not. People in school gardens were least likely to say that the project made a difference.

### 2. **Impact on mental/emotional wellbeing, including impact on social connections and on physical fitness**

More respondents than not, felt that the project made a positive difference to their mental health (to life satisfaction and to the feeling of being calm and relaxed).

Positive social connections are important to mental health, so any kind of project that brings the community together can help. Correlations suggested that a longer time in the gardening project was correlated to a greater sense of knowing lots of people in the neighbourhood and to feeling supported by neighbours. Although some of these connections could have been made anyway through alternative venues, around half of all attendees interviewed attended no other community group, suggesting that the gardens provide an important link-point to others in the community. People attending veg patches however, although particularly unlikely to attend any other group, were also the least positive about the effect of the gardens on their social connections.

Good mental health is also related to good physical health. Regarding physical fitness, slightly more people than not, felt that the project made no difference to personal fitness, although data correlations were found between physical fitness and length of time in the project. It is not certain whether the project actually impacts physical fitness or whether it happens that the least fit tend to eventually drop out. A liking for being outside certainly features in the comments of our interviewees, but this does not tell us how much strenuous activity they engage in. School garden attenders were the least likely to feel that the project affected their fitness.

### 3. **Impact on confidence and skills to take on responsibility in the community**

The project intends to increase the confidence of people to take on extra responsibilities in their neighbourhood. This is through equipping people with new skills and practical experience, and also through group encouragement.

There is little evidence that the project is making a great deal of impact in this area. In fact, there was little evidence that *anything* in our survey correlated to an increased sense of responsibility. Having been on a course was not correlated to any sense of increased

confidence (but then, having more gardening skills, studying or being highly qualified in any other way was not correlated to confidence either). There could be a problem with the way the question is worded – people were asked to whether or not they agreed with the statement, “I feel confident about taking on extra responsibilities within my neighbourhood,” and even competent people (like group leaders) may be put off by the words ‘extra responsibilities’ if they feel busy enough already. If this is the case, then the feeling of ‘influence’ (below) may be a better indicator of project impact.

There *was* a weak link between being part of multiple community groups and responses to this confidence question, and also between being in supportive relationships and confidence. This suggests that the experience the garden gives of active social engagement *may* help boost confidence, and the more things people can get involved with, the better. However, based on this study, increasing confidence to take on extra responsibilities cannot be claimed as a definite achievement of the project. Interviewees rated this lowest out of all the ways in which the project influenced their abilities and thinking. Vegetable plot users were particularly negative.

#### 4. **Impact on the local environment and one’s sense of influence over it**

Both community spirit and pleasant green spaces are seen to make a community more attractive, and the gardening project has the potential to make a contribution in both these points. In terms of its success in doing so, the same number of people said the project made a difference to the attractiveness of one’s neighbourhood as those who did not feel it made a difference. Some people felt the gardens need to look nicer. *Community* gardeners were, however, significantly more likely than others to feel that the project made a positive difference to their wider community.

The project also aims to increase the influence people have over the attractiveness of their community. ‘Influence’ is not something that people generally feel they have much of (only 6% of respondents strongly agreed that they had it). Correlations suggested that a greater length of time in the project *was* associated with a somewhat higher sense of influence than was felt by others, even though slightly more people than not reported that the project made no difference. Again, those in community gardens were significantly more likely than others to report feeling that they have some influence over the attractiveness of their community, and they were also the most likely to report that the project made a *difference* to that influence. People in school gardens were the least likely to feel that the project made a difference to their influence.

#### 5. **Extending the impact of the garden**

Impact can be increased both by reaching more people and by improving the gardening programme itself. In terms of reaching more people:

- Personal invitation via trusted social networks (schools and other community groups or friend-to-friend) is most important, although RISC has also been successful in recruiting people by direct invitation.
- Clearer signs could be made at the garden itself about where the project is and how to get involved.
- Backup online information is also important.

**Key points of attraction are:**

- The project makes the most of green spaces. Being in touch with nature is important. People very much appreciate being able to access green and beautiful spaces. They also believe that green spaces make a big difference to the attractiveness of their community;
- The project is a child friendly activity;
- It brings the community together (people of all different backgrounds). Respondents rate the need for good relations with other people in the community very highly. This was not necessarily the first thing people cares about when they came into the project, but it was the main thing they appreciated once they were there;
- The project provides opportunities to learn and gain experience.

