



The Big Lunch

FEEDING COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Authors

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‘Our aim is to encourage people to use this special day to foster togetherness and a sense of shared responsibility or stake in, the communities in which we live and, perhaps most importantly, to create a shared memory of something good’

Tim Smit KBE, Co-Founder and Chief Executive,
The Eden Project and Co-Founder of The Big Lunch

‘The Big Lunch is a simple way to bring people together who might otherwise not have the chance to meet and share a sense of community. That’s why the Big Lottery Fund is proud to continue to support The Big Lunch’

Peter Ainsworth, Big Lottery Fund Chair



Summary

LGiU has been assessing the social impact of The Big Lunch every year since it launched in 2009. We have looked at the sort of people and communities that have taken part, the social impact that this has had and whether The Big Lunch has been successful in strengthening social capital.

Year on year we have argued that:

- The Big Lunch works: those who take part in Lunches meet new people, feel closer to their neighbours and ultimately, it strengthens communities.
- The Big Lunch has an on-going impact: after Lunches, people keep in touch with their neighbours and do new things with them.
- The Big Lunch is sustainable: the idea engages people from different age groups and communities to take part together.

By building social capital within communities, The Big Lunch creates support networks and contacts that make those communities more resilient, and makes the people living in them feel better about society.

This report looks back over the past four Big Lunches, summarises our findings and presents the case for why we think The Big Lunch is important for a wide range of public policy goals.

The key challenge looking to the future is to maintain and increase the number of Lunches each year and the number of people taking part in them, so that the benefit can be felt more widely across society.



Introduction

The first ever Big Lunch took place in July 2009, when almost 600,000 people sat down to eat with their neighbours, to get to know new people and, most importantly, to have fun together. The project, the brainchild of Tim Smit of the Eden Project and Paul Twivy, has a simple and unchanging aim: to encourage people across the UK to have lunch with their neighbours, once a year, as a simple act of community, friendship and fun.

The principal idea behind The Big Lunch was that bringing together neighbours, streets, and even entire communities through a street party would be a good way of making people feel happier. As well as a fun, social event, The Big Lunch also has a more serious intention – to be a way of bringing neighbours together and strengthening community spirit.

Big Lunches can be large or small and take place in the street, garden, park or community venue – anywhere people can get together and share lunch and conversation. Since starting in 2009, thousands of Big Lunches have taken place in all kinds of communities.

The Big Lunch is active across the UK. The Big Lunch organisers believe that the benefits outlined in this report hold true

across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; the focus, however, for this assessment is the impact that the Lunches have had in England. The Big Lunch has only been possible because of the support of the Big Lottery Fund (BIG). Since 2009 BIG has invested nearly £10m in The Big Lunch. Bringing communities together, reducing loneliness and isolation and helping to make a difference locally is at the heart of BIG's mission.

The Big Lunch delivers this and equips people with the skills and confidence to bring about real positive change within their communities. BIG continues to invest in The Big Lunch in order to increase participation across the UK, to foster more resilient communities and to bring about further social change.

Since 2009, The Big Lunch has grown significantly and in 2012 it was part of The Queen's Diamond Jubilee events programme. The Big Jubilee Lunch attracted 8.5 million people – a 350% increase on 2011.

This represented the sort of breakthrough that The Big Lunch was looking for and the challenge looking forward is to maintain this interest and momentum in taking part in Lunches.

1. Social capital: why we need The Big Lunch

LGiU has been assessing the social impact of The Big Lunch every year since it launched in 2009.

The initial intention of the event's organisers was to spread a little of what they termed 'human warming' through community meals that would be enjoyable, social occasions but which also serve a more serious purpose of bringing neighbours together, creating new relationships and strengthening community relations.

The core idea was that bringing together neighbours, streets, and even entire communities through a Big Lunch would be a good way to make people feel happier and build a sense of community.

