



**MEASURING YOUR
SOCIAL IMPACT:
COMMUNITY FOOD
PROJECTS IN ACTION**

JONATHAN SCHIFFERES | DECEMBER 2014

Contents

Contents	2
About this report	3
Introduction	4
Lessons learned: top tips on food growing initiatives	8
Evaluating success	11
Community network mapping	16
Conclusions	20
Contacts, resources and further reading	22

About this report

To be successful at making positive social in the long-term, community-led groups face two challenges. These can be partly addressed through measuring social impact.

Firstly, when they experience growth and achieve progress, community projects can often become dependent on a few individuals who take on a leadership role. As the projects develop, new people become involved while others may leave. In order for new leaders to build on the power of the creative contributions of others, it is helpful to inherit an understanding of how participants in a group are connected – how they came to be involved, what they've done so far, who they know and who they don't.

Secondly, it is clear that the most powerful impact of many community groups and community projects happens when they sustain over time, becoming movements. A movement has leadership in several forms, which are constantly evolving to self-organise and direct energy, attention and resources to where it is needed and can make a difference. It is the connectedness and commitment to taking action in a local community which is valuable – but it is also the hardest thing to measure.

This short paper shows how the Incredible Edible project has engaged local communities in Yorkshire and is using growing to encourage people to play a more active role in shaping their place. Drawing on research with Incredible Edible undertaken by the RSA Public Service and Communities team we reflect on the impact of these projects. We share insights on what made them successful, outlining lessons that can be drawn for others trying to organise movements for social change. We suggest how they can demonstrate and quantify social impacts, in particular the connectedness of the social networks that movements nurture and sustain.

The paper and the research to support it was commissioned by RSA Fellowship in Yorkshire, and delivered in partnership with the RSA Action and Research Centre.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead, Anthropologist

Introduction

A growing movement

Whichever way you look at it, more attention is being given to where and how our food is produced. Celebrity chefs promote the benefits of growing your own veg; there are long waiting lists for allotments across the country and crisp manufacturers are keen to point to the regional credentials of their potatoes.

At the same time, the rise of supermarkets has been inescapable in the UK in recent decades, and the public has paid increasing attention to the role of the business of food in addressing challenges such from obesity to economic regeneration.

The benefits of growing food locally extend in several directions. The theory is that local produce that travels a short distance from ground to fork avoids expensive, carbon-intensive food miles. It doesn't need preservatives or packaging to keep it fresh. And perhaps most importantly for campaigners, initiatives which make apparent how a community feeds itself restore the link between what we consume and produce, and how our choices affect our local area.

Incredible Edible was founded in Todmorden in Yorkshire in 2009 and led by RSA Fellow Pam Warhurst, and has attracted international attention. Starting with volunteers planting herb gardens in public spaces, several related projects now extend to orchards, social enterprise and work with local schools. Incredible Edible *uses* food as a means of strengthening people's connection to place; inspiring action and ownership to influence the physical environment where we live, and fostering the social commitments necessary to make that environment attractive and productive.

What does it all add up to?

Incredible Edible in Todmorden is a fundamentally 'grassroots' project: anyone can get involved by picking up a trowel, and it has succeeded not through generous funding but committed activists leading slow, patient work with local organisations. Along with this attitude goes a wariness of bureaucracy, targets and central planning:

“The time to read a report, write a report, make a strategy document, take it to a committee and do bugger-all is long gone.”

(Pam Warhurst)

“You can't wait to rely on politicians to do something for the environment”

(Todmorden participant)

This approach isn't unique to Incredible Edible or food activists in general, and reflects a powerful strain of discontent with the bureaucracy of professional approaches to place-based regeneration.

“As a wider ambition, overturning the entrenched idea that others (Council, Government, whoever) will improve local economy, society and environment. Catalysing a more self-sufficient approach across all areas of the City.”

(York resident)

A shift towards impact evaluation

The “Do-It-Yourself” approach runs counter to the wider climate in the voluntary sector, which increasingly stresses the importance of evaluation and measurement – of being able to demonstrate how and to what extent community projects have an impact on the ground.