**Key suggestions for improving the gardens (and thereby increasing their impact) include:**

- Put on more fun events/activities. Have refreshments. Games.
- Make some of these events for the wider community; sharing.
- Offer more special learning events/speakers for the whole group.
- Have more hours available when people can go along.
- Have covered/sheltered spaces in case of bad weather, and nice places to sit down.
- Make the gardens more aesthetically pleasing – a pleasant and *tidy* green space for the wider community to enjoy.
- Keep paying attention to group dynamics. The groups need to feel welcoming and encouraging, and everyone needs to be informed of what is going on. People can get a bit discouraged when attendance is low.

**6. Success of the different garden types in meeting the needs of the target group**

21% of the interviewees were not white, 14.5% had not lived in the UK more than 10 years, 21% faced financial struggles, 32% were not in a paid job, 11% said that poor health limited their activities and 61% were in caring roles. These percentages suggest that the garden is succeeding, at least to some degree, to attract vulnerable people, and also to mix people of different backgrounds.

However, men were relatively poorly represented in the gardens (79% of interviewees were female), and men tended to be less satisfied with the project and were less likely to feel that it added to their life-satisfaction or to their social networks. The predominant age of adult attendees was people in their thirties and forties. People over the age of 50 tended to be somewhat less satisfied with the project, and were less likely to feel that the project added to their social networks. More provision may be made for elder members *and also for people with young children* if sheltered and aesthetically pleasant areas to sit are provided.

A surprising number of people attending the group were highly qualified – just over half held university degrees! Highly qualified people were more likely to rate their gardening skills highly, they were more likely to eat their five-a-day, and they were more likely to feel that they have influence over the attractiveness of the community. These advantages suggest that they are not necessarily the target group of the project, although in terms of wellbeing, social connections and confidence they were neither more nor less advantaged than others. Indeed, people of all demographic profiles analysed in the survey were equally likely to say that they benefit from the project in some one way or another, suggesting that the project has broad appeal and relevance. The only possible exception may regard people *currently* studying, who in several ways did not seem to get so much out of the project as other groups. The garden has particular appeal to people who are already ‘into’ gardening. It may be harder to capture the interest of people outside of this group.

## To sum up

The impact of the project may not be as strong as hoped for in all areas (such as building confidence to take on new responsibilities) but correlations in the data show that a longer time in the project was generally associated with improved gardening skills, healthier eating (five-a-day),<sup>3</sup> improved social networks, improved social support, a greater sense of influence over the attractiveness of the community and possibly increased fitness (although fitness and an interest in gardening may rather be a pre-condition than a project impact). Moreover, people who were part of community groups generally tended to experience higher levels of life satisfaction than those whose community contact was more limited.

The different types of garden may have particular value in different ways:

- The profile of veg patches users suggested that this initiative was the most successful in reaching vulnerable people who are not involved in anything else, even though these were the hardest forms of garden to make work;
- Clients of the school gardens were the most satisfied with the project (and particularly with the contact it gave them with other people);
- Clients of the communal gardens were the most likely to feel that the project made a positive difference both to themselves and to their community.

The garden appeals to a wide demographic profile. A range of suggestions were made for how the impact of the gardens may be improved, building on project strengths in terms of bringing various members (and ages) of the community together, making more of green spaces (including making the gardens tidier and nice to look at for the rest of the community) and offering further opportunities to have fun, learn and gain experience.



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<sup>3</sup> Controlling for personality – relaxed people are less likely to bother with five-a-day

# Qualitative research

## FINDINGS

### Reasons for participation

Although experience and motivations were listed as separate topic areas in the interview schedule, they have been merged here as the respondents made similar responses in both sections. Reasons for participating have been broken out into concrete or immediate reasons, abstract reasons, consequential reasons, and finally, the values that participation connect with.

