DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

‘More than food’: Using the lens of commensality to understand the practices of The Nottingham Social Eating Network

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‘More than food’: Using the lens of commensality to understand the practices of The Nottingham Social Eating Network

By Marsha Smith
January 2022

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of Coventry University’s requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Abstract

People eat together in many different places, at many different events, and through many different stages of their lives. Commensality, or ‘eating at the same table’, is an omnipresent manifestation of human sociality. But despite the perennial human need to eat in groups, the practices of commensality vary widely. In the UK context food insecurity coexists with food wastage and a concomitant rise in loneliness, fast and ready meals is creating conditions which make it ever more challenging for people to eat, eat well, and to eat together.

However, in the UK commensality is currently undergoing a transformation as a range of new ‘social eating initiatives’ emerge dedicated to creating new, shared eating practices. But as yet there is limited empirical work which places the individual consumption of surplus food back into the social context of commensality or which addresses how participants forge experiences of value through their engagement in these practices.

This thesis addresses this gap in the literature through a practice theories-informed approach, looking at ‘social eating initiatives’ not as an aggregate of individual consumer behaviours, nor as solely a reaction to austerity politics, but as form of group, commensal practice manifested through complex arrangements of materials, competencies and meanings. The thesis also synthesises a number of distinctive but related concepts to create a ‘more than food’ lens with which to examine the value that ‘social eating initiative’ participants ascribe to these mealtimes.

The Nottingham Social Eating Network, the case study for this thesis, is demonstrated to be a site of these ‘more than food’ practices. This informal network is composed of 17 self-identified ‘social eating initiatives’ which offer a low-cost, paid-for, ‘surplus’ meal offer, which is consumed at a public, shared mealtime. Through a range of qualitative research methods, the thesis demonstrates how these initiatives create multiple points of pleasure, participation and contribution. They are of value to participants because they counter the alienating and individualising tendencies of the current milieu to construct group cohesion. Participants identify eating together, helping out and socialising as crucial and vital
aspects of their social eating activities and these are analysed within the thesis as practices which *restructure* commensality, which enable *alimentary contribution*, and which can also be understood of as being composed of interlinking *performances of care*. The results contribute towards the advancement of commensal scholarship and have important implications for including commensality in public health and food policy debates. The thesis findings demonstrate why practices of commensal participation are both about much ‘more than food’ and can shape behaviours around much ‘more than food’, making group eating together activities a key lever of social change.

**Acknowledgements**

Just as a shared mealtime is the result of many hands, processes and practices, so too, the production of a thesis is never a solo effort. I have been extremely fortunate to have been given guidance and opportunities all the way through my transition from the community food sector into academia. I have also benefitted from a scholarship from the Centre for Business in Society and the positive steer from my supervisory team; David Bek, Kevin Broughton and Adrian Evans, and Luke Owen and Lopa Saxena.

In no particular order I give heartfelt thanks to the following individuals: Jason Pandya-Wood, Mark Weinstein, Marylyn Carrigan, Jordon Lazell, Victoria Wells, Nadina Luca, Sally Hibbert, Judy Muthuri, John Harvey, Megan Blake, Louis Kosed, Mark Game, Simone Connolly, Bryce Evans, Johnny Grey, Deborah Sugg-Ryan, Karen Oehme, Charlie Spring, Lucy Danger, Lucy Antal, Laura Alvarez, Andrew King, Rene Meijer, Isabella Harriss, Lee Kimberley, David Mellen, Penney Poyzer, Pete Noy, Greg Fell, Tom Hughes, Ana Souto, Clare Pettinger, Lucy Dearlove, Rebecca May Johnson, Jonathan Smithers, David Salt, and Lexi Earl. And especially Vicky Leadbeater for feeding me. And of course, much love and deep respect are offered to The Nottingham Social Eating Network, past, present and emergent. The research participants who gave this project substance give us many reasons to believe that the solutions to some of our most profound problems can be found with one another, across a table full of food. My many, wonderful friends also deserve credit here, as do my beloved family. My sister, Amy, has given me so much encouragement over the years as has my boyfriend, Ed (who has been lulled into a dreamless sleep on many a night by the sound of me talking through practice theories).
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Figure 1. My sister and Father at a social eating space, Nottingham, and my Father eating a massive pie, Scunthorpe.

I dedicate this thesis to my late father, George Smith, who loved ‘people places’ and for whom food was a big deal, in one way or another.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research problem: *Food insecurity, food wastage and mealtime destructuration - the challenges in eating and eating together in the UK*

At a time when communities are reeling from the interruptions in food supplies that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused, sobering figures have emerged about the levels of hunger, food wastage and social isolation in the UK. At the time of writing, 14% of UK families with children were reporting experiencing food insecurity (Food Foundation, 2020). And whilst the UK Government has recently announced plans to begin small-scale measurement of household food insecurity in 2021 as part of existing household research, ‘these statistics will not reveal the depth or prevalence of the issue at large’ (Nica-Avram *et al.*, 2021:2). Indeed, recent research states that in some local authority areas, almost a third of UK residents are struggling to access the amounts and types of food they need, and one in ten local authorities have levels of hunger that are 150% higher than the national average (Moretti, Whitworth and Blake, 2021). The Food Foundation recently claimed that requests for statutory and community food provisioning support rose sharply during the pandemic crisis, highlighting national, regional and local levels of need, where those already experiencing challenges in eating were joined by ‘a newly vulnerable segment of society [...] seeking help for the first time’ (Food Foundation, 2021). These figures show that for many people across the UK, the presence of a market of food goods and services is not enough to guarantee the security of their food; access and affordability are significant factors that also shape the capacity to eat well.

In response, there has been an unprecedented scaling-up of charitable food-provisioning organisations, conceived of as ‘food aid’ (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015), with those on low incomes having to rely increasingly on minimal diets, food charity and emergency provision (Riches and Silvasti, 2014). This food aid provision is instrumental and individuated; responding to an individual's physical requirements for sustenance through free food parcels (Garthwaite and Bambra, 2017; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Caplan, 2017). The receipt of food aid also positions individuals as passive beneficiaries, with little agency and choice over the foodstuffs they consume (Caraher and Furey, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019).
And paradoxically, 4.5 million tonnes of edible food are wasted, domestically (Smithers, 2020). The food industry also wastes around 3.6 million tonnes of perfectly good food each year (FareShare UK, 2020). Within the context of increasing environmental concerns about food wastage occurring parallel to austerity policies and the rise in individuals experiencing food insecurity, it might appear that excess foodstuffs that cannot be commercially distributed, provide a mutually beneficial adjunct to these social malaises by linking two ‘needs’ together (c.f. Lalor, 2014, Caplan, 2017, 2020). Existing literature highlights the importance of understanding the contextual setting with regard to what is determined to be food waste (Evans, Campbell and Murcott, 2012), because the current framing of edible but commercially unsaleable food (i.e., fit for human consumption, which is termed or ‘surplus food’) (Midgley, 2014), is that of a waste stream. This ‘waste stream’ is currently being redirected towards those experiencing food insecurity via initiatives such as charitable food banks (Dowler and Carahe, 2003; Carahe and Dowler, 2016; Carahe and Furey, 2017).

However, redirection of ‘surplus’ to those struggling to afford food is subject to an ‘uneasy dualism’ arising between 'quality food' for higher-income consumers and 'other food' consumed by others (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011; Goodman and Goodman, 2016). Much of the literature on food insecurity and food aid critiques the effects of austerity politics and calls for dignity, choice, and income to be re-instated (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Middleton et al., 2018). This approach has some unintended consequences: not only does this approach disconnect pleasure, performances of caring and practices of social cohesion from meal provision, but it also reifies the idea that the most important mechanism for accessing and contributing to society is the market. This underlying presumption conceals what anthropologists and sociologists know well: that humans require social interaction, and the purchase of products and services cannot be solely used as a proxy or replacement for social participation.

Food insecurity in the UK also coexists, moreover, within a broader foodscape, where the traditional structuring of mealtimes has undergone a transition to ‘culinary plurality’, as eating practices continue to diversify and fragment (Mäkelä 2009:45). Amidst this troubling portrait, almost half of all adults in the UK
Chapter 1. Introduction

report feeling lonely, either occasionally or often (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), and one-third of adults eat their meals alone (Dunbar, 2017a). In the UK we have the highest consumption of fast food and ready meals in Europe (New Food Magazine, 2021), yet 75% of individuals in one survey thought making friends was best done by sharing a meal (Dunbar, 2017a).

Experiences of food security, then, are not just about the access to, availability and affordability of food but might also be considered as involving the capacity to engage in reciprocity and social bonding over shared foods (Healy, 2019; Blake, 2019b, 2019c, 2020; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Abarca, 2021; Smith and Harvey, 2021). Interpersonal sharing of food is a fundamental feature of social life, both as a 'mechanism through which sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social relations’ (Davies et al., 2017:136). Commensal Food sharing involves the creation and reinforcement of social relations, it fabricates and consolidates social connections, and it also shores up the social realm through the practices of everyday life (Valentine, 1999; Giacoman, 2016; Masson, Bubendorff and Fraisse, 2018). Far from being mundane, group eating, and food sharing activities are positioned within the literature as a potent, pervasive and persistent part of social life and worthy of careful attention, especially in times where it may be threatened or where novel forms of its practicing are emerging. Indeed, communal meals, according to Dunbar are ‘perhaps the single most important thing we could do – both for our own health and wellbeing and for community cohesion’ (Dunbar, 2017a:5).

This thesis argues that group eating, or commensality, is a distinctive but largely unexplored dimension of food community initiatives. The focus of the thesis and where the argumentation within it leads, concerns the examination of the value of social eating initiative commensality. It appears that these initiatives are offering much more than food and may be valued beyond their capacity to instrumentally feed people. However, this specific phenomenon has not been empirically well mapped, and the value that participants ascribe to social eating initiatives is certainly not well-understood, nor has a conceptualisation of commensality and social eating initiatives been much advanced (c.f. Luca et al., 2019, 2021; Blake, 2019, 2019b, 2019c, 2020; Marovelli, 2019; Smith and Harvey, 2021). Much closer accounting of the complex and dynamic ways in which individuals and groups are engaging in eating-together practices is necessary if clearer articulation of these ‘more than food’ values is to be accomplished, and for this lacuna in scholarship to be addressed. It is proposed that any research into this phenomenon should involve
dialogue and engagement with the agents who are fabricating these new forms of commensality and encompass not only individual consumption behaviours, or more abstracted policy effects, but the ‘nitty gritty’ of these novel community food initiative commensal practices.

1.2 Research setting: from community worker to social eating initiative researcher- my positionality statement

At this point in the introduction, I provide a brief positionality statement in the form of a vignette (Humphreys, 2005; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). I do this because my situation is somewhat unique; I am studying the phenomenon I helped create, and I remain a regular participant at these community food or ‘social eating initiative’ mealtimes. My positionality will be further addressed within the methodology section. However, for now, I provide a summary introduction to contemporary ‘social eating initiatives’ in the East Midlands region and make my place as a friend and collaborator (Haraway, 1988; Ramírez-i-Ollé, 2019) within this network, explicit.

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‘In 2014, I founded a community food initiative in Nottingham and worked as a Project Director there for two years; advancing the charitable aims of enabling people to eat together in groups through a model of meal-provision that was affordable, which minimised food wastage and was relatively simple for groups to set up and run. Years of eating at cheap, canteen-like eateries; in ethnic ‘thali’ style community restaurants, local cantinas in Spain, but also at local anarchist cafes, cheap student spots and during my upbringing at arts centres, ‘working men’s clubs’ and more
recently at the IKEA café, has instilled in me a love of cheap, busy, bustling eating places where conversations spark and stories are shared. My approach had also developed through setting up, volunteering and working in a number of community food projects since 2010, and through ground-up testing, prototyping and redesigning of meal-services which eventually led to the 2014 project and what participants came to term the model of ‘social eating’. This initiative was established in Nottingham City, but within two years, the social eating initiative model had been taken up by groups in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire.

However, in the haste and everyday commotion of building a project, we had yet to ask some critical questions about member groups and their customers; there was no empirical data that enabled us to state with certainty, why groups were participating in social eating initiatives. We could suggest that food insecurity was a factor amongst the network as funding to address local food insecurity through social eating initiatives have certainly formed part of the organisations workload. However, there had been no systematic or even haphazard examination of the role of social eating initiatives as a participatory, group response to food insecurity and perhaps to the other concurrent social problems of food wastage and the destructuration of the shared mealtime.

I left my position as Project Director in 2016, retaining an interest in the proliferation of social eating initiatives while moving into academia as an early career researcher. My approach then is shaped and guided by experiences of being a participant; both in setting up and eating at, social eating initiatives, amplified through my current research position.

After several years away from the organising-side of social eating, I return to engage in an academic investigation that seeks to better understand social eating initiatives as an additional and alternative response to food insecurity, food wastage and the destructuration of the shared mealtime.
1.3 Thesis overview

The thesis aims to engage with a complex social, and conceptual problem, namely that currently, there is a challenging milieu in the UK wherein rising numbers of individuals are experiencing a disconnect from the structuring qualities of eating together (Fischler, 2011). Whether that is due to food insecurity, the breakdown of the structure of the shared mealtime, the rise of snacking, fast and ready meals, foodstuffs, or likely a complex and shifting amalgam of these interpolated issues, within the thesis eating and eating together is presented as a contemporary challenge for many people.

In the midst of this austere and complicated context, commensality, which means ‘eating at the same table’ (Fischler, 1980) is perhaps undergoing a transformation in the UK as a range of new initiatives emerge dedicated to creating new, shared eating practices. Through an attention to these services and how they are fabricated and constructed, and the material resources they utilise, it appears that surplus foods, rather than being a waste stream, feeding ‘leftover food for left behind people’ (Riches and Gerlings, 2019), are entangled in sets of complex practices whereby ‘the material good is transformed into a series of products, and the characteristics, values and qualities attached to the products change through the involvement of different actors’ (Midgley, 2014:1876).

Amidst these challenges, ‘social eating initiatives’ are shown to be emerging within the UK. These novel eating-together activities are disclosed as being insufficiently mapped and poorly understood by scholars as they are potentially being mis-identified and accounted for as expressions of surplus food aid pertaining solely to ‘poverty consumers’ suffering from food insecurity (Caraher and Furey, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019). By focusing on what can be bought rather than what is valued, attempts to reduce food insecurity continue to revolve around reinstating access to the economic means to a commercial consumer. However necessary restoration of income may be, alternative and additional strategies to build food security, reduce food wastage and build social cohesion are also being deployed by community food organisations ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017).

The thesis also questions the notion that, within the context of austerity in the UK, community commensality has been diminished and that responsibility has shifted from the state to the charitable sector (Caraher and Furey, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), with charitable food projects instead rebranded as
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‘community food’ (Dowler and Caraher, 2003). The literature review identifies debates suggesting that community food projects that utilise surplus foodstuffs are unwittingly being complicit in the continuance of both corporate food waste disposal and austerity through the amelioration of their worst effects under the guise of charity. Instead, social eating initiatives are framed as a novel expression of the potent, persistent, and pervasive social phenomenon of commensality. The challenges in eating per se, eating well and eating together are shown to be occurring not just for those with limited incomes, but those with limited time, motivation and social contacts which therefore grounds the claim that these initiatives may be of value for their ‘more than food’ services.

Moreover, the problematic conditions of those experiencing food insecurity are often framed in an overall approach which has been described as a ‘deficit’ approach (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003; Vihalemm et al., 2015). Whilst these framings are not inaccurate, they do not necessarily create an epistemological framework wherein the valiant and innovative efforts of community groups to forge new forms of food security and stewardship can be discovered (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). Research into these initiatives then, affords us an opportunity to understand the social values expressed by citizens who may be ‘below the level of consumption adequacy’ but who are nonetheless ‘beneficiaries and co-creators of value’ (Baron et al. 2018: 137). One route into uncovering the value that participants within communities ascribe to food, eating and the wider organisation of their social worlds is through enquiries into the types of commensality they construct.

An expanded conception of commensality as constituted through social eating initiative mealtime practices is therefore proposed. To elaborate this approach the places, spaces, materials and timings that constitute social eating practices are also encompassed and examined through a particular theoretical lens and via a qualitative, participatory set of methods. By expanding the view of social eating commensality beyond the mealtimes itself and by adding these contextual, material, narrative and behavioural dimensions, a ‘more than food’ conceptualisation is proposed.
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To ground this thinking, I introduce The Nottingham Social Eating Network through a vignette, as a localised example of this broader UK movement which is transforming the way communities eat. This network of ‘social eating initiatives’ (Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Smith and Harvey, 2021) are examples of an increasingly popular way of providing meals for the public in the UK. These organisations provide a limited menu of low-cost meals prepared using supermarket ‘surplus’ foodstuffs, and serve meals communally, to improve social inclusion, at regular, weekly, public mealtimes. The Nottingham Social Eating Network is an informal, self-identified network of 17 organisations which offers surplus-made meals, at mealtimes across Nottingham city and some areas of Nottinghamshire County. Groups vary from scouts to Churches, and meals are offered weekly, monthly and sometimes through ‘pop up’ events. Community halls, miners welfare building, and commercial café spaces are given over to social mealtimes through the arrangements of kitchens, storage areas and hall spaces which are sometimes small and domestic-sized, some on larger scales with rows of freezer storage and 6-burner commercial cookers. The spaces, meal timings, greeters, payment-takers and emotional states of these complex assemblages are captured by both the researcher, customers and organisers using a range of methods which seek to convey both the uniqueness of each eating space but also the common, commensal practices which can be identified as interleaving through this network.

Analysing data from a qualitative, multi-method study conducted across The Nottingham Social Eating Network reveals what participants value about these initiatives. Using a range of community-based and participatory research methods and a practice theory analysis, three important practices are highlighted as being of value to social eaters: eating together, helping out and socialising.

Social eating commensality then, is disclosed, not simply as a consequence of reducing food waste or charitably responding to food insecurity with surplus food aid. Instead, it is proposed that these initiatives are also valued because they counter societal trends such as the rise in social isolation and the displacement of the shared mealtime. They also enable participants to actively engage and contribute to public life, and they meet the need for social bonding, pleasure and conviviality.
The key findings of the thesis reveal that eating together, helping out and socialising are analysed as sets of intersecting practices that involve materials, competences and meanings. This analytical approach advances what is termed a ‘more than food’ approach to develop thinking beyond binaries towards a more nuanced, complex, and hopeful reading of the value of social eating initiatives to their participants. The findings of the thesis are important for positioning social eating within public policies which seek to address each or any of these social malaises in ways that are consistent with the needs of those communities to eat well, and to eat together.

The Nottingham Social Eating Network is positioned within the findings of the thesis, as fabricating mealtimes practices that articulate newly emerging and not-yet-formed responses to the broader social challenges around the access, availability, affordability and wasting of food within spaces of participation, contribution, care and nurturance. Therefore, social eating initiatives are disclosed as creating ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) which shore up the structure, and enrich the fabric of, social life.

The thesis addresses this opportunity to develop new thinking on commensality by articulating the value that participants ascribe to these novel commensal arrangements. Accordingly, the overall research question that the thesis addresses is: (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?**

This overall question or research objective is addressed through posing a series of sub-questions. The following sections summarise these sub-questions and further convey the structure of the thesis.

### 1.3.1 Research aim and research questions

The overall research objective is to understand the value of social eating initiatives to their participants. As stated, this overall aim is articulated through the main research question, which in turn, is addressed through the answering of a series of sub-questions which are presented in the diagram below.
1.3.2 Conceptual model development

After situating the phenomenon of study within a disciplinary space and identifying an overall research question, the next stage of the thesis will be the identification of a conceptual model. This will take the form of a visual proposition of key concepts and an overview of the structure and direction that empirical
work will take. Informed by Giacoman’s ‘dimensions and role of commensality’ model (2016) which maps out the structure and cycle of commensality and how it creates, or diminishes social cohesion, this chapter aims to develop a model which create a visual conceptualisation of how the features and practices of social eating initiatives are constructed.

Giacoman identifies three dimensions of social life that interact to construct commensality, and in turn, social cohesion (2016). This chapter also draws upon Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s ‘dynamics of social practice’ model (2012) and a practices-informed approach which proposes that social eating commensality is fabricated through materials, competences and meanings, through practices. After answering research sub-question (a) what is the social milieu within which social eating initiatives are emerging and how is this conceptualised? in the literature review chapter, the research sub-question that drives this chapter is: (b) how is social eating commensality constructed? Mindful of the complex array of ‘things’ that ‘go into’ a social eating mealtime, consideration of the constitution of social eating, not just according to individual behaviours and social structures, but as also coming about through the intermixing of spaces, places and materialities, is foregrounded.

1.3.3 Methodology
In this chapter, the rationale for practice theories and specifically a dynamics of social practice theory approach will be presented. This chapter will respond to the sub-question: (c) which philosophical underpinning, and which methods, are appropriate for examining the practices of social eating initiative commensality?

The most significant driver for designing the research approach, whilst responding to the overall research question, is the desire to capture and convey the nature and intricacies of the dynamics of the social eating mealtimes in-situ. Emerging from the literature review, a theoretical mid-space between the overly deterministic framings of solely structural or behavioural explanations for social eating practices is sought. This approach will require a conceptual and theoretical lens which maintains internal and philosophical coherence whilst articulating how and why that which may be observed at a local level of social eating initiatives, may also be nested and connected to the broader UK social context.
The social eating initiative mealtime will be positioned within the research design not as a discrete event but as caught amidst other flows of mealtime preparation, set up, delivery and clear down and as reflecting and constructing the broader milieu within which social eating initiatives are emerging. Therefore, a qualitative, in-situ, multi-method research approach is proposed using methods which can capture narrative, visual and situational data, which can be analysed for the contextual, structural, behavioural, discursive, habituated, innovative and material features which all shape and constitute a mealtime.

In the methodology chapter the ontological commonalities between the theorisation of both practices and commensality will also be identified. The thesis draws specifically upon the approach of Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) to explain how the intersection of materials, competences, and meanings are constructing dynamic social eating practices. And in turn, how these practices reflect, account for, and connect to, the current UK milieu.

After justifying the underlying research philosophy upon which the thesis argumentation is built, the methodological sections will consider the ethical and positional dimensions of the research. Then a number of methods which privilege the views of participants, and which enable the convivial and conversational atmosphere of a social eating initiative mealtime to be conveyed will be chosen. These methods are: (1) meal-centred focus groups; (2) go-along interviewing and (3) photovoice. These will result in Post-it note insights, interview transcriptions, and a series of photographs, and (4) ethnographic fieldnotes. These participant-shaped methods will be added to and enriched by theoretically-informed fieldwork observations, presented as vignettes, which are alert to the context, situation, materiality, and spatial and temporal ‘participants’ and how they are shaping practices.

1.3.4 Data collection and coding
In this chapter, I will reflect on the process of data collection and fieldwork, and I articulate how the large, complicated data set is progressively organised, structured and presented in order to arrive at a series of initial results. The sub-question that drives the argumentation of this chapter is: (d) what are the practices
of social eating commensality? This chapter will provide a description of how I move from the data collection to organising, processing, and structuring the large, rich data set of texts, both written, transcribed and photographic, through a coding process. These specific stages of coding will occur through observation-based coding undertaken by participants in-situ, through theory-informed coding undertaken by myself, and then via a ‘best guess’ coding approach wherein I sort this array of complex participant and researcher-created codes into three distinct but intersecting initial findings. Practices which are of value to participants are identified as occurring across the Nottingham Social Eating Network: eating together, helping out and socialising. The rationale for this sequencing and organising of the data will be provided; with the aim of linking the conceptual model, methodology and emergent ‘more than food’ conceptualisation to the data and findings.

1.3.5 Key findings
Drawing upon a practice theories-informed approach the formative, coding analysis of the data highlights three key practices: eating together, helping out and socialising. These practices are shown to contain elements of materials, competences and meanings, confirming the conceptual model and theorisation. The research sub-question that drives the structure of this chapter is: (e) how do these practices contribute to a ‘more than food’ approach? This sub-question is partially answered in this chapter by grounding the ‘more than food’ concepts in the empirical findings of the chapter. Taken together, these three practices are analysed as constituting a restructuration of the mealtime, as enabling alimentary contribution and as enacting performances of care. These key findings confirm that social eating initiatives are of value to their participants because they are about much ‘more than food’. These mealtimes represent and actualise, not only the formation of social cohesion which acts contra to the alienating tendencies of the current milieu, but they also constitute a conceptual path to move beyond the current conceptual impasse that suggests that surplus food redistribution is solely conceived of through a charitable food aid lens.
1.3.6 Discussion and contribution

In this chapter, the originality and criticality of the thesis and its overall contribution to advancing commensal scholarship is discussed. In the thesis contribution section, the final sub-question is answered: (f) *how does the ‘more than food’ approach inform understandings of commensality?*

Using concepts from the literature positioning and review, and via a practices informed analysis, the social eating practices of restructuring commensality, alimentary contribution and performances of care, subsumed into a ‘more than food’ approach, are now understood as enriching the conceptualisation of commensality. The ‘more than food’ approach to commensality goes beyond just accounting for the discrete practices of eating together at the same table, to also encompass the set-up, service and clear down of the social eating mealtime. This approach, confirming the conceptual model, also encompasses the materials, competences and meanings which all ‘go into’ social eating practices. The utilisation of a practice theories-informed approach and an emphasis on revealing participant-ascribed viewpoints updates the scholarship on commensality by linking the requirement for physical sustenance and social connection to the co-existing need for pleasure, community, non-economic transaction and social inclusion within the current UK context.

Furthermore, beyond dialogic discussion of this contribution, the thesis will propose a more nuanced, complex and logically consistent approach which constructs a dialectic argumentation about the overall organisation of the social realm, itself. The ‘more than food’ approach enables the thesis to more sensitively articulate and account for, how and why the practices of The Nottingham Social Eating Network reach out into, draw upon, and are shaped by, other elements and practices of the social realm, even in partial, messy and temporary forms. This enriched ‘more than food’ approach therefore affirms the continued usefulness and relevance of commensality as a lens for understanding the production, reproduction and transformation of the social realm.
1.3.7 Conclusion

In the conclusion of the thesis, I return to the overall research question: (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?** and I make some suggestions about the implications of the investigation and its findings.

In seeking to better understand and articulate how participants at social eating initiatives value these mealtimes, new insights into the continued value of commensality, and its potential as a lever for social transformation are examined. It is proposed that the implicit, apolitical and ‘quiet’ (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013; Pottinger, 2017) opportunities for different people to eat together counter the alienating, fragmenting and isolating tendencies of the current UK milieu through practices which shore up the social structure of communities. This may be occurring in temporary, shifting, partial and messy ways, but these are nonetheless portrayed as creating value for participants in ways that position them not just as passive receivers of corporate food waste, but as active creators of new social realities which are being fabricated not because of austerity in the UK, but in spite of it. In light of these findings the thesis conclusion also discusses the uptake of a ‘more than food’ approach into regional food security strategic agendas.

Moreover, adopting the lens of commensality through a practice theory-informed approach extends our understandings of community food groups who utilise surplus by revealing a range of practices that create a social eating mealtime. This elaborates not only a richer conception of these ‘more than food’ ‘social’ infrastructures but also highlights a range of entry points for developing policies on these challenges. This has implications for the designing of services which now might better be focused towards achieving outcomes and outputs which look beyond instrumental feeding, budget-management and education, alone, to promote pleasure, participation, sharing and sociality. Indeed, the latter section of this chapter specifies how a ‘more than food’ approach has shaped local and regional public health policy.
Chapter 2. Literature Review: Making the scholarly case for viewing ‘social eating initiatives’ through the lens of commensality

2.1 Introduction
In this chapter, as stated in the introduction, the phenomenon of study: ‘social eating initiatives’ are located within a social context and a disciplinary space. In the introductory chapter, the current challenges in eating, eating well, and eating together are set out. These challenges are always-already part of the production, reproduction and transformation of this specific social realm. Understanding why social eating initiatives are valued by participants first requires an examination of how they ‘fit’ into this context. Accordingly, the first sub-question of the thesis directs us to: examine the milieu or social context within which social eating initiatives are emerging and understand how this is currently conceptualised.

This sub-question is addressed in this chapter as the reviewing and positioning of various literatures ‘sets the scene’ for the research by defining and describing social eating initiatives. This ‘scene setting’ also requires a consideration of the social context within which social eating initiatives, food insecurity and food wastage are emerging, how they and that context are currently being conceptualised. This appraisal generates research questions and sub-questions as opportunities to modify, enrich and extend the related literature are surfaced. This, in turn enables the identification of the empirical and conceptual work which is required to extend and enrich the literature on commensality.