This poses a problem: although Incredible Edible has clearly succeeded, other projects seeking to emulate their success will struggle to secure funding or support if they cannot demonstrate that they have a positive impact on the people they work with and the communities they grow from.

How this project came about

In recognition of the need to demonstrate measurable impact, Pam and the RSA Yorkshire regional team (which she chairs) asked the RSA to investigate how a food-growing project might start to understand and evaluate the impact it had on the community. With support from the region, we carried out two research workshops in Todmorden and York during the first half of 2014. These brought together local volunteers and campaigners involved in Incredible Edible, Edible York (EY) and The Incredible Movement in York (TIM).

This report summarises what we learned about the local food movement in these two very different places, and suggests a how the impact of these movements can be understood, measured and communicated. Over the coming months, we'll be supporting local groups to test this in practice using a Community Network Mapping approach. This uses tablet-based surveys to collect data which helps to understand people's involvement in community activities and their connections to other people.

Our aim is not to reduce a vibrant community movement to statistics. Instead, we want to find out how community projects like Incredible Edible can make the case for what they achieve – and help others to achieve similar successes in their own communities.

What you'll learn

- How the experiences of food campaigners in Todmorden and York have differed.
- What helped and hindered their attempts to get people growing food.
- The common outcomes, shared by different groups and activities in different places, as part of the Incredible Edible movement.
- Useful evaluation questions which help community groups learn from their participants about how their activities contribute to change.
- How and why collecting information on people's social connections and networks can be useful to community groups.
- How local government, business and voluntary groups can support growing.

Approach to reviewing Incredible Edible projects

The two places where we've sought to review Incredible Edible activities are very different, and food growing has developed in distinct ways that reflect this. However, there are some common themes to the successes and setbacks that both communities have experienced. Figure 1 below outlines some basic facts about the places.

To build our understanding, we held two workshops, with participants and leaders from Incredible Edible groups in Todmorden and York, and reviewed several previous evaluation documents. We interviewed several group leaders informally during the course of the project, and circulated additional questions via email distribution lists.

Table 1 - Todmorden and York compared

	Todmorden	York
Economy	District retail centre, small light industrial firms, within commuting distance to Greater Manchester.	University town, regional tourist capital, retail and entertainment hub, within commuting distance to Leeds.
Ancient history	First historical record: collection of hill farms in Domesday book 1086	Founded 71 AD by the Romans
Population today	14,941	153,717
Famous through history for...	Cotton mills, high-profile murders, Incredible Edible	Vikings, York Minster, chocolate manufacturing, railways
Average (median) weekly full-time wages	£480	£523
Number of supermarkets	2	over 30

Lessons learned: top tips on food growing initiatives

1. Grow food in public

The public nature of many of the new food projects – locating growing soil beds in town centres, for instance – was a big part of their ability to draw people in. It provided a focal point for conversations and connections that wouldn't happen if the activity took place behind a garden wall, and it was relevant to a wide range of existing activities.

“We have a presence at everything that goes on in the community”
(Todmorden participant)

“New participants ask astonishing questions: ‘how do strawberries grow?’”
(York participant)

“Appealing to see people doing stuff, not just talking about it”
(Todmorden participant)

“You could see the growing on the streets. The streets changed and inspired curiosity”
(Todmorden participant)

2. Respond to the local context

It's clear that projects had succeeded by responding to locally-specific needs, interests and opportunities. There was some resistance to the idea that a model that works in one place can be applied successfully in another – and a sense from some that this was at odds with the very ethos of a sustainable food culture.

“People want to feel that community groups create an identity and respond to their culture and conditions. We're reacting to a homogeneous food culture. The fact that a local context exists is as important as what that context is. Even if the context was identical, people don't want to hear that their own situation is generic.”
(York participant)

“I am motivated by doing positive things, not campaigning against something”
(Todmorden participant)

3. Emphasise community and education

In Todmorden, people emphasised that food was only part of the story. Many participants felt the reward came from what they learnt, alongside and indeed from their neighbours, about the food system, rather than the material benefit of consuming the end product. Participants saw a focus on food as a means to an end – a way of starting conversations – and an effective way of getting over the suspicion that some attach to ‘green’ projects.

