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Understanding 'More than Food' meal services to co-develop supply ecosystem innovations

Background

More than Food (MtF) meal services have been shown to positively impact food insecurity, social isolation and health for local people who are vulnerable to health inequalities. The nature of these service and ways in which they adapt and innovate independently and through collaborations with supplier ecosystems affects service effectiveness, capacity and resilience and their social, environmental and economic impacts. To strengthen the role and contributions of MtF meal services and supplier ecosystems within local systems, there is a need for policy, action and knowledge building to facilitate exploration, experimentation and engagement to enable innovation.

The project

Researchers in the Food Systems Institute at the University of Nottingham are building understanding of ways in which food systems can address the nutritional needs of people experiencing health inequalities and provide evidence to inform new developments. Between April 2023 and February 2024 this project, focused on MtF meal services, engaged local stakeholders to co-develop understanding of the different types of services and explore opportunities for innovation. The researchers have produced a report based on this project. The key recommendations are outlined below.

Report prepared by

Sally Hibbert - Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, UK
Marsha Smith - Centre for Business & Society, Coventry University, UK (formerly Food Systems Institute, University of Nottingham).
Moira Taylor - School of Life Sciences, University of Nottingham, UK
Bryn Smith - Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, UK

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The recommendations outlined below provide a roadmap for researchers, policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders to explore the local value of MtF meal services, mobilise resources and coordinate collaboration in innovation.

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Recommendation 1: Gather, integrate and share dynamic data, including lived experience insight, to build understanding and track local evidence on food insecurity and social isolation for population sub-groups and the linkages with health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 2: Evaluate the implementation and outcomes of MtF meal services, including their cost effectiveness and preventative effects. Identify how supplier ecosystems influence 'what works' by examining how their inputs affect service processes and outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Generate evidence on the motives and experience of different types of organisations and actors in supplier ecosystems that have engaged in independent and collaborative innovations.

Recommendation 4: Build capacity for and promote dynamic or 'test and learn' approaches with built-in feedback and modification mechanisms to help derisk innovations in the early stages.

Recommendation 5: Transform data and the findings of research and experimentation into accessible and useful forms. Develop materials and programmes of activity to showcase, disseminate and engage stakeholders in cycles of knowledge building activity.

Recommendation 6: Facilitate integration by mapping assets and establishing platforms for local resource sharing and coordination. Currently, organisations and actors across the county hold resources that could significantly enhance MtF meal services. County-wide efforts to identify resources and establish platforms and processes to enable their use could mobilise diverse and currently untapped system resources.

Recommendation 7: Develop mechanisms for collaborative innovations, to promote and facilitate integration, dialogue and coordination at a local level. Networks varying in scope and purpose can enable knowledge sharing amongst stakeholders or support progression through stages of coordination from developing a shared commitment, creating a shared vision, aligning goals and developing and implementing new strategies and actions. Evaluations of alternative models, exemplars of good practice and expert input are important to form and run networks effectively.

Recommendation 8: Progress towards whole systems policy approaches that engage multiple local authority departments and stakeholders in MtF meal services and supplier ecosystems. Embed a prevention-orientation and target stakeholders with funding, policy, regulatory capacity and resources to facilitate scalable innovations.