In order to set the scene and to draw out the research questions and further sub-questions an exposition of the relevant, contextual material on food insecurity, food wastage and surplus food-use by charitable food initiatives is conducted. In defining, describing, and appraising these bodies of literature, it becomes apparent that although useful in conceptualizing food insecurity, food wastage, and the tropes of individual responsibilization, and for critiquing their conjoining under the guise of food aid, these approaches do not adequately explain what else may be occurring alongside the emergence of, and within, social eating initiatives. The literature positioning and review goes on to appraise the notions of ‘alimentary exclusion’ (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015) and ‘the Right to Food’ (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012) as a way of extending these explanations to encompass people’s need not just to eat or eat well, but to eat together.
The role and framing of surplus foods within community food initiatives are then assessed alongside a ‘food ladders’ (Blake, 2019b) approach to understanding the role of surplus food within community food settings. Then a vignette is offered to describe the setting and experience of a social eating initiative mealtime. A narrative thread then emerges that connects the phenomena of study; social eating initiatives, to the additional field of sociological and anthropological scholarship concerning the fragmentation or de-centring of the shared mealtime, termed destructuration (Lund and Gronow, 2014), and thence on to considering and proposing the use of the lens of commensality or group eating, as an additional and enriching means of understanding the context and phenomenon of social eating initiatives.

Because, as Coveney states, food is not merely something ‘inert on the plate’; instead directing us to consider how ‘influential, symbolic, powerful and transformative’ (2014: 5) food can be. However, ‘the patterning and complexity of contemporary food sharing, especially that occurring beyond the home and in urban, industrialized settings, has received limited attention to date’ (Davies et al., 2017:137). As Marovelli states:

(with a few exceptions [...] the vast body of literature on commensality, defined as eating together at the same table, has yet to engage with urban food sharing and does not take into consideration the new forms of sharing meals that extend beyond traditional forms of kinship and friendship in contemporary affluent countries (2019:2).

The lens of commensality, then, reveals how mealtimes are about ‘much more’ than instrumental feeding and involve ‘much more’ than just an eating behaviour. This broader, commensally oriented perspective is developed by synthesizing insights from other research (Healy, 2019; Blake, 2019b, 2019c, 2020; Marovelli, 2019; Smith and Harvey, 2021) and using a theories of practice analysis (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) to create a ‘more than food’ conceptualisation. This ‘more than food’ approach articulates the need to look beyond both the critiques of surplus food aid, to the shared mealtime itself for clues about how and why social eating initiatives practices may be emerging at this present time in the UK. Thus far, the lens of commensality, and its development via a ‘more than food’ approach, has not been well-utilized to examine how community food initiatives are responding to both the pernicious issue of food insecurity coexisting with food wastage, but also rising levels of loneliness and fast food and convenience food-use in the UK.
Additionally, in identifying the social and disciplinary context of social eating initiatives, a discursive tension arises within the literature over the extent to which structural or individualistic, behavioural theorizations appropriately account for the construction, reproduction and transformation of the current UK context. Outlining which theoretical position and conceptual models may be appropriate for underpinning and investigating the emergent ‘more than food’ approach of the thesis begins within this chapter, and it is confirmed in the concluding remarks. The conclusion of the chapter summarises each section, acknowledges and responds to the tensions and opportunities raised within the literature positioning and review, clarifies the overall research question, and sets a number of research sub-questions.

2.2 Examining the current UK milieu: Food insecurity amidst plenty

‘It is a national scandal that in the seventh wealthiest nation on the planet, in excess of half a million people are now reliant on food aid... austerity and cuts are leading directly to an explosion in hardship and hunger across the UK’ (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013:16)

‘Foodbank use is up almost fourfold since 2012, and there are now about 2000 food banks in the UK, up from just 29 at the height of the financial crisis. Not only does the government not measure food insecurity, but a Minister dismissed the significance of foodbank use as being only occasional and noted that foodbanks exist in many other Western countries. The clear implication was that their rapid growth in the UK should not be seen as cause for concern, let alone for government action’ (OHCHR, 2019:17).

In this chapter section, food insecurity is examined as it is constructed and enacted at a social, organisational and individual level. The material impacts of food insecurity, the existing scholarship in this area and the subsequent positioning of individual agency and responsiveness to food insecurity are discussed. The ‘right to food’ as one response to food insecurity is considered, and in this way, the following section on the use of surplus foods by community groups is thus given context.
Food insecurity is the inability to access an adequate, healthy diet or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so, as well as concerns about accessing foods that are socially and culturally appropriate (Lambie-Mumford, 2015: 497, see also, Radimer, Olsen Campbell (1990); Dowler and O’Connor, 2012). This more encompassing term is purposeful and moves away from the binary notion that people are either hungry or not hungry. Food insecurity is thus a more nuanced term that incorporates the short and longer-term strategies households and communities use to avoid hunger or food deprivation as well as encompassing the spatial and temporal orderings of social life that impact upon the availability of, and an individual’s access to, affordable and appropriate foodstuffs.

Indeed, at the time of writing, 14% of UK families with children were reporting experiencing food insecurity (Food Foundation, 2020). And whilst the UK Government has recently announced plans to begin small-scale measurement of household food insecurity in 2021 as part of existing household research, ‘these statistics will not reveal the depth or prevalence of the issue at large’ (Nica-Avram et al., 2021:2). This is because food insecurity is heterogeneous, and ‘for any given citizen the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity will also be directly influenced by transport mobility, the local availability of affordable food, the prevalence of neighbours experiencing economic deprivation, and the wider embeddedness of social support networks’ (Nica-Avram et al., 2021: 13); and these features of the UK’s foodscape are not yet integrated into food insecurity tracking and measurement.

The broader historical trajectory which frames these definitions emerged from discourses on food sovereignty, food justice and food security, largely pertaining to the global South (Agarwal, 2014; Jarosz, 2014; Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder, 2015). The Food and Agriculture Organisation (1996) defines ‘food security [as] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life’ (cited in Riches, 2002:92). It is notable that these terms, which emerged from the global South, are now used to critically frame and contrast with the experiences of individuals in the global North who are experiencing food insecurity in an affluent and predominantly food-secure society (Kneafsey et al., 2013).

Indeed, an All-Parliamentary Inquiry into hunger concluded that ‘something fundamental is happening in advanced Western economies which throws into doubt the effectiveness of a national minimum below
which no one is allowed to fall’ (Feeding Britain Report, 2014:9). Food insecurity within the global North is not positioned as a result of environmental or supposedly ‘natural’ scarcity but is instead conceptualised as a phenomenon that intersects with welfare retrenchment and, in particular, the austerity-driven milieu of neo-liberal UK governmentality. Neo-liberalism here is understood as a ‘new form of political-economic governance premised on the extension of market relationships to all spheres of the social life’ (Larner, 2000:5), where the value of financial and economic capital often prevails over other forms of capital (Surman, Kelemen and Rumens, 2021).

In the UK, specifically, an increasing number of households are experiencing food insecurity linked to rising food and fuel prices, economic recession and welfare reform (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012; Garthwaite, Collins and Bambra, 2015; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Lansley and Mack, 2015). The focus of recent literature on food insecurity (Loopstra et al., 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2016; Borch and Kjaernes, 2016; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017) has utilized the lens of political economy perspectives to systematically review primarily quantitative data and policy evaluations. This interpretative framework establishes a correlation between upstream welfare reform policies and the rise in food charity, substantiating the claim that food insecurity is an emergent and increasing issue in the UK. It is observed that the policies designed to reduce public spending by reducing or reorganizing entitlement to social security are correlated strongly with the rising need for food charity (Loopstra et al., 2015).

Further, that these policy determinants are coming together to produce very specific and problematic forms of acute food insecurity so far previously unseen in the UK, as evidenced for example, in econometric analyses which link rising food bank usage, food insecurity, in-work poverty to welfare reform (De Schutter, 2013; Tarasuk, Dachner, and Loopstra, 2014; Loopstra et al., 2015). For example, the Trussell Trust network, which covers around 60% of food banks, reported an increase in three-day food parcels provided from 61,000 in 2010/11 to 1,583,000 in 2018/19 (Trussell Trust Report, 2020).

These approaches suggest that experiences of food poverty, food security, and food insecurity are not fixed and immutable but are shaped and constructed by an array of factors that are subject to cultural and social variation. Therefore, food insecurity is being constructed and can be empirically and conceptually approached at multiple and intersecting levels within society. As Blake (2019b) asserts: ‘the
term everyday food insecurity encompass(es) the difficult place-based and everyday interactions with food that those who are living at the sharp end of neo-liberalism are currently facing’ (2019b:3).

The manifestation of food insecurity in the current UK context is positioned not then as an issue with production capacity or as a commercial, infrastructural supply issue (Maye, 2018) Instead ‘the terrifying idea that hunger is here to stay’ (Feeding Britain Report, 2014:8) is positioned as an expression of UK economic and welfare policy, embedded, entrenched and facilitated by a perhaps well-meaning, but ultimately problematic array of charitable benefactors and agencies. These form an alternative, charitable welfare state which simultaneously constructs a whole range of characterizations of individual eligibility, deservedness and worthiness, fragmenting a shared consensus on what constitutes need (Williams et al. 2016; Cloke, May and Williams, 2017).

2.2 Austerity, shadow welfare and responsibilization

After success in the General Election in 2010 the then UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, made an appeal to the British society to ‘share the pain’ of deep, structured public budget reduction, termed ‘austerity’. Accompanying this fiscal restructuring he also launched a campaign under the name of ‘Big Society’ to fix ‘Broken Britain’ through the valorizing of community empowerment, public service reform and social action (Briggs and Foord, 2017). This approach has been persistently criticized as a ‘philanthropic fantasy’ (Slater, 2014:948) and as an ‘attempt to get necessary social labour done for nothing [...] by pushing work back across the market/non-market boundary’ (Levitas, 2012:322). However, the era of austerity accompanying the UK coalition government of 2010 has instead been identified as one of the factors for rising food insecurity but also in increasing social isolation, especially of vulnerable populations (Briggs and Foord, 2017). Social isolation and loneliness have also been identified as factors contributing to both food poverty and to poorer overall health (Hauver and Shealey-Griffiths, 2017).

This increase in food insecurity is theorized within the existing literature as being undergirded by a Governmental narrative and policy shift from addressing the complex, social and structural issues surrounding hunger to an approach that locates responsibility and agency with individuated, familial and parental relations, notably around financial dysfunction (Hancock, Mooney and Neal, 2012; Churchill, 2013). This ‘responsibilization’ can be defined as ‘a governance praxis that operates through ascribing
freedom and autonomy to individuals and agents (e.g., as autonomous ‘consumers’) while simultaneously appealing to individual responsibility-taking, independent self-steering and ‘self-care’ (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017: 216). As Rose claims, ‘neo-liberal programmes [...] respond to the sufferer as if they were the author of their own misfortune [...] the disadvantaged individual has come to be seen as potentially and ideally an active agent in the fabrication of their own existence’ (Rose, 1996: 59). The process of neoliberal welfare state retrenchment – and related ‘subordination of the social’ (Clarke, 2007) is therefore purportedly enabled through the shift, or even transformation, of citizens into self-steering, economically independent, responsibility-taking agents.

Moreover, ‘an additional emphasis on the disciplinary potential of the welfare system, driven by incentives, conditionality and sanctions’ (Morris, 2020:276) has transformed the notion of state welfare as a bureaucratic arbiter; securing social integration within a context of social inequality, towards a punitive enforcer of austerity. Receding state support is theorized as increasingly conditional and contractual, and access to food charity is similarly conceptualised around eligibility, deservedness and performances of need (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2015; Lansley and Mack, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). Indeed, a key plank of UK government austerity discourse revolved around ‘confronting head-on the continuing ‘abuse’ of the welfare system by an apparently growing population of the undeserving or feckless’ (Williams et al., 2016:2297).

The pejorative framing of those in poverty as responsible for their ‘lifestyle choice’ (Garthwaite, 2011: 371), however, did nothing to reduce the growing demand for food aid wherein 1.9 million food parcels were distributed by the Trussell Trust alone from 2019-2020 (Trussell Trust, 2020). As noted, the responsibilization agenda demonstrates ‘a limited understanding of claimant circumstances and questionable attributions of individual responsibility that rebound on the moral standing of claimants’ (Morris, 2020:289).

Furthermore, the relationships between charities and volunteers are also seen to foment food insecurity. Within these conceptualisations, food insecurity is produced through the discursive mechanisms of framing ‘the poor’ in terms of deservedness, need and eligibility (Tarasuk and Beaton, 1999; Tarasuk, Dachner, and Loopstra, 2014; Van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol, 2014; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Williams et al., 2016; Middleton et al., 2018). Food insecurity as mediated through the eligibility criteria
of many food banks, social supermarkets or charitable pantries (Williams et al., 2016; Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018; De Souza, 2019), for example, are viewed as a key ‘translation mechanism’ whereby the restructurings of the welfare state are down-stepped into practice according to a narrowed definition of financial ‘need’ (Carson, 2014) and through ‘paternalist technologies and representations of deservedness’ (Williams et al., 2016: 2294); locating both the problem and the effects of the problem, at an individual level.

Charitable responses to food insecurity and the mobilization of volunteers are viewed as a ‘moral safety valve’ (Poppendieck, 1999:298), enabling ‘donors to feel better while vital public policy issues go unaddressed’ (Williams et al., 2016:2294). Such work has also sought to emphasize how, by meeting the immediate ‘symptoms’ of food insecurity, food banks are themselves symptomatic of a corporatized food aid sector (Dowler, 2013) which depoliticizes issues of poverty by institutionalizing the food-poor within a shadow rather than collectivist welfare system (Poppendieck, 1999; Riches, 2002; Lambie-Mumford, 2013).

Indeed, the capacity of food charities to respond to food insecurity might also diminish the opportunity for organisations to challenge indicted policy agendas as they become entangled in the dilemma of both highlighting and ‘solving’ the issue of food insecurity (Blake, 2019b, 2019c). ‘Indeed, there is increasing evidence that food banks in the UK are being formalized as part of a denuded state welfare system’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:705), wherein local authorities, public sector professionals or Church staff become inculcated in the translating of food insecurity via voucher distribution. Instead, the risk of rising reliance of individuals on food banks, for example, is that short-term emergency response to problems of temporary food insecurity will become accepted as a response to an issue they cannot solve. This leads to ‘enabling some people to experience less hunger but doing little to tackle the underlying injustices and inequalities’ that create food insecurity, and which require State-level reform (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017: 705).

A further concern that emerges explicitly throughout the literature centres on the scaling of food charity as the key response to food insecurity (Middleton et al., 2018). The literature concedes that when tailored to the needs of recipients, systematic, well-coordinated food charity can alleviate immediate hunger, but it cannot address the structural determinants of food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Lambie-
Mumford and Dowler, 2015). This charity-at-scale is evaluated as being an ad hoc, provisional and variable response to a structural, national, policy-driven issue. Moreover, food charity organisations are theorized as being increasingly industrialized via the systematization, professionalization, and coordination of their services (Middleton et al., 2018).

Accompanying this purported industrialization is the attendant focus on them becoming service-providers to the consuming-poor (Riches, 2011; Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015). Indeed, corporatized food charity at-scale is purported to produce positive public perceptions of active engagement whilst these organisations trade in political economies of low pay and unstable employment that further amplify the contradiction between committing to ‘fight hunger’ on the one hand whilst accepting it with the other (Dowler, 2013; Riches, 2011). This emergent, industrialized response-at-scale is further critiqued as mirroring the transactional model of economic exchange which places value on the ability of an individual to engage in the market as an active consumer without querying whether this conception is appropriate (Kneafsey et al., 2013). And consequently, if the issue is foregrounded ‘simply in terms of hunger and deprivation, then the appropriate response is to give people more food – a role that is currently being filled, to some extent, by food banks across rich, liberal economies’ (Healy, 2019:2)

From this perspective, food aid initiatives such as food banks (Williams et al., 2016; Cloke, May and Williams, 2017), charitable pantries (De Souza, 2019) and social supermarkets (Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018) are entangled within the wider neo-liberalization of society and become positioned as an essential service within austerity tropes; responding to individualized needs with individualized food parcels, for example. A note here as the chapter proceeds, there is a distinction to be addressed between food banks, social supermarkets and charitable food pantries. Saxena and Tornaghi identify social supermarkets as transactional sites wherein food insecurity is mitigated through the offer to individuals to purchase low-cost, surplus foodstuffs. An attempt is made to ‘move away from the charity model of the food bank; handing over free food parcels, by offering a choice of food and by providing food access in a retail-like environment’ (2018:48).

However, they also concede, as does De Souza (2019), when considering the redirection of surplus through charitable pantries, that there is an ‘uneasy dualism’ arising between those higher-income
consumers able to access a choice of ‘quality food’, and those who have a limited or illusory ‘choice’ to ‘other food’ (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011; Goodman and Goodman, 2016).

In this way, social supermarkets and charitable pantries which offer a limited, surplus-based ‘choice’ of foodstuffs are envisaged as both attempting to mirror the conventional market model of a paid-for food choice whilst also embedding a second-tier food system for the ‘poverty consumer’ (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015). Food banks offer no choice, free foodstuffs, and social supermarkets and charitable pantries offer low-choice but low-cost foodstuffs, and materially, although they offer foodstuffs, they do not explicitly provide meals (although it is acknowledged that many food banks, for example, do have café-type offers alongside the food bank offer). As the chapter proceeds, this delineation is of import because although social eating initiatives could conceivably be situated within this conceptual framework, an argument is developed that they escape this characterization and thus require both further empirical examination and perhaps, a different conceptualisation.

However, this current connection between upstream economic policies, retrenchment of the welfare state and the subsequent rise and entrenchment of food aid responses are conceived of as a ‘multiplicity of largely aggressive political forces deployed to replace established models of welfare provision and state regulation with a free-market fundamentalism that normalizes individualistic self-interest, entrepreneurial values and consumerism’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017: 706). This siting of welfare disbursement at the regional, local, community and individual levels all enact a movement away from clear state provision. Herein, the state’s duty to provide income and food security for all citizens becomes obscured, especially when individual hunger manifests as local-level and requires immediate attention and relief.

Within the neo-liberal trope of UK austerity, the unit of social agency is prefigured as the individual, independent, rational, employed consumer whose main value, worth, and identity is determined through their capacity to purchase or goods and services (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). This concept of the prime social unit becomes a framework through which the food-insecure are refracted. In this way, food insecurity tropes are being ‘responsibilized’ (Rose, 1996, 2006; Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Morris, 2020) or discursively situated as being both created and sustained at the level of the individual. The food-insecure are always already positioned as being both unable to manifest their own food security
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and simultaneously responded to with services which render them passive recipients of food aid. This is further compounded through experiences of food aid receipt where they must perform their impoverishment (Williams et al., 2016), further enmeshing the production of neoliberal welfare subjectivities.

A further facet to these tropes is the narrative of home-cooking, frugal provisioning and household management: ‘food reformers tell us it’s time to return to the kitchen *en masse*, to restore the health of the nation and the planet. The time is there to cook, they believe, if only people would get their priorities straight’ (Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019: 45). This performance of poverty and the individuation of both the problem and the responsibility for solving that problem intensifies the ‘darker side’ to food bank environments, and in particular, the emotional nexus of shame, stigma, and gratitude they argue is constructed and performed through the interactions of many food aid recipients and food aid providers (Van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol, 2014; Douglas et al., 2015; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016).

This darker side of food aid subjectivity is further amplified when those helping out at food aid services are conceived of as engaging in ‘moral selving’ (Allahyari, 2000 in Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). Here, the seeming positive contribution of helping others is understood to be a personally fulfilling projection of the self; whether motivated by religiosity and ideational platforming (Poppendieck, 1999) or the contentment to achieve a sense of personal worth without questioning why voluntarism might be a common requirement of food aid provisioning. Not only do these enactments of subjectivity fail to generate structural critique, but they also amplify the exclusion and ‘othering’ of the food insecure. These enactments may compound experiences of isolation, stigma and deficit in relation to the neo-liberal primary agent of the individuated, active and choosing consumer or, indeed, the well-meaning ‘helper’.

In the following section, the significance of alimentary exclusion is buttressed by an examination of mealtime destructuration; surfacing the notion that whilst food insecurity amplifies the challenges of eating well and eating together, it may be that the neo-liberal, marketized model of society is also generating problems with alimentary participation more broadly.
2.2.2 Alimentary exclusion and poverty consumers

The way groups of people eat cannot be separated from broader debates about satiating hunger, directing us to consider how retrenchment of the welfare state, neoliberal economic policies, and the dominance of the paying-consumer as the primary agent of society distorts understandings of who and what is deserving or of value. The era of austerity has also been identified as one of the factors increasing social isolation, especially of vulnerable populations (Briggs and Foord, 2017; Klinenberg, 2018b). As previously stated, social isolation and loneliness are viewed as contributing to poorer general health and as intersecting with food poverty (Hauver and Shealey-Griffiths, 2017). Loneliness ‘can be understood as an individual’s personal, subjective sense of lacking desired affection, closeness, and social interaction with others’ (Davidson and Rossall, 2014:3), with social isolation defined as ‘a lack of contact with family or friends, community involvement, or access to services’ (Davidson and Rossall, 2014:3). According to the Thomas (writing for the British Office for National Statistics), ‘social participation decreases with age, along with the increasing likelihood of ill health, living alone and bereavement’ (Thomas, 2015:11). About 5 million elderly people in the UK say that the television is their main form of company, while 9 per cent reports that they feel cut off from society (Davidson and Rossall, 2014).

Moreover, social isolation is not only recognized as a significant issue among the elderly populations (Thomas, 2015) but as also emerging among young people and new parents, for example (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Therefore, although this section focuses on alimentary exclusion, the emergence of a culture of loneliness indicates that the company and companionship, which have been historically enmeshed with food sharing and mealtimes, has now been interpolated with loneliness and alienation. The value of being able to eat with, to food share, and to participate in mealtimes, may then be of particular significance.

Conceptualisations of food insecurity can, then, be extended to include the ‘ability to participate in customary activities associated with food’ (Healy, 2019: 2). Healy argues that to get a ‘true sense of the prevalence of food poverty […] those who experience social exclusion vis-a-vis food also need to be included in official estimates’ (2019:2). Healy further notes that ‘qualitative research has shown that low-income households could not afford to socialize regularly with food […] either through eating out or entertaining friends at home with food’ (2019:5).
As Blake notes:

‘community-based activity can shape local communities’ capacities for the necessary self-organisation of their community resources, but this alone is not a sufficient condition for overcoming food insecurity. This relationship indicates that policy that focuses on self-organising is necessary, but not sufficient for enhancing resilience in low-income communities. Instead, a multi-scalar approach is needed that on the one hand redresses larger-scale policy that undermines resources and creates shocks in the first place. On the other hand greater support is needed at the local level that enhances the community-specific self-organisation capacity and resource needs’ (2019b:18).

Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher (2015) further discuss ‘the ability to afford to have family or friends for a drink or for food once a month’, something they describe as ‘alimentary participation’ in their analyses of food insecurity. Alimentary participation concerns both physiological hunger and ‘hunger for social inclusion’ (2015:485). It refers to ‘the possibility of experiencing the social function of food, by eating outside the home, and/or together with others, [and] is something from which poor people are significantly excluded’. Individuals employ coping strategies that include ‘surfing the ups and downs’ wherein they attempt to maintain control, agency and choice by eating as they wish for the beginning of the month but eating cheap quality and lower cost meals as income dwindle towards their next payment date. However, as well as these strategies, which of course, also include ‘abandoning quantity’ and ‘abandoning quality’ of foodstuffs. Pfeiffer et al. also confirm that ‘special occasions such as birthdays become a particularly difficult endeavour under tight financial restrictions’ (2015:493).

Thus, even if the social aspects of eating are not necessary for nutritional wellbeing, ‘the possibility to eat with others, offering hospitality, and being able to share food outside the home, appear to be regarded as an essential and significant part of people’s lives at every age’ (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015: 488). Furthermore, it is noted that whilst social networks are a crucial facet of overall health (Dunbar, 2017b) and resilience (Blake, 2019b, 2019c), they may also result in an ‘additional burden for those suffering from nutritional poverty in that they have little to offer in return, and thus cannot meet social obligations, from which they eventually withdraw’ (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015:492). Thus, going beyond simple material inadequacies and mere sufficiency of eating, alimentary exclusion provides an
extended conception of food insecurity as existing within the spheres of sociality and which includes shopping, preparing food and getting together for hospitality and sharing as well as the strategies individuals are employing to mitigate these complex circumstances.

2.2.3 The destructuration of mealtimes, and convenience and care
Aside from the socio-economic issues around food insecurity that undermine individuals’ attempts to eat healthily, regularly and with others, one problem associated with food insecurity is the possible destructuration of the shared mealtime (Murcott, 1997; Warde, 1999; Lund and Gronow, 2014; Yates and Warde, 2017). Food insecurity and food waste in the UK occur within a broader foodscape, where the traditional structuring of mealtimes has undergone a transition to ‘culinary plurality’ as the breadth of individual and shared eating practices continues to grow in diversity (Mäkelä, 2009:45). Evidence is presented that shared mealtimes are either under threat (Twine, 2015) or are instead being reconstituted in new forms (Yates and Warde, 2017). But despite a lack of clear evidence to support the notion that family mealtimes are indeed declining in frequency or duration, this narrative of destructuration persists (Brannen, O’Connell and Mooney, 2013; Lund and Gronow, 2014; Yates and Warde, 2017). However, it is nonetheless widely agreed upon that commensality remains a potent normative feature of UK society (Mestdag, 2005; Brannen, O’Connell and Mooney, 2013; Dunbar, 2017a, b); emphasizing that the shared mealtime retains a central significance in the routine structurings as well as the collective imagination of society with the family meal in particular, positioned as a symbol for togetherness, domesticity, caregiving and social cohesion (Van Esterik, 1995; Higgs, 2015; Meah and Jackson, 2017). As Bowen, Brenton and Elliott note: ‘eating home-cooked food, around the dinner table, has become a symbol of people’s commitment to family life and good health’ (2019:16).

The narrative or framing of group eating practices demonstrates how a meal can stand in for something more than physically eating together. So, too, the notion of the disintegration of the family meal appears to signal a threat to the integrity of other social domains such as those of family and community. Accordingly, cheap, mass-produced, processed meals, replacing the freshly cooked, from-scratch, shared or family mealtime, are implicated in the fragmentation, diminishment or destructuration of society.
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According to Fischler (1980), this proliferation of and focus upon neoliberal expression of individuated consumption disrupts the necessary social consensus that group eating practices generate. Fischler terms this de-centring of the shared meal, and particularly the accompanying rise of lone-eating and fast or convenience foods, as ‘gastro-anomie’ wherein he states that ‘modern individuals are left without clear socio-cultural cues as to what their choice should be, as to when, how, and how much they should eat. Food selection and intake are now increasingly a matter of individual, not social, decisions’ (1980:948).

Therefore, I now move to consider the literature which discusses these broader concerns around commensal eating practices in contemporary UK social life, noting that the use of convenience foods, for example, or the use of domestic technologies such as microwaves are also implicated in the expressions of everyday eating-together practices. This scholarship helps us think through the notion that within the current UK milieu, there may be multiple intersecting issues around food insecurity which also affect broader swathes of society, and which cannot be solved by increasing access, availability and affordability of foodstuffs alone. And specific facets of this scholarship and how they attend not only to behaviours but the rich constellation of social ‘things’ that are involved in mealtime offers us an emergent theoretical approach which will be unpacked in the following chapters.

The prevalence of cheap, mass-produced, individually portioned, fast-food and snacks offers in contemporary UK foodscape have been described as restructuring, and in some cases replacing, the freshly cooked and shared family mealtime (Twine, 2015). This disruption is further compounded by the rising cost of healthy foods in the UK, which increased more rapidly than the cost of unhealthy foods (Wiggins et al., 2015), and the relatively high concentration of fast-food outlets in lower-income areas (Maguire, Burgoine and Monsivais, 2015). Snacking, too, which may be used by the food insecure, as well as lone eaters, in lieu of full meals, is configured in the destructuration of commensality with small-scale, individually portioned and mobile mealtimes positioned in temporal and spatial competition with conventional meals such as breakfast or lunch (Grogan, Bell and Conner, 1997; Weijzen, de Graaf and Dijksterhuis, 2009; Orbell and Verplanken, 2010; Twine, 2015).

‘Convenience food’ is an expansive category, encompassing a diverse range of goods (Jackson and Viehoff, 2016). Derided as among the least sustainable and most unhealthy of dietary choices, the use of
convenience food is frequently ‘tinged with moral disapprobation’ (Warde, 1999: 518). What are termed ‘food deserts’ (Wrigley, 2002; Shaw, 2006) and ‘food swamps’ (Luan, Law and Quick, 2015; Bridle-Fitzpatrick, 2015) are also implicated in the destructuration of mealtimes as both proximity to affordable, fresh ingredients, or a local oversaturation of fast food and processed ambient food outlets, impact upon the capacity to both eat well, and the ease with which people can readily assemble meals and fabricate shared mealtimes. This destructuring foodscape may be further compounded by a dearth of domestic space, culinary equipment and a lack of dinner table and chairs; issues often exacerbated for those living in poor-quality or temporary housing (Garthwaite, Collins and Bamber, 2015).

Underpinning and intensifying the rise in experiences of gastro-anomie more broadly, is the UK neoliberal economy which is in part characterized by irregular and shift-pattern working hours and through geographical movement such as commuting (Southerton, 2006; Jabs and Devine, 2006; Warde et al., 2007; Janowski, 2012). The notion of ‘time poverty’ (Hochschild, 1997; Garhammer, 1998; Brannen, O’Connell and Mooney, 2013) is implicated in commensal practices as busy work and leisure schedules impact upon the time reserved for family mealtimes.