“People get less sceptical when they realise it’s not about feeding the whole town but education about food”
(Todmorden participant)

“Our purposes are to improve health, skills and education, community cohesion, and to continue to maintain public gardens areas”
(York leader)

4. Seek unlikely alliances to get things done

Rather than working within an existing structure – for instance, through a local authority or established charity – Incredible Edible projects have developed by working in a self-organised way with unusual partners. For instance, Incredible Edible has been growing beds outside Todmorden’s police station.

“We have a presence at everything that goes on in the community”
(Todmorden participant)

“We’re everyone’s best friend”
(York participant)

“I had an argument with somebody ... I invited him to the orchard and realised that whatever people's politics you can bring them together and forget differences”
(Todmorden participant)

5. Cultivate support from those in power if you can

For Edible York, the presence of a supportive district council Chief Executive was a big factor in getting things off the ground. She brought legal expertise that meant she was able to help the group navigate the rules governing use of space in the city. In contrast, Incredible Edible activists’ frustration at the ‘invisible’ council in Todmorden was one of their motivations for starting the movement.

6. Keep it impulsive so people stay interested

The attraction of food growing for many is that it can often go ahead without a lot of preparatory work: all that's needed is ground going spare. The idea that something can be done quickly and without fuss appeals to those who tire of the bureaucracy involved in other forms of community activity.

“People are attracted to the idea of anarchy, that we don't ask permission before growing food in places”
(Todmorden participant)

“Food growing is positive, instantly gratifying”
(York participant)

“[It works] because of the people who started it. It's egoless...Nobody had to be anybody to make it work”
(Todmorden participant)

7. Different circumstances call for different kinds of organisation

In Todmorden, where there was relatively little interest or activity around food before Incredible Edible, an activist model developed, with very little formal structure. This suited most (but not all) residents in the town. Some expressed concern about who would coordinate projects in the future, while others didn't see coordination as a necessity. In York, by contrast, there were already lots of projects acting with little knowledge of one another; the need identified was for a structure that would bring them together and help them amplify their impact.

“I didn't understand it at first. It was different to other volunteer groups: freer, fresher, anarchic.”
(Todmorden participant)

“Edible York started loose, but is now in the process of registering a charity, and pressure from Trustees has been key in this”
(York participant)

Evaluating success

One challenge for community-led initiatives is that while plenty of good stuff happens it rarely gets captured. It may be remembered, but not recorded. When the people involved move on, others are left without the knowledge to replicate. Understanding what worked and why can help projects be sustainable in the long-term and ensure that different groups, and groups in different places, learn from each other.

This section outlines some basic ideas for groups to reflect and learn as they go. The RSA Yorkshire Fellowship have taken leadership in recognising the benefit that simple tools and guidance can bring. Community projects which build a “record of achievement” make a valuable contribution to the movement as a whole, allowing groups to build on success, helping them to recruit new members and resources, and expand what they do.

This is common problem with start-ups, whether they are businesses or social enterprises. The knowledge from the initial phases of development is lost. It is useful to consider, from the outset, tools such as **process evaluation** and **impact evaluation**. That means that evaluation can focus on how things went (the process) or the results of taking action (the impact).

A key challenge to overcome for a broad network of activities such as Incredible Edible is recognising how very different processes - different activities and projects - share a common purpose. It is important to appreciate that IE projects vary greatly in their route to achieving these goals. For local groups, success looks different in different places. Impacts can be felt by different people at different scales: group leaders and volunteers; young and old; neighbours and visitors.

We begin by describing a common set of **outcomes** that we have understood Incredible Edible projects to be working towards: shared goals held in common by different projects. We have also drawn on other studies of Incredible Edible¹.

Following the common outcomes, **evaluation questions** have been developed, reflecting the research findings from engagement with Incredible Edible groups. These questions should prove useful in

¹ These include *Incredible! Plant Veg, Grow a Revolution* by Pam Warhurst and Joanna Dobson (2014) and work by Juliet Hammond.

helping groups understand the way in which they contribute to the common outcomes.