**Table 4 Reasons for participation**

Type	Reason	Number <sup>4</sup>	Examples
Immediate reasons	No garden at home	1	"We live in the high rises, we don't have a garden"
	Location	3	"It's very close to our home too" "It's a nice spot too, it's very quiet"
	Growing produce	5	"At first I wanted to grow my own food as much as possible" "I have cooked with everything I have brought home and made new recipes"
	Social interaction	8	"It's a very friendly place" "I think it's quite social and quite friendly, I mean that's really important" "It's somewhere I can spend time with my daughter" "It's so nice to have people you can chat to whilst you're doing something"
	Time outdoors	5	"It's just nice being outdoors" "The fresh air it's so relaxing getting back to nature"
Abstract reasons	Satisfaction from growing things	3	"I appreciate growing my own food, my own crops, yeah, organically and sustainably" "I just like growing things [laughs]. I think if I get vegetables at the end and I get to meet with friends and chat to people, yeah, for me that's the added bonus" "Me personally, I like to see the development. I like looking after the vines, trees, learn about pruning, how to shape the trees, that kind of thing, look out for the health. That's the thing I like in particular because you see the difference over the years. It's like making slow, eventual changes"
	Friendship/ community	6	"I just love...that I've made new friends here, my children have made new friends here too"

<sup>4</sup> Refers to the number of respondents citing each reason

Type	Reason	Number <sup>4</sup>	Examples
			<p>“There are the same people that run the site, and then new volunteers who come in. And there’s been a few new people who’ve stayed on. Some come for just a one off, or they come a few times, but others come and they stay”</p> <p>“A big part of our enjoyment are the tutors as they are so kind and pleasant”</p>
	Promotes sharing	3	<p>[Helps the children to learn about] sharing...they’d all pick things and then they’d share them out...</p> <p>“I think the fact that it’s a group effort and we share everything that’s grown here...all the tasks...”</p>
Consequences	Exchange labour for produce	3	<p>“It’s a great feeling eating your own produce”</p>
	Children [may!] eat the produce	4	<p>“They don’t <i>know</i> they’ve eaten them, but sometimes they do”</p> <p>“I think having the kids involved is also...is really quite enjoyable because you feel you’re teaching them something, you can see them getting excited about growing something”</p> <p>“[My son is] autistic and he has, like, a really restricted diet. So I think if he grew stuff it would make him a bit more interested in it”</p>
	Learning new skills	4	<p>“I feel I learn something each week I have a small veg patch at home and I didn’t know what I was doing with it”</p> <p>“Currently I’m involved in a research project, a large permaculture project, and this particular experiment is to compare how crops grow in polyculture compared to monoculture”</p>
	Improved diet	2	<p>“It’s helped with a healthier diet as well, they can see where food comes from, and they’ve grown it themselves”</p>
	Improved mood	3	<p>“The memory of how good it makes you feel motivates me to go when I’m feeling low”</p> <p>“I always feel better ...if just from everyday tasks ...I know it improves my mood...I feel better”</p>
Values	Connecting with nature	5	<p>“I’ve had a lot of growing in my background. I used to grow a lot as a kid. Getting my hands dirty in the soil, so it’s like a thing”</p> <p>“This feels very much like home for me”</p> <p>“I want to be able to give children the experience of getting out and about in the outdoors and hadn’t been able to do that until I found the garden”</p>
	Teaching the next generation	5	<p>“I think having the kids involved is also...is really quite enjoyable because you feel you’re teaching them something, you can see them getting excited about growing something”</p>

Type	Reason	Number <sup>4</sup>	Examples
			".. and opportunity for my daughter to learn about nature"
	Belief in organic methods	1	"That's the reason I'm here, I always wanted more organic..."
	Working for the common good	1	"And it's good to have common projects and common goals"

Reason types ('initial reasons', 'abstract reasons', 'consequences' and 'values') have been used to explore some of the thought-processes driving participation. It draws on means-end research (often used to understand consumer decision-making), whereby participants are encouraged to explore the motivations and values behind their choices. A few examples to illustrate the point (not based on one interview):

Primary reasons	Abstract reason	Consequences	Values
'I want to grow my own veg'	'I get satisfaction from growing things'	'It improves my mood'	'I feel connected to nature'
'I want to grow my own veg'	'So my kids know where food comes from'	'My children eat the produce'	'I want my family to be healthy'