Intuitively this feels right. Many of us are familiar with the feeling of well-being that comes from knowing our neighbours or feeling connected to a community. We wanted to see whether The Big Lunch engendered this sort of well-being and whether this made any on-going difference to the communities where it took place.

At the heart of this analysis lies the rather opaque concept that social scientists and policy analysts know as 'social capital': the idea that interactive networks between people have value for the people who are in them. When we are part of a network, we often have easier access to important information, we may be in a better position to influence decision-making processes, and by sharing similar interests or resources with

others we derive emotional benefits from a sense of belonging.

Robert Putnam, a Harvard academic and leading expert on social capital, explains that there is a broad range of networks that constitute social capital.¹ Networks can be highly formal, such as a parent-teacher association. Other forms of social capital, like a group of people who gather at the pub every Thursday evening, are highly informal. There are also very thin forms of social capital, like the nodding acquaintance you have with the person you occasionally see at the local shop. The higher the quality and the amount of social interaction in a community, the higher the level of social capital in that community.

This matters because there is plentiful evidence that high levels of social capital positively and significantly influence people's health, educational performance, crime rates and socio-economic inequality in an area. For example, a study by the University of Oxford in 2007 showed clearly that in England, low levels of social capital across domains such as trust, perceived social support and civic participation are linked to poorer health and poorer perceived well-being.²

As for educational performance, Robert Putnam presents evidence that the link between this and social capital is twice as strong as the link between educational performance and spending on schools or teacher/pupil ratios.

1 Putnam, R. (2001) 'Social Capital- Measurement and Consequences.' *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/25/6/1825848.pdf>

2 Petrou, S. and Kupek, E. (2007) 'Social capital and its relationship with measures of health status: evidence from the Health Survey for England 2003' *Health Economics*

And of course, there is the important issue of feeling happy – as a study from the Harvard Medical School found out, happiness can spread through social networks.³ People who are surrounded by many happy people are more likely to become happy in the future. These ‘happiness clusters’ result from the spread of happiness through social relations, not just because people tend to befriend similar individuals.

Even weak social capital can make a difference. There have been experiments that suggest that nodding acquaintances are more likely to come to your aid than people you don’t even nod to.

Social capital is a crucial resource. We live in a world of complex challenges, from climate change to social cohesion, to changing demographics. These challenges cannot be solved by governments alone or by individuals, they can only be met by collaboration, by pooling our creativity and intelligence and responding through collective action. In meeting these challenges, social capital is the most valuable currency we have.

It is therefore not surprising that during the last decade the creation of social capital has been a major policy aim of many government departments in Britain and elsewhere. Concerns over declining social capital motivated the New Labour government to target whole neighbourhoods with local regeneration initiatives, and also to make Citizenship part of the National Curriculum in 2002.

For the incoming coalition government in 2010, a commitment to the more organic, bottom-up concept of the Big Society, in which communities are empowered to solve

problems for themselves, was for a time, a key vehicular concept that placed this analysis at the heart of government policy.

In the 2010 Big Lunch evaluation, we argued that “the Big Society, self-evidently, must be a strong society: a society in which people have the connections, the capacities and the *community* spirit to act together for the common good. In short a society with high levels of social capital.”

The four years over which The Big Lunch has been taking place have seen a change in government, a deepening financial crisis and an unprecedented period of public austerity. Despite these changes, or perhaps because of the debate about the limits of state action that they have engendered, we have seen a continuing emphasis on the importance of social capital as a means to achieve desirable ends, a policy accelerant that can help us achieve more cohesive, resilient communities, a healthier populace and enhanced well-being.

This analysis continues to underpin a wide range of contemporary political discourse from across the party political spectrum. Whether it’s framed in terms of One Nation, Community Empowerment or the Big Society, there’s an agreement that high levels of social capital, in strong, connected communities are an important public good.