We conclude our evaluation guidance with a focus on community mapping, describing a pilot which aims to provide a powerful evaluation approach through collecting and analysing data on the connections between participants in activities. We consider this impact – the strengthening of social networks – to be a very important outcome, but small and locally-based community groups often struggle to evidence their contribution.

Common outcomes shared by Incredible Edible projects

Building on the concept of the “three plates” – community, learning and business – which Pam Warhurst has promoted we see four ways in which Incredible Edible projects create positive changes for the individuals involved. Taken as a whole, these four outcomes are important ingredients in making a place strong and resilient. Communities should be better able to deal with life’s challenges, and make the most of opportunities, when they are well-connected and engaged with what is happening in their area. It is our view, backed by a range of wider studies, that participating in community group activities can lead to knock-on benefits in the workplace and in politics, as well as social and family life:

Community connections: If more people get involved in activities in their local community they get to know new people and strengthen their connections with existing people better.

Community leadership: If more people take action and initiative to conceive, design and lead activities which improve the use of the landscape of a place, and involve active participation of people in providing food for their community, then a growth in community leadership provides additional opportunities for community connections to be made.

Local learning: If people are inspired to learn new things about the food system: how a place feeds itself, they will be more engaged with the social and economic circumstances around the food system – the factors that make change possible and others that present challenges to overcome. Through the participatory nature of the programme, people pass on what they learn to others. This develops **transferable skills**, include critical thinking, while sharing knowledge can increase **self-confidence** and **change perceptions** of the ways in which learning can happen.

Business intelligence: If people become **entrepreneurial** through seeking ways to make their projects pay for themselves, generating an income, they develop a better **understanding the business environment** which many organisations operate in, as part of the system of how a place feeds itself. In the most transformational

examples, Incredible Edible participants will **start their own business** as well as making choices to **support other local businesses**.

To understand progress towards these outcomes, a range of evaluation questions have been developed which should prove useful in structuring a discussion with participants in Incredible Edible projects. These are organised chronologically, from the need that is being addressed through the project through to the long-term impact.

Certain evaluation questions, highlighted in **bold**, can provide quantifiable answers, helping to provide the numbers behind the stories. Those in **bold underline** also feature in the proposed Community Network Mapping pilot.

Figure 1 – Todmorden and York



Conversation points: Questions to help groups discuss their impact

Need

- What is the reason that people are taking action?
- What is already being done about this?
- What is the main motivation for people to get involved?
Are there other factors?

Input

- What are the resources being put to work?
- How many people are working on addressing this need?
- How many young people under 18?
- How many people who are retired or grandparents?
- How many people will be taking part in a community activity for the first time in over a year?
- How many hours are they spending, each, on average?

Activity

- What are people doing?
- Where?
- How many people?
- What proportion knew each other before?
- What proportion had worked together on this kind of project before?
- How long will the activity last?
- How long to finish the activity?
- How long will it last before activity needs to be repeated?
- What was going on before which helps or hinders this activity?
- Why did you think the activity was organised in the way it was?
- What worked particularly well?
- What could have worked better?

Output of activity

- What is the best way of showing that the activity took place?
- Have other organisations changed their activities because of what your group has done?

Long-term impact: what change has been created

- How have **the people involved** in the activity been affected?
 - Through physical activity
 - Meeting new people
 - Learning new things about their place
 - Learning new things about the growing and eating food
 - Developing business skills
- How have **others** been affected as a result of the activity?
 - A more attractive environment
 - Learning new things about their place
 - Learning new things about the growing and eating food
 - A different business offer locally

Community network mapping

As part of their work together, the RSA Yorkshire Fellowship commissioned the RSA to work with Incredible Edible to pilot an approach which maps the community networks around the project. These networks are supported and strengthened through the range of Incredible Edible activities. This pilot is designed to generate data which shows the community connections and community leadership. Despite being one of the most important impacts which flow from the work of community groups, social networks are traditionally hard to measure. Quantifying connections and leadership can have a range of benefits, described below.