## Attracting and retaining participants

- There is evidence to suggest that Southcote is not engaging the local community. Some of the younger children appear to be interested but are not allowed onto the site without supervision
- "We have events where you come along and *visit*... And every time we do have any engagement people say 'oh it's fantastic', they love it, promise that they'll come next time. And then they don't"
- "[Name]...was involved in some outreach trying to go round to get people involved. And I remember him saying that people were saying we don't eat that muck [laughs]. We don't eat vegetables, basically. So unless you want to eat the *produce*, then you're not seeing any reason to come, really
- "And then local kids visit, yeah...they just come here from neighbouring places. But they must be supervised... They come on their own. We tell them they need to bring an adult"
- On the other hand, there are indications that Southcote has a high retention rate. For example, [2] of the respondents discussed how they continue to attend, even though they are no longer within walking distance and a further [2] participants discussed the fact that participants were willing to travel some distance
- "I don't *know* of anyone who lives here [that comes to the garden]...I think people do tend to come from further afield"
- Coley Park appears to be underused and the raised level of the garden could put off parents with young children. Fliers have been distributed but the respondent flagged that Coley Park isn't on the Food4Families website
- Sites are by the nature of their locations hidden from view and so a lot of people don't know they exist. A number of people mentioned that better awareness of the garden in question would make a difference as well as better understanding of what is involved and the benefits
- "I had no idea Whitley GrowAllot was there even though I worked at the school next to it for three and a half years"

- It's just getting people to the space to see it for the first time – I had a totally different idea in my head when my friend had been talking about it to what it actually meant ... so much better”
- At other sites, listed word of mouth, social media (e.g. Facebook) and schools are cited as being the key routes to discovering the gardens
- Suggestions for encouraging greater participation include running specific sessions e.g. children's craft and promoting the gardens as a family friendly activity
- Changing work commitments, changing life patterns and moving away were cited as reasons why some people stop attending

## Growing skills and nutrition

While 7 of the 10 respondents indicated that participating in the garden had influenced their eating habits to an extent, it is clear that all of the respondents are minded to eat healthily and in at least one case this was a factor in participating.

**Table 5 Influence on eating habits**

Response	Number	Examples
Participation influences eating habits	7	<p>“I started to make the vegetable sauces again, as I had trailed off on that”</p> <p>“I've always...I think I've always eaten quite well but I think generally in my cooking now I'm more adventurous...”</p> <p>“I made quince jelly last week...[laughs] which I've never done before in my life. So yeah, I think it does kind of encourage people to be a bit closer to the food they eat, maybe try new things and encourage people to cook”</p> <p>“We eat pretty healthily anyway, but we've tried a few new things”</p> <p>“It has shown me the importance of involving my son in preparing food and learning how it grows as he is always so excited to eat food that has come from the allotment”</p>
Participation hasn't influenced eating habits	3	<p>“No, I eat healthily anyway. That's a feature for me...it just helps us <i>financially</i>”</p> <p>“Not really, no. I was probably eating in the same way...I think I would have got to that point [being mostly vegetarian/vegan] anyway”</p> <p>“Ah, I decided about my eating habits already”</p>

A few suggestions were made to better support people who want to change their eating habits, including holding cooking/healthy eating sessions and outreach, potentially in coordination with another charity.

## Physical, mental and emotional wellbeing

Nine of the ten respondents feel that participating in the garden makes some degree of difference to their physical and mental state.

**Table 6 Impact on physical and mental wellbeing**

Aspect	Improvement?	No.	Examples
Physical	Yes	9	<p>“Probably [laughs], but I’m fairly active anyway...but I think for a lot of people it would make a <i>huge</i> difference, yeah, so just having a half hour out doing physical activity. Probably especially for older people, but I think kids as well benefit from it. Not so much me...”</p> <p>“after a session my body definitely tells me it has been doing something”</p> <p>“Not so much gardening but the mile walk there and back”</p>
Mental	Yes	5	<p>“It’s therapeutic, and socialising, there’s nice people, yeah, it’s all good, Its time well spent”</p> <p>“Yes gardening is a great stress reliever”</p> <p>“It helps me feel closer to nature and as someone who has suffered with depression involving myself with nature is a great help”</p>