So social capital matters. It’s the medium that holds communities together and allows good things to happen and to spread. But it’s also in crisis. According to the Economic and Social Research Council, social capital in Britain is declining, at best stagnating.⁴

A detailed analysis by Grenier and Wright from 2005 showed that the level and quality

3 Christakis, N. and Fowler, J. (2008) Dynamic spread of happiness in a large social network: longitudinal analysis over 20 years in the Framingham Heart Study. http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/337/dec04_2/a2338

4 Economic and Social Research Council <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/facts/index54.aspx#0>

of social capital in Britain is changing for the worse.⁵ And a recent study by a team at Sheffield University demonstrates that communities in Britain are significantly more fragmented and provide a lower sense of belonging than 40 years ago.⁶ We also know that social capital is lower in deprived areas.

A 2008 study on community cohesion by the Department for Communities and Local Government showed that although not all deprived areas have low social cohesion, out of several possible factors deprivation consistently undermines community cohesion the most.⁷

A 2010 recent survey for Legal and General found that:

- 61% of British residents don't socialise with their neighbours
- 59% feel they don't have much in common with their neighbours
- 50% don't enjoy spending time with their neighbours
- 70% wouldn't recognise their neighbours if they passed them in the street.⁸

Research conducted by Havas Sports and Entertainment on behalf of The Big Lunch showed that people feel this gap keenly. In a representative sample of 1,500 adults, 38 per cent of respondents said they would welcome more organised activity to bring neighbours together and 35 per cent, the equivalent of 17 million people across the

UK, said they would feel happier if they knew their neighbours better.

The most disturbing example of missing social capital took place in August 2011 when we experienced the worst urban disturbances in England and Wales for a generation. In many ways these riots seemed almost like the evil counterpart of The Big Lunch spirit, their most dispiriting aspect the readiness of local people to direct violence upon the fabric of their own communities, communities with which they clearly felt little identification. The wound that this inflicted upon our collective sense of belonging lingered long after the physical scars of the rioting faded with more than two thirds of the population forming a worse opinion of society as a result.

But what can we do to encourage social capital? Central government initiatives to build it have a chequered record. Like the well-being of which it is such a vital component, social capital is difficult to encourage directly.

So could The Big Lunch provide the social capital boost Britain so badly needs?

We argued that The Big Lunch would be a success if it could show that it creates a sense of community across the fragmenting neighbourhoods of Britain, sparking new, sustainable networks of value for people. Even more so if it could be shown that this had happened not just in 'nice', affluent areas but also in the socially deprived communities that are most in need of additional social capital.

5 Grenier, P. and Wright, K. (2005) *Social Capital in Britain – an Update and Critique of Hall's Analysis*

<http://www.istr.org/conferences/toronto/workingpapers/grenier.paola.pdf>

6 Dorling et al. (2008) *Changing UK – The way we live now*

http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/research/changinguk/Changing_UK_report_sheffield_webv1.pdf

7 Communities and Local Government (2008) *Predictors of community cohesion: multi-level modelling of the 2005 Citizenship Survey*

8 Legal and General (2010), *Next Door Strangers*

<http://www.legalandgeneralmediacentre.com/Resource-Library/Next-Door-Strangers-Report-1d4.aspx>



Photograph: Iain McLean

To determine this, in each of the years 2009-2012, we conducted a postcode analysis of the registered Big Lunches mapped against multiple deprivation indices, surveyed all The Big Lunch organisers and followed up with some targeted interviews.

What we found was The Big Lunch was a great success and provides a powerful alternative narrative to the sense of declining social capital.

Looking across the four years that the event has taken place some key features emerge:

- The Big Lunch takes place in all types of communities: just as many Big Lunches take place in deprived postcodes as in more affluent ones.

- The Big Lunch has a positive impact on communities: people feel closer to their neighbours and find out more about community issues.
- The Big Lunch brings neighbours together: participants meet new and diverse people and new people participate in the Lunches each year.
- The Big Lunch has an on-going impact: relationships formed at Big Lunches endure over time and lead to further activities.

This brief report summarises what we have learnt about where Big Lunches take place, what sort of connections people make with each other at them and what all this might mean.