However, as Warde (1999) points out, a reduction in time itself might not be the issue so much as the experience of time, and in particular, the capacity for people to manipulate and re-order meal timings, which may be more keenly experienced by those in insecure employment, or those whose access to meals or food items are translated through food bank opening times, for example. Shopping around for reduced items, which forms a key strategy of many food insecure and poverty consumers (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015), often results in the purchase of varying items that are not always readily assembled into or available at a time, which enables their organisation into a conventional meal (Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019).

Warde, in his examination of the use of domestic technologies and the arrangements of mealtimes, also considers the emergence of convenience foods as reflecting the ‘re-ordering of the time-space relations of everyday life’ (1999: 518). Here, specific types of convenience food, positioned within other literature as detrimental to everyday eating-together, for example, (Jackson, 2018), are examined as evidence of hypermodern, time-shifting technologies that both enable and constrain specific types of eating practices (Warde, 1999; Warde et al., 2007; Kera and Sulaiman, 2014). For ‘so long as meals presuppose
companions, an increasingly complex set of negotiations is required to achieve a meeting around the table’ (Warde, 1999: 525-526).

This re-ordering or ‘de-routinization’ (Warde, 1999) of everyday life can, however, be detected in the foodstuffs consumed by an increasing proportion of the modern, Western population (Fischler, 1980, 2011). Indeed, the UK has the highest level of ready meal consumption in Europe (New Food Magazine, 2021). However, as Meah and Jackson reflect:

‘convenience foods are not deployed simply because there is a lack of time to cook, but rather because the use of these foods either facilitates the redistribution of time to spend on other caring activities [...] in more imaginative and less onerous ways’ (Meah and Jackson, 2017: 2073).

Ready-made meals, meals that can be microwaved, and pre-prepared ingredients all enable new forms of mealtime scheduling and sharing and serve as proxies for the care that shared mealtimes stand for.

In this context, the perceived benefits of cooking ‘from scratch’, as surfaced in a previous section (Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019), often overlook the routine and widespread use of an array of processed ingredients; suggesting that the distinction between scratch cooking using fresh ingredients and a reliance on convenience food is frequently overdrawn. This echoes the discussion in the previous section on surplus food- that the dichotomous, divisive and moralizing distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ food, invoked in critiques of surplus food use, obscures the more ambiguous and complex affordances that surplus food enables. So, too, the notion that every meal must be freshly cooked, from scratch, homemade, within budget and on time both valorizes the achievement of one model of domesticity whilst diminishing any other (Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019).

Moreover, just as in a previous section which outlined how individuals suffer the intersecting stigmas of responsibilization (Rose, 1996; Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Morris, 2020) so, too, those struggling the most to fabricate a healthy, shared mealttime are subjectivized as caring less (Meah and Jackson, 2017; Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019). When a hegemonic, interpretative framework is privileged in understanding and valuing the strategies individuals are deploying in order to eat well and eat together, rather than one which ‘transcends analytical binaries of incorporation and resistance’ we
may miss the everyday practices of commensality which are occurring ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017).

Thus, the negative or at least morally ambiguous associations of convenience, fast and snack foods, especially as consumed by the food insecure, need to be appraised and should be understood as being embedded in everyday practices (Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Jackson and Viehoff, 2016; Halkier, 2017) that are enacted as part of the broader, deeper and more persistent need for people to eat, together (Dunbar, 2017a, b). As Warde observes, ‘social habits, routines and conventions provide a source of general resistance to rapid change’ (Warde et al., 2007:381). Group eating practices then are anchored as an enduring, social phenomenon within more mutable expressions of contemporary social life (Warde, et al., 2007; Dunbar, 2017b; Warde and Yates, 2017).

Furthermore, just as in the previous sections, I have established that conceptions of food insecurity are mutable, are located within complex contexts, and are subject to more nuanced readings. In this section, understanding the phenomenon of mealtime destructuration directs us towards a more complex view of the significance of shared mealtimes, as they pertain not just to the food insecure but to broader sectors of society who are also situated within the problematic foodscape of the neoliberal UK context, and who may be experiencing both economic and social, food insecurity.

In this sense, the public, shared mealtime offers of some community food initiatives such as social eating initiatives might offer a counter to the intransigent problems of scheduling in a de-routinized society (Warde, 1999; Jackson and Viehoff, 2016), as well as enabling forms of commensality that are challenging for the food insecure to fabricate, such as mealtime reciprocity or going ‘out’ to eat (Meah and Jackson, 2017). It is evident that within the current UK context, the capacity to engage in alimentary scheduling, mealtime reciprocity and social eating are all being rendered problematic, not regardless of lack of income, but certainly not solely because of it. Moreover, despite the critiques of convenience foods and the rise of gastro-anomie, what has emerged from this literature positioning and review, is that the deeper significance of commensality endures. Given these complex and intersecting facets of the current UK milieu, attention is now focused on how the capacity to manifest commensality may be realized. Accordingly, in the following sections, I draw upon two approaches that proffer conceptual tools with which to critique the phenomenon of food insecurity within the current UK context. Calls for the
instatement and enactment of a ‘right to food’ (Dowler, 2002) are discussed, and in a subsequent section, another facet of the current UK foodscape – the use of ‘surplus’ foodstuffs by community groups - are introduced and evaluated in terms of their significance to the current UK milieu.

### 2.2.4 Current perspectives on food insecurity: Awaiting the ‘right to food’?

One conceptualisation of food justice that emerges in relation to the literature on food insecurity reimagines the role of individual rights and responsibilities. The ‘right to food’ is positioned as a structural response to a structural issue that moves away from a focus on food poverty and food-aid to a wider conception of food security, health and well-being, and access and provision for all (Dowler, 2002; Dowler and O’Connor, 2012; Caraher and Furey, 2017). The concept of the ‘right to food’ acknowledges that the division between state, market and voluntary agencies is challenging to delineate but claims that the state has, in effect, devolved responsibility for food security, in effect creating the conditions for food insecurity.

However, the conceptual value of the right to food and food justice as a framing device for the lived experiences of those in food insecurity, and the responses they themselves mount in tackling this situation may be limited. For example, charities and community initiatives might be reluctant to engage in the politicized language of food justice within the context of austerity as this might have implications for both access to resources and funding (see, for example, state-backed charitable ‘gagging’ contract clauses, as reported by Laville, 2019). Furthermore, there are issues around an expectation that a singular or homogeneous message of food justice is unproblematically transmitted to potential beneficiaries and user groups (Kneafsey et al., 2017). The right to food whilst situated amidst renewed attention to, and interest in, rights-based approaches in international development and strengthened, democratic forms of governance (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003), the term is illusionary or at least representative of an idealized version of the relationship between individuals and broader social structures.

According to Hilbrandt and Richter:
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‘[a] necessity for change amounts to no less than the responsibility to attend to the potentials presented by engaging proactively with more solidary practices. Austerity research needs to make room for the possibilities that may emerge from studying sharing and saving practices and yet continue to resist co-optation, especially with ecological and social injustices in mind’ (2015:175).

Here, the right to food is conceived of as emerging from a territorially grounded, contractual relationship with the government in the modern nation-state. This hinges upon a conception of an individualized citizen, and particularly of an engaged, politicized citizen whose agency and socio-cultural literacy enable them to ‘demand’ the enactment of a right. This approach can be conceptually-situated alongside the responsibilization tropes wherein it is left to individuals to take personal responsibility, via an assumed neoliberal subjectivity, the opportunities to enact their agency as a consumer-citizen (or as an individual with the means to participate in the market of food goods and services). Moreover, individuals and groups may not identify with or coalesce around broader political aims or be invested in participatory forms of activist-citizenship (Kneafsey et al., 2017).

The dominant political and citizenry purview of the right to food tropes is countered by the conceptualisation of community places, spaces and activities as being sites of ‘quiet’ resistance (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013; Pottinger, 2017). Within this approach, not all beneficial outcomes of mundane, everyday and apolitical work relate directly or indirectly to market transactions. Moreover, neither are they framed as expressions of overt politicism nor active protest. ‘Quiet’ practices come in different guises which direct us to consider where and how new forms of solidarity and purpose may be being forged in unconventional ways. Quiet forms of resistance can also be understood as ‘exuberant, appealing and socially inclusive, but also unforced’ (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013:148). Smith and Jehlicka (2013) identify how for example, food self-provisioning is often motivated not by an explicit political or environmental stance, but rather by an individual’s desire to feed themselves, often in healthy and delicious ways. Therefore, this approach complexifies the stance taken by the right to food corpus by surfacing the notion that social eating initiatives might also be understood as a nonconfrontational and even inadvertent way of ‘doing something about something’ or ‘plugging away’ at neoliberalism (Miles, 2008 cited in Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:717).
Indeed, the conception of the right to food is tempered by the admission that ‘the content, origins and allocations of responsibilities for realizing the right to food [...] seemed to be more closely shaped by local realities than by universalist human rights or legal frameworks’ (Hossain and te Lintelo, 2019:1). Thus, any conception that citizens can readily claim or advance their right to food must be carefully considered within the partial, mutable and intersecting social contexts through which they emerge. Whilst the importance of the right to food as an interpretative framework is not being diminished per se; it may be argued that this discourse is waiting for something to happen ‘from above’ whilst missing the action on the ground and obscuring ‘the more progressive possibilities arising in and through spaces of [...] wider welfare care’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:704) that are indeed attempting to materialize everyday opportunities to eat.

Indeed, according to Luca et al., social eating initiatives can be understood as ‘community-based initiatives [...] that can address food insecurity, support health, well-being and social capital’ (House of Lords, 2019:2.1). This provisioning increases opportunities to develop food socialization, food literacy (Bublitz et al., 2013, 2019; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021) and are important place and space-based services that extend food choice, accessibility and availability (Blake, 2019b, 2019c, 2020). Social eating spaces may therefore be considered places as localised, community-level examples of the partial manifesting of this ‘right’. However, their use of ‘surplus’ or unsold supermarket foodstuffs appears to be an essential part of their offer of an affordable meal. However, as surplus is conventionally conceived of a waste-stream, this conjoins food waste with food insecurity (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Caplan, 2017, 2020; Caraher and Furey, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, Riches and Gerlings, 2019). The appropriateness of this conceptual linking will now be appraised through an analysis of surplus food and its use by community initiatives.

### 2.2.5 Leftover food for left behind people?

The theorization of ‘food waste’ has re-emerged as a priority in food policy and regulation, within cultural tropes and within environmental debates in relation to the rise of Western food insecurity. It is observed that the conceptualisation of food waste has been subject to scholarly divisions in tacit and interrelated ways: between its production and consumption, disposal and use, visibility and invisibility, its value and worth, and its interrelation with social marginality and inclusion (Evans, 2012, 2014; Evans, Campbell and
Murcott, 2012; Evans and Welch, 2015). Further, food waste is positioned as an absent-presence or as something hidden from material and consumer view, which is nonetheless inculcated in the processes of social ordering through narratives on risk and contamination (Evans, Campbell and Murcott, 2012). More recently, the distribution of waste food by food aid organisations has contemporarily come within the purview of food insecurity scholarship.

‘Surplus’ foods are commonly conceived of as ‘waste food’, as being damaged or going ‘off’, for example, and as such, the aligning of surplus food with waste immediately and inherently problematizes its use in alleviating food insecurity; surplus food is envisaged as ‘leftover food for left behind people’ (Riches and Gerlings, 2019). In this way, surplus is conceived of as:

‘the second tier of our food system insofar as [it is] food that has been rejected from the competitive retail market’ as that which ‘cannot be retailed’ due to ‘manufacturing errors or damage during shipping, handling and storage, new food products that failed when introduced to the marketplace, and unprofitable agricultural crops’ (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005:178).

Surplus, treated as waste food within food insecurity scholarship tends to position it as ‘less than’ or marginal to the conventional market (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005; Lalor, 2014; Caraher and Furey, 2017; Riches and Gerlings, 2019) therefore, it continues to be discursively framed in terms of deficit; as poor people’s food aid (Caraher and Furey, 2017).

The issue of individuated hunger set within a modern foodscape of both wealth and wastage have been examined within scholarship in North America (Riches, 1986, 2002; Poppendieck, 1999, 2014; Tarasuk, Dachner, and Loopstra, 2014) and Europe (Van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol, 2014; Silvasti and Karjalainen, 2014). And although it is recognized that responses to the intersections between hunger and social welfare differ by social setting, the current UK context reflects a number of concomitant themes that have been identified and conceptualised, particularly within food banking scholarship (Dowler, 2013; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Garthwaite, Collins and Bambra, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016) and food waste scholarship (Alexander and Smaje, 2008; Midgley, 2014; Evans, Campbell and Murcott, 2012). Namely, that rising food insecurity has occurred alongside the simultaneous entrenchment of food aid, and particularly the distribution of surplus foodstuffs, as a means of alleviating
individual food insecurity (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Caraher and Dowler, 2016; Caplan, 2017, 2020; Caraher and Furey, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Indeed, since 2010 there has been an unprecedented scaling-up of food-provisioning organisations, conceived of as ‘food aid’ (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015), with those on low incomes having to rely increasingly on minimal diets, food charity and emergency provision (Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015).

Within the literature, the dominant focus has been on food banks and free food provisioning as an emergency response. Alternative and additional provisioning remains under-researched, conceivably because it is both haphazard, contingent upon locale and scales of effectiveness and because it may not explicitly be promoted as a form of food aid (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). This literature critiques the effects of austerity politics and calls for dignity, choice, and income to be re-instated (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012; Lansley and Mack, 2015; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Middleton et al., 2018), suggesting that the relationship between redistributing food surpluses to the food insecure is morally questionable (Caplan, 2017, 2020; Caraher and Furey, 2017). The notion of feeding poor people waste food further sharpens arguments against the neo-liberalization of welfare reform whereby corporate providers offload residual products onto individuals lacking the authentic choice to participate in the market of conventional consumption (Riches, 2016; Caraher and Furey, 2017; Fisher, 2020).

The literature notes that whilst surplus food consumption appeared as a contested practice to improve food access for the economically insecure little was known about this in a UK context, despite a continued promotion of this practice in UK/English government policy (DEFRA, 2006, 2010; Midgley, 2014:1872). However, in 2016 FareShare UK redistributed 12,000 tons of surplus food to over 5,000 community groups (FareShare UK cited in Baron et al., 2018:138). Indeed, in the UK, rising food insecurity does indeed coexist with industrial-scale food wastage, creating the iniquitous social problem of hunger despite food excess (Caplan, 2017, 2020). WRAP (2020) estimates that in 2018, 9.5 million tonnes of food were wasted within the UK, 70% of which was intended for consumption. Additionally, also WRAP notes that between 2015 and 2018, surplus food redistribution in the UK almost doubled (WRAP, 2019).
And whilst the literature concedes that the collection of data concerning surplus food distribution is advancing, concomitant data on its receipt and usage is both haphazard and pertains predominantly to those accessing food charity (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Loopstra et al., 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2016; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017; Healy, 2019), which, as has been discussed, conceals the scale of food insecurity in its expanded conception as also involving alimentary exclusion and a broader swathe of community food projects. Indeed, as Baron et al. concede, ‘studies of service provision to poor consumers are needed’ (2018:135). Moreover, as stated by Midgley ‘the interaction and tension between different framings of surplus food with regard to the waste stream suggest that a clearer distinction by policymakers and practitioners is needed if surplus food is to be more fully utilized as a social and community resource’ (2014: 1889).

This lack of evidence about non-food bank or non-emergency food aid recipients ensures that the practices of ‘food insecure-consumers’ (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015; Baron et al., 2018), as well as those groups not comfortably described within existing typologies, such as social eating initiatives, remain under-investigated. This gap is further identified by Blake, who asserts that ‘there remains a lacuna in the research considering non-emergency food support for low-income communities’ (2019b:3). And that the dominance of food insecurity tropes as they pertain to surplus food use has ‘eclipsed the importance and impacts of organisations that offer food-using service either alongside or instead of a food parcel’ (2019b:3).

The multiplication in surplus distribution networks and mechanisms and their increasing bureaucratization and professionalization occur within a context in which the supply of commercially donated goods remains haphazard and unpredictable, a circuit which has been referred to as being ‘beholden to turbulence within its donors’ logistics operations’ (Alexander and Smaje, 2008: 1295). An analysis of the third-sector model of surplus food distribution highlighted contesting agendas between retailers, store managers and community groups whereby the acquisition of good quality foods, the timings of donation and receipt and other operational issues affected the range and quality of surplus items received (Alexander and Smaje, 2008; Midgely, 2014; Baron et al., 2018).

This tension between corporate-donated foods and the foodstuffs actually required by charities further intersects with the rhetoric of eligibility and deservedness whereby community groups and individuals
seeking charity are expected to be grateful for free food aid donations. Again, the critique follows that lacking agency to protest through consumption choices food insecure individuals are doubly burdened by being the depositories for sub-standard and unwanted foodstuffs, being excluded from channels of consumer-protest whilst simultaneously being viewed as ungrateful if they complain (Van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol, 2014; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Williams et al., 2016; Middleton et al., 2018). Furthermore, the expectations of charities such as FareShare UK to distribute ‘fresh, healthy, and edible’ foodstuffs which promote choice and dignity for recipients, conflicts with the demands of some community food groups who require food that is ‘easy to prepare, both for the charities who cook the food and for the people fed by them’ (Baron et al., 2018:141).

Within the context of increasing environmental concerns about food wastage occurring parallel to austerity policies, it might appear that surplus food redistribution and use by community food groups provides a mutually beneficial adjunct to these social malaises by linking two ‘needs’ together (Lalor, 2014; Caplan, 2017, 2020). As Baron et al. reflect, ‘the problem of food waste is magnified in periods of austerity [... ](and) more effective redirection of edible food waste to those citizens suffering from hunger would represent one such response’ (2018: 135-136). And whilst, it is corporate food donors who benefit from working with charitable food redistributors such as FareShare UK, for as Baron et al. note, companies ‘not only garner an impressive public relations story to share with their stakeholders, but by having their business examined [...] they essentially gain insights into supply chain process improvement (2018:141).

This upstream benefit does not, then, determine that only corporate food donors benefit; as Blake reflects, it does not necessarily follow that surplus food should be solely categorized as corporate-waste food (Blake, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Indeed, the valuing of surplus food by community food groups must also be considered. As Fisher notes, corporate surplus quality has ‘undeniably improved in recent years. The amount of produce has increased dramatically. More food banks have nutrition policies and staff to evaluate the quality of the product they distribute’ (2020: Point 8., para 1)

These varied admissions position the distribution of surpluses within a contested foodscape, which oscillates between the commercial, logistical and legal demands of the market, and the ‘softer’ social requirements of charitable user groups. The latter often being underfunded, staffed by volunteers and coping with increasing demands for regular amounts and a variety of good quality food to service food
parcel and meal provision for their users (Midgley, 2014; Spring et al., 2019). This turbulence is often compounded for local food projects who have to ‘reinvent’ themselves year in, year-out, to take advantage of funding initiatives’ (Dowler and Caraher, 2003: 10) which makes the embedding of systematic challenges to the structures of neoliberal austerity all the more problematic.

Therefore, a nuanced interpretation of both materiality and value of food surpluses are required, not least due to surplus’s material perishability and evident material affectivity, which happens regardless of whether we value it or not, but also due to the ways in which it gets enfolded into community food practices. Thus, the idea that surplus is merely waste or ‘leftover food for left behind people’ (Riches and Gerlings, 2019) is being complicated by its appropriation and use, not only by those who are food insecure but also by those who are suffering from loneliness, or who want to consume rather than waste edible foodstuffs, for example.

Another factor that complicates an understanding of the current context is the effects of both food insecurity and the receipt of food aid upon mealtime participation and reciprocity. Recent research suggests that people with low incomes have limited capacity to engage in social eating activities and are thus excluded from an important aspect of social life (Dunbar, 2017b; Healy, 2019). Despite social food practices such as ‘eating out’ and eating together being regarded as essential in a modern and individualized consumer society (Dunbar, 2017b), according to Healy (2019), previous studies have largely omitted to consider the social aspects of food insecurity (see also Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015).

Scrutinizing the long-term political consequences of surplus food redirection to the poor is of vital importance, and recent research into surplus food redistribution services has highlighted the need for further work which can articulate the experiences of citizens that may be ‘below the level of consumption adequacy’ but who are nonetheless ‘beneficiaries and co-creators of value’ (Baron et al., 2018:137). But as yet, there is limited empirical work that places the individual consumption of surplus food back into the social context of commensality or which addresses how participants forge new experiences of social value through the group consumption of surplus food, for example. Those consuming what may be conceived of as low choice, second best, surplus consumption, are often framed - as with food insecurity - according to a ‘deficit’ approach (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003; Keller et al., 2015).
Chapter 2. Literature review

Just as the primary agent of neoliberal society is presented as the individuated, choosing consumer, so too, foodstuffs within the neoliberal economy are positioned as resources whose purpose is to enable the generation and maximization of extracted profit. This then allows for its appropriation for consumption by groups that are constructed as ‘other’ because of their limited capacity to purchase food in the marketplace (Midgley, 2014). Surplus foods are primarily conceptualised as a market-framed resource that becomes available once its use for profit-production is completed, as being both of the market and having uses, meanings and materialities beyond the market (Midgley, 2014; Gollnhofer, 2017; Blake, 2019a). The claim that surplus food has neither a fixed materiality nor an immutable designation not only renders food as an object-product within marketized tropes but also sets in motion and fixes into place, ‘alternative generations of distinct realities’ (Mol, 1999). Within this conception, the nexuses of redistribution of surpluses through charitable networks and the practices of surplus food usage by community food initiatives also become central aspects through which surplus is described, used and brought into being.

The differing framings of surplus food within the context of community food initiatives centre around its material relocation into non-commercial foodscape, ‘where practices of meaning-making around edible material configure it as a carrier of social good’ (Blake, 2019a:4). This approach supports an understanding of the value of social eating initiatives wherein surplus foodstuffs are utilized within a range of socially valued, rather than commercially valued, practices. Indeed, it is not merely the value of surplus that can be reappraised, but surplus is also inculcated into a community-oriented foodscape which becomes fabricated through distinctive yet interrelating nexuses of activities, places, things, techniques, institutions, and orientations which then order and sustain practices of surplus usage (Schatzki, 2003; Nicolini, 2012).

Thus, considering the surplus food beyond its conventional designation as waste food or as substandard food aid also involves considering the contexts through which it is known, which directs us to consider, much like convenience food usage, how it may be being afforded new uses within new practices. In this way, surplus may be envisioned as a material flow within food aid tropes, as a socially elaborating resource within community food initiatives, or as something other, depending on the specific context.
Through escaping a homogenizing critique of the conjoining of food waste and food aid (Caplan, 2017, 2020; Caraher and Furey, 2017), surplus can be understood as actively affording new practices, which include those pertaining to critiques of charitable food aid, but which are not fully captured by them. This position not only prompts curiosity about how exactly surpluses emerge within differing settings, it also has methodological implications by sensitizing empirical enquiry to uncovering participant-affordances, beyond nutritional sustenance and physical consumption.

Moreover, on a pragmatic note, surplus distribution is second on the UK governments' food waste hierarchy which means that the redistribution of food surpluses will remain a mechanism for reducing food wastage (DEFRA, 2021). As Cloke, May and Williams reflect:

‘(p)ut simply, whilst food banks are certainly not the solution to the current mean times, where, for example, might the hundreds of thousands of people in the UK currently reliant on food aid turn for food in the meantime whilst longer-term solutions to the problems of food poverty are sought?’ (2017: 707).

If we admit, as per this reflection, that ‘in the meantime’ people need to be fed, we can also countenance that surplus foodstuffs need to be consumed somewhere and by some people. Just as conceptualisations of food insecurity can be extended to encompass alimentary inclusion and exclusion, so, too, the conceptual designation of surplus as waste food can be expanded to consider its use-value as a commensal resource.

2.3 Surplus food, ‘spaces of encounter’ and ‘food ladders’

According to Dowler and Caraher, ‘local food projects’ are challenging to characterize consistently. The term indicates initiatives which have in common:

‘food (its production, preparation or consumption), local involvement (management, delivery, paid/unpaid workers) and state support (funding, space, professional input, transport,
It is claimed that, within the context of austerity in the UK, these food projects, which have multiplied to counter the effects of food insecurity, have been branded as forms of ‘community food’ whilst authentic spaces of community commensality have been subject to deepening cuts (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Caraher and Furey, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

This re-labelling effectively gives the appearance of a ‘quick fix’ to immediate and proximal food insecurity (Dowler and Caraher, 2003: 2) whilst failing to address the deeper and more abstracted issues of the austerity-driven context. Whilst the declared aim of many local food projects is to tackle food poverty, enable skills acquisition or improve individual food access, Dowler and Caraher (2003) claim that these initiatives are not tackling food insecurity but rather responding to its effects. Much as the free food aid disbursed by food banks is problematized, so, too, local food projects that utilize surplus foodstuffs, such as social eating initiatives, are similarly described. They are described as colluding in ‘the rhetoric of dignity and self-help’ which are used to ‘cover up the lack of fundamental change and to locate both the ‘problem’ and the ‘solutions’ as belonging to those labelled – and living – as ‘poor’’ (Dowler and Caraher, 2003:2).

Moreover, a complexifying factor is the rising use of surplus foods by local or community food projects. The question arises as to whether the proliferation of surplus foods to create community mealtimes is, in fact, another ‘cover up’; ameliorating the worst excesses of austerity, or whether surplus can also be viewed as a very modern material addition to ongoing as well as emergent forms of community commensality.

At this stage within the literature positioning and review there is a movement from a focus on surplus food aid provisioning pertaining to food banks that disburse free food to more specific interest in its use by community food projects, such as social eating initiatives. No-cost and low-cost initiatives which utilize surplus foodstuffs might indeed be encompassed by the socio-economic, structural critiques examined within the literature review thus far (because they share some of the same features of conventional food aid initiatives).
However, they can also be viewed as escaping these conceptualisations. For, as Luca et al. surmise: ‘shared food practices and eating together contribute to social capital and are important dimensions of food well-being that are significantly restricted by food (2021: Abstract, para. 2). Free food, affordable food, cheap meals, low-cost shopping at social supermarkets - these are all forms of community food provisioning which sit at and traverse the boundaries of the ontological concept of food aid. That they are fundamentally positioned as using ‘waste food’ is problematized, as is the notion that they uniformly and unidirectionally create and perpetuate the subjectivities and dynamics of recipience and passivity.

Blake’s concept of ‘food ladders’ (2019a) is useful here, as it shows that food resources are not static but can be used selectively, during different phases of social life, for differing reasons. A food ladders approach sees food utilized at differing stages of both crisis and cohesion. It locates agency both within food as a material resource, as a performative and agential resource. This sets in motion specific types of subjectivity and practices and also operates as a symbolic resource that can be utilized to build social resilience and capacity both within individuals and groups.

This approach seeks to mobilize ‘the more than nutrient, calorie and commercial aspects of food, such as its capacity to bring people together to foster shared understanding and collaboration’ (Blake, 2019b: 2). Moreover, surplus foods, and food in general, marshalled within community spaces can create ‘safe and inclusive spaces for experimentation and interaction with food’ (Blake, 2019b:2). Moreover, as Luca et al. also consider that:

‘social eating initiatives and their focus on group eating, or commensality, food sharing and mealtime inclusion, participation and contribution can be viewed as expressions of a food well-being-oriented approach, which seeks to prioritize food as a means of developing and sustaining both physical and social capital’ (Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021: Discussion and conclusion, para.3).

The concept of food ladders also enmeshes and buttresses Johnson’s observation that eating in public spaces can engender new forms of meal consumption; calling into being new forms of subjectivity and agency that escape the tropes of the individuated, responsibilized, politicized, neo-liberal consumer by emphasizing the value of informal mealtime participation (Johnson, 2019). Blake also asserts that
developing ‘place-specific levels of support [...] enable(s) the recognition and enhancement of locally-based assets to create transformations in communities’ (Blake, 2019b:2).

As with the conceptualisation of convenience foods proffered by Meah and Jackson (2017), this surplus food resource is conceived of as being interpolated within the temporal and spatial ordering of social life in ways that a narrower focus on behaviour or structure misses. This view of how materiality, space, place, time, and the shifting between these registers show how agency and subjectivity and social practices are enmeshed with and are brought into being through complicated arrangements that are not fixed but mobile and contingent.

As Cattell et al. note, when considering locally based, publicly accessible spaces:

‘for most people [...] public spaces that brought people together and where friendships and support networks were made and maintained were key to a general sense of well-being. Indeed, informants tended to describe public open spaces in terms of their interaction with other people. Both fleeting and more meaningful encounters in public spaces were beneficial, they could provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people’s sense of community, and alleviate tensions at home or in a neighbourhood’ (2008:552).

The capacity of social eating initiatives to create ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) where participants are ‘mingling, observing, and lingering’ can be conceived of as:

‘sensitive resource(s) for both individuals and communities [...] Social interaction in spaces can provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people’s sense of community, opportunities for sustaining bonding ties or making bridges and can influence tolerance and raise people’s spirits. They also possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time and can contribute to meeting diverse needs’ (Cattell et al., 2008:544).