**Table 7 Reasons for impacts on physical and mental wellbeing**

AttributesType		No.	Examples
Primary reasons	Seeing stuff grow	2	<p>“Just seeing stuff that you’ve planted grow is really good”</p> <p>“Being involved in something simple like planting, growing and harvesting with other people brings a sense of jot and satisfaction”</p>
	Being outside	5	<p>“It feels good to work in fresh air”</p> <p>“It’s being in touch with the ground as opposed to manmade surfaces, having to deal with the earth and using my body in a different; just being outside”</p>
	Getting exercise	6	<p>“It gets you moving about and physically active”</p> <p>“...But if [the children] were at home they wouldn’t be running around”</p> <p>“I definitely feel that I’ve done some exercise as I’ve often been digging and harvesting”</p>
	Enjoyable/relaxing	3	<p>“Well it’s enjoyable, yeah. I’m in a good mood [laughs]”</p> <p>“It’s relaxing, yeah, it makes me happy”</p>
Abstract reasons	Benefiting from company	5	<p>“It’s made me feel happy, because when I woke up this morning my back was really bad and I thought I’ll either stay at home or I could push myself and go out...it’s better for me and I’ll speak to people. I do feel better!”</p>
	Feeling more connected to local area	2	<p>“It makes you feel a bit more connected in to your local area...Because a lot of the clubs people come from all over, whereas this...most people would walk here and they’d come from the local roads. So it’s a good way to go actually I <i>do</i> know people around here, and it makes it feel more <i>safe</i>, maybe”</p> <p>“the sense of community is great for building self-esteem”</p>

	Headspace	1	"It gives me much needed headspace even though the children are here we all seem to find some space and feel at ease"
Consequences	Improved mood	4	"It give me happy points in my memory so they are there to help me through the bad times" "Having the session as part of my week definitely makes me feel happier and more content"
	Better local support network	1	"You can support each other if anything went wrong, you know like if people live a couple of roads away and you really need help, you feel you could do that. It's good to know people around you because you feel less isolated. Yeah"

## Community leadership

There appears to be a high level of volunteerism amongst respondents, which may suggest that people who already volunteer are more likely to go on to participate in community gardens. When asked whether participating in the garden project made respondents think about getting more involved in their communities, three respondents indicated that they already volunteer, and another said they had volunteered previously.

"I'm not so much active in the *local* community, but I'm active...really active in the wider community"

"I don't think I'd be able to pick anything else up because I also run a playgroup and all these different things "

"No. I was already volunteering anyway, so I haven't done more or less"

On the other hand, two respondents said that being involved in the garden has made them think about getting involved in their community and one has already started as a result of coming to the garden.

### Would you like to be more involved with the garden?

While the general feeling was that people don't want to become heavily involved, there is a willingness to help on an ad-hoc basis, for example by supporting or running one-off activities or providing guidance when the participant has specific skills or expertise.

## Local environment ownership

### How involved do you feel in your neighbourhood?

None of the respondents feel especially involved in their neighbourhoods, although six indicated that they know their neighbours. This line of question was complicated by the fact that not all garden participants are local to the garden they attend.

### Has participating in the garden influenced how you feel about your neighbourhood?

There is some evidence to suggest that participating in the gardens has a positive effect on perceptions of neighbourhoods. Comments relate to knowing more people (2), providing a counter-balance to the negative perceptions of the area (2), feelings of greater inclusion and belonging (2).

## Perceived impact of community gardens on the neighbourhood

Table 8 Impact on the neighbourhood

Aspect	Number	Examples
Generates interest	1	"Well the kids, sometimes, they get curious. And the little kids, they're all cute, and they want to pick some raspberries and that's all fine, only they need to be supervised"
Vandalism/anti-social behaviour	1	"Sometimes there are rough kids...sometimes they come and vandalise the site, so it's a very negative cycle. And sometimes neighbours see it as a dump, as a tip, and they chuck things over"
Regeneration	1	"If you don't use the space, it would be deserted, it would be shut down. And I think the general idea was that the allotments were set up to provide food for local families..."
Replacing declining services	2	"It's great to have somewhere to go, and also for the kids to have somewhere to go, because there is less to do now...well yes, the children's centres are closing down so there's not as much going on" "It's an activity to do with children when the children centre is able to provide less"
Getting people into gardening	1	"There's another lady who used to come, and she got an allotment, <i>because</i> she started coming here. So, I mean that's <i>another</i> person into the allotments, so that's good"
Connecting people	2	"I've personally met other people in my community, whereas before I didn't...and people have met <i>me</i> " "It brings people together"
Source of fresh fruit and veg	3	"I do bring back some veg to local neighbours who seem to appreciate it" "Promotes healthy eating"

### What makes an attractive growing space?

Almost all respondents are appreciative of the gardens they attend, and the following comments are generally endorsements of the spaces.