In our proposed approach, a set of questions (Table 2) are to be loaded into a tablet computer, with responses recorded automatically in electronic format. The questions are designed to be answered directly by participants in any Incredible Edible project.

The process is designed to be integrated with the record-keeping that community groups are likely to be pursuing for the purposes of maintaining a contact list to communicate with participants.

The data collected will be in network format (collected using ONA Surveys – an online platform). This means that information is collected about who knows who, who relies on who and how people share information about the local area. Visualising all this information as a network allows you to understand the fabric of community activism, where weakness might be (for example two relevant projects that do not know about each other) and where some people might be overloaded or act as gatekeepers (for example if one person holds all the key relationships for a group).

By asking people some basic questions about who people have got to know through the project, this type of data can be analysed (through programmes such as Gephi and NodeXL) produce a visualisation of the community networks through which Incredible Edible projects operate.

By keeping records at several points in time (e.g. every three months over the course of a year), the visualisations can show how the size and shape of the community network is evolving.

The **potential benefits** for this type of community network mapping include:

Managing communications: Many community groups keep **contact information** (e.g. names and email addresses) for their members and participants in a spreadsheet format using programmes like Microsoft Excel. The data collected for community network mapping is also in spreadsheet format. Many of the pieces of information collected for an individual as part of the community network mapping process will also be useful when communicating with that individual as part of the ongoing administration and activities of the group. For example:

1. The community network mapping questions ask participants when they first joined. Holding data on the length of someone's involvement can be useful in identifying who has historical knowledge, celebrating anniversaries of involvement.
2. The community network mapping data will identify individuals who are very well connected and individuals who are less well connected to others in the group. This can help leaders or organisers make sure they can identify key influencers within the group, who are effective at spreading messages. This can also help ensure that those who are less well connected can be reached through a range of methods; special efforts can be made to make introductions to boost their connections to people in the group.

Lots of this kind of information is held in the minds of group organisers, leaders and participants. However, recording information on things like time involved and connectedness within the group can be hugely helpful when there is a handover in taking responsibility for communications. It means a group can avoid being overly reliant on a small number of individuals to remember these details, meaning groups are less vulnerable to becoming disorganised when people leave the group.

Evaluating progress and participation: Over time, changes in the community network map can help a group reflect on how they are progressing. For example, a group may decide to start a new activity which is particularly attractive to a particular age group (e.g. teenagers). Monitoring the participation of people in this activity can help a group understand whether the activity attracted new teenagers who weren't previously involved (expanding the network), provided an additional activity for teenagers already involved in other activities to get to know each other (making the network better connected), or simply diverted existing involvement from one activity to another.

Diagnosing hotspots and pinchpoints: Through analysing data, patterns and trends can be found. These may serve to inspire a group to change the way it operates.

For example, a community network may show that one person in a group operates in a particularly central role. There may be small groups of individuals who aren't connected widely to others in a group, but are all connected to one very well-connected individual. Group leaders and organisers could then benefit from understanding the types of ways in which people succeed in bringing in new people in to participate – such as through school, work or family relationships.

In another example, analysing data over time may show that pinchpoints exist: new members sign up and take part in an activity but do not report making any new connections. A group could then act to ensure that the activity was being structured in a way to integrate new members and introduce them to existing members. In another example, data may reveal that very few people who participate in one activity rarely take part in any other activities organised by the group. The leaders of that activity could be given promotional materials to distribute which explained the wider range of activities organised locally.

Communicating impact: Through visualising changes in the community network associated with their leaders, members and participants, community groups have a powerful way of communicating to a wide audience the connections that are being formed. A range of evidence shows that the scale and nature of community connections are critical to achieving a wider range of desirable social and economic outcomes for a community. Showing impact through community mapping can help community groups attract funding, support and recognition from other organisations.