These conceptualisations see surplus foods used not as simplistic instrumental interventions to bring about behaviour-change or to manage-away crisis, for example, but as part of complex social assemblages
of designation, usage and appropriation. These are held within broader material, temporal and spatially influenced social practices. Whilst food bank users’ experiences of food precarity are conceived of as homogenous, repeating, temporary need-meeting, food ladders and the conceptualisations of ‘mingling, observing and lingering’ during ‘moments of commensality’ provide for a more nuanced, complex, shifting conception of what the value of social eating initiatives may be to participants. ‘Food ladder’ practices are not solely driven by austerity-shaped structural impositions but through multiple, modified, mutable food practices, which can be empirically evidenced in ways that are important to those communities.

Moreover, as Buser and Roe state: ‘to focus only on the inevitable and infinitesimal heterogeneity, embeddedness and hybridity of alternative re-localised food movements [is to] conceptually marginalize their activities because of their embeddedness and variety in place’ (2013:2). They claim that the central role of local food initiatives to those who rely on them cannot be underplayed, emphasising how criticism of these initiatives stems from how studies have tended to position these local food projects in opposition to the major corporate-led food provisioning system where they are always-already rendered relatively ineffectual.

This is what Marsden and Franklin term ‘the local trap’ (2013:637). They instead make the argument that alternative local food initiatives, rather than be dismissed as irrelevant, any interpretation of them should position them in opposition to conventional food production systems. They should be seen as examples of society in transition, transition from ethical consumption towards ‘ecological citizenship’ (Dobson, 2003) wherein ‘the local dimension offers research on low budget practices possibilities to chart moments of agency’ (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015:169). For, as Ferguson notes, ‘some emergent political initiatives that appear at first blush to be worryingly neoliberal may, on closer inspection, amount to something a good deal more hopeful’ (2011: 67).

This approach forms a vital facet of the response to food insecurity because it articulates the tension between acknowledging the seriousness and evident need for food security in its broadest sense within communities whilst admitting that there is much occurring within this sector which can be understood as valuable, and even as potentially transformative. Fundamentally, the focus is on assets rather than deficits, and Blake stresses the foregrounding of community voices in projects that ‘meet community needs as communities themselves identify them’ (2019a), and which seek to learn from the experiences
shared in these spaces to consider ‘behaviour in context’ (Luca, Hibbert and McDonald, 2019). Surplus within this context acts as a path back into participating in a shared social life. For example, in its requirements to be received, sorted, stored, cooked and served, it becomes a tool of engagement, of agency, of alimentary education (Pettinger and Whitelaw, 2012; Pettinger et al., 2017; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021), and a symbol of plenty and of commensal reciprocity.

As with the conceptualisation of food banking ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017), as spaces where solidarity, care and community are being fostered despite the ‘mean times’ of austerity so, too, social eating initiatives may be understood as what Marovelli terms ‘spaces of encounter’ (2019). Herein, the consumption of surplus meals creates the benefits of commensality. The repositioning of community food projects as spaces of encounter sees them valued as places and spaces where a range of foodway practices are being enacted with surplus food, expanding and strengthening their community food service-offers. They are conceived as creating places of welcome and respite (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017), materializing ‘quiet’ protests concerning food wastage (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013; Gollnhofer, 2017) or sites of contemporary commensality (Dunbar, 2017b; Laakso, 2017).

As the networks of collection and redistribution have expanded, so too has the choice, volume and quality of surplus foods, with community organisations being able to offer access to branded and high-value foodstuffs that food-insecure consumers would not ordinarily have access to, which allow them to reduce their food-budget and to redeploy these funds for alternative and additional service-provision (Midgley, 2014; Baron et al., 2018; Blake, 2019b, 2019c, 2020). Indeed, it is observed that the haphazard, problematic character of surplus foods (Alexander and Smaje, 2008) has changed with contemporary evidence suggesting that there is little material difference in quality between food as surplus and that which remains within the market (Midgley, 2014).

Surplus foodstuffs here may be envisaged as a resource that is being incorporated into a number of different and coexistent ‘foodways’ (Coveney, 2013) to engender social connection, contact and conviviality- all facets of social life which are affected by the current context. Indeed, Gollnhofer claims that:
‘value does not exist apart from our cultural and economic sphere. It is created through a combination of material resources, work and energy. Discarding safe food items implies ignoring or deprecating any other value that has been built into the object’ (Gollnhofer, 2017:633).

This increase in surplus availability moves the discourse beyond food waste or as ‘poor person’s food’ to encompass the performativity of surplus in constructing consumers as food resource stewards and towards practices that engender sociality and commensality such as social eating. As Marovelli observes:

‘these initiatives do not only respond to a variety of needs of vulnerable populations: their capacity to embrace social and cultural differences extends to offering a space for minorities and for people with learning, psychological and emotional difficulties’. (For) in the face of complex issues, these initiatives, if not granting a solution to conflicts, do act to ameliorate the negative aspects of contemporary life [...] They certainly stimulate moments of social dialogue around these issues, with cooking and eating together explicitly employed as strategies to create spaces of encounter, facilitating communal ways of thinking and acting’ (2019:11).

Taken in isolation, surplus may be conceived of as facilitating the provisioning of low-cost meals. But as Evans posits: ‘this is where movements can be so powerful and disruptive, not just telling new stories, but in creating ‘congregational spaces’ where these stories can be incubated and lived out’ (Evans, Welch and Swaffield, 2017:12). Surplus may be envisaged as materializing a broader range of social practices, which include, but are not limited to, sustenance; surplus manifests a capacity for people to congregate, to convene and to consider their circumstances and find commonalities. The capacity of local projects to add meals onto existing services, to engage more widely or to create spaces where people can hang out, is materialized through the use of surpluses, and the ‘mingling, observing, and lingering’ (Cattell et al., 2008) around informal mealtimes is framed here as an entry-point to deeper understandings of how social value is expressed in non-formal ways. As Marovelli states:

‘food sharing’s collective spaces and the affective qualities that they evoke are particularly vital in urban contexts at times of austerity, as these initiatives operate as a bridge connecting people, communities, projects and services. This interconnectedness can help to address complex societal
challenges such as food poverty and social isolation and it can also initiate a much-needed reflection on the causes of urban inequalities’ (Marovelli, 2019:11).

Thus, an opportunity arises to focus attention on the ‘multiple circuits of meaning of which (surplus) food becomes a part’ (Blake, 2019a) and, in particular, examine how surplus foodstuffs are used and understood by social eating initiative participants themselves. As stated by Gollnhofer, ‘engaging with the food surplus is understood as far more normal when consumers see other people like them doing it, and when it is positioned within a community’ (Gollnhofer, 2017:635). And as Blake asserts:

’a multi-scalar approach is needed that on the one hand redresses larger-scale policy that undermines resources and creates shocks in the first place. On the other hand greater support is needed at the local level that enhances the community-specific self-organisation capacity and resource needs’ (2019b:18).

Materially and discursively connecting food surpluses to group eating activities challenges the overly deterministic conceptualisations of who should consume surplus foodstuffs, it de-stigmatizes surplus by connecting it to an alternative, social realm of life that in turn may create discourses of relative empowerment absent in the current coupling of neo-liberalist welfare retrenchment, food wastage and food banking: ‘reconstructing the biographies of food objects allows consumers to see the inherent value in them’ (Gollnhofer, 2017:638). Using food to do ‘more than’ feed people has the ‘potential to engage individuals in personal-level and community-level change through reflection, empowerment and connectedness’ (Pettinger et al., 2019:2). Herein, the re-valuing of surplus foodstuffs may also be implicated in the re-valuing of those participating in its consumption.

Before the chapter develops, a note on the use of the term value is proffered to clarify why this term is being utilized, rather than, for example, a question about the motivation for attending or an investigation into what participants ‘like’ about these spaces and services. The term value is specific and may be interchanged with what is liked, needed, or wanted, or what has merit, usefulness, practicability or worth. The term value also pertains within practice theory-informed theorisations as those practices or parts of
practices which are habituated, which persist and endure and which form crucial animating aspects of practices (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

The use of the term value within the thesis is purposeful and signals the desire to capture a rich range of interpretations and ascriptions of what is valued within social eating initiative commensality, both experientially and materially, beyond any instrumental provisioning of food or revealing of individual preference. It is also purposeful in admitting that understanding motivation relies upon a rational, conscious conception of individual decision-making rather than the broader conception of what and how other social ‘things’ may be emerging to create value. The term value also traces back to the use of commensality as a conceptual lens. The existing literature makes a compelling case for the profound significance of eating together and its role in social cohesion and therefore, in the broader construction of everyday life.

These approaches, which consider not only behaviours and broader social contexts, but the role of material, temporal and spatial elements within social life, is of import here given our previous examination of surplus food and its affordances and appropriations. The way that, for example, temporal considerations or the rise in convenience foods shape the emergence of commensal practices in modern life buttresses the calls emerging within this literature positioning and review for more nuanced and complex readings of the constitution of social life. Emerging from this positioning of the existing literature is also a call to engage with the ways in which social eaters themselves reflect, make sense of and articulate their experiences (Smith and Harvey, 2021; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021). Attention to the participatory experiences of eating practices is posited as a significant pathway to both unveiling, and being sensitive to, the tensions that have been surfaced within a more-than-waste-food approach.

Supporting those who advance alternative responses to food insecurity and the inclusion of their knowledges and experiences can enable conceptual development through new empirical engagement. This more nuanced approach can create conditions that have ‘unintended consequences, ironies and contradictions’ and where social change may emerge through ‘productive disagreement’ (Dupuis and Goodman, 2005:361). As Johnson reflects, ‘such moments of resistance are reassuring and suggest the will for a different situation to the impoverishment of municipal hospitality that increasingly defines public space’ (2019: Hiding, para.2). Value is deeply enmeshed within eating together practices, as evidenced by
the everyday, mundane and habituated form of commensality, which in turn demonstrates that ingrained power relations are suffused so thoroughly within commensal practices that they often go unnoticed or unquestioned. Attention to the value placed by participants onto their commensal practices then, offers us a lens with which to not only articulate the role and significance of eating together practices in the current UK milieu, but also a means of interrogating the role of commensality in the production, reproduction and transformation of the social realm.

In the previous sections then, the notion of a more complex and nuanced approach to considering food banking as a potential site of solidarity, care and perhaps of critical praxis was surfaced (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). The concept of the right to food was discarded as a lens to draw out the value of social eating initiatives due to its precondition of active citizenship and its ideological reliance on the structure to fix the structure. This conceptual sidestepping, following the previous sections reappraisals of the overly top-down-power portrait of the UK food aid-scape, is also employed when considering the use of surplus foodstuffs by community food initiatives. This disregarding and sidestepping is not a refutation or a critique *per se* of this perspectivisation within the literature, but a call to broaden and enrich the empirical and conceptual scholarship by holding the possibility that there is more happening within the community foodscape which thus requires investigation, both ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) and beyond the purview of the existing literature.

2.4 Social eating as a response to the UK context: A ‘social eating initiative’ mealtime vignette

With this broadened and more complex conception of the significance and value of social eating initiatives being foregrounded, a vignette of a social eating mealtime is proffered. The montage of images provided alongside the social eating vignette is constructed from fieldwork photographs and visually emphasises the vignette text. These describe a foodscape in situ, bringing attention to the different experiences of meal sharing and ‘social eating’. Moreover, encompassing the complex interplay of elements, both human and non-human and the heterodoxy of, for example, experiencing abundance through a very cheap meal that is made from food surpluses. As Johnson expresses in her ode to public eating spaces: ‘I Dream of Canteens’ (2019), these spaces are populated and shaped not only by their varying institutional settings and customers, but affixed by materialities such as chairs, plug sockets, food prices and toilets.
Therefore, in this section this vignette is offered as a means of describing and formatively articulating the findings of the literature positioning and review thus far, that social eating initiatives involve more than the passive consumption of ‘waste’ or ‘poor people’s food’, for example (Riches and Gerlings, 2019). Or that materialising regularised access to good quality meals may already be happening without recourse to an upstream ‘right’ to food (Smith and Harvey, 2021), that these places are enabling a variety of types of ‘encounter’ (Marovelli, 2019) and are dependent upon a variety of social ‘things’ and upon practices that go beyond the identification of a clear-cut consumption of a meal at a mealtime. This vignette seeks to ‘ask readers to relive the experience through the writer’s [...] eyes’ (Denzin, 2000: 905; Johnson, 2019), to convey a ‘vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life (Erickson, 1986:149), in order to enhance the ‘contextual richness’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 83) and to ‘bring life to research [and] bring research to life (Ellis, 1998:4).

The method of autoethnographic vignette-making (Denzin, 1997; Crawford, 1996; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Humphreys, 2005; Reed-Danahay, 2021) can be described as a means of representing the subject/object of study within a qualitative framework; noting impressions, senses and feelings as well as materialities; enabling the reader to see the ‘multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:733) to ‘illuminate the culture under study’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:40). This vignette was created during and after dinner at Growin’ Spaces in Sneinton, Nottingham in November 2017 from 5-7 pm. Written notes were made and annotated in situ.

‘The first thing I notice is the smell of food cooking; I can smell good food from right across the street. This is a church hall on a small side street in the east end of Nottingham city. There are no banners or signs, save for an a-board jamming the door open. However, the smell is enticing and the chink of light coming through the doorway is welcoming. It’s gloomy outside and the building looks like it hasn’t been refurbished in a while, but it’s clean and this contrasts with the scruffy street outside where rubbish and full-up bins crowd the pavement.

The thing I notice on entering the space is the sound of people talking and greeting one another; a low conversational hum punctuated by the occasional shout from the group of children who are
running into the building. We step inside and the noise levels rise with many people chattering, greeting one another with the scrapings of chairs being pulled out so people can sit together. Chairs are added, and seating rearranged to accommodate people. It’s warm and well-lit and the tables are set with tablecloths and vintage flower displays.

A queue at the serving hatch begins to form. There are two meat-based and one vegetarian meal on the menu, all made from supermarket surpluses. A buffet of additional items, condiments and refreshments laid out attractively on a large side table. It’s getting crowded near the hatch with people paying a lady sitting with a bucket for the money collection. The mood is anticipatory and people at the front of the queue jostle good naturedly at the hatch asking how the cook is, and what is on the menu for today. A shout rings out from the kitchen. It’s 5.07pm on a Thursday evening. “Dinner is served!” This then is a publicly accessible and open mealtime, but food isn’t on offer here all day, It is just open so we can eat dinner between the times of 5-7pm.

I choose the vegetarian option; all of the food is supplied by a charity which redistributes foods designated as surplus to requirements by the supermarkets. The meal is really cheap! It costs £2.50 and I get a plate loaded with rice, roasted vegetables, including a chunk of steamed cabbage, a red cabbage salad and some cheese. I am thrilled with the cabbage. You never get served just a wedge of the vegetable as if in recognition that this humble food needs no further adornment or processing. There is something almost unapologetic about the cabbage and that pleases me! I can also add to the meal from the side table in the hall. Here I find bread and butter, cheeses, cakes, fruit, yoghurts and juices. Tea, coffee and a variety of herbal tea bags are also on view as I queue to get my cutlery. This seems to me to be a pretty cheap meal with plenty of additional food available should my cabbage not suffice! It’s also evident that the meal has been freshly cooked; homemade if you will. There is a sense of abundance, of plenty to go around, of second helpings that feels both familiar as in domestic but also like a ‘going out’ meal occasion.

I walk over to a table which already has some people sitting around it; a mother and her twins, another lady whose daughter is running around with other children and an elderly lady who walks
with a frame. Her meal is brought out to her by a kitchen volunteer. Some aspects of the meal are served, and some aspects entail the customer making a contribution such as plate-scraping or plate-rinsing. Volunteers appear in the kitchen, washing up, and are also traversing back into the dining room to eat alongside customers.
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Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

Figure 3. Photographs taken during ethnographic fieldwork activities- showing dining hall, queues, volunteers, anniversary event and meal, itself.
To me, there is something very comforting about eating with people, it certainly reminds me of my own upbringing and current family life. This is what my Dad used to call ‘people places’- busy, unfussy; places you can move around in and stay in without getting shooed away or disciplined by officious staff. Places where table manners are not scrutinised. Informality. The atmosphere here is convivial and welcoming. It is also participatory, and it seems to me that a balance is struck with meals being served but people helping themselves to extras and being expected to scrape and rinse their own plates in the washing up station set up near the kitchen door. People seem to know what to do or are told by other diners. There is something very familiar and ordinary about social eating. But at the same time, I am eating with people I don’t know. This meal seems both domestic and celebratory. Not having to do the washing-up or the meal preparation makes social eating initiatives seem reminiscent of a ready-meal or a fast-food joint. But it comes without the sense of either low-quality junk or the guilty feelings associated with ‘ordering-in’ (or the higher-cost!).

I am aware that people here may be eating because of food insecurity and the low-cost of the meal. But I also think it’s because of this ‘feeling’ of participation and being welcomed. But there may be myriad other reasons. They may even be attending for purposes that are contrary to the reasons this space was set up. I think the main feelings I’m experiencing are those of feeling welcome and of being looked after and of being, however briefly, connected to something bigger than myself.

Accordingly, in the following section I take up the conceptual lens of commensality to develop a more precise understanding of the eating together practices that social eating initiatives appear to valorise. For, if the current context creates and intensifies the conditions of food insecurity, food wastage, loneliness, and mealtime destructuration, then ‘commensality can be perceived of as a practice that fulfils the role of strengthening cohesion among the members of a group [...] in symbolising a sense of belonging and respect for shared norms’ (Giacoman, 2016:460). This deep-set engine of social production may be understood as a nexus through which seemingly unreachable or intangible social malaises of austerity-gastro-anomie can be tangibly resisted by the pragmatic feeding of people. Moreover, as a site where these complex issues of social fragmentation and reproduction are constructed. Not because of upstream determinants, but in spite of them. In this final section of the literature positioning and review, the lens
of commensality is proffered as a way of understanding the potential significance and value of social eating initiatives.

Therefore, in the following section, I appraise everyday, exceptional and community commensality and examine its significance and constitution within social life. Social eating or community commensality which involves the use of surplus may be understood as displaying elements of both mundane and celebratory eating practices, and this consideration links back to previous chapter sections by reflecting on why this might be significant. This then furthers the proposition surfaced in the section that considered the place of convenience foods in fabricating contemporary commensality, that commensality be considered not solely as an individual behaviour nor as a demonstration of a totalising social structure, but as a form of social practice. Then after these sections on commensality, I conclude the chapter by summarising the findings of the literature positioning and review and consider how a commensal and ‘more than food’ approach is emerging, which in turn shapes the research questions that direct the thesis.

### 2.5 Potent, persistent and pervasive: The inevitability of commensality

‘Interpersonal sharing of food has been an omnipresent feature of human civilisation from hunter-gatherer societies to the present, both as a mechanism through which sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social relations’ (Davies et al. 2017:136).

Commensality, the act of ‘eating together at the same table’ (Fischler, 2011:529), is a deeply significant social ritual that creates benefits beyond the biological need for sustenance and which is well established amongst food studies scholarship. As Chee-Beng reflects in ‘social science rhetoric, this means that commensality is not just a biological act of consuming food; it is also a communicative act which has the significance of social relations’ (2015:13). Commensality is about the creation and reinforcement of social relations (Bourdieu, 1987 in Murdock, 2010) and envisaged as a symbol and a confirmation of mutual social obligations (Giacoman, 2016).

Commensality is perhaps one of the most ubiquitous manifestations of human sociality (Mars, 1997; Sobal, 2000; Fischler, 2011), regarded as central to all societies, irrespective of time, place and culture,
and imagined as a ‘total social fact’ (Mauss [1923] cited in Valeri, 2013) which reflects something essential about social values and value of certain forms of social organisation. According to Kaplan et al., ‘the patterning and complexity of food sharing among humans is truly unique’ (2005: 1). Indeed, eating together in groups is characterised as ‘one of the most fundamental, socialised, imaginative and collectively invested biological functions’ (Masson, Bubendorff and Fraisse, 2018:109) with food sharing manifesting ‘an aggregative potential that strengthens the social bonds and common identity of people sharing a meal’ (Masson, Bubendorff and Fraisse, 2018:109).

This potent ‘engine’ of the social wherein the macro can be seen within the micro, and vice-versa, positions commensality as a tridimensional feature of the social realm and as being both shaped by, and as affecting the sociological, historical, and physio-psychological construction of the social realm (Valeri, 2013: 266). The purpose of commensality, then, is the manifesting of material connections with others and the nourishing of the symbolic and social body (Masson, Bubendorff and Fraisse, 2018), a deep-set social phenomenon that may take on particular portent in times of austerity, food insecurity and destructuration. The lens of commensality is revealed through an attention to the varying practices that manifest it, as being both socially and contextually mobile, shifting and situated at the same time as being enduring, persistent and unexceptional (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015). However, the patterning and complexity of contemporary food sharing, especially that occurring beyond the home and in urban, industrialised settings, has received limited attention to date (Davies et al., 2017).

In this section of the literature positioning and review, the differing types of commensality are discussed in order to substantiate a claim that social eating initiatives may be novel expressions of commensality, a hybridised mix of everyday, exceptional and community commensality. Understanding the value of social eating commensality and its conceptual mobility may strengthen the claim that thinking about the value of social eating initiatives may require thinking beyond the structural versus behavioural dichotomy common within socio-economic critiques of austerity in the UK and responsibilization tropes, for example, towards an understanding of social eating as a form of practice that is emerging within a dynamic community and group oriented ‘mid space’. The research questions are clarified at the end of this chapter by drawing together the literature positioning and review through what will be termed a ‘more than food’
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approach. This approach valorises commensality as a lens through which the value, and particularly the value that participants ascribe to social eating initiatives, can be understood. For, it is claimed that:

‘communal eating, whether in feasts or everyday meals with family or friends, is a human universal [...] (E)ating with others provides both social and individual benefits [...] (T)hose who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support [...] (A)nalysis suggests that the causal direction runs from eating together to bondedness rather than the other way around’ (Dunbar, 2017a:1).

Without seeking to confirm or dispute Dunbar’s causal assertion, it is evident that commensality is hugely significant to personal and social wellbeing. This evidence sustains the emerging argumentation within the literature positioning and review that utilising the lens of commensality to examine the significance and value of social eating initiatives is appropriate. This conceptual lens captures not only an expanded conception of the significance of eating together, but also its role in the very fabrication of social order. It also emphasises the implications of being excluded from meal-sharing. This directs us to consider why social eating initiatives that appear to create accessible, affordable, healthy and prosocial moments of commensality may be valuable beyond the current available conceptual categorisation of being places where (waste) food aid is disbursed to poor people.

The lens of commensality supports the appropriateness of the ‘more than food’ approach by showing how significant the practices of eating together are by directing the researcher to look closely at the role of eating together practices beyond those pertaining to physical nutrition. A ‘more than food’ approach broadens the scope of what can be empirically and conceptually considered as constructing commensality through encompassing the spaces, places, timings, and resources that also come ‘into play’ within expressions of commensality, as per the vignette. Fundamentally, the lens of commensality reveals that contributing to social life is certainly about more than the consumption of commercially purchased alimentary goods and services.

Whether examining ceremonial and ritualistic feasts (Levi-Strauss, 1963; Douglas, 1972, 2002; Appadurai, 1981; Dietler and Hayden, 2010), eating ‘out’ (Warde, Paddock and Whillans, 2017; Diaz-Mendez and van
den Broek, 2017; Bardone and Kannike, 2018) or the mundane happenings of the everyday mealtime (Murcott, 1982a; Grieschaber, 1997; Valentine, 1999; Marshall, 2006; Brannen, O’Connell and Mooney, 2013; Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Jarosz, 2017; Yates and Warde, 2017) commensality is positioned as an essential facet of social life. Studying everyday commensality illuminates the seemingly banal mechanisms and practices that undergird and give substance to social life and its rules, regulations and orderings (Giacoman, 2016). Within everyday commensality, the exclusive act of individualised, physical eating for nourishment becomes transformed into an inclusive and socially fabricating force through the practices of eating together (Fischler, 2011). Indeed, it is through attention to the production of everyday commensal practices that the ‘immeasurable sociological significance of the meal’ is found (Simmel, [1910]:130 in Featherstone, 1997).

As well as a general descriptor, the term commensality can be distinguished in several ways. It can be described as being both everyday or as exceptional and can be observed to occur within commensal units, such as families, and in commensal circles, such as communities (Van Esterik in Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015). These commensal practices then shape and demarcate our social worlds (Sobal, 2000). Everyday commensality in popular discourse as well as social research (Fischler, 1980, 2011) is viewed as a symbol of and vehicle for family togetherness, as a means by which families are reproduced as such (Brannen, O’Connell and Mooney, 2013; Julier, 2013). Indeed, family meals have been the focus of a significant amount of sociological and anthropological research (Murcott, 1982a,1982b, 1983; Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1994; Warde and Hetherington, 1994; Grieshaber, 1997; Valentine, 1999; Coveney, 2013; Julier, 2013).

It is suggested that family meals materially and symbolically construct home and family, albeit in both constructive and problematic ways (DeVault, 1994; Valentine, 1999; Julier, 2013; Parsons, 2016). The family mealtime can be conceived of as a minutely distinct yet more broadly representative site of performance where broader notions of gendered identity, class and social status are produced, negotiated and reiterated (Murcott, 1982a,b, 1983). As Chee-Beng notes ‘since eating together is a social act that has communicative significance, it involves rules of hierarchy and solidarity, boundary making as well as symbolic expression. All of these have implications for the organisation of society’ (2015:13).
Furthermore, mealtimes are the sites where the intersectionalities of these social distinctions are applied and displayed (Bourdieu, 1987 in Murdock, 2010; Parsons, 2016), and competencies around nutrition or cooking skill (Marshall, 2006; Meah and Watson, 2011; Julier, 2013) and performances of care are enacted and expressed (Murcott, 1982a; DeVault, 1994; Grieshaber, 1997; Valentine, 1999; Meah and Jackson, 2017). Shared mealtimes form practices that establish and maintain family and culture, and this reality is constructed habitually (Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1994; Warde and Hetherington, 1994; Grieshaber, 1997; Valentine, 1999; Julier, 2013).

However, much of our commensal practices are unspectacular and inconspicuous, undertaken within the domestic sphere and regulated by a series of unspoken rules regarding eating, which are nonetheless commonly shared and accomplished (Bourdieu, 1987 in Murdock, 2010; Giddens, 1991). An interpretation of habitual and everyday behaviours is that they form part of assembled arrangements which are constituted not just through individual action but also through spatial, temporal and material resources. Here, practices emerge not just from individuals but from a complex social milieu that shapes commensality in ways that are not well-revealed by a sole focus on behaviour. Indeed, the everyday performance of commensality does not appear to depend on individuals having to consciously reproduce behaviours each time a mealtime occurs (Giddens, 1991).

Instead, mealtime practices form a social repertoire composed of an array of social ‘things’. Some facets of these social compositions endure over such time and across such areas of social life that they become invisibilised (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). Indeed, according to Warde (2016), the function of commensality to social life its capacities in the bonding and sorting or bordering of social groups and the broader structuring or organising of society, depend upon congealed and nested practices within practices that can accommodate changes to certain elements of the composition without disturbing the functional continuity of the commensal whole. Indeed, Warde notes that ‘[e]ating is not a simple integrative practice but a compound of component practices’ (2016:10).

However, as stated by Warde (2016), this habituation or embeddedness is not static; it shifts and transforms to reflect the broader mores of social life whilst retaining its deep-set function of social ordering, bordering and binding, or the structuring, demarcation, and cohesion of social groupings. And as has already been emphasised within this chapter, anxieties about the destructuration of the shared,
family mealt ime, or the assurance of its continuity and persistence, albeit in different formations, can be
evidenced as acknowledgements of the power of commensality (Lund and Gronow, 2014; Dunbar, 2017b).
Whether it can be achieved or not (Brannen, O’Connell and Mooney, 2013; Julier, 2013) everyday
commensality is perceived as being personally valuable, socially significant and essential for the
integration of society. It could be argued that eating together is ‘extraordinary in its ordinariness,
exceptional in the extent to which we treat it as mundane, and outstanding as a focus of the study of

Conceptually, moving beyond its evident and enduring bonding function, everyday commensality can also
be understood as a practice or series of practices, which in turn, construct a broader conception of what
constitutes social life. This broader conception is useful because it buttresses the claims emerging within
literature positioning and review that a more complex, nuanced approach is necessary to detect and
explain the significance and value of social eating initiatives. It is within this expanded purview of surplus
food consumption and the role commensality within social eating initiatives, that these nuances can be
encountered. For example, cognisance of how surplus food is being deployed to achieve ‘more than food’
affects within community food initiatives in the UK shows that material, non-human actors are also
implicated in the articulation of alternative readings of so-called waste food (Midgley, 2014; Blake, 2019b,
2019c, 2020).