- "Somewhere safe and tidy, that's nice, well kept, not overgrown"
- "I like that they're always taking suggestions from people, it's always evolving, each year it's a completely different garden... "
- "Pretty, well kept, variety of flowers and produce, you know they look after it, you can see its well-kept"
- "I suppose this is an attractive one, the fact it's got all the trees, umm...pond, umm...different plants around, willow arbour setting area"
- "Openness, obviously...accessibility is really important so...well I mean if it's servicing the local community, you have to be able to walk to it or cycle to it, umm, it has to be big enough so you can do what you're trying to achieve. So this is actually quite a large...it's the right size, it's a good location"
- "Friendly tutors, flowers and attractive plants, different sections e.g. raised beds, orchard, somewhere to sit down and congregate and get a drink"
- "Reasonably organised, quite active ... with things growing and not too overgrown"
- "A good mix of flowers and vegetables"(2)

## What might the garden offer to tackle loneliness/isolation?

A number of suggestions were made help tackle loneliness and isolation. These included running more targeted/social gardening groups to offer opportunities to meet others (3). Several comments provide examples of how participating in gardening sessions promotes inclusion:

“I think it’s quite nice [during the sessions] when...someone will go “right, you do this, you do...” cos sometimes people won’t necessarily offer up ‘what can I do’ or...some people who are more confident will be that ...but what I like is they say “can you help me with this, or can you help me with that”...

“If you can get people there of all ages gardening provides a good activity to work around, it cuts across barriers. Shy people can go and listen, you can just be, there are options for all kinds of people, you can help if you want to but there is no pressure to do anything specific. People can make natural connections and ease into things”

“Keep doing what it’s already doing and done for me”

## Reflections on lessons learnt during evaluation process

- Further down the line, consider running a more targeted set of interviews with fewer questions on ‘what might the garden do’ and concentrate on better understanding individual experiences and underlying values/drivers
- Conduct semi-structured interviews or focus groups with people who have heard about but have not become involved in the garden projects to better understand barriers



# Overall recommendations

**How well you did** – the gardening project did well as follows:

## Impact

- The gardens were clearly significant in helping users to connect with others in their community, particularly the community gardens.
- Most people, especially those attending the community gardens felt that the gardens made a difference to their fruit and veg growing skill. Moreover, the longer people had been involved in the gardens, the more highly they tended to rate their skills.
- Most people felt that the garden project made a positive difference to their mental health – to life satisfaction and to the feeling of being calm and relaxed. They also felt the garden added to the attractiveness of the community.
- There is a strong base of regular users – average time involved was two years. The school gardens were especially well supported by regular attendees.
- The vast majority of users are satisfied or extremely satisfied with the garden project. The project has wide appeal.
- The veg patches were found to reach those most likely to face financial struggles, least likely to be in a job and or have other community connections.
- There was a definite interest in learning – seen as a key benefit of the garden project.
- The best things cited about the garden project included bringing the community together, closeness to nature, being child friendly and offering opportunities to learn.
- It was noted that the gardens were filling in gaps left by the reduction of council provided services such as Children’s Centres.

## What lessons learnt

- Finding new and innovative ways of publicising and raising awareness of the garden facilities and access arrangements including provision of a wider range of activities and events to encourage attendance
- The most common way that people got to hear about the garden was through personal invitation. Having a personal invite via trusted social networks like friends/schools is important – how can we exploit these more?
- Veg patch users are the least connected to their wider community, and it is necessary to consider how we can help to strengthen this link
- Learning is vital – this should prompt more organised responses to increasing people’s gardening skills and knowledge
- Garden connections to the wider community are tentative still – more needs to be done to build community connections and extend garden influence and activity in ‘greening’ the local community.
- A review needs to be undertaken to consider how best to retain users and how best to sustain their on-going use of the gardens – additional support and other organisational changes; for instance, hours of opening could help people stay longer in the project which, in turn, helps yield greater benefits.

- Relationships are crucial to sustaining as well as encouraging attendance – how people respect, trust and relate makes a key difference to attitudes and ultimately attendance. This needs to be reviewed and developed.
- Garden users could do more to promote a tidy, pleasing and beautiful space enjoyable in its own right as a community asset.