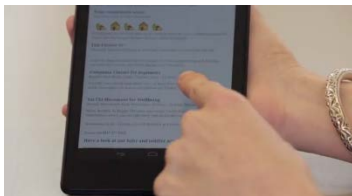


Table 2 – 11 pieces of information to build a social network map

Name	
Email address	
Age	
Home postcode	
Date of first contact with community group	
Date took part in first activity with community group (if applicable)	
Date of first activity which I helped organise (if applicable)	
People I knew before I had contact with the group	
People I know now through participating	
People I introduced to the group	
How many hours have you spent participating in group activities in the last three months?	

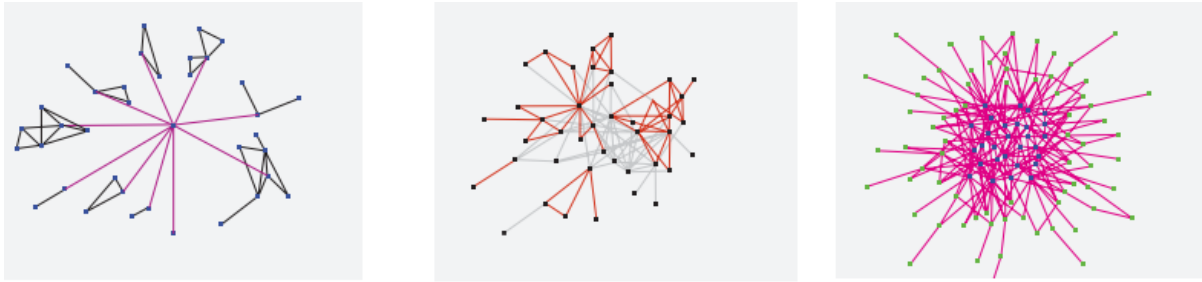


Figure 2 From Hub-spoke (left) to Core-Periphery (right)

Collecting this information over time allows groups to understand their role within their wider community. The community map would allow you to understand how far local projects are networked locally, and see changes over time. In a best case scenario, there might be evidence of the network map transitioning from a 'hub-spoke' shape – where there are one or few key people – to a core-periphery model where people are well-linked together, and well-liked into other, relevant, local projects.

Hub-spoke to Core-Periphery model; adapted from Krebs & Holley
<http://www.orgnet.com/BuildingNetworks.pdf>

Conclusions

This report captures some of the learning from five years of community-led activity in Yorkshire centred on growing food in local communities, involving local residents. It suggests that developing community connections and community leadership are key outcomes that are shared across the Incredible Edible movement, and outline details of a forthcoming pilot project to undertake Community Network Mapping.

Based on the lessons emerging from our findings, there are wider considerations for different audiences, recognising the broad context in which the food growing movement is finding its place:

For voluntary groups

- Small projects can benefit from teaming up with others trying to achieve similar objectives – as Edible York are doing – to pool resources for evaluation and measurement.
- Despising structure and having a hands-on focus is a good way to bring people in, but by recording achievements, others will be better able to find inspiration and replicate what they do.

For businesses

- There is increasing consumer demand for locally-produced products. Partnering with local community groups as well as with the traditional supply chain could be a unique selling point.
- Using spare land on your premises for growing food, with the involvement of local groups, can prevent environmental deterioration, improve staff morale and community relations, providing a differentiator for recruitment and marketing.

For local government bodies

- Health and Wellbeing Boards and Public Health Commissioners should consider that obesity, poor nutrition, and poor mental health can in part be addressed by providing opportunities for people to grow food in a group setting.
- Supporting local food growing projects can provide a practical application for residents with environmental concerns, raising awareness and prompting wider behaviour changes.
- Evaluation can support the business case for councils to demonstrate the benefits of growing projects to their citizens' health and wellbeing, justifying public investment.

Contacts, resources and further reading

The RSA Public Services and Communities team

<http://www.thersa.org/action-research-centre>

The RSA Fellowship in Yorkshire

<http://www.thersa.org/fellowship/where-you-are/yorkshire>

Incredible Edible Todmorden

<http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/>

Thinking as a platform – and how that changes everything

<http://www.slideshare.net/JoostBeunderman/civic-systemslab-platforms>

Incredible! Plant Veg, Grow a Revolution

http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?page_id=1898