The lens of commensal practices directs us to a more complex understanding of the value of social eating
initiatives amidst this challenging UK foodscape and may enables us to account for how some facets of
that foodscape change and transform commensality. If commensality is important in fabricating the social
order and this fabrication is full of both enduring and novel, social things it follows that social eating
initiative commensality is, too.

So, too everyday commensality occurring in local, accessible places and spaces where a variety of eaters
and participants congregate in informal ways can prompt an array of practices that engender wellbeing
and social cohesion beyond kinship ties. As Cattell et al. reflect:

‘research has shown that people derive a sense of wellbeing from diverse sources. Some
appreciate a chance for reflection in public spaces, others derive satisfaction from belonging, from
perceptions of safety and attachment to place. Consolidation of supportive, bonding ties through interaction in public spaces is important, but so too is the opportunity to make loose, and bridging ties, while some gain benefit simply from the impromptu nods and smiles of other users. Yet others seek out places—including crowded places—where, at ease with their surroundings, they feel free to be themselves’ (2008:557).

I turn now to the phenomenon of exceptional commensality as facets of this scholarship also allow us to think through why social eating initiatives may be of value to participants within the current context. Against this backdrop of the perceived primacy of the family mealtime this more recent scholarship complicates the clear distinction between everyday and exceptional commensality. This more complex approach views the challenges to the social order posed by the destructuration of the shared family meal and the concomitant rise in gastro-anomie and lone-eating as intersecting in ways that require new and sensitive articulation.

Exceptional commensality has been further complexified in recent years in the UK through the modifying aspects of the rise in use of convenience foods, austerity policies and food insecurity, food wastage tropes and broader anxieties about the destructuration of the family meal. Social eating initiatives are then situated within a dynamic and contextually complex milieu wherein a conceptualisation of commensality may be usefully deployed to understand the significance and value of social eating initiatives (Blake, 2019b,2019c; Marovelli, 2019; Smith and Harvey, 2021). This conceptual lens would see social eating initiatives, not as produced because of the current context, but as a deep-set and inevitable expression of human social practice that shapes itself again and again, within the given social context, as a primary mechanism that foments and reinforces the fundament of social bonding, connection and conviviality (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015; Giacoman, 2016).

As Diaz-Mendez and van den Broek reflect: ‘food consumption has transformed as a result of the modernisation of societies’ (2017:1) noting that there has been a shift in the concept of eating ‘out’. Herein, the traditional concept of exceptional commensality as describing both a celebratory, familial, social mealtime event and the commercialised ‘eating out’ commensality practiced at restaurants and cafes is changing. As Meah and Jackson (2017) acknowledge in the section on convenience foods, the clear distinction between homemade and ready-made meals, for example, which are also conceived of as
carriers of morality and culinary care, cannot always be easily made. As DeVault (1994) notes, for example, there has been a historical lack of terminology to precisely articulate the labour women undertake, which cannot be adequately described as either paid work or true leisure. This linguistic and conceptual deficit was representative of the hitherto invisibilized, gendered and classed workload of domestic meal provisioning by women.

This obfuscation continues to be refracted throughout contemporary responsibilization tropes (Rose, 1996; Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Morris, 2020) wherein the oftentimes amplified and intensified labour of the food insecure, and that of particularly food insecure women in meal provisioning is concealed (Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019). Not only is the shopping for, storing, preparing and cooking of meals made more onerous when income is reduced or working hours are extended, but there is also the additional pressure to produce a variety of low-cost, and simultaneously healthy and delicious meals. As Bowen, Brenton and Elliott note ‘a lot of people feel they are coming up short in realizing this idealized version of the family meal’ (2019:20).

The unfairness of this intensification of expectation is emphasised by scholarship which locates the consumption of convenient and sometimes cheaper meals within a modern foodscape which is being shaped by a ‘culinary plurality’ as the breadth of eating practices continues to grow in diversity (Mäkelä, 2009). Indeed, contemporarily, many UK homes consume and make use of a mix of pre-prepared ingredients, ready-made meals and convenience foods, buying in fast foods, and engaging in more conventional ‘eating out’ visits to restaurants (Meah and Jackson, 2017). Thus, the conventional value and function of everyday commensality is being transformed by the rise of ‘eating out’ practices which populate both the commercial sphere of social life but which are also evidently also incurring into the domestic sphere, creating hybridised forms of commensality.

As Johnson describes, eating at public canteens can engender new forms of meal consumption that encompass both the need to dine cheaply and the pleasure of eating ‘out’:

‘Food is cheap. I can afford it and everyone else here can afford to buy it for themselves and their child without anxiety. There are no instances of that tightening around the throat when you do not have the money to buy food, but you are hungry and in a place that serves it. For those who
have more money the price is a joyful novelty; for those who have less, the prices are a blessed relief that allows eating to take place. The food is as cheap as fried chicken shops and like the meals served in fried chicken shops the food here has enough calorie density to sustain a child or an adult for a good while’ (2019: Space, para.2).

Eating take-out together may enable families to share a mealtime and to experience the pleasure of having others cook for them (Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019): ‘[S]o, although eating out is still highly esteemed, it is not reserved for special occasions’ (Paddock, Warde and Whillans, 2017:11). Furthermore, recent research tracks the shift towards people eating out at commercial premises more routinely and in less formal ways. Historically an ‘ordinary’ meal might describe a family mealtime with freshly cooked food eaten at home at a mealtime, but what is now constituted as an ordinary meal encompasses greater variation of structure and content and extends to describing meals eaten at commercial premises. As Paddock et al. note, ‘eating out’ has become normalised: ‘that is, eating out is increasingly incorporated into people’s daily lives as a mundane form of food provisioning’ (Paddock, Warde and Whillans, 2017:8).

This shift is significant for several reasons, namely that as per convenience foods, cheap, accessible opportunities to eat out may be viewed as ‘economical in the face of cooking the same dish at home’ and ‘given the pleasure derived from a practice which also offers a convenient solution to some day-to-day struggles in scheduling of competing practices, the replacement of meals prepared at home by eating out can be welcomed’ (Paddock, Warde and Whillans, 2017:8). Eating out may ‘oil the wheels of familial and friendship interaction, giving an extended period of co-presence, an unusually extensive context for conversation, probably a time spent focused on mutual communication than is usual when distracted as home’ (Paddock, Warde and Whillans, 2017: 11).

Moreover, eating food that has not been home-cooked, and in cheap and convenient forms is a more complex endeavour than the moralising narrative of responsibilization suggests. For as Paddock, Warde and Whillans claim:

‘permutations of special, impromptu, and regularised social meals fashion means to achieve commensality and conviviality. Crucially, the informalisation and normalisation of eating out do
not signify its waning importance, but instead signal the shifting purpose and meaning of meals out of the home for English households’ (2017: 12).

Whether eaten-out food is considered as cheap, convenient or pleasurable, for many if not most people a hot meal of some sort, shared with others is of value for its capacity to create a moment of comforting commensality. This may be particularly welcomed by those enduring the relentless drudgery of austerity sufferance. But as Meah and Jackson (2017) reveal the culinary strategies widely deployed in modern UK life such as the use of ready meals or convenience foods, occur not wholly due to gastro-anomie or poverty consumption, but in order to maintain the socially valued practice of commensality.

Moving towards the chapter conclusion now, the conceptual lens of commensality reveals it to be both shaped by social structures and as a structuring feature of social life. Commensality is potent, persistent, pervasive, and inculcated in the fabrication of social life in both everyday and exceptional ways. It is conceived of occurring not just as a set of eating-together behaviours, but also, with regard to social eating initiatives, as involving a range of material resources and discursive meanings. By its very nature, commensality also involves going beyond any individual to appraise the more-than-oneness of group eating, directing us to consider the group dynamic and the possibility of social cohesion and socialising. The lens of commensality positions social eating initiatives as connecting to our deeper, social need to eat together; not just a different form of food aid consumption but a set of practices which connect the challenges of the current UK social context with the deeper ahistorical function of commensality in social bonding and cohesion (Dunbar, 2017b).

2.6 Conclusion: Key findings from the literature review
In this final section the literature positioning and review chapter concludes by summarising the findings from the chapter sections and by proposing a commensal, practice-oriented, ‘more than food’ approach’, to underpin the developing thesis. A review of the literature has revealed that neither structural or behavioural approaches, alone, nor the concepts that accompany them are appropriate means of understanding what social eating initiatives are or why they have emerged in the current UK context. The reasons for this are summarised below. Instead, a ‘more than food’ approach which takes up the conceptual lens of commensality reveals that there is much more to eating well than instrumental,
calorific nutrition and that the social dimension of eating together is a key facet of social eating initiative mealtime practices.

This ‘more than food’ approach can also encompass the alternative and additional literatures reviewed and the concepts such as ‘food ladders’ (Blake, 2019b) and ‘spaces of encounter’ (Marovelli, 2019) that these approaches provide. Within the ‘more than food’ approach, eating-together practices and their constitution can also emphasise the role of surplus foods in constructing new forms of commensality and agency. The literature positioning and review then, provides a practice theories grounding to the thesis and a commensal or ‘more than food’ conceptual approach aims to produce an appropriately sensitive and robust framework with which to shape the empirical work and the data analysis of the thesis.

In the UK, rising food insecurity exists simultaneously with industrial-scale food wastage, creating the iniquitous social problem of hunger despite food excess (Caplan, 2017, 2020). Accompanied by welfare retrenchment (Garthwaite, Collins and Bambra, 2015; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Lansley and Mack, 2015; Blake, 2019b) there has been an unprecedented rise in economic food insecurity and the scaling-up of surplus food-provisioning services, conceived as ‘food aid’ (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015). These social malaises and the responses to them are subject to structural socio-economic critiques, which denounce the ways that surplus food aid has been positioned as a necessary and pragmatic solution to food insecurity (Caraher and Furey, 2017).

This ‘solution’ of surplus being redirected to the hungry is subject to critique which highlights the ‘uneasy dualism’ arising between conventionally purchased ‘quality food’ for higher income consumers and ‘other food’ consumed by ‘poverty consumers’ (Holt Gimenez and Shattuck 2011; Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015; Goodman and Goodman, 2016). This hierarchised conceptualisation ensures surpluses continue to be discursively framed in terms of deficit; as ‘poor people’s food’ (Caraher and Furey, 2017; Caplan, 2017, 2020; Blake, 2019b, 2019c, 2020).

These critiques also question the organisation of food aid disbursement as it becomes framed in terms of deservedness, need and eligibility (Tarasuk and Beaton, 1999; Tarasuk, Dachner, and Loopstra, 2014; Van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Middleton et al., 2018). Food insecurity is shown to be mediated (and often amplified) through the eligibility criteria of an
array of charitable food services; food banks (Poppendieck, 2014; Williams et al. 2016), community pantries (De Souza, 2019; Rosenthal, 2020), and social supermarket membership (Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018). These criteria act as ‘translation mechanisms’ whereby those deemed ‘in need’ are defined through ‘paternalist technologies and representations of deservedness’ (Williams et al., 2016:2294).

Food insecurity is further compounded by tropes of responsibilization which situate the individual consumer as both the cause of and the solution to, the problem of food insecurity (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017). Food aid organisations in turn are conceived of as part of an alternative, charitable welfare state apparatus which ‘has come to be understood as a shadow state mechanism that gradually supplants, and draws legitimacy for, an ever-diminishing welfare state’ (Williams et al. 2016: 2294).

Taken together, the scholarship on food insecurity, food wastage and surplus food aid constructs a complex, multi-scalar and intersecting perspective through which remote, powerful and upstream socio-economic and policy determinants, downstepped via a range of charitable food aid organisations, construct individuated food insecure subjectivities.

Crucially, it is also claimed that, within the context of austerity in the UK, authentic community commensality has been also diminished as responsibility for welfare provisioning has shifted from the state to the charitable sector (Caraher and Furey, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), food aid has been rebranded as ‘community food’ (Dowler and Caraher, 2003). As places that serve up cheap, no-choice, surplus meals, social eating initiatives could be partially described using the concepts and terms applied to other UK food aid services. This interpretation would frame social eating initiatives as a form of food aid and therefore as being inculcated in the capture of the community food sector by austerity-entrenching tropes of individuation and responsibilization (Rose, 1996 Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Morris, 2020).

The vignette, however, describes an alternative and additional type of encounter and experience, which highlights different facets of a surplus meal service to those described and conceptualised in the aforementioned literatures. In order to incorporate this new empirical evidence and to think beyond the structural food aid critique without sole recourse to either individualistic, rational, poverty consumer behaviour tropes or the State-sanctioned and active citizenship-dependent Right to Food approaches, a new conceptual approach is required. As Hilbrandt and Richter note:
Chapter 2. Literature review

‘[t]he framework of studying low budget practices is currently positioned within a two-sided political/discursive field, the two poles of which are an uncritical celebration of its practices and effects on the one hand and the (equally uncritical) denunciation of its constraints on the other’ (2015:175).

Moreover, ‘relying on this discourse alone may lead to overlooking actual potentialities of these practices’ (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015:175). Here then, is an opportunity to extend empirical and conceptual work on social eating initiatives through the lens of commensality and its ‘more than food’ approach to accounting for and explaining the significance and value of, eating together practices. Again, this ‘more than food’ approach aims to take elements of all of these approaches and extend them by using the lens of commensality, and through an analytical approach that encompasses both the structure, agency and the materiality of social eating commensality.

The ‘mingling, observing, and lingering’ (Cattell et al., 2008) within these ‘spaces of encounter’ (Marovelli, 2019) positions social eating initiative mealtimes as an entry-point to deeper understandings of how social value is expressed, experienced and valued. Just as the literature positioning has surfaced the complexities inherent in naming and valuing surplus foods beyond a designation of waste, so too the valuing of the activities that surplus foods may mobilise can be viewed as more complex than the passive receipt of stigmatising food aid. The ‘food ladders’ (Blake, 2019b) approach frames surplus food as enabling shifting types of agency and points to how in certain spaces, and with particular resources, new forms of agency, subjectivity and collectivity may emerge and recede. So, too, the consideration of what may be happening within food aid spaces ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) also proposes that caring, conviviality and community solidarity (Marovelli, 2019) may emerge in these discrete spaces in ways that are valued, even if they are not measurably socially transformative.

These temporal, spatial and resource-based considerations enrich the possibilities for understanding the emergence of social eating initiative commensality beyond the traditional dichotomy of steadfastly structural and behavioural debates by not only proposing new conceptual devices but by directing
empirical research to ask participants themselves, about what they value. A feature of the literature review and positioning concerns the tension between structure and agency. As Marovelli reflects:

‘these initiatives have the capacity to embrace social differences and to facilitate the circulation of ideas and practices of care and hospitality. They operate as bridging mechanism between people, communities, projects and services, providing the connective tissue in ways which are hard to measure’ (2019:1).

Moreover, as Cloke, May and Williams claim:

‘it follows that in order to reassess the politics of possibility emerging in these ambiguous and contested responses to social need it will be necessary to deconstruct […] The binary that too often characterizes dominant ways of thinking about such spaces of care’ (2017:719).

When I consider whether these structural socio-economic critiques of the current UK milieu fully account for the emergence of social eating initiatives and whether they explain beyond instrumental meeting of nutritional needs, why groups of people may be eating surplus foods, together, I can see that new empirical work is required to describe and articulate social eating initiatives particularly from the perspectives of participants. And that the current structural socio-economic critiques available to make sense of this phenomena, could be augmented by a consideration of where else the action of the social is occurring, especially in ways that convey group dynamics, alternative forms of agency and which encompass non-human agents such as surplus foods.

When I consider behavioural critiques of this social context, and as Warde also notes: ‘the source of changed behaviour lies in the development of practices’ (2005:140). For as Shove, Pantzar and Watson, claim: ‘the idea that new social arrangements are the result of an accumulation of millions of individual decisions about how best to act is enormously influential in everyday discourse […] in which action is, in essence, explained by the pursuit of individual interests’ (2012:2). The issue of course, is that this grounding has given rise to the neoliberal tropes of responsibilization that have been multiply critiqued
as the ‘subordination of the social’ (Clarke, 2007) and as concealing the extent to which structures shape individual behaviours (Rose, 1996; Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Morris, 2020).

An approach which takes up these tensions and provides a more nuanced framework for understanding both the phenomenon itself and the social context within which social eating initiatives are emerging is the anthropological and sociological concept of commensality (Fischler, 1980, 2011; Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015). Commensality is valued because of its capacity to construct and structure social groups through the mechanism of social cohesion (Giacoman, 2016).

The lens of commensality not only elaborates the significance of the shared mealtime; showing how this everyday practice enfolds into the personal and domestic realms, but also articulates it role in the wider spheres of social life. Herein, meals sit within broader food and socialscapes, which include but are not limited to the sorting, receiving, giving, sharing, distribution and utilisation of food and meals for their more than nutrient value. Its inevitability and persistence are a valuable and organising facet of social life wherein people seek to ‘resolve their everyday food needs both inside and outside of the home’ (Diaz-Mendez and van den Broek, 2017: 2) through a variety of ‘culinary strategies’ (Meah and Jackson, 2017) and practices that involve ‘more than’ creating and consuming a meal.

Commensality as a phenomenon exists as a locus of social life in ways that are empirically encounterable and as a conceptual device that holds the tension of being both universal and peculiar. It is proposed as a means of capturing the conviviality, the sense of alimentary inclusion and enjoyment described in the vignette. Commensality is also envisaged as potent social engine, constructing and structuring the social realm, as a simultaneously continuous feature of social life and as also reflecting and being shaped by the specificities of any given milieu. In investigating the ways that commensality is staged and conducted, I can gain insights not only into the particularities of social eating initiative mealtime, but I can also detect and conceptualise the priorities, processes, practices and powers of social production and ordering.

As noted by Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Von Savigny (2001:3) ‘understanding specific practices always involves apprehending material configurations’. Therefore, being sensitive to the ways in which commensal practices emerge or are ‘carried’ within constellations of ‘things’ such as through the group consumption of surplus foods, requires a different theorisation (Farber, 2014; Farias and Bender, 2010:}
Chapter 2. Literature review

As a form of practice, a social eating initiative mealtime can be understood as a ‘temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings’ (Schatzki, 1996); as a simultaneously reflective as well as constructive site of social production. The specific arrangements or assemblages of both human and non-human ‘things’ shape the performance of commensality without recourse to an explanation which relies wholly upon either a behaviour emerging from an individual, conscious agent or which an account wherein social eating initiatives are fully accounted for by recourse to remote social structures (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012; Warde, 2016).

Commensality can be conceived, then, as being enacted and enmeshed within the complex array of social life. The processes of building social cohesion entail people, both individuals and groups, places, timings and spaces as well as conventions, transformations, and orders of power and structuration (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015). Empirical and conceptual attention to the construction of practices can, then, provide a dynamic and complex account of social eating initiative commensality.

2.7 Research questions and objectives

An emphasis on additional and alternate readings of social eating initiative commensality such as those developed by the ‘food ladders’ (Blake, 2019b) and ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) concepts, for example, direct us to seek out the shaping-structures, the evidence of agency, the resources and the places and spaces within which the practices of social eating commensality emerges. In this enriched view of social eating initiative commensality, the ‘more than food’ approach may be evidenced by examining how participants themselves, through the practices they ‘carry’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012), bring forth experiences, instances and manifestations of value.

This approach, then, generates the overall thesis research question (1) what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?

Each chapter has a research sub-question that is responded to in a sequential manner that successively constructs an answer to this overall question. These are shaped by what learnings have emerged from the literature positioning. Answering each sub-question requires specific conceptual and/or empirical activities which organise each chapter through a question-and-answer structure. This gives the overall
thesis purpose, clarity and coherence. Before I move on to the conceptual model chapter, these six sub-questions which underpin the overall research question are elaborated upon and the structure and argumentation in the thesis is clarified.

As stated in the introduction, the thesis moves from identifying a series of associated social challenges and a potential response to them which are occurring in the UK, currently. In order to explore this dynamic an overall research question is posed about the value of social eating initiatives within this milieu and in particular the value of eating well and eating together, to participants of these initiatives. In order to successively build an argumentation that aims to enable me to answer the overall research question a series of research sub-questions are posed. Again, as stated in the introduction, each one of these sub-questions aims to collectively and convincingly move the thesis through the process of clearly identifying the ‘what’ of the thesis: or the social milieu and the phenomenon of social eating initiatives that the thesis is contending with (a). Next, the thesis aims to explore, specifically, ‘how’ this context and phenomena are constructed (b). Then the appropriate underpinning research philosophy and set of empirical methods for understanding this process of construction will be explored (c). The ‘why’ or the specific interpretation of the fieldwork data will be shaped by the next set of research sub-questions (d and e). Responding to the final sub-question (e), aims to answer the ‘so what’ aspect of the thesis.
Taken together, all of these sub-questions, then, aim to answer the overall research question by setting out a problem, a response, a conceptualisation of this dynamic, a credible way of ‘testing’ out this conceptual approach through data collection and analysis and finally by articulating how a ‘more than food’ approach to understanding the practices of social eating initiatives can give us clear insights into

Figure 4. Thesis overview diagram with research questions.
why they are valued by their participants, and the significance of these insights in advancing scholarship in this field.

In the following chapter, taking the findings of the literature and positioning review into account, it is evident that in order to understand the value of social eating initiatives to their participants the conceptual framework that shapes the research design must account for how commensality is produced, reproduced and transformed. The specific conceptual model should aim to articulate the specificities of social eating initiatives whilst retaining, extending or refining the evident role of commensality upon social cohesion and social order.

To conclude, in this literature positioning, and review chapter the phenomenon of study has been situated within a disciplinary space, I have identified empirical and conceptual omissions and opportunities within this scholarship and I have proposed a synthesising of concepts from diverse literatures, under a commensal and ‘more than food’ approach in order to better account for and understand the value of social eating initiative mealtimes. Moreover, the lens of commensality was identified as a more suitable and specific lens with which to examine these ‘more than food’ mealtimes and the experiences and resources embedded within them. A reflective vignette has also emphasised the additional and alternative social experiences of eating surplus foodstuffs in public places, beyond instrumental feeding. Having outlined the purpose of the overall and sub-questions and how they will shape the thesis argumentation, I now move on to the next chapter where the conceptual model which underpins the empirical research is examined.
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework: A conceptual model of mealtimes

3.1 Introduction
In the previous chapter I have considered how elements of the existing literature on food insecurity and food surpluses can be synthesised with literature on the destructuration of the shared mealtime, the use of convenience foods with the concept of commensality. This review and synthesis of the literature has enabled us to answer the initial research sub-question (a) what is the social milieu within which social eating initiatives are emerging, and how is this conceptualised?

Drawing together these different strands of literature, the sociological and anthropological lens of commensality provides an overall perspective that valorises the seemingly mundane act of eating together. The lens commensality, extended through a ‘more than food’ approach, directs attention to the assembled arrangements; structural, behavioural, and material, through which social eating initiatives are providing ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019).

Commensality is actually a manifestation of social bonding, social role transmission, social cohesion and resource allocation (Sobal, 2000; Fischler, 2011; Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015; Dunbar, 2017b). Eating together therefore accomplishes much more than physical sustenance. Commensality can be said to form durable and persistent social knowledges and affects (Jodelet, 2018) which contribute to the construction of a common reality (Fischler, 1980; Giocaman, 2016; Dunbar, 2017b; Masson, Bubendorff and Fraisse, 2018). Commensality is positioned as a site of profound social action; practiced despite the challenges of alimentary exclusion (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreich, 2015; Healy, 2019) and gastro anomie (Fischler, 1980) and valued broadly, regardless of the capacity to engage in it (Brannen, O’Connell et al., 2013; Giocaman, 2016).

Moreover, a review of the literature has evidenced that this value comes into being in dynamic, situational and temporal manner. Social eating initiative commensality is constructed, disassembled and
reassembled according to an array of factors beyond individual motivation and behaviours, such as the revaluing and rise in distribution of surplus foodstuffs. Achieving and maintaining commensality, then, is shown to be contingent upon an array of meanings, symbols, and practices which are constantly negotiated at multiple and intersecting levels of society (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012; Warde, 2016).

This shift in conceptualisation of social eating initiatives from a food aid/food waste and deficit-based framing towards a more asset-based, commensal and ‘more than food’ approach aims to better articulate and account for the value of social eating initiative commensality to their participants. This shift is summarised in the following diagram:
Figure 5. ‘Moving from a ‘leftover food for left behind people’ approach to a commensal and ‘more than food’ approach to social eating initiatives.

In establishing the overall contextual and conceptual standing for the thesis, the research is now moving from the literature review to the conceptual model stage. A conceptual model is required to address the overall research question because it underpins and shapes the research design. It visualises what the
thesis will be investigating and how that phenomenon is believed to be organised and perpetuated as part of the broader social realm. Therefore, the overall question (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?** will now be further addressed by responding to the second sub-question (b) **how is social eating commensality constructed?**

![Figure 6. Thesis overview diagram with research questions.](image)
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, two specific commensal conceptual models are examined. Conceptual models should provide a visual premise or proposition; an illustration of some crucial feature, process or mechanism of the object/subject of study that has been identified through the literature review. A conceptual model should illuminate the processes and relationships between variables and have a direct relation to how the empirical work is organised (Bryman, 2012). In this case, the conceptual model aims to illuminate the practices through which social eating commensality is constructed by participants.

Accordingly, this chapter is concerned with identifying and developing a conceptual model that enables the distinguishing of the features, the symbolism, the materialities, the performances and roles of social eating commensality. Moreover, corresponding to the findings of the literature review the conceptual model should be sensitive to both the structural drivers and the propensity for community groups to construct emic or internally described, organised and understood, value. It must also encompass the non-human actants that form part of the assembled arrangements and continual fabrications of these social eating ‘constellations’ (Farias and Bender, 2010; Farber, 2014).

The findings of the empirical work will reflect, in part, on the suitability of this model and the propositions it visualises in order to confirm, refute or modify the underpinning claim that social eating commensality is valued by participants because it creates social cohesion through a variety of practices. The overall thesis aim, operationalised through this conceptual model, is to engage in empirical work that identifies the ‘value’ of social eating initiatives for their participants, and which aims to extend the current literature on commensality.

To summarise, an appropriate conceptual model must situate social eating commensality within the current UK milieu and be sensitive to empirical data relating to this social context, it must capture the distinctive and shared features of social eating commensality beyond mundane and exceptional commensality and direct empirical work towards revealing the practices through which this type of commensality is constructed. It should be capable of including the human and non-human oriented facets
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

of practices. It must enable findings that can respond to the overarching research question: (1) what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?

3.2 Exploring an ‘embodied and encultured commensality’ conceptual model

‘Eating together, commensality, is the moral core of human society. Feeding and eating teaches us that our relations with others are not optional; we are all connected through food and eating [...]. The commensal relation created by food sharing involves intimacy, nurturance, and reciprocity’ (Van Esterik, 2015: 31).

In this section I describe and visualise two anthropological conceptual models. Firstly, one which seeks to visualise all forms of commensality, both domestic, embodied, exceptional and encultured (Van Esterik, 2015) and secondly, one which then describes in more detail the dynamics around commensality as a form of participatory, group eating activity which produces social cohesion (Giacoman, 2016). Later in this section, these models are synthesised and adapted to offer a thesis-specific conceptual model which aims to visualise the multiple, complex features, dimensions and practices which create and reflect value for social eating initiative participants.

The following diagram on ‘commensal circles’ (Van Esterik, 2015:34) envisions the differing stages of commensality from embodied infancy to enculturated eating with strangers; from familial nurturance and bonding towards encultured commensality, or what Giacoman calls ‘out groups’ (2016). Van Esterik’s model shows that close attention to food sharing and group eating reveals more nuanced and complicated stages of commensality. This stratified, relational model is intended to show that there are structured, discrete yet interacting stages of commensal development that are anchored in both domestic and public life which can be identified and empirically examined.
Family and exceptional commensality are not seen as two distinct stages of domestic and public eating practices but as oriented more or less towards physical sustenance and social sustenance. These more complicated strata are envisioned in the model as being successive, sequential, intersecting and proximal stages of commensality which move from embodied to encultured (although for the sake of conceptual model-making they are delineated into distinct stages and ‘circles’).

The idea here is not to strictly bind differing types of commensality but to diversify and extend the conceptualisation of commensality by envisioning the more complex expressions of it. In Van Esterik’s model social eating commensality would not be present as a separable ‘event’ but rather, it is always-already nested into social life; reliant upon other forms of commensality to ‘make sense’. This elaboration directs us to look beyond the ‘eating event’ and see the significance and function that the meal performs as well as looking at the contexts both embodied, performative and material which also shape a particular type of mealtime.
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

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Figure 7. ‘Envisioning the commensal space’ diagram, modified from Van Esterik (original drawing by Kerner) (2015) using a photograph from The Decorators website, 2017).

Van Esterik then, deepens the description to populate these layers, noting that ‘if we pull apart and deconstruct the commensal elements, we find varying degrees of sharing- shared food, shared spaces or tables, shared time, and shared social interaction’ (Van Esterik, 2015:41). This discloses that different types of meal sharing emerge and manifest through different material, temporal and spatial
arrangements. For Van Esterik, these convivial stages are constructed through interactions or performances and material and symbolic flows. Although these circles are delineated for the purpose of the diagram, it is admitted that they are not distinct nor fixed in practice. They are also contextually sensitive and potentially subject to modification through changes in other practices, which occur within the other domains of commensality. Van Esterik’s model articulates that there are stages of food sharing; commensality is positioned as existing on an intersecting spectrum; as complex, distinctive but relational.

Shared meals then, assemble and arrange families, fabricate social groups and contribute in turn to the organisational phenomena of social structures which we commonly associate as being integral features of our social world; the boundaries of the household, of friendship patterns, of kinship gradations (Murcott, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1988; Valentine, 1999). These practices of defining must involve negotiations around who and what is included and excluded from various social groupings (Giacoman, 2016) in forms that are both powerful and subtle, and at once simultaneously socially and materially determined and spatially and temporally variable (Valentine, 1999; Van Esterik, 2015; Parsons, 2016; Giacoman, 2016).

This model then ‘speaks to’ the ‘more than food’ approach which has been developed within the literature review and it visualises the role of eating together in the most fundamental way. It valorises commensality as a potent, persistent and pervasive foundation of human society; as its ‘moral core’ (Van Esterik, 2015: 31) which is underpinning and sustaining our personal and social life. Indeed, Van Esterik states that ‘the commensal circle is a space where people share food, eat together, and feed each other [...] these circles are pre-constituted culturally’ (Van Esterik, 2015:33). This asserts that the commensal mechanism constructing social cohesion is of such significance, that it is stated as a normative feature of social life (Higgs, 2015; Giacoman, 2016; Dunbar, 2017b).

This conceptual model does, however, show that social cohesion alters according to meal type, changing according to proximity and familial relationships. Social eating with strangers, then, constitutes a form of
encultured commensality but it also shares elements of domestic and kinship-based commensality (unlike the model’s conjoining of eating with strangers and food aid). In effect, exceptional or encultured commensality is fabricated upon prior layers of domestic commensality that become less and less cohesive as the forms of commensality move out from the family towards eating with strangers. However, drawing upon what is known about social eating commensality thus far it appears that social eating initiative commensality is inculcated in additional and alternative forms of social bonding beyond kinship; operating to fabricate ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) that foreground conviviality, company, and cohesion (Smith and Harvey, 2021).

Thus, it is proposed in the modified model below that social eating initiative commensality could be considered as an additional form of encultured commensality and herein, it is placed upon Van Esterik’s model as an additional circle. A new circle is necessary to signal, if not adequately describe, that a social eating initiative mealtime are a mix of both the familiar and the encultured; ‘(c)loser examination reveals that social eating initiatives support a hybrid form of commensality wherein the varying practices of domestic, charitable and ‘eating out’ commensality intersect’ (Smith and Harvey, 2021:2).
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

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*Figure 8. Modified version of the ‘envisioning the commensal circle’ diagram, modified from Van Esterik (original drawing by Kerner, 2015) in Kerner, Chou and Warmind, (2015) using a photograph from The Decorators website, 2017.*
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

This modified version of the commensal circles is only partially useful, however. Whilst the commensal circles diagram shows us the different stages of eating which also concern different relations and social bonds, resources and life-stages, it requires further refinement so that the dynamic practices by which social eating initiatives create ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) can be articulated. What this conceptual model (Van Esterik, 2015) does not explicitly bring into view are the processes through which social eating becomes embedded in an assembly of other social ‘things’; the properties and practices that enable it to be discerned as a family meal or a community meal.

Social eating initiatives can be viewed as traversing or modifying these striations and stages in commensality by linking all of these enculturated forms of commensality together in varying and intersecting ways. Social eating, as described in the vignette, appears to transpose the materiality and symbolism of the family meal into a public setting where families, friends and strangers eat together at a mealtime from the same, limited menu. These new ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) appear to extend beyond any current delineation of eating behaviours and practices, perhaps in part due to the broader social restructurings of austerity which are impacting upon individual’s opportunities to engage in commensality, but also because of the proliferation in surplus redistribution, for example. It is likely not any one issue which is transforming and expanding what constitutes enculturated commensality but rather the intersection of a number of issues.

This overview and conception of how commensality beyond either domestic or exceptional types might be typified, seeks to convey that social eating initiatives are constructing hybridised, ‘more than’ conventional types of commensality. This modified model is envisaged as an overarching descriptor of the complexity and interrelating of differing types of commensality and it signals but does not elaborate upon, specifically, how those differing types of commensality are constructed, focusing instead on how these more complex conceptions of commensality are organised, relationally.

Therefore, a dynamic and more granular model is required which captures not only the strata of, and processes by which the practices within each banding are fabricated, but the variety of social phenomena,
possessions and properties that get enfolded into these practices, such as surplus foodstuffs, Church Halls and the making of new friends.

Accordingly, the next conceptual model expands upon the commensal features emphasised in Van Esterik's model of commensal circles (2015) to explicate the processes and properties by which social bonds or associations of social value, are constructed. In effect, this next conceptual model ‘zooms in’ to the circular bands of the commensal circles model to look more closely at the construction and fabrication of social eating initiative commensality and the different dimensions through which this practice is manifested.

3.2.1 Developing a ‘dimension and role of commensality’ conceptual model

Giacoman suggests a more careful elaboration around the types and the significance of commensality is required ‘because it is considered problematic in contemporary societies, insofar as there is a contradiction between the cultural value assigned to eat together and the effective realization of this practice’ (2016:461) and that although ‘some authors have pointed toward a possible decrease in collective meals and an increase in eating alone […] some sociologists question the existence of empirical data to support this hypothesis’ (Giacoman, 2016:461). One response, and that which Giacoman proposes, is to better understand how specific forms of commensality are constructed and valued.

Giacoman (2016) confirms assertions within the literature review that destructuration of the shared mealtime (Fischler, 2011; Lund and Gronow, 2014; Yates and Warde, 2017) and ‘culinary plurality’ (Mäkelä, 2009:45) are affecting the capacity for individuals and groups to engage in commensality: ‘the obstacles to commensality are the structural factors that are conducive toward individualism and isolation and the personal dietary requirements for ideological or medical reasons’ (Giacoman, 2016: 461). Moreover, Giacoman also inculcates commensality itself in the processes of social exclusion and the reinforcement of difference. Giacoman cautions against simply accepting a homogenous interpretation
that any moment of commensality is necessarily fomenting social cohesion or indeed occurring between peers, or that commensality can be explicitly positioned as a proxy for care, but instead emphasises the need to scrutinise and delineate commensality in its complexity and specificity.

From this fundamental proposition and through close attention to its features, the variable dimensions of commensality are shown then, to reinforce (or diminish) social cohesion. Giacoman’s approach suggests that commensality is not a homogenous or simplistically emerging phenomenon. Its value to participants should not be assumed but investigated.

This more critical reading of the role and value of commensality, its accomplishment and by whom and how, gives rise to a conceptual model which is concerned with detailing the process through which commensality is constructed. It is also cognizant of how the structural and behavioural features of any given society, shape and influence how groups eat together as well as the values that can ascribed to commensality. Giacoman (2016) proposes a dynamic model wherein groups and the features of those groupings construct and produce, across various dimensions of social life, types of commensality. Commensality can be valued in a number of ways, but underpinning these ascribed values, is the fundamental mechanism of social cohesion. This model, therefore, shows the interleaving of social context, group dynamics, commensality and social cohesion. This is particularly apt for this thesis argumentation given the conjoining of accounts of food insecurity and surplus food usage with the concepts of commensality and mealtime destructuration.

This model can be viewed as an elaborated view from ‘inside’ one of Van Esterik’s commensal circles (2015). It points to the deeper, dynamic operation of various intersecting practices enacted across three dimensions of social life through which particular moments, as well as the broader strata, of commensality are created. It is the feature of group participation and dynamics which Giacoman brings into focus with her conceptual model and how it is created on multiple levels: ‘(t)he study of commensality is relevant
because its analysis allows us to explore the way in which solidarity mechanisms operate in society with respect to uniting its members, imposing rules, and creating identity’ (Giacoman, 2016: 460).

Commensal practices are understood by Giacoman (2016) as existing through roles and interactions, through the symbolism and abstract ‘ideal’ of the family meal and through the normative dimension, whereby group norms facilitate cohesion and a shared sense of roles and expectations for behaviour. As Higgs notes, the ‘(n)ormative social influence on eating is potent and pervasive. The presence of other people at an eating occasion or when choices are made about food has a powerful effect on behaviour’ (2015: 42). However, for Giacoman, commensality also:

‘entails a staging in a concrete space, where the different actors involved play a part and follow a script that directs their practices and conversations. Three aspects of this interaction have been emphasized. First, a shared meal is an instance of communication among members of a group especially for families. Second, commensality contains manifestations of behavioural norms and
social control with respect to their fulfilment. Third, a shared meal is shaped by spatial and temporal constrictions, as well as other material and even political conditions’ (2016: 461).

One way to modify this model then, is to organise the social dimensions according to *practices*, which better encompasses the spatial and temporal features and integrates them more fully into the material, interactional and symbolic dimensions of social life.

### 3.2.2 Proposing a ‘practices of social eating initiative commensality’ model

As has been suggested within the literature positioning and review, this complex consideration of the fabrication of our social worlds and how to appropriately empirically interact and observe them is provided for within a practice theories approach. This approach and its appropriateness for underpinning the empirical research and analysis are discussed in the following methodology chapter. Here, drawing upon Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s elements and dimensions of social life concept (2012) the following table suggests the three dimensions across which social eating initiative commensality is constructed, at the level of practices. This approach will be drawn upon to shape the development of what a conceptual model of social eating initiative commensality needs to capture.
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

Table 1. Elements of social practices and illustrative examples for group eating, informed by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012).

Attention to these three dimensions and how they express the varying features of commensality enables us to better understand how new contextual factors (such as the rise in surplus food usage) correlates with new forms of commensality. The modified model is explicative of the various facets of social life which can be then dissected to produce a complex and more thoroughly evidenced case for how commensality is both constructed, achieved and valued within social eating initiatives.
By modifying Giacoman’s model to provide the social context of food insecurity, alimentary exclusion, food wastage, surplus redistribution and destructuration of the shared mealtime, a broader, structural milieu is positioned as the social ‘container’ within which social eating initiatives exist. Next, this model synthesises Giacoman’s normative dimension with the interactional one, now more generally termed ‘competences’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). This encompasses not only the capacity for commensality to establish, reinforce or transform social boundaries and behaviours but to also include skills, techniques and knowledges around not only the mealtime, but also the practices of preparation, cooking, serving and clearing away. And by adding a material dimension to include flows of surplus foodstuffs, the physical spaces and the meal itself, a modified conceptual model is proffered that...
incorporates the broader and more specific facets of the current UK socialscape and which directs empirical work to capture a rich range of commensal activities and practices.

This ‘practices of social eating initiative commensality’ model takes concedes that although social eating initiatives are viewed as a novel or distinctive form of commensality, like all other forms of commensality, they produce and disrupt or diminish, social cohesion. Social eating initiatives have distinctive as well as in-common mealtime features. These features are constructed within and through three dimensions of social life at the level of practices. By mapping and close analysis of these social practices in relation with their participants the value of these initiatives will be discerned and the research question: ‘what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?’ can therefore be further addressed.

This model also fulfils the stated research sub-question requirements to examine that context or the milieu within which social eating initiatives are emerging as well as inculcating human and non-human features in its construction. This model emphasises the involvement and enfolding of intersecting dimensions of social life within the social eating initiative mealtime. The requirement to clarify and elaborate upon the participants’ views of the significance and value of social eating initiatives is also encompassed within this modified conceptual model.

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, there has been an exploration of conceptual models which provide a visual exposition about the nature, function and organisation of commensality. These models have been modified to appropriately convey the thesis-specific propositions and empirical approach which will be used to understand how value is constructed for social eating initiative participants.

The ‘commensal circles’ conceptual model (Van Esterik, 2015) has been considered in its capacity to envisage commensality as multi-layered, proximal, relational and as nested and interrelated. However, it is posited that social eating initiatives do not neatly fit into these commensal circles. Social eating
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

initiatives contain elements of these relational strata but their activities traverse the circles; indicating that any conceptual model must encompass both this complexity but also express the dynamism of commensal practices more clearly and effectively.

Accordingly, Giacoman’s conceptualisation of commensality (2016) is proposed as a model which captures these practices and the processes of their construction appropriately. It sees commensality as being enacted through material resources and properties, performances or roles and through symbolic representations. It views commensality not as an event but as a dynamic process. These features are embedded in and not independent from, the society in which the commensal practice unfolds. Therefore, commensality within Giacoman’s conception is positioned as a site of dynamism, transformation and negotiation as well as potent, persistent and pervasive practice which fabricates and reinforces social connection and cohesion and therefore, social structures.

This approach is useful because it directs us to a deeper interrogation of what social eating initiative commensality are ‘achieving’ for participants in a way that can be evidenced not just by observation of individual behaviours, but by a more nuanced and complex consideration of social context. This model also encompasses and is sensitive to the effects of new materialities, such as the proliferation of surplus food redistribution in the UK. This model is also sensitive to the social and cultural variability of commensality, without unquestioningly accepting that commensality equals conviviality. Giacoman (2016) understands that commensality and its capacity for bonding, bordering and binding groups can both build and diminish social cohesion.

Therefore, this conceptualisation provides an empirical and analytical model of the processes through which the value of commensality can be described and analysed in its complexity, specificity and dynamism without collapsing into localised specificity. In order to make this approach more pertinent to *social eating initiative commensality* a modified model has been developed and visualised. The ‘practices of social eating initiative commensality’ model articulates that social eating initiatives are emerging within
specific and multi-scalar contexts, which are not fixed but mutable, contested, negotiated and entangled with a variety of other social practices and arrangements.

The sub-question which directed this chapter: (b) how is social eating initiative commensality constructed? has been addressed by developing a practice-oriented, processual, conceptual model. Social eating initiative commensality is constructed across various dimensions of social life. The thesis-specific model situates social eating initiative commensality within the broader expression of group eating practices whilst attending to its specificities and novelties. Herein, conjoining with other forms of commensality, social eating initiative commensality is articulated as functioning to build social cohesion through varying, intersecting practices of domestic, charitable and ‘eating out’ mealtime practices. It delineates three dimensions of social life as per a practice theories approach, drawing upon Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s dynamic approach to practices in particular (2012). Discerning and analysing these dimensions of social life directs the empirical work to encompass not just the discrete mealtime itself, but also setting up, serving and clearing and down activities. This conceptual model will direct empirical work to capture the richness of social eating initiative commensality beyond the mealtime itself; suggesting a particular methodological approach which is discussed in the following chapter.

The following chapter aims to strengthen and uphold findings developed within the literature and positioning review that a focus on group, commensal practices (rather than solely social structures or individual behaviours) may be an appropriate means of addressing the overall research question. The conceptual model advanced in this chapter articulates a particular vision and version of the social realm, within which social eating initiatives ‘sit’. This account conveys the rich, intersecting, dynamic and meaningful role of commensality in building social cohesion, and thereby, the social realm itself. Accordingly, a qualitative research philosophy and a suite of methods capable of capturing the complex assemblages of a social eating initiative practices, are proposed.

In the following chapter there will be a contemplation of the ontological, epistemological and methodological features of practice theories; situating the thesis and the ‘more than food’ approach
within broader debates about the production of knowledges within the social sciences. At the end of the next chapter, I review the overall approach to, and summarise the justification for, proceeding with the empirical work and move the thesis from a conceptual and philosophical into a practical space.
Chapter 4. Methodology: Making mealtimes matter: Aligning theory, practices and methods

4.1 Introduction

A conceptual model of social eating initiative commensality and the practice theories approach it appears to align with, was proposed in the previous chapter. These theories are compatible for a number of reasons which will be discussed in this chapter. These propositions about the practices of social eating commensality and its value for participants must, however, be sited, or nested within a hierarchy of knowledges concerning how the broader social world itself is constructed, structured, reproduced and transformed. Therefore, in this methodological chapter, and prior to the implementation of meaningful and purposeful empirical research, attention is now given to the research philosophy and theorisation which undergirds the thesis.

It is noted here that there is no singular practice theory. There are a range of theorisations which, although they conceive of the social realm in various ways, are nonetheless united by their insistence that ‘both social order and individuality [...] result from practices’ (Schatzki, 1996:13). Thus, multiple but related practices approaches will be appraised later in the chapter.

This chapter outlines the research strategy underpinning this project. The overall aim of this thesis is to understand the value of social eating initiatives to their participants, and it will accomplish this through an attention to how participants practice commensality. This requires going beyond the duality of either behavioural or structural accounts of the social realm to examine how social eating practices may be emerging within it.

It is a focus on the practices of social eating initiative commensality that guides much of this research as these theories are shown to encompass this broader view of the social context, the material resources, the competencies and roles of caring and contribution as well as the way time and space shapes that ways
that we eat and eat together. Guided by this perspective, then, the chapter identifies a practice theories research philosophy as the appropriate underpinning philosophy for this research and in particular, ‘the dynamics of social practice’ theorisation proposed by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012).

Occupying an ontological mid-space between structure and agency whilst being cognizant of both, a practice theories approach views the construction, reproduction and transformation of the social realm as occurring at the empirically encounterable level of practices. These practices are pre-formed, formed and de-formed as the elements of the social world- material, competences and meanings- assemble and dis-assemble (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). This focus on practices locates agency both in individuals but also in places, spaces and timings as well as non-human agents such as surplus foodstuffs, in the co-shaping and carrying into being, of a practice.

It is then proposed that quantitative inquiry cannot create the rich data delivered through a qualitative approach. Therefore, the methods section discusses the qualitative approach and a suite of three, qualitative methods are presented; meal-centred focus groups, go-along interviewing and photovoice, and a plan of empirical work is developed.

Then the chapter concludes with a summary of the methodological approach and a review of the developing argumentation of the thesis. The overall thesis question: (1) what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants? is therefore further addressed by responding to the third sub-question:(c) which philosophical underpinning, and which methods, are appropriate for examining the practices of social eating initiative commensality?
Chapter 4. Methodology

4.2 Theoretical context and research design rationale

It does not always follow that because a phenomenon may have been usefully conceptualised within one discipline, that subsequent, related scholarship should reproduce this very same perspective. Indeed, as the argumentation developing within this thesis shows, an overly deterministic or structural approach is not the most appropriate means of accounting for the significance and value of social eating initiatives. This is because it is insufficiently sensitive to the human and non-human activities, competencies and discourses of commensal care, contribution and pleasure which are brought into view through the ‘more than food’ approach. Nor is the overly behaviouralist approach which locates agency within a rational, individual consumer, without taking into account the degree to which unconscious actions, shaped by social structures, shape behaviours. This approach also minimises the extent to which food insecurity, for example, is constructed through multiple and interleaving activities, many of which are out of active control for some individuals. This over reliance on the choosing consumer as the agent of the social realm finds its problematic expression in the responsibilization tropes of the UK wherein food poverty is framed as a culmination of poor, individual choice (Garthwaite, 2011; Rose, 1996, 2006; Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Morris, 2020).

As has been surfaced in the introduction and substantiated within the literature review, these dualistic critiques of food aid and responsibilization the UK can create an almost heretical dynamic around articulating the alternate, beneficial interpretations of community food practices due to concerns around appearing to validate the continuation of the food aid/food waste, problem/solution discourse and the tropes of responsibilization. As Hilbrandt and Richter caution, ‘framing these practices through more structural approaches runs the danger of closing down any potential for alternatives’ (2015:173). As has also been elaborated within the thesis thus far, this results in a kind of intellectual hesitancy towards finding out what is actually occurring within these food spaces, especially through the perspective of the people that organise and use them (Buser and Roe, 2013; Roe and Buser, 2016).

Although I do not refute the problematic significance of the broader neo-liberal, austerity-riven foodscape and how it is being variously conceptualised, ‘this kind of interpretative framework [...] can obscure some of the more progressive possibilities arising within and through spaces of [...] wider welfare and care’
Chapter 4. Methodology

(Cloke, May and Williams, 2017: 704). Moreover, the literature review purports that attention should be given towards ‘a deconstruction of any simplistic dichotomy that identifies them as either embodiments of the neoliberal shadow state or as symbolic representations that work to catalyse public debate about the pernicious injustice of austerity welfare’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017: 704).

In the literature review, then, key opportunities for new scholarship were identified through a consideration of the concept of mealtime destructuration and the challenges within the current UK milieu around eating, eating well, and eating together. This broader view of food insecurity encompasses the value of and need for, meal sharing and for mealtime sociality and reciprocity as well as the need for access and availability to affordable and appropriate foodstuffs. It also considers how resources such as surplus foods may be shaping the types of commensality which are emerging in the community food sector. There is then, much occurring within the community food sector which is not wholly accounted for through a structurally nor a behaviourally deterministic perspective. However, it is argued that eating together is ‘extraordinary in its ordinariness, exceptional in the extent to which we treat it as mundane, and outstanding as a focus of the study of consumption’ (Marshall, 2006:69). Social theory then, is tasked with continuously negotiating a balance between (somewhat) totalising tendencies and individualistic explanations across its various domains, as is evidenced in the corpus of sociological and anthropological scholarship (DeVault, 1994; Chee Beng, 2015; Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015; Danesi, 2018).

Therefore, the novel use of an existing conceptual lens, commensality, is proposed to create new knowledge. Commensality is envisaged within the thesis, as a social engine constructing, reproducing, and transforming social relations through the various practices through which social cohesion is realised. It is conceived of as a structuring process which fabricates, at the level of both the everyday and the exceptional, the broader social structures of the family (DeVault, 1994; Brannen, O’Connell and Mooney, 2013) or social class (Murcott, 1982a,b, 1983, 1988) for example. It can be envisaged as a tangible and empirically observable facet of the social fabric of the UK and as contributing to the broader and more intangible structures of the social realm.
With this opportunity to extend the literature on commensality in mind, through its application to social eating initiatives and the value of their apparent hybrid forms of commensal practices, a conceptual model was developed. As has been visually proposed in the previous chapter, the research approach of the thesis is based upon a formative understanding of social eating initiative commensality as dynamic, as identifiable through its features, and as composed across three intersecting social dimensions. These dimensions (informed by Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s ‘dynamics of social practices’ theory (2012) are constructed through practices which emerge through assemblages of materials, competences and meanings. These practices can be conceptualised by the related concepts shown in the diagram below. Taken together this creates a model which announces the possibility of identifying a series of commensal practices which may be valued by participants in various ways.

![Diagram of social eating initiative commensality conceptual model]

*Figure 11. The practices of social eating initiative commensality conceptual model.*

In the model, commensality is always situated within a specific socio-cultural context, in this case, the current UK milieu of food insecurity coexisting with food wastage and the destructuration of the
mealtime. This context shapes but does not determine the expression of commensality. Instead, the role and import of this social context can be detected in the array of practices which have elemental links to those other contextual practices. This conceptual model draws upon empirical methods which are qualitative, capable of discerning dynamism, nuance, meaning and valuing. Furthermore, these methods should be shaped by and sensitive to uncovering, the social world as being composed of and constructed through practices. These practices and their groupings into ‘bundles’ of ‘proto-practices, practices and ex-practices’ are viewed as the dynamic units of empirical and conceptual enquiry (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:25).

The question that underpinned the conceptual model chapter was (b) **how is social eating initiative commensality constructed?** In this chapter, the sub-question (c) **which philosophical underpinning, and which methods, are appropriate for examining the practices of social eating commensality?** is responded to through an examination of the ontological, epistemological and methodological features of a practice theories approach.
In seeking to understand the value of social eating initiatives, an opportunity arises to articulate a more complex and nuanced account of their commensality through the inclusion of the activities and perspectives of participants, including the non-human ones. Examining how the spaces, places and timings of mealtimes occur can also provide insights into how participants value these mealtimes. This
opportunity therefore requires the identification of an ontological ‘mid-space’ wherein structure, individual agency, group practices and various materialities are positioned within a dynamic and intersecting account of the social realm.

This theoretical account of the social world within which social eating initiatives are emerging and participants are engaging in commensality, should encompass austerity and welfare policies and their effects, food insecurity, charitable redistribution of food aid, and community food practices in both a contextual and more immediate manner. So, too, the more elementally descriptive, discursive and performative facets of social eating initiatives in-situ must also be conveyed consistently through this theorisation. Therefore, the ontological and epistemological approaches of practice theories is examined next as a means of demonstrating why the rationale for the methodology chapter is justified. As Reckwitz claims:

‘[s]ocial explanations that attempt to derive individual behaviour from social systems, or social systems from behaviour, are doomed to failure. Neither holism nor individualism is satisfactory. The alternative is to seek entities or mechanisms which can generate observed effects at both individual and societal levels. Theories of practice begin from the assumption that practices play that role; practices are the fundamental units of social existence and hence the core concept of social analysis’ (2002:249-250).

Giddens states: ‘The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across time and space’ (Giddens, 1984:2). Therefore, the claim that practice theories can ‘handle’ this dynamic complexity in a way that can be empirically investigated is now substantiated.
4.2.1 Ontological and epistemological alignment of the thesis

Theories of social change conventionally take one of two forms. Accounts of the social realm centred on macroscopic entities such as structures, cultures and institutions, tend to prioritise regularity and stability and are viewed as more suited to accounting for longer term, enduring and relatively unchanging social phenomena. Herein distinctive social actions are always-already shaped by these larger-scale, pre-existing social entities (Giddens, 1979, 1984). Alternatively, individualistic and behavioural explanations take these social constituents to be products of the social realm which are ultimately reducible to the rational actions of individuals. These types of thought are characterised as being are more adept at explaining transformation and dynamism within the social realm (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). These two forms of explanation for the construction, reproduction and transformation of the social realm are therefore embedded in different ontological and normative assumptions.

Within research philosophy ontology concerns the nature of what exists, its composition and the deep causal structures upon which knowledge about the social realm is developed: ‘the set of specific assumptions underlying a theory or system of ideas’ (Kitchin and Tate, 2013: 6). Epistemology unfolds from ontology by enquiring about what ‘constitutes knowledge and how we can know something to be true and how we share that knowledge’ (Rugg and Petre, 2006: 121). Ontological and epistemic beliefs underpin and direct the research focus and they articulate what the researcher believes to be both the underlying ‘nature’ and structure of reality and how that can be known.

Summarily, Positivistic approaches posit that there is a singular, objective reality that can be measured using reliable and validating methods. Historically, the social sciences initially sought to replicate the ontological and epistemic approach of the natural sciences. Scientific objectivity and detachment gave rise to social generalisation and comparability in a macro or large-scale vision of the social world. This sociological identification of social ‘facts’ formed the basis for immutable ‘social laws’ which can be used to explain social phenomena and social change. Since Positivism argues that ‘the role of research is to test theories and to provide material for the development of laws’ (Bryman, 2012: 14) the fundamental goals of this research are not compatible with the ideals located within this thesis-epistemology because I am seeking to develop the theorisation of commensality by examining the values participants give to social
eating initiatives. Indeed, the inescapable subtleties and uniqueness associated with each social, cultural and spatial context means that the testing of unified theories and search for universal applications for knowledge is impractical\(^\text{(1)}\). Leaving behind the more Positivistic approaches as less appropriate for the study of social eating initiative commensality, I now consider whether the epistemological approach of social or cultural construction of mealtime meaning is a preferable means of conveying the theoretical foundations of the thesis.

Hoggart, Lees and Davies (2014) regard Constructionism as part of a wider mid twentieth century ‘cultural turn’ whereby the researcher is concerned with the interpretation of the meaning or values of objects and subjects. This requires nuance, empathy and understanding, and not solely objective explanation. Social Constructionist theorisations not only state that there is no singular or absolute social reality, but further that there are multiple ontologies and by dint of there being an interpretable social realm, it follows that there must be radically different versions of reality. In contrast to Positivism, Constructionism is an ontology critical of the application of the scientific model to the study of the social world. This approach asserts that the social sciences are different from natural sciences and require a different logic of research procedure. The social realm, here, is not objectively measurable, but rather that measurement is in itself, an interpretation (Bryman, 2012).

In addition, an interpretive stance which is mindful of multiple and intersecting forms of social construction enables researchers to embrace the inter-subjectivity of knowledge production and recognise that the issue(s) under investigation are ultimately a range of interpretations developing upon the many representations, actions and processes that arise within social relationships. Rather than seek absolute certainty in an established social reality, as is often the intended outcome of a Positivist position, Social Constructionist epistemology allows researchers to account for social phenomena and to develop

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(1) The contemporary philosophy of the natural science is, however, more nuanced and based on different varieties of ‘realism’ – ranging from naïve realisms (Fish, 2010) to more ‘critical realisms’ that provide a more nuanced account of the connections between scientific knowledge-making practices and the objects of their enquiries (Archer et al., 2013; Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2016).
a reasoned and robust argument as to why this accounting-for, including the meanings and understandings of it, has been interpreted in the way that it has, in a relational and interpretative manner.

This means there may be multiple and mutable ‘truths’ to contend with, making situatedness, positionality and reflexivity more crucial and appropriate. It can be argued that this approach avoids the ‘god eye vision’ (Haraway, 1998:581) of a Positivist ontology that simultaneously seeks to assert a claim to the production of an objective truth whilst pretending to be adverse and immune to the powerful, potent and pervasive movements and impressions of socio-history, of which Positivist thought is of course, a product.

Constructionism denotes a view that social properties are constructed through interactions between people, rather than having a separate existence. The social world is always-already entangled within the structures of knowledge that name, organise and make sense of society. Knowledge cannot be readily teased apart or disentangled from the society within which these knowledges emerge. Meaning is contingent upon the broader social structures of meaning-making. This conception grounds knowledge within the social structures of the human realm and accounts for how new and emergent knowledges are derived from these a priori social structures. As such, there is a focus within Constructionist interpretations on individuals and the processes by which they construct and make sense of the social realm, and on the broader structures that are organised and reproduced through these processes in a cumulative or hierarchical ordering of the social (Bryman, 2012).

Indeed, Social Construction, Haraway (1988, 1991) provides a strong assertion that knowing is a participatory and immersive process; knowledge is always produced in a mixed-up relationship between a knower and a known. This relationship does not always have to produce unified findings; it can instead be viewed as an assembly or constellation of knowledges. Again, as Haraway writes ‘complex layers of one’s personal and collective historical situatedness in the apparatuses of the production of knowledge can be acknowledged whilst simultaneously engaging critically through ‘withinness’” (1998:277).
Commensality itself calls upon this withiness, inviting the role of academic-as-eater; in both enjoying the mealtime as evidenced in the vignette and reflecting upon a deeper set of questions concerning the value of that practice to other participants. Moreover, ‘good’ science, according to Nicolini, involves becoming ‘more articulate and capable of perceiving differences (and thus meaning)’ (2012: 216). Such an undertaking is ‘generative, not eliminivist: its goal is to increase our capacity to make connections among phenomena, not to eradicate interesting features in the name of generalization’ (Nicolini, 2012:216). This quote emphasises the inductive approach to research of using specific observations to support broader generalisations; adding-in, elaborating and enriching knowledges.

4.2.2 Theorising commensality as a set of practices
‘[C]ommensality is the essence of food, and commensal acts are essential for the integration of society. Moreover, these are acts that must be continually reinforced through practice’ (Kerner and Chou, 2015:1)

Throughout the thesis thus far, the challenges of ‘fitting’ an explanation for the emergence, construction and reproduction of social eating initiative commensality into either a wholly structural account or a solely behavioural account of the social realm has been emphasised.

Thus, social practice theorists have attempted to transcend the dualism of agency/structure debate by pointing to ways in which agency and social structures are clearly working in tandem (Schatzki, 1996, 2003, 2011; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove, 2003; Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Warde, 2005, 2015; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012; Maller and Strengers, 2018). Theories of social practices inherently account for the entangled nature of relational events, things, people and the places and context in which they interact and occur, albeit via the reflexive gaze of the researcher (Linderson, 2010). This type of approach can be seen clearly in the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1987 in Murdock, 2010) and Giddens (1979, 1984), both of whom have had a marked impact on the direction of contemporary sociology by directing attention to the concept of ‘practice’ as an empirically accessible and intelligible mid-point between structure and individual agency: ‘indeed the approach has been mooted as a useful bridging concept’ (Davies et al., 2017: 137).
Rather than suggesting individuals are autonomously engaging in economic interactions, or that behaviour is simply a habituated and routinized function of society as a whole, this work argues that there is an inseparable ontological relationship between agency and structure, for example, Schatzki (1996) locates practice theories between holism and individualism. In other words, one cannot exist without the other: ‘practices are the site where understanding is structured and intelligibility articulated’ (Schatzki, 1996:12). For Schatzki, sociality or social organisation should be understood neither as constituted through normative regulation nor upon rational individualism: ‘by virtue of the understandings and intelligibilities they carry, practices are where the realms of sociality and individual mentality/activity are at once organized and linked. Both social order and individuality, in other words, result from practices’ (1996:13).

Practice theories accounts of the social realm explain both routinization and commonality and novelty and dynamism (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). They are therefore useful in conceptualizing how commensality is at once common, general, pervasive and enduring in its function of producing social cohesion in practice, but also in accounting for commensality that is localized, specific and about ‘more than’ instrumental, physical feeding.

At this juncture of the thesis and prior to the commencement of empirical work it is important to clarify how facets of practice theories can usefully underpin the study of social eating commensality. I contend that there are a number of intersecting ways in which commensality and practice theories synthesise; a shared commitment to a social world that is co-constituted by an array of human and non-human ‘things’; a view that holds that agency is both routinized and habituated and intentional and performative; a position that holds that the mundane and everyday is, in fact, the socially significant and consequential; and the view that the particular and specific also reveal the general and universal.

Clearer understandings of how and why these approaches synthesise confirms the appropriateness of practice theories as a lens to examine social eating initiative mealtimes because it directs us to consider how commensality is constituted or ‘carried’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) through social eating
practices. Practice theories can build a bridge between abstract, dualistic theories and empirical, commensal research by sensitising us to both the instrumental as well as the social value of social eating initiative mealtime commensality.

Summarily, sociology may be understood as the study of the myriad of ways that humans live together in groups and how this shapes the production, reproduction and transformation of society (Scott and Marshall, 2009). Commensality, sitting within this scholarship, pertains to how eating together, as a facet of that living-together, functions as a bonding, ordering and organising mechanism of human sociality (Warde, 2016). The key term of anthropology is not society, but culture, being invested in not only the social relations between humans but also how and why artefacts and materialities enable and constrain these relationships (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015).

Anthropology and sociology both present commensality as socio-culturally specific and therefore as constructed (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015). Therefore, the theorisation of commensality has an ontological and epistemological basis that is shared with theories of practice.

Moreover, both commensality and theories of practice share an interpretation of the social realm as being co-constituted by both human and nonhuman entities. As van Kesteren and Evans assert, practice theories ‘provide an innovative and nuanced ontology of social life which decentres human agency and focuses attention on the complex webs of materials, meanings and competencies that constitute everyday action’ (2020:147). Practice theories can sensitise us then, to the role of artefacts and ‘things’ in initiating, enabling and constraining certain types of action, behaviour and routine (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002; Shove, 2007; Ropke, 2009). For as Schatzki states, ‘practices are intrinsically connected to and interwoven with objects’ (2003:106). The social realm can be more deeply appended by explicitly encompassing its materiality; envisaging society as ‘an interplay between bodies, know-how, nonhuman organisms, artifacts, and things’ (D’Anna and Jauss, 2015:66).
Context, locale, space and timings also shape behaviours and may be viewed as facets of the materiality of that commensal culture. Materiality here concerns access to and application of, agency. Therefore, agency emerges in co-relation with artefacts and contexts which enable, constrain and shape the type and mode of practice. There are differing emphases within theories of practice on the significance and role of materialities on agency, for example, Latour adopts a ‘principle of generalized symmetry’ (1992) wherein both humans and things are conceived of as equal and active participants of any given practice. Moreover, conceptions of agency within both theorisations of commensality and practice theories differ and a number of terms are used that signify the greater or lesser extent to which structures and materialities impinge upon expressions of agency. Roles, performances, actors, routines, habits and gestures- all of these terms refer to particular assemblages of agency. Specifically, within this thesis, I draw upon Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s conception of ‘competences’ (2012) as stated in the conceptual model chapter.

Shove, Pantzar and Watson define competences as ‘know-how, background knowledge and understandings [...] practical consciousness, deliberately cultivated skill, or more abstractly, as shared understandings of good or appropriate performance’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:23). As per the diagram offered in the conceptual model chapter, a working-level definition of materials, competences and meanings is favoured in this thesis.
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Table 2. Elements of social practices and illustrative examples for group eating, informed by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012).

As will be further discussed on the dynamics of social practices approach section, the framing of commensality within the thesis draws upon Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s position that ‘practices simultaneously constitute and are constituted by the ongoing enactment of daily lives and social structures’ (2012:125) wherein ‘the flow of largely routinized social life depends on forms of practical knowledge, guided by structural features- rules and resources- of the social systems which shape daily conduct’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:3). This dynamic approach, shared by both much commensal scholarship and certain readings of practices is consistent with the view that although practices are social,
and habituated or routinized, individuals retain some freedom in how they perform them (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996, 2006; Warde, 2005).

Therefore, analysis into second nature, habituated or routinized forms of commensality, including their intertwining with material artefacts and uses, can in fact reveal much about the broader social contexts of that commensality: ‘we are able to build a bridge between material culture, gestures, actions, and people [...] to investigate the functional and social dimensions of [...] practices’ (D’ Anna and Jauss, 2015:69).

The disciplines of sociology and anthropology are also united in their framing of the relations between everyday or mundane eating together activities and the broader organisation of the social realm. Commensality, and its function and propensity for social bonding and organisation is positioned as a significant field wherein the social realm is itself, fabricated. As Chou contends ‘[s]tudying and analyzing the seemingly mundane everyday practices of eating is simply not a trivial pursuit but constitutes significant sources for comprehending the movement of society’ (2015:141). The mundane, banal, everyday or even small-scale or micro facets of social life are positioned as significant. As Nicolini reflects:

‘social conduct that according to the accepted views are considered ‘small-scale’ – for example, the practice of greeting other people at the beginning of a social encounter – are in fact ubiquitous, pervasive and critical to sustain the fabric of social relationships and its orderliness’ (2017:100).

The notions of the scale and size of social practices is also pertinent to both anthropology and sociology within the study of commensality. Theorists such as Nicolini (2017) purport that a form of relational or ‘connected situationalism’ is a preferred means of articulating simultaneously what may be apprehended through empirical enquiry alongside what may be represented in abstract theory; the everyday and how it relates to social structures. Here, as with commensal scholarship, the basic unit or lens of analysis does
not focus solely on a single scene of action, specific situation or instance of the accomplishment of a
mealtime practice, but rather a ‘chain, sequence or combination of performances plus their
relationships – what keeps them connected in space and time’ (Nicolini, 2017: 101-102).

From this perspective the empirically encounterable associations of practices are framed as a means of
studying ‘how large phenomena emerge from and transpire through connections between practices’
(Nicolini, 2017:102). As with commensal theorisations and the framing of mundane meals as socially
significant, understandings of social practices must ‘account [for] the nexus in which they come into being’
(Nicolini, 2017:102) and moreover, start with examinations of the everyday and small-scale and ‘follow
connections’ (Nicolini, 2009) to account for how these small-scale occurrences substantiate larger scaled
phenomena.

The function of commensality of social organisation and in particular the structuring of social cohesion,
means that its undergirding purpose is continually realised through a variation of expression. As Mauss’s
classic concept of the mealtime as a ‘total social fact’ ([1923] cited in Valeri, 2013) suggests, commensality
simultaneously conveys a universal function whilst presenting ‘all aspects of society: the economic, jural,
political, religious, aesthetic, moral’ (Van Esterik, 2015:3). Or as Appadurai notes the commensal realm
constitutes ‘a highly condensed social fact’ and a ‘marvellously plastic kind of representation’ ([1981:494],
cited in Chou, 2015:140).

Moreover, in synthesising theories of commensality and practices, eating in groups maintains an
ambivalent, dynamic position as both universal and particular. Just as commensality can be
simultaneously interrogated as evidence of both the broader structurings and the situated productions of
the social realm, so, too, theories of practice take practices as expressive of and as constituting these
differing social domains. The internal theoretical consistency of both commensality and social practices
whether situated or distributed, or specific or universal, are maintained through this positioning of
commensal practices as varyingly scaled engines of the social. For example, as D’Anna and Jauss note
when thinking-through foodways:
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‘cooking builds a link between food production and consumption, [and] the actual commensal act. Cooking, like consuming food, can take place in various social contexts, and how, where, when, and by whom food is cooked plays a crucial role in commensal practices and may reveal social relations that shape the background of the act of eating and drinking together’ (2015:66).

Herein, one will always see the links between the particular and universal because commensality both enacts and represents the construction of the social realm. As the vignette has emphasized, beyond the food itself, there is a myriad of social ‘things’ that ‘go into’ a social eating mealtime both before, during and after service. The competencies of cooking close-dated surplus foods, the enjoyment of a cheap dinner as expressed by paying eaters, the moving and arranging of tables and chairs to accommodate new eaters, the position of a serving hatch and how that may shape service-delivery, the conversations in the queue, the shared meal at a particular time- all of these practices come within the purview of commensal anthropology and practice theories. They also draw upon the commensal practices evidenced in other areas of social life such as the sharing, caring and hospitality of the domestic mealtime, the repertoires of etiquette required to politely engage in eating ‘out’, and the rites of celebration and mourning. These are all facets of commensality that exist elsewhere within the social realm and can be understood as being called upon within the practices of social eating commensality- as will be evidenced and analysed within the final chapter.

Encompassing all of these facets of a social eating mealtime and how they are both expressive of that specific social eating space and simultaneously refracting the current UK milieu requires a theorisation which ‘speaks to’ this mid-space wherein the interleaving of agency and structure can be encountered and accommodated without sole recourse to either.
4.2.3 Between structure and agency, social practices and their flat ontology

Practice is ‘a rich polysemic word that, in addition to denoting organised arrays of action, also highlights the necessary embeddedness of human activity in social and material contexts and the relentlessly unfolding character of action and sequences of performances’ (Hui *et al*., 2017:2). Practice theories purport to uphold the following propositions: that practices consist in organised sets of actions; those practices link to form wider complexes and constellations – a practice nexus; and that these practice arrangements form the ‘basic domain of study of the social sciences’ (Giddens, 1984: 2).

Practice Theories resolve the ontological ambivalence of the structure and agency duality through what is termed a ‘flat ontology’ and through a focus on social practices as the empirical and conceptual lens for comprehending the social realm. Practice theories are not just ontologically unified through their interest in and commitment to practices, and how they form together into ‘bundles’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) of more complex sets of practices, they also share an additional, general feature, that of ontological ‘flatness’. Although by no means completely accepted or without discussion within practice theorisations, this proposition holds that everything there is to any given phenomena is laid out on one level of reality (Schatzki, 2016). A ‘flat’ ontology is variously conceived of as overcoming the structure versus agency dualism (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005), as shifting from hierarchies into networks of knowledge (Kuijer and Watson, 2017; Maller and Strengers, 2018), as moving from a sole focus on individual actions to assemblages of individuals, objects and contexts (Hand and Shove, 2007; Gherardi and Perrotta, 2014; Strengers, Nicholls and Maller, 2016). What these various interpretations and usages of a ‘flat’ ontological position share is a commitment to viewing the social realm beyond recourse to dualistic hierarchies, and as occupied by a range of actants and participants beyond human individuals.

In practice theories levels of social reality are conceived of as ‘domains of entities between which systematic relations of causality or supervenience exist. The existence of such relations establishes domains as higher and lower levels’ (Schatzki, 1988; Spaargaren, Weenink and Lamers, 2016). Supervenience means that changes to one domain cannot occur without corresponding changes to
entities in another domain. Rather than new and emergent phenomena that are partially autonomous from their originary entities, a supervenient reading of the social realm purports that without a change in individuals, no change can manifest within a social system, for example.

Therefore, the domains of the social are viewed as being nested within one another, and any account of social change depends upon either a change in structure affecting the individual, or a change in behaviour affecting the structure. In sociological investigations, the two most conventional levels are the higher level of social structures, systems and institutions, as a macro level of the social. The other, lower level is that of the individual and their behaviours and interactions, the micro level of the social. If changes in structures and systems depend upon changes in individuals and behaviours then it can be argued that these two levels are actually one, interdependent and mutually constitutive level where change occurs not just between levels but rather through a ‘flat’ ‘field’ of the social where there are only linked social arrangements in the form of practices and ‘bundles’ of practices (Schatzki, 1996; Latour, 2007; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

This approach is in contrast then, to the structural critiques of food aid that locate social change as unfolding from the higher-level social tiers of welfare policies, neoliberal governance or corporate food waste management, or as being downstepped by the mid-level charitable food aid sector. In an opposite location within that model of the social is the rational, choosing consumer and individual or individuals: ‘[t]he model of the homo economicus explains action by having recourse to individual purposes, intentions and interests; social order is then a product of the combination of single interests’ (Reckwitz, 2002:245).

Instead, the flat ontological approach proposes a differing view and lens of analysis which can make sense of ‘the emergent organisational forms, diverse forces and unreliable agents’ (Reckwitz, 2002: 173) that characterise social eating initiative commensality. This encompasses ‘a more transductive approach that not only leaves behind the dualist either/or of possibilities or constraints, but also attempts to remain focused on concrete contexts and actual practices’ (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015:174).
The social realm here, is populated by clusters, arrangements, assemblages, nexuses and bundles of practices that are related in differing ways. Rather than analyses that look at the levels of society for the causes of social change, practice theories look at the slices or aspects of practices (Schatzki, 1996) and view them as containing both aspects of intangible structures and obscure activities, and aspects of more empirically encounterable social structures and individual actions:

‘there are no levels of the social which represent different dynamics of social change. A flat ontology entails that practice theories accept no stratification of social reality when it comes to the workings and mechanisms of the social. Rather the constitution of society evolves through, and takes the form of, a myriad of interconnected social practices being (re)produced in time and space’ (Spaargaren, Lamers and Weenink, 2016: 12).

Practice theories also promote ontological flatness because they also consider that practices are being constituted by things other than humans. Without surplus foods, for example, the practices of social eating commensality would be something else. The spaces of the dining room and their layouts and the mealtime times and rhythms also co-constitute social eating practices. Inanimate ‘things’ are not just tools that get co-opted by thinking humans, instead they are crucial elements which shape and influence practices, not as add-ons but as existing in the same field of this flat ontology of the social:

‘meanings and norms implicit in [...] practices are not just in the minds of actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, of mutual action’ (Taylor, 1971:27).

Humans are de-centred but positioned as coexisting with other ‘things’. Subjective behaviours are also not insignificant, for practices are also ‘carried’ by humans (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) but always in relation with other social things be those material, performative or discursive. ‘[I]n the moment of doing, practitioners (those that do) simultaneously reproduce the practices in which they are engaged
and the elements of which these practices are made’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:22). This approach enables the analyst to examine individual behaviours within the social contexts that shape them (Delormier, Frohlich, and Potvin, 2009). For as Warde claims ‘[p]ractices precede individuals; and practices, because they adumbrate standards, determine the basic parameters of mutually intelligible acceptable behaviour. This is achieved by virtue of the co-constitutive interrelationship between Practices and performances’ (2016:50).

Moreover, a flat ontology does not mean flat in practice or flat in analysis wherein all facets of a practice are collapsed into the same level of significance, for:

‘[the] ‘web of social practices is generating different kinds of inequalities. Unequal relations of power and the unequal distribution of emotional energies, values, knowledge and skills among groups of social actors do not go against the flat ontology of practice theories’ (Spaargaren, Lamers and Weenink, 2016: 12).

As Nicolini asserts, practice theories can offer a flat ontological account of a nonetheless ‘layered reality’ (2017). Moreover, the accounting for or representation of larger-scaled phenomena may be conveyed by ‘textures, nexuses, meshes or assemblages of practices’ (Nicolini, 2017:102) (and indeed, through creative displays of research findings).

This approach then, does not fall into the dualism of either locating the emergence, significance or value of social eating within either a structural or behavioural theorisation, but as Reckwitz claims: ‘forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understandings, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge’ (2002:249) can all be accounted for through an attention to practices.
Practice theories, contrary to criticism that they are limited to analysis of smaller-scale and local social phenomena, do also consider scale, complexity and sometimes, largeness, in their conceptualisations (Reckwitz, 2006; Hui, Schatzki and Shove, 2017; Kuijer and Watson, 2017). Whether this tendency to focus on more modest-sized social phenomena limits the capacity of this theorization to account for social eating initiative commensality will be addressed in the following methodology section, as will other limitations of this theorisation.

However, when it comes to articulating how practices join and enmesh with other practices to create larger orders of practices, Schatzki (1996) uses the concept of practice-arrangement-bundles. This refers to sets of social practices and material arrangements that ‘hang together and are interconnected in more or less strong and enduring ways’ (Spaargaren, Lamers and Weenink, 2016: 13). When accounting for larger practice-arrangement bundles, in particular, Nicolini (2009, 2017) refers to using a ‘zoomed-out’ methodological point of view to approach the ‘plenum of practices’ (Schatzki, 1996).

Taking this overview is useful for identifying smaller and larger bundles of practices and the patterns that they create through time-space (Schatzki, 2010). When practice-arrangement bundles are anchored at specific places, Shove (2012) refers to them as complexes. Well-defined chains of interconnected practices are also called nexuses, for example, in the empirical study of international food chains (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012).

Practice theories can also reveal the profound challenges encountered in attempts to disrupt and change behaviours, difficulties that extend far beyond the removal of contextual ‘barriers’ to change, and instead implicate the organisation of normal everyday life as a potent and often concealed force of power. As Shove (2010) reflects ‘one key condition is to shift the focus away from individual choice and to be explicit about the extent to which state and other actors configure the fabric and the texture of daily life’ (Shove, 2010:1281). However, Shove, Pantzar and Watson, also purport that:
‘[i]n exploring the potential for developing practice-oriented approaches to public policy [...] we confront a more rugged environment in which theories, like practices, compete with each other for advocates and carriers [...] it is important to remember that social theories do not lead directly to prescriptions for action. In allowing us to understand the world in a particular way, they are nonetheless relevant for how policy agendas and problems are defined and framed and for the kinds of intervention that are deemed possible, plausible or worthwhile’ (2012:139).

This consideration of impacts and effects, along with the consideration of scale within practice theories application, will be formatively discussed in the methodology section of this chapter and more fully examined within the thesis analysis chapter. Moving on from presenting the appropriateness, potential efficacy of and limitations to a practice theories approach, I now delve into the details of how this practice theories approach will be operationalised via narrowing down on which particular interpretative application of practice theorisation will be used as the lens for empirical analysis.

4.2.4 Why a ‘dynamics of social practices’ approach?
Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012), provide a particular approach to understanding the shaping and mobilizing of practices by segmenting practices out into ‘proto-practices, practices and ex-practices’. This model can aid an understanding of the dynamic processes through which social eating initiative commensality emerges, is constructed and sustained. They state that social practices consist of elements that are integrated when practices are enacted [...] practices emerge, persist and disappear as links between their defining elements are made and broken’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2021:21). Through attention to the trajectory of elements of practices it is possible to trace how they are taken up, co-opted and reproduced both as new practices or as hybrid practices which contain one or multiple elements of other practices. They suppose that elements of practices circulate and travel across and between practices. For example, surplus may be conceived of as both circulating in food aid practices and in social eating practices, creating differing types of food and meal provisioning materialities, competencies and being understood and categorized in differing ways.
This gives us a particular way of conceptualizing the hybridity of social eating initiative commensality because it provides an explanation for how certain elements of the domestic or exceptional mealtime also find expression within a social eating mealtime. Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) advance a schema of three elements, as noted in the conceptual model chapter—materials, competences and meanings.

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Figure 13. Diagram of a practice, informed by Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012.

*Material* encompasses ‘objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:23). Next is the ‘know how, background knowledge and understanding [...] deliberately cultivated skills, or more abstractly, as shared understandings of good or appropriate performances’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:23). These differing aspects of understanding and practical knowledge are put together and referred to as *competences*. The third element of practice collapses mental activities, emotion and motivational knowledge into one element—*meaning*.

This ‘deliberately streamlined approach’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) supposes that elements, however they might be defined, are somehow ‘out there’ in the world, operating within other practices with the potential to be linked together to co-evolve new practices. If I go along with the idea that practices exist when elements are integrated, I need to ‘recognize two related possibilities: one is that relevant elements exist but without being linked (proto-practices); the second is that practices...
disintegrate when links are no longer sustained’ (ex-practices) (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:24). This linking is crucial because it accounts for the dynamism of social practices in latent, active and disintegrating forms: ‘if specific configurations are to remain effective, connections between defining elements have to be renewed time and again’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:24).

This suggests that stability and routinization are not end points of a linear process of normalization. Rather, they should still be understood as ‘ongoing accomplishments’ wherein similar elements are linked together in similar ways. One particular feature of this approach alongside the dynamic and specific account of how practices come and go, change form and endure, is the emphasis on how elements in circulation produce commonalities in practice, such as a mealtime. This account also specifies how, dependent upon their specific use, elements produce local variation such as the variation in social eating initiative mealtimes.

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Figure 14. Diagram of social practices and how they change (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

This account which explains both routinization and commonality and novelty and dynamism is useful in conceptualizing how commensality is at once common, general, pervasive and enduring in its function of producing social cohesion in practice, but also as localized, specific and about ‘more than’ instrumental,
physical feeding. This approach can appropriately articulate the emergence of novel configurations of public mealtimes which ‘evolve as these ingredients change’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012:25) (quite literally in the case of surplus foodstuffs).

Commensality within this theorization endures because of the continued circulation of specific elements-material, competences and meanings and it also shifts and is situationally practiced when new elements or arrangements of elements come into play. As stated in the previous chapter where a Shove-inspired table listed possible elements of a social eating initiative mealtime- surplus foods, tables and chairs, kitchens and funding streams coalesce with diners, volunteers, washing up activities and the notion of the family meal and eating ‘out’, to construct a social eating initiative mealtime practice.

Therefore, a practice theorisation, and in particular Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s ‘dynamics of social practices’ approach (2012), gives us a number of concepts through which the value of social eating initiative commensality to participants can be articulated, as well as an organizing framework through which to code and assemble the insights generated through fieldwork. This will be discussed in the following coding and formative analysis chapter. For now, the conceptual model developed in the previous chapter is now modified to show where the focus of the empirical work will be.
However, before the empirical work is undertaken, the following section discusses the methodological issues which must be clarified prior to fieldwork.

4.3 ‘Zooming in and zooming out’ and the methodological implications of using a practices approach

‘Researchers that find an interest in commensality research will discover that there is no easily identified common research methodology [...] Moreover, the diversity of the applicability of the method differed within qualitative methods, ranging from more or less rather standardized questionnaires, with specific open questions, to collections of life stories [...] According to different application of theories, theories surrounding “practices” were observed as the most commonly used’ (Scander, Yngve and Lennernäs Wiklund, 2021:2632).
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Having laid out the philosophical and theoretical foundation to the thesis the application of this approach to the conduct of research is now discussed. Just as a rationale for studying social eating initiatives as a form of commensality has been provided, so, too, a rationale for the methods to investigate them will also be presented. This is the stage of the thesis where the chosen theoretical literatures are drawn together, much like in the conceptual model chapter, to create a framework through which the empirical research is operationalised. In this chapter, then, the methods, the setting, the case-study, the types of data to be collected and the type of conceptual analysis to be performed upon this data will all be discussed. This focus ensures that the organisation of empirical work and the clarification of the coding approach are successively contributing towards answering the specific chapter sub-question, and the overall research question (c) \textit{which philosophical underpinning, and which methods, are appropriate for examining the practices of social eating commensality}

At the core of the intended research-approach is the social eating initiative meal itself. Social eating initiatives are conveyed through the fieldwork vignette within the literature review as being experienced socially, materially and symbolically, and as a practice that connects, via the shared meal, to the broader current social milieu of food insecurity, food wastage and the destructuration of the shared mealtime. The literature review and the conceptual model on commensality and the ‘more than food’ approach gives disciplinary and conceptual focus to these issues going forward and this focus is sharpened through the selection of a particular practice theories approach as an analytical framework- the dynamics of social practices (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

To begin to build the bridge between abstract theory and empirical research I return to the dimensions of social practices diagram from previous chapters. This ‘dynamics of social practices’-informed diagram indicates what practices I may detect which may illuminate how commensality is being ‘carried’ through social eating mealtime practices. This illustrates why practice theories offer us a specific set of ‘tools’ because this approach sensitises us to what the social realm of social eating initiatives may be composed of, ‘carried’ by and therefore enable us to discern where value may be being created, experienced and ascribed.
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Table 3. Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) - informed diagram of elements as related to commensality.

As stated, all of these parts of the developing argumentation lead back in various ways to the phenomenon of a social eating initiative mealtime itself and how I have chosen to account for it and formatively analyse it. The vignette paints a picture of a busy, bustling mealtime in a somewhat run-down part of Nottingham city. What transpires throughout the mealtime, however, are experiences that feel quite different from those painted by the literatures on food banks, for example (Tarasuk and Beaton, 1999; Garthwaite, 2011; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016; Caplan, 2017, 2020; Lambie-Mumford, 2017). Therefore, central to this thesis has been the development of a different and...
distinctive explanation for why these meals may be valued by participants, beyond instrumental feeding and beyond the conceptualisation and critiques of charitable food aid. This has shaped the thesis through a consideration of the additional, alternative, concepts that are drawn together in a ‘more than food’ approach. If I return to an excerpt from the vignette, I can now identify a number of these alternative themes:

‘The thing I notice on entering the space is the sound of people talking and greeting one another; a low conversational hum punctuated by the occasional shout from the group of children who are running into the building. We step inside and the noise levels rise with many people chattering, greeting one another with the scrapings of chairs being pulled out so people can sit together... Chairs are added, and seating rearranged to accommodate people.

A queue at the serving hatch begins to form... The mood is anticipatory and people at the front of the queue jostle good naturedly at the hatch asking how the cook is, and what is on the menu for today. A shout rings out from the kitchen. “Dinner is served!

I can also add to the meal from the side table in the hall. Here I find bread and butter, cheeses, cakes, fruit, yoghurts and juices. Tea, coffee and a variety of herbal tea bags are also on view as I queue to get my cutlery... It’s also evident that the meal has been freshly cooked; homemade if you will. There is a sense of abundance, of plenty to go around, of second helpings that feels both familiar as in domestic but also like a ‘going out’ meal occasion.

As expected, the mealtime itself and the food are central, but the place, the space and how it is arranged and re-arranged are also important. The feelings of pleasure, abundance, and care are also apparent, as are the relating of links to domestic and ‘eating out’ occasions. All of these impressions, sensations, reflections and activities coalesce within a social eating mealtime and therefore, I am concerned with how empirical research might proceed in capturing: ‘the coming together of a multitude of pieces into one
grand (yet simultaneously mundane) performance’ (Wills, Dickinson and Meah, 2016:471) which can be viewed as ‘amalgams of materials, performances, structural factors, and cognitions whose particular time-space constitution is contingent on the agency of actors and is thus open to accident and improvisation’ (Jones and Murphy, 2011:374). Furthermore, I did not eat with others at a social eating space in a detached, objective manner and I seek to consciously capitalise on this experience of researcher-as-eater and foreground and incorporate it into the methodological approach.

4.4 Ethical and positional reflections
I aimed to capture this mealtime: both before, during and after, the people within it, and the arrangements of non-human ‘things’. And in addition, according to the ways that spaces and places and timings also ‘take part’ in this mealtime’. I was not searching for an objective measure of this mealtime where findings can be generalised, and I am not looking to prove or disprove a hypothesis per se. Although I can reflect that the overall research questions and the argumentation thus far do at least make a claim about what may be of value within these spaces for participants. The claim that commensality and its associational values of social bonding, social cohesion and more broadly, social production, may be being ‘carried’ within these spaces can, then, be empirically encountered and examined at the level of practices.

Much like the thesis thus far I have employed a hybridised approach to the research to try and ‘get at’ an answer to my research questions in ways that is both sensitive to the participants views themselves but which also seeks to leverage my unique positionality to gain access to people, places, spaces and projects that other researchers may struggle to realise. However, I am also conscious of what is termed ‘drive-by’ research:’ a colloquial phrase used to describe studies conducted by researchers who are only interested in their own study (i.e., usually collecting a survey) and, whether intentional or not, provide nothing in return to help the community’ (Carpiano, 2009: 267).

My status as a researcher rests not only being legitimiated by gatekeepers who can provide me with access to their social eating mealtimes but also upon building genuine and authentic rapport with diners.
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Therefore, consideration is given in the methodology and methods sections of this chapter to engagement modes and styles which cast the researcher as an eater and not just as a collector of information.

My unique capacity to navigate the field occurs (as stated in the introductory positionality statement in chapter 1), due to close working within the field for around 10 years. I have an extensive network of connections from the community food sector, local authority and public health contacts, Church groups, community centres, youth organisations and of course, the social eating network members themselves. Prior to undertaking the thesis, I had kept up contact with groups, usually by attending their events. This ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998) ensured I was conversant with which groups were operating, which were moving or changing staff or even venue. This positionality enabled me to gain consent to research easily and readily and this was a crucial benefit in enabling the empirical part of the thesis. Moreover, my previous position as a community food activist had also enabled me to identify that more than numerical evidence to accurately articulate the ‘more than food’ aspects of these initiatives. Several years ago, together with the network, we had looked at forming partnerships with public health, local councillors, funders and corporate responsibility contacts. What these efforts had shown us at the time was that the network needed to build an evidence base to valorise its efficacy. This remained a strategic proposition before I left that field to move into academia. However, this thesis and my position within its development is not one of completing that task. Rather, my academic positionality, whilst capitalising on my particular form of participant access and knowledge, actually requires a different set of skills or ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1990) than those of a community food activist. Deep knowledge of the field, extensive reading, careful consideration of the existing literatures, ethical training, structuring an academic argument, identifying a conceptual model and research questions- all of these scholarly activities have to be undertaken before the benefit of those contacts can be leveraged.

But beyond access, how did my positionality effect the methodological aspects of the thesis? A deep immersion in the field showed me that my positionality might be appropriately reconciled by firstly, foregrounding this position through ethnographic fieldnotes (Learmonth and Humphrey, 2012; Marovelli, 2019) which made my situation within the research explicit. My ‘voice’ was prioritised here and my subjectivity as an ex-organiser and current eater-researcher was leveraged to bring a viewpoint to bear
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that did not just describe the meal itself, but which reflected on the ambience, the location, the mealtime activities and the conversations overheard, through the creation of vignettes and photographs.

This approach, rather than to try and minimise my influence within the data collection process, seeks to utilise it to collect the more reflective and in-detail facets of the mealtimes, especially as they are synthesised over time and across venues into a singular vision of social eating practices across the network.

Secondly, my positionality affected the methods chosen because I also sought to utilise those which consciously positioned the participants to direct the data collection processes, as with the ‘Go-along’ interviews (Carpiano, 2009; Evans and Jones, 2011; Garcia et al. 2012), meal-centred focus groups (Trubek and Belliveau, 2009; Halkier, 2017; Hall et al., 2020; Smith and Harvey, 2021), and ‘Photovoice’ exercises (Chilton et al., 2009; Valera et al., 2009; Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Pettinger et al., 2013; Flint et al., 2016; Soma et al., 2021). Herein, alongside my subjective position within the process, I also chose to explicitly gather the viewpoints of participants through their own, subjective positions. For example, go-along interviews gave the organisers the opportunity to lead the process as they walked me around their spaces, at their pace, and with their emphases.

I chose not to attempt to minimise my previous position and influence but rather to select methods which foregrounded the opportunity to both dialogue in-situ (but not in a formal interviewer and respondent dynamic), and the opportunity to create data when I was not present such as through the Photovoice exercise. I sought, rather than make any (pointless) claim towards objectivity, to situate myself within the field explicitly and to give voice to other subjective participants within it, as an alternative way of underpinning the scholarly legitimacy of the thesis (Ramírez-i-Ollé, M. (2019).

However, legitimation of my positionality also emerged from the adherence to proscribed research procedures as specified by my University. In order to initiate the fieldwork stage of the research I had to
submit a peer-reviewed ethical application and provide participant information and informed consent forms, in accordance with the Coventry University research procedures and policies. I also identified myself as a researcher at each research site and wore a lanyard with photographic identification. Moreover, at the time of writing I have spent a year post-fieldwork, organising a quarterly Nottingham Social Eating Network get-togethers and online-meeting events. I also ate at each social eating space as a paying customer several times prior to each fieldwork session. I also undertook voluntary setting up, cleaning and washing up roles in order to ensure I was contributing to the mealtime as a researcher, where possible.

I also wish to be sensitive to the participants and am very mindful that, as appraised in the literature review chapter, people are likely to be dining here due to the effects of food insecurity, be that economically mediated food insecurity or the social food insecurity of alimentary exclusion, which is engendered by the destructuration of the shared mealtime. My rationale for focusing on practices, group dynamics and in-situ research is as follows. I have already stated my ethical sensitivity to interrupting people’s dinner. Who likes to be interrupted when they are eating? I don’t. So, I extend that courtesy to social eaters. Again, concurring with the literature review, I perceive these issues to be serious and have significant impacts upon a person’s sense of wellbeing (Dunbar, 2017b). Therefore, an approach which doesn’t interrupt or impinge upon the enjoyment, or the nutritional sustenance of the mealtime is also important (see also, Pettinger et al., 2017, 2019; Soma et al., 2020, 2021; Chilton et al., 2009; Bowen, Brenton and Elliot, 2019).

Moreover, individual interviewing on potentially sensitive issues requires stepping away from the dining room to record people’s answers in confidence. This necessarily excludes eaters with children or people who may be accompanying someone they care for. It may reduce participation and research take-up. My experience is that people often feel intimidated by academic researchers and worry whether their answer is right or wrong. Choosing particular methods with care may enable us to minimise these potential barriers. I wanted the research to feel invitational rather than intimidating.
Importantly, I did not wish to stigmatise or differentiate diners and participants by asking them to disclose demographic information, such as age, income or identity (about which we would also need to have prior and definitional agreement) for that too would be interruptive and potentially stigmatising. It also supposes that an individual’s status determines their relation to commensality and whilst some literatures do support this (Giacoman, 2016) I have identified an opportunity within the literature positioning and review to develop a different and additional perspective which doesn’t have recourse to individual economic status as the sole determinant for the type of commensality that is being generated within social eating initiatives.

Given the context of the UK milieu I have identified, it is both empirically and conceptually novel to ask participants what they value, rather than what is ‘wrong’ for them. It may be that respondents do enunciate their grievances and challenges, this approach does not foreclose that option, but it also seeks to engage people around potentially more positive or at least different issues which may be a point of brief respite and reflection amidst challenging times. This approach may also enable people to call to mind what their strengths, opportunities and contributions to this social realm may be (McKnight and Russell, 2021).

Therefore, I state at this stage of the thesis (reconfirming my previous reflection on my positionality within the research) that I am invested, impartial, interested, curious about and embedded in, social eating practices. I did not wish to move too far away from them or to try and dilute the experiences I had when I ate with others in public spaces and places. I wish to convey the different parts of the mealtime itself, the dining room in action, the busyness of the service, the conversational chatter and the sense that a social eating mealtime is for participants, something of an occasion; to convey how commensality is ‘carried’ through social eating mealtime practices I wanted the research to happen in-situ, where possible, and to recruit participants in-situ, informally and to capitalise on the conversational and convivial atmosphere of social eating initiatives to create the context within which reflection rather than knowledge-extraction can occur. I wanted to leverage, like my positionality, the opportunity for diners to see what others ‘think’ and do and to keep the responses energised by the dynamism of the dining room, meal service and clean-up activities.
I was therefore, conducting research that sought to capture data that conveys the multiple perspectives of participants that were carried within and through social eating initiative commensality practices. This occurred through their own data-utterances, whether that be words, pictures or descriptions and I also utilised my own insights, experiences and reflections. This methodological style seeks to generate and substantiate the emergent ‘more than food’ approach by apprehending the viewpoints of participants, but not just by capturing what they ‘think’. Additionally, methods such as interviews or diaries also inherently conceal the competencies and often habituated aspects of a practice (Halkier and Jensen, 2011) and the intricacies that might exist between ‘carriers’ of practices (Goffman, 2002 [1959]). As Martens (2012) contends, relying on talk about practices tends to reduce the meaning and significance of a practice to an individual and potentially misses out on the ways in which contexts direct practices.

By a careful selection of methods, I co-opted participants into sharing not only their views but also a richer account of their lifeworlds through the inclusion of the material, spatial and temporal features of their social eating practices. The data determined which themes or practices were discerned, and what practices became evident during the coding and formative analysis stage, but I did know that I was seeking to identify commensal practices through the lens of the conceptual model and the ‘dynamics of social practices’-informed model (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

4.5 Practices as an empirical lens

Another principal methodological challenge for empirical research is the identification of the key lens for analysis or the ‘entry point’ for empirical enquiry (Southerton, 2006; Halkier and Jensen, 2011). An individually oriented methodology here, utilising one-to-one interviews, for example, would potentially miss the dynamics of group discussions, convivial deliberation and roundtable discussions that social eating appears to generate.

Moreover, coming to the empirical stage of the research with this interest in practices does create a pre-framing lens through which these data-utterances are seen and made sense of. Data was coded, made sense of, and linked together intelligibly to create a data-narrative that conjoins individual and group
insights with the literatures discussed and to the theoretical, conceptual and methodological requirements of thesis-construction.

Practice theories proponents, here, can usefully offer a ‘toolkit’ approach to practitioners who wish to take practices as the nexus between and expressive of, both local achievement and a broad social formation and articulation of thought, behaviour and being, and which includes non-human actants and factors as equally constitutive of any practice (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002; Nicolini, 2012; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). However, as pertains to the specific methods utilised, as Shove (2017) notes that ‘theories matter for how problems are defined and for how lines of enquiry are formulated. At a minimum they are sensitising devices’. Specific research questions are situated within theoretical paradigms but ‘there is no single or simple link from theory to method’ (Shove, in Hui, 2017: np).

This sensitisation to the research phenomena occurs in this thesis firstly through the recognition that current structural and behavioural accounts of the UK social milieu ‘tell’ stories about that context and how it can be made sense of, but they do not fully or adequately account for why social eating initiatives may be being valued beyond their instrumental capacity to feed individuals. This sensitisation has directed enquiry towards ‘additional and alternative’ conceptualisations such as ‘food ladders’ (Blake, 2019b) and particularly towards the view of social eating initiative commensality as being an expression of much ‘more than food’.

Moreover, and fundamentally, I was interested in not only the feeding requirements but what else and what other ‘things’ are going on in these mealtimes. Through the focus on commensality, I learned that it is a potent, persistent, and pervasive practice which is always being engaged in, by multiple social actors, in a variety of ways so that the fundamental mechanism of social cohesion can be sustained (Higgs, 2015; Giacoman, 2016; Dunbar, 2017b). As Nicolini states (2012) research should aim to become ‘more articulate and capable of perceiving differences (and thus meaning)’, and that such an undertaking is ‘generative, not eliminativist: its goal is to increase our capacity to make connections among phenomena, not to eradicate interesting features’ (Nicolini, 2012: 216).
As stated by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) practices exhibit both commonalities and variations and grasping these textures and complexities through a careful choice of methods can enable a better understanding of how value is created, attributed, sustained and transformed through social eating practices. This intent to look for commonalities and variances in practices means the size of the case-study, or its scale, must also be implicated in the methodological choice. The lens of empirical entry is ‘the practice’ but as we know practices can also link and assemble together into more complexes and nexuses; into a ‘plenum of practices’ (Schatzki, 1996). As Nicolini reflects:

‘practice-based approaches join forces with other relational sociologies and invite us to re-think certain entrenched distinctions starting with the idea that micro and macro-phenomena can be cleanly distinguished [...] practice-based approaches suggest that large phenomena are made and that differences in scale are produced in practice and through practices’ (2017: 112).

According to Nicolini, ‘the advantage [...] stems from their capacity to use more than one scale at a time and to move skillfully between them’ (2017:112). Notwithstanding the skill of the researcher to actualize this, ‘sociological concepts can be made fully empirical only by grounding them in a sample of the typical micro-events that make them up’ (Collins, 1981:988). A methodological choice and rationale around the casestudy has to be advanced here in order that empirical work is manageable and realistic within the schedule of research. The methodological approach here must not too broad as to create a shallow listing of all of the different practices due to there being insufficient ‘space’ and time to analyse them. However, too close an analysis might result in an overly localised view which overstates that differential variations and particularities of those projects mealtime offers. This would constitute a missed opportunity to draw upon the broader, functional commonalities that commensality purports to uphold. Therefore, a practices oriented, ‘mid-space’ approach to is favoured.

It is likely and expected that in surveying the network of social eating initiatives, not only will a variety of social eating practices be uncovered but some of the key facets that ensure commensality is considered to be an enduring social phenomenon may also be evidenced. The analysis is not intended to be
comparative but rather the specific identities of each social eating initiative will go relatively unmentioned in favour of searching for the overall commensal practices which link these initiatives and which participants across these mealtime events disclose as being of value.

Therefore, I moved between these scales of practice by collecting both individual-participant information at each social eating site as well as using the ‘largeness’ of the network to detect repetitions, overlaps and intensities of commensal practices. Through this practice theories positioning I expected that there would likely be profound commonality in the ways that social eating was valued in specific initiatives, due to the elements of these social practices also existing in other areas and practices of social life, and across initiatives. I intended to add all of the individual-participant insights together during the coding phase of the analysis to uncover broader types of commensal practice that appear both within individual initiatives and when these initiatives are viewed as a network.

As per Nicolini’s statement on sociological knowledge developing along a generative line (2012:216), Heuts and Mol also note that ‘crafting a rich theoretical repertoire […] does not work by laying out solid abstracting generalisations, but rather by adding together ever shifting cases and learning from their specificities’ (2013:127). This ‘nested-within’ approach constitutes a ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ (Nicolini, 2009, 2017) perspectivisation of the coding and analysis stage. It is expected that specific types of individual participant and individual initiative data-utterances will coalesce to construct overall and conjoined social eating network commensal practices. Rather than a somewhat linear progression of size or scale, instead focus will be given to the nested-within commensal practices of The Nottingham Social Eating Network as a means of using ‘largeness’ to identify significance, intensity, repetition and crucially, value.

Accordingly, this network-scale is appropriate for this research being both empirically encounterable and varied enough to substantiate an analysis that looks for the commonalities of commensal practices in order to confidently craft an analysis that can respond to the overall research question (1) what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?
How empirical research can ‘handle’ this zooming in and out and what type of data enables this type of analysis to occur is the subject of the next section where a suite of methods is proposed to accomplish these aims. In reflecting upon this methodological approach to sampling I return to this chapter’s sub-question: (c) which philosophical underpinning, and which methods, are appropriate for examining the practices of social eating initiative commensality? I can state now with confidence that I have examined the theorisation of practices, its methodological implications and formatively considered the case study. In the next section, I ‘meet’ The Nottingham Social Eating Network members and convey brief snapshots of each of them. After the section on the network case study, a specific methodological approach inspires a discussion of the range of methods used and then the chapter concludes.

4.6 Sites of participatory practices: Introducing the Nottingham Social Eating Network

In 2017, Nottingham city council declared its support for Nottingham to be recognised as the UK’s first social eating city (Nottingham City Council, 2017; BBC, 2018). This declaration was a supportive response to the growing number of community groups participating in a specific form of mealtime practice, referred to locally as ‘social eating’. To help demonstrate the variation of the network a brief description of the social eating groups are provided in the table on pages 146-150 which is based upon fieldwork observations and local government statistical data on indices of deprivation and poverty (Nottingham City Council, 2019). Social eating groups are active in most wards of Nottingham city and their activities range from weekly to monthly social eating meals held in a variety of spaces and by a variety of groups: Church and community organisations, informal companionship groups, commercial cafes which ‘bolt on’ a social eating event, meal-delivery services via pop-up social eating events and charities- social eating is provided by a diverse network to diverse audiences across the city. These are informally known as The Nottingham Social Eating Network, and they are the focus of the research.

Nottingham is an area of high, multiple deprivation and has, for example, the UK’s lowest rate of disposable income (Lawton, 2017). This broad-brush picture of the city frames it as an area where social eating initiatives may have proliferated due to food insecurity, replacing community commensality with
charitable commensality. However, as the snapshot of the network shows, the variety of projects offering social eating meals demonstrates that whilst there are for example, church groups who emphasise the charitable giving of food, social eating initiatives are not primarily about charity. Nor do the organisers and attendees of social eating initiatives in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire fit neatly within any single determinant category of demography, social class, economic wealth, or religious membership. As their name suggests, they are more easily characterised by how they arrange eating rather than who they preclude from eating. More specifically, Luca et al. (2021) describe social eating initiatives as:

‘community-based initiatives that provide an integrated model for recovering and using surplus food, localizing food and providing spaces of interaction that can address food insecurity, support health, well-being and social capital. Generally, these social eating projects [...] cook and provide nutritious meals in a community venue for a suggested donation of, for example, £2.50 per three course meal for adults; children eat for free’ (2021: Introduction, para. 3).

In the way that many of the spaces, such as Church halls, are adopted and utilised for social eating, so too, are practices get adopted into, or ‘carried’ into new contexts, bringing with them certain materialities, competences and meanings. For example, I was able to detect practices which both cross over and are carried into these spaces from external, pre-existing practices such as domestic, dinnertime or food aid provisioning. As one group reflects:

‘through community dining spaces we create purpose, friendship and build resilience. When we sit and eat together, barriers are broken down and new ideas can flow. The spaces being created are ones where anyone and everyone can eat in company’ (The National Food Service, 2020).

Smith and Harvey state that:
‘these initiatives operate as non-profit organisations. The meal is a paid-for offer with discretionary free meals available, rather than a free meal via referral. They have limited opening hours and reclaim spaces which otherwise serve different functions at other times in the day, such as church halls. The provisioning is typically overseen by a skeleton staff, with support from a broad ensemble of volunteers managing how food is served, participants are greeted, spaces are organised, entertainment provided, and dishes cleaned. Social eating spaces are open once a week or fortnight for example, and for a few hours; effectively ensuring people come together to eat a large-scale social meal’ (2021:4).

In Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, there are currently (2021) 17 self-identified ‘social eating initiatives’ informally known as The Nottingham Social Eating Network². This local network also links in with The National Food Service³ network through the co-promotion for the public consumption of surplus foods for social good. There are some other examples of ‘social eating’ and surplus-utilising projects and networks in the UK, however, each of these networks can be differentiated by the practices through which their meal services are organised and delivered. Sheffield’s FoodHall Project⁴ promotes a revivification of social space and hosts arts and community events through its focus on place and space-based urban infrastructure. The national FoodCycle⁵ and The Real Junk Food Project⁶ networks attempt to valorise and normalise the consumption of intended-to-be-wasted-food through the trope of environmental stewardship (Gollnhofer, 2017) and social eating. However, these projects differ in that they do not charge for meals, preferring a ‘pay as you feel’ model of suggested donations.

3. https://www.nationalfoodservice.uk/
5. https://www.foodcycle.org.uk/
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The ‘social eating initiatives’ described within this thesis refer specifically to the organisations offering a low-cost, paid-for, surplus meal offer, which is consumed at a public, shared mealtime such as those offered across The Nottingham Social Eating Network (Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Smith and Harvey, 2021).

This specific Nottingham site focus and network selection are based on a purposive selection strategy: ‘selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide you with the information that you need to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative selection decisions’ (Maxwell, 2013: 195). Moreover, whilst there is rarely a fixed and pre-established sample in qualitative research, in this case, purposive selection is also necessary due to the limited number of specific ‘social eating initiatives’. In line with the research questions selecting the sites and participants for qualitative research, which is conventionally termed sampling, I was also aiming to include observations of and interactions with, materials, settings, events, and processes. This means that participants were selected based on their ability to provide relevant information in service of the research questions and aims.

Prior to specific approaches and purposive selection of participants, I also engaged in extensive site visits, informal discussions and I took many photographs of my meals, the venues and the equipment such as the washing up facilities. This work was conducted over a 4-month period, prior to the 6-month formal and ethically consen ting engagement stage of the fieldwork as a way of immersing myself in the social eating experience and formatively exploring the field- both physically and as a way of working out the appropriate selection of participants for further, formal engagement. Therefore, as well as the social eating groups, I also observed, contacted, and dialogued in person, by phone call and via email with the following organisations: Dig In (a Nottingham allotment ‘grow and eat’ group), Nottingham Good Food Partnership (a local food and growing group representation organisation who are seeking to support the transition of Nottingham into a Sustainable Food City), Square Meal (a social eating initiative that collected surplus from around the city who were involved in early discussions but not the official fieldwork stage), a one-off visit to a social eating group called Snacks & Ladders who ran a monthly meal sharing dinner (which was not made from surpluses, currently defunct), Neighbourhood Kitchen (an Oxford-based contact who established a social eating café there (now defunct), FairNSquare (a surplus-selling
community pantry shop in Worksop), various *Nottingham Trent University* architecture and the built environment staff who had engaged with The Nottingham Social Eating Network, neighbourhood development officers from *Nottingham City Council* who had been working with some of the groups to link up local community food provision and a representative from *Big Lunch* (a national organisation linked to the Eden Project who organise annual, national, community lunch events), and a community development worker from *FareShare East Midlands* (now FareShare Midlands, a national surplus redistribution charity).

The formal fieldwork stage of the thesis was then set up and arranged after it was decided that a disparate, wide-ranging (both organisationally and geographically) and multi-agenda selection of participants might yield an overly complex and differentiated data set where any commonalities around commensality might be challenging to demonstrate.

9 of the 17 social eating groups approached were available to engage in the study and 7 of the groups helped organise research events involving customer participant groups in-situ.7 Taken from its website, The Nottingham Social Eating Network describes a social eating initiative as ‘a safe and welcoming place with food at its heart’. Social eating initiatives are promoted as beneficial for those that ‘hate food waste’ but also to those who ‘just enjoy a meal with others as part of your social life’. Although not focused on analysing the organisational and customer demographic of social eating initiatives, on the following pages a brief description of each initiative is provided based upon fieldwork observations and local government statistical data on indices of deprivation and poverty (Nottingham City Council, 2019) giving a sense of the variation of organisational type, frequency, location, ‘style’ and ethos and observed customer demographic. These descriptions of different venues and organisational features of social eating initiatives

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also express how they relate to different pre-established social networks, particular spaces and particular socio-demographics.
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Someone said that to us once, and we couldn’t agree more. Everyone is welcome at a social eating space. Instead of opening all the time like a community cafe, we operate at public mealtimes. We focus on providing homemade food and a welcoming atmosphere. We use surplus foods and have affordable, dynamic menus that change all the time.

We all call ourselves social eating spaces but are individually unique and develop our services to cater to our local communities, often using well-loved community venues (but some of us do pop-ups, catering and other partnership-working, too).

If you...
- don’t want ready-meals or take-away
- don’t want to go into town to eat but you don’t want to cook
- hate food waste
- just enjoy a meal with other folk as part of your social life
then social eating is for you!

Social eating is a future-food practice which saves food, fuel and water and making good use of our collective resources. It’s also a smart way to reach our carbon-neutrality and food waste-reduction targets.

Figure 16. Website content from The Nottingham Social Eating Network
### Table 4. The Nottingham Social Eating Network venue and project descriptions (more detailed descriptions of each project are provided in the appendices).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Eating Initiative</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Eating Initiative</strong></td>
<td>This is a Church group that runs a weekly social eating event and a monthly family meal. It offers table service and tables set out in longer, canteen-style arrangements. The group is also developing a community allotment and is partnering with a local vermiculture project to compost local food waste. Meals are paid-for. The project has a mixture of paid staff and volunteers. Bestop Kitchen is based in Bestwood, North Nottingham City. Bestwood is an area classed within the city council literature (Nottingham City Council, 2019) as an area of multiple deprivation. This is a primarily white family and elder group with a number of customers with physical disabilities and mental health conditions. The weekly lunch has an average of 30-80 attendees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secret Kitchen</strong></td>
<td>Based in Newstead, Nottinghamshire, a predominantly white, working class and deprived ex-coal industry village, Secret Kitchen runs a monthly social eating event on a Saturday evening and additional events across Nottingham. It is a family-run social enterprise offering social eating events, cooking education, and surplus catering. Meals are paid for. There is a mixture of customers ranging from families, elders, individuals eating alone to large groups eating together. The monthly event is well-attended; often with around 80- customers and has a busy, noisy and highly sociable atmosphere as customers sit around large, circular tables to dine. The menu is a mixture of ethnic cuisines and traditional meals and is known for homemade puddings and homemade jams and chutneys which are sold alongside the meal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based in relatively wealthy Newark, Nottinghamshire, Carriages Café is a conventional, commercially operated café which runs a bi-monthly social eating meal in the evenings, after the conventional café closes. The meal is paid-for, but they accept monetary donations according to what the customer can afford to pay, and they also offer discretionary free meals. The customers range from people who are homeless to groups of elders. Around 40-50 customers enjoy table service in pleasant surroundings and free, additional food parcels are available to take away when there are surplus-surpluses such as short-dated items which will not be used by the time of the next event.

In a smaller adjunct to a large council estate in Clifton, South Nottingham city, Parkgate Community Café offers a weekly, table service, and pay-as-you-feel food shop. Staffed by a team of long-standing, dedicated volunteers, this social eating space primarily caters to families and elders. Clifton is a predominantly white, working-class area and this is reflected in the make-up of the diners. The café serves traditional meals, and a friendship group also operates in the same venue at the same time to encourage isolated people to socialise. 55-60 people come for a meal each week at this very well-organised project who have engaged widely with local supermarkets and food retailers to augment their FareShare delivery to produce a three-course meal each Friday lunchtime.
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Pulp Friction is a charity that enables young adults with learning disabilities to gain work experience. They run a pedal-powered smoothie service and are well-loved in Nottingham for their creative and welcoming events which sometimes showcase their Glee Choir. Meals are cooked and served by the young adults, and Pulp Friction has partnered with the Fire Brigade and Police services to utilise their catering facilities, provide meals to these services, and to subsidise their community social eating events.

In inner city Radford, Nottingham, Soul Food Café offers a mixture of ethnic and traditional UK cuisines from a Church Hall space. Soul Food attracts a diverse array of around 30 customers from students, local residents, food bank attendees, its Church congregation and members of a local arts hub to its £2 weekly lunch offer.

After persevering with a venue that lacked footfall, Sycamore Diner changed its focus to providing paid-for meals in partnership with a local housing association. Diners in each housing complex book their meals in advance and enjoy a freshly prepared lunch made by this group which has its origins in a local Scout group. Sycamore Diner has won awards for its services and is an example of partnership-working wherein a meal offer has added value to an existing and already-established service.
Sharing Sherwood’s primary focus, as communicated by its customers, is to reduce food waste, highlight sustainable eating practices and provide a monthly meal for the local community. Sherwood is relatively wealthy and