### **What needs to be changed if project is going to continue and how?**

- Whilst the gardens do appeal to a wide demographic they are mostly women, people who are already keen on gardening and with a disproportionate amount of those who are better educated – more needs to be done to address this imbalance.

#### **HOW**

1. Publicise through existing community groups where the widest range of people come e.g. the school gate.
  2. Improve signage
  3. Give users and volunteers more say in managing garden sites
  4. Target particular groups e.g. special needs groups and groups or activities mostly supported by men
  5. Offer training in garden or site management
- Most gardens offer a limited range of activities – they are obviously garden focused but more could be done to make the gardens livelier and more attractive to the varied needs of the local community.

#### **HOW**

1. Offer sites as meeting venues
  2. Offer a wider range of activities and events such as food markets, summer garden visits and open days,
  3. Provide some services meeting community needs e.g. garden tool hire, activities for children, household repair sessions
- Links with communities tend to be hesitant and uncertain; too often the gardens are seen as detached from the local neighbourhood

#### **HOW**

1. Give people more say in organising events and activities
2. Improve links to local groups and organisations – map range of local organisations and generate partnership arrangements
3. Allocate and outreach role as a part time paid or volunteer ‘ambassador’ role

- The gardens are a precious and valuable but a largely hidden resource in that what could and should be available and accessible to the local community is not well presented or proclaimed – publicity of all types must be regularly and systematically broadcast.

#### **HOW**

1. Regularly circulate information about the garden to local organisations and nearby residential properties
2. Organise open day or occasional guided visits – to community broadly as well as targeted groups or organisations e.g. primary schools

3. Ensure that the publicity is appropriately worded including 'free' and 'open to everybody'

**This section concludes our evaluation report. It has been an absorbing and enlightening process and given us all – tutors, users, volunteers and our management team, a positive boost and a clear incentive to further improve and develop our community garden provisions.**



# APPENDIX 1: Quantitative questionnaire

## Food4Families questionnaire

Date:	Interviewed by:	Location:
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*Food4Families has asked an independent research body to find out what people think about the gardening project. This will help them to improve their services. You do not have to take part in this survey, and even if you do, you can skip any questions you do not want to answer. Your anonymity is protected. Would you be willing to answer some questions for us please? Yes / No*

1a. Which garden are you involved with?

1b. How long have you been involved in the garden? ..... years, ..... months

1c. How frequently do you attend the gardening project?

- Once a week or more
- Not every week but at least once a month
- Not every month but three or more times a year
- Just once or twice in the year

2. Have you taken part in any courses/training events related to the gardens?

- No
- Yes. Which one(s)? .....

3a. How did you find out about the gardening project?

3b. What was it that made you want to join up at the time?

4a. On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you with the gardening project?

1 (not at all satisfied)	2	3	4	5 (extremely satisfied)
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4b. What is the best thing about the gardening project?

4b. What might attract more people?

4c. Why do you think some people stop coming?

5a. Are you part of any other group/groups in your neighbourhood?

- No
- Yes. Which one(s)? .....

5b. If yes, were you part of another group before getting involved with the garden, or only after?

- I was part of another community group **before** joining the garden
- I became part of another community group only **after** joining the garden

6. Please tick the relevant boxes in the following table

	Strongly disagree	disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Strongly agree	Has being part of the gardening project made a positive difference to your response?	
					No	Yes
I have the skills to grow fruit and vegetables on my own	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I eat my 'five a day'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My level of personal fitness is adequate for good health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am, on the whole, satisfied with life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I usually feel calm and relaxed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know plenty of people in my neighbourhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have supportive friends in my neighbourhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel confident about taking on extra responsibilities within my neighbourhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think my neighbourhood is an attractive place to live	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have influence over the attractiveness of my neighbourhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. How could the gardening project make *more* of a difference to you/your neighbourhood?