2. Neighbourhoods: who Lunched where

- In England, Big Lunches tend to take place in the south of the country; in particular in London and the South East.
- The Big Lunch takes place in communities across areas of differing deprivation in England.

Year on year, we see the same patterns in where Big Lunches take place.

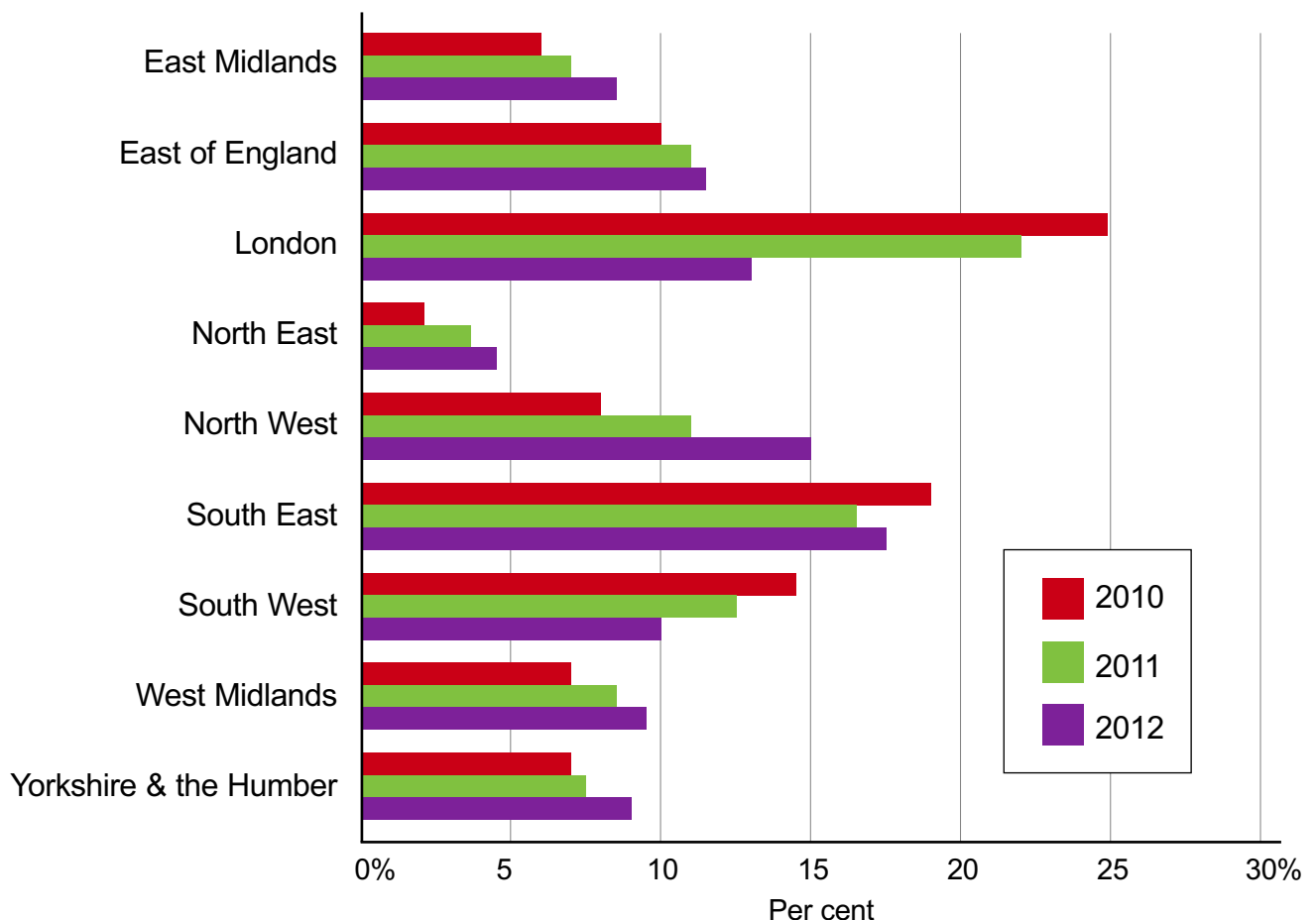
The majority of Big Lunches tend to take place in the south of the country: in particular in London and the South East.

The fewest number of Lunches take place in the North East. The only notable exception to the pattern was that in 2012, London saw a drop in the proportion of Lunches – a possible explanation was the significant number of official Jubilee events already organised in the city, which were well attended by Londoners.

Lunch locations

We looked at the Lower Super Output Area of registered Big Lunch postcodes to determine where Big Lunches took place in England.

Chart 1: Where did The Big Lunches take place?



Case Study: Falcon Estate Mums from Wandsworth, London



In June 2011, the Falcon Estate Residents Association was celebrating 50 years of its estate. Senia Dedic, Sandra Munoz and Hadas Hagos, mums from Women of Wandsworth and Wandsworth Housing residents, decided to celebrate with a Big Lunch.

“The day was full of fun and we all got to mingle and enjoy the company of our neighbours. The children enjoyed bouncing on the bouncy castle and face painting as well as the lovely food and cakes made by the residents and friends.

“Everyone chipped in and brought their own food and our local business man Levi Roots donated Jamaican Jerk Chicken. Hadas got to cook and share her Ethiopian signature dish with all the neighbours. As a result of our Big Lunch, the residents have acquired three big planters and will grow more flowers and herbs on the estate to make it look more friendly and pretty.”

More info can be found here:

<http://www.thebiglunchers.com/index.php/2013/03/falcon-estates-star-mums/>

Did Big Lunches take place in areas of differing deprivation?

We wanted to understand whether Big Lunches took place in areas where an increase in social capital could have the most far-reaching and deepest positive effects, i.e. in the most deprived communities.

We investigated whether Big Lunches occurred in areas of different levels of prosperity by mapping the postcodes of Big Lunches across the UK against the English Indices of Deprivation. The Deprivation Index is a way of measuring the social, economic and housing issues of neighbourhoods across England. The Multiple Deprivation Index combines the score for seven indicators: income, employment, health, education, barriers to housing and services, crime, and living environment, to create an overall score to compare the relative level of deprivation of different neighbourhoods.

Our analysis of a breakdown of the number of Big Lunches taking place in quintile areas demonstrates a very even spread of Big Lunches across areas of differing deprivations in England – from the most to least deprived areas.

This shows us that The Big Lunch does engage people across the spectrum of areas of deprivation in England. The Big Lunch is successful as it is not limited to affluent areas with high social capital.

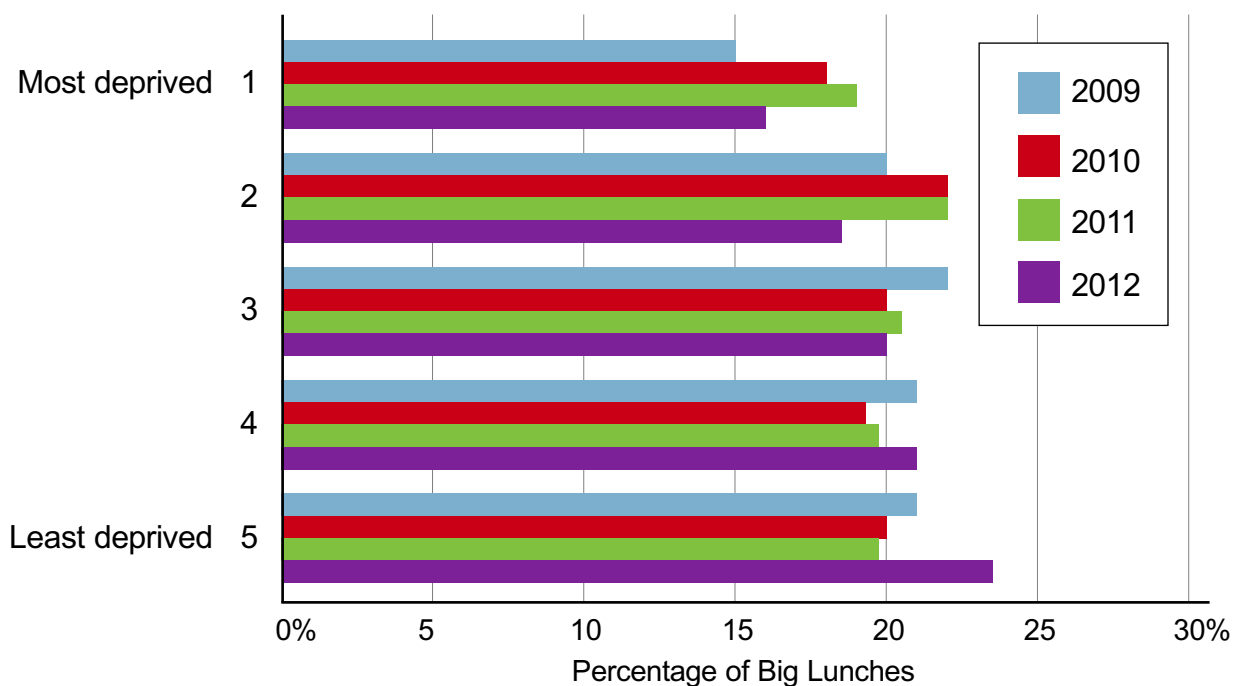
We know that this crucial outcome of The Big Lunch is very important, and unique. Robert Putnam confirms that there is less economic and civic inequality in areas of high social capital, and the conditions are mutually reinforcing. The fact that The Big Lunch breaks this vicious circle, whereby one can generally expect low levels of communal activities in more deprived areas, is hugely important. What The Big Lunch does, is engage



communities that are affluent as well as communities that are less affluent; it brings them together to share lunch

together and by doing so, builds social capital in even the most deprived communities.

Chart 2: Multiple Deprivation Score by Area of England



Photograph: Iain McLean

3. Connections: what difference did The Big Lunch make?

- People who take part in The Big Lunch meet a diverse range of people, many of whom they haven't met previously.
- The Big Lunch connects people, and because of these connections, they go on to do other things together.
- People who meet at Big Lunches stay in touch with each other and feel closer to their neighbours.

People tell us that they want to take part in The Big Lunch because they want to encourage a sense of community and get to know their neighbours better. Year on year, participants tell us that one of the most successful things about their Lunch was 'a great sense of community'.

By 2011, nearly nine out of 10 participants cited wanting to encourage a sense of community as their prime motivation for holding Lunches and even in 2012 when celebrating the Diamond Jubilee was a major motivation in taking part we still found three quarters of people saying that wanting to encourage a sense of community was an important reason for participation.

Taking an average of all four years from 2009 to 2012 we found that 82 per cent of people met new people at their lunch.

We also know that the connections that are made at the Lunches are enduring. People tell us that they plan to stay in touch with others that they met at Lunches. They say that key events in the calendar year such as Christmas, Halloween, November 5th and

Easter, in addition to specific events such as quizzes, walks and village fetes would give them the opportunity to come together again.

A key success of The Big Lunch is that we know people actually follow through on these intentions and both remain in touch with new friends from their Big Lunch and undertake community activities together.

Over four years we found:

- 82 per cent of participants felt closer to their neighbours as a result of The Big Lunch
- 88 per cent of people met new people at the event
- 81 per cent thought the event had made a positive impact on their community (2009 – 11)
- 74 per cent of people feel a stronger sense of community (2012)
- 82 per cent of participants from 2009-2011 had actually kept in touch with people they had met at previous Lunches.

This tells us that The Big Lunch is a very successful way to form new relationships in communities, and relationships that last. What is also striking about the impact of Big Lunches is that half of these people went on to take part in further activities with the new people that they had met. These activities included:

- sharing things: cars, skills, tools
- walking bus

Case Study: Paul Selby from Manchester



2013 will be Paul's fifth Big Lunch. Back in 2009 Paul and his family moved on to a new development of homes and used The Big Lunch as a celebration of this move and to establish a community.

Paul says: "We have found that The Big Lunch has helped us create a better place to live, our children know each other, and there is a sense of belonging and caring about the place we all call home.

"The Big Lunch has also assisted with our Home Watch Scheme (Neighbourhood Watch) and neighbours actively look after each other's houses when their owners are away or even on holiday together! It has turned a new build development where no-one knew each other into a vibrant and caring community."

This year Paul and his wife were invited to celebrate Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee by the Lord Mayor of Manchester. This invitation was in recognition for the hard work and time given to their community since 2009.

More info can be found here:

<http://www.thebiglunchers.com/index.php/2012/11/brooklands-big-lunches-from-the-very-beginning/>

Case Study: Emma Knight from Neath, Wales

After the success of their first Big Lunch in 2009, Emma's street went on to create a community group – Friends and Neighbours Community Alliance (FAN) – who now organise local activities to keep the community spirit going.

They also have a 'Mini Fan' group, in which the younger Big Lunchers have got together to create events for their own generation – including a circus group.



Emma says: "The event made the sense of distrust that existed in our area quickly fade away and, in what now seems like no time at all, the street began to feel safe. Younger and older generations started treating each other with more respect and attitudes changed too."

More info can be found here:

<http://www.thebiglunchers.com/index.php/2012/09/continuing-the-community-buzz/>



Photograph: Wendy Turner

- joining/setting up a local group or society
- organising events
- joining / setting up a neighbourhood watch / residents association
- setting up babysitting groups / kids holiday clubs
- setting up transition groups.

A key indicator of The Big Lunch's evolution will be whether the vast number of new people who took part in The Big Jubilee

Lunch – bringing the participation figure to 8.5 million people – also sustain the new relationships that they formed at their Lunch.

If this transpires, and half these eight million people do go on to form lasting relationships and take part in further activities with people they have met through the Lunches, this will have a truly transformational effect in communities across the country.

Finally, we should never forget one crucial thing about The Big Lunch. It's fun. Over the four years from 2009 to 2012 on average people scored the success of their Big Lunch at eight out of 10.

Case Study: Lisa Claire from Canterbury

Lisa's street has benefited from their Big Lunch in lots of ways. They know each other better, dog owners in the road now walk each other's dogs and perhaps most importantly Lisa had the opportunity to befriend an 83 year old resident who had been in her property for over 50 years.



Lisa regularly visits her for a cup of tea and explains: "It was through our chats that I found out she was finding it difficult to manage her house and garden. Despite desperately not wanting to move, she was seriously considering it because the housework was becoming too much for her. When I found this out, I said that I would help and it only takes me an hour a week to clean her entire house. One hour out of my week means that she can stay in the home she has lived in and loved for 50 years.

"She was quite depressed about all this at Christmas and now is very much back to her former cheery self. This is why I think that things like The Big Lunch are crucial – it's not just about having lunch together (although that is very nice!), it's also about developing a sense of community and being able to be there for each other. In this day and age I think it is easy for people to feel isolated, especially if they live alone but this is a way of lessening that isolation and is therefore in my opinion extremely important."

More info can be found here:

<http://www.thebiglunchers.com/index.php/2012/10/coming-together-in-canterbury/>

Case Study: Tony Kremer from Horsell, England



With teams of cake and bunting makers, road reps, retailers, pubs and on the day helpers, Tony Kremer and his band of volunteers pulled off a spectacular Big Jubilee Lunch for Horsell village.

Volunteer, Caroline Hughes, wrote: "Not even a burst balloon or sweetie wrapper was left as evidence of the day's activities. Many helping hands did make light work of clearing away and we all left feeling that the community had come together in the best possible way. We had aimed high – 'per ardua ad astra' – and hit the stars!"

They are now organising a Christmas Fair, a monthly Litter Pick and the setting-up of a nature reserve on a waste bit of woodland – all benefiting from the activism initiated at their Big Lunch.

More info can be found here: <http://www.thebiglunchers.com/index.php/2012/09/horsell-matters-a-big-jubilee-lunch/>

4. Public policy outcomes: what The Big Lunch achieves

The summer of 2012 was generally seen to have a feel good factor in Britain with The Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics both providing a focus for national pride, solidarity and celebration – a stark contrast to the riots a year earlier.

But these moments of celebration take place within a broader context of austerity, of social and economic anxiety and of a long-term perceived decline in social capital.

Despite the feel good factor of summer 2012, 65 per cent of people continue to worry they will not have enough money to live comfortably and the same percentage feel they will suffer directly from cuts to public spending: figures that are only marginal improvements on a year ago.⁹

The beauty of The Big Lunch model is that it speaks to this mood of celebration while directly tackling the underlying anxieties about social connection.

Our analysis over four years shows that:

The Big Lunch works

The Big Lunch strengthens communities: people who take part in The Big Lunch meet new people, feel closer to their neighbours and find out more about community issues.

This strengthening of social capital takes place in all sorts of communities all across the UK. Moreover, while The Big Lunch has

government support, the campaign's success does not derive from a centralised top-down strategy; instead it comes from the fact that it is light touch, community-led and, most of all, fun.

The Big Lunch has an on-going impact

We all know that good intentions sometimes come to nothing and that a key problem with many community initiatives is that they run out of steam after an initial stimulus. The Big Lunch appears to be different. Nearly nine out of 10 of the people we surveyed had actually kept in touch with their neighbours and many of them had participated in joint activities with them.

The Big Lunch is sustainable

We also found when we revisited Big Lunch communities that repeat Lunches were attended by a mixture of people who took part the previous year and others who were participating for the first time. People also reported a mixture of different age groups taking part in the Lunches.

By building social capital within communities The Big Lunch creates support networks and contacts that make those communities more resilient and makes the people living in them feel better about society.

Moreover, The Big Lunch is uniquely appropriate for doing this in an era of tight public finances.

⁹ YouGov Tracker Polls
http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/i5ji5zb49j/YG-Archives-%20Trackers-%20economy-301012.pdf



Photograph: Mark Radford

As an organic, community-led initiative The Big Lunch is a unique form of indirect policy intervention which engages people outside the usual political channels and is all the more powerful because it is light touch and non-directive whilst tending towards a vital but elusive social goal.

The relational nature of social capital is such that, like well-being, it is perhaps best pursued indirectly and The Big Lunch with its emphasis on the simple human transaction of eating together is able to achieve this with remarkable efficacy.

After three years of steady growth the Jubilee effect led to an exponential increase in the number of people taking part in The Big Lunch in 2012. This is both an opportunity and a challenge.

2012's analysis shows that The Big Jubilee Lunch had exactly the same impact on its participants but on a radically larger scale.

We cannot expect all the participants from 2012 to return in 2013. Nonetheless, even a relatively modest percentage of the eight million people who took part in 2012 offers the chance to make a real difference to communities across the country.

The key task for The Big Lunch over the years ahead is to develop and communicate a compelling narrative that refocuses the celebratory impulse of the Jubilee on to communities themselves.

After four years of on-going success The Big Lunch now stands at a crossroads. The potential for mass engagement opened up by Jubilee participation gives it the chance to establish itself as a key part of the national calendar on the first Sunday in June, benefiting millions of people each year. Given the positive impact we have already seen it making in communities of all sorts across the country, we should all hope it succeeds.

Authors

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The LGiU is an award winning think-tank and local authority membership organisation. Our mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with local councils and other public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and third sector organisations.

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