8. What would you like to see more of in your locality in terms of

- The people (social characteristics)
- The way the place looks (physical characteristics)
- Things to do, facilities and services (cultural characteristics)

9. Personal details

	No	Yes
Are you studying?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you doing a paid job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does poor health limit your activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you caring for children or other dependent family members?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you struggle financially?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you live with a partner?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Age: Under 20; 20-29; 30-39; 40-49; 50-59; 60-69; 70+

How long have you lived in the UK?  
All my life / ..... years

Background:

Gender: M F

Highest qualification:

10. Any other comments?

# APPENDIX 2: Food4Families locations

## FOOD4FAMILIES GrowAlot CENTRES – Evaluation Report Visits

CENTRE	VISIT	CENTRE	VISIT
1.Southcote		14.Strathy Close – disability centre	
2. Whitley		15.Raglan Court	
3. Weller Centre		16.Circuit Lane	Unavailable
4. Katesgrove		17.St Stephan’s Court	
5. Erleigh Rd		18.Mead Close	
6.Coley Park Community Centre		19.Sun St Community Centre	
7.St John’s Church		20.The Dingles	
8.Micklands Primary		21.Eskin Close	
9.Thameside Primary		22.Hunters Court	
10.Whitley Park Primary		23.New Christchurch Primary	
11.Mead Close		24.Newtown Primary	
12.Rothbury Court		25.Maple Centre – disability centre	
13.Windermere Rd	Unavailable	26 John Madejski Academy	

# APPENDIX 3: In-depth interview schedule (University of Reading)

<b>Interview guide</b>	
<b>Part 1: setting the scene</b>	
Purpose	Part of the Gardens Project evaluation process
Length	20 mins
Interviewer role	Guide discussion, listen, neutral as possible
Why selected	How and why participant selected
Permission to record	Recorded but not attributed Recordings stored on password-protected device
Confidentiality and anonymity	Anonymised transcripts, stored on password-protected device Participation is voluntary Free to stop at any time and/or decline to answer any questions
The discussion	No right or wrong answers Interested in your experiences, feelings and opinions
<b>Part 2: forms (participation and background information)</b>	
Complete	Discuss use
<b>Part 3: how has the garden made a difference to you? What would make more of a difference?</b>	
Experience	How often do you visit the garden? Do you come with others or arrange to meet others here? What do you appreciate about coming here? Is there anything you'd like to change?
Motivations	What brings you here? How does it make you feel? What would encourage more people to join the sessions? What would encourage people to visit more often? Why do you think some people stop coming along?
Growing skills and nutrition	Has participating in this programme made you think about your eating habits? <i>[If yes]</i> in what ways has it influenced what you eat/cook? What could the community garden do to better support people who want to change their eating habits?
Physical, mental and emotional wellbeing	Do the gardening sessions have an affect on your physical health? How about on your emotional and mental wellbeing? In what ways have the gardening sessions affected you?

Please turn over

Part 4: supplementary areas	
Community leadership	<p>Has participating in the gardening project made you think about getting involved in your community in other ways?</p> <p>Can you think of any practical examples of how you have become more involved?</p> <p>Are you involved in the running of this garden?</p> <p><i>[If no]</i> Would you like to be more involved?</p>
Local environment ownership	<p>How involved do you feel in your neighbourhood?</p> <p>Do you feel able to improve your neighbourhood, or change the things you don't like?</p> <p>Has participating in the garden influenced how you feel about your neighbourhood?</p> <p>What affect do you think the food growing spaces have on your neighbourhood?</p> <p>What makes an attractive growing space?</p> <p>What might the garden do or offer to tackle loneliness or isolation in your community?</p>
Thank you!	

# Appendix 4: Background information



## Background information

All data generated are anonymous. You will not be identified from your answers and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. All information and data will be handled in a confidential manner. All data and recordings will be stored in a secure password-protected location and will be deleted on completion of the project.

### Age

Under 20	<input type="text"/>	50 – 59	<input type="text"/>
20 – 29	<input type="text"/>	60 – 69	<input type="text"/>
30 – 39	<input type="text"/>	70+	<input type="text"/>
40 – 49	<input type="text"/>		

### Gender

Male	<input type="text"/>
Female	<input type="text"/>
Rather not say	<input type="text"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>

### How long have you lived in the UK?

All my life  A number of years (please specify)

### Ethnicity

Please describe your ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

### Personal details

Are you studying?	No	Yes
Are you doing a paid job?	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Does poor health limit your activities?	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Are you caring for children or other dependent family members?	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Do you struggle financially?	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Do you live with a partner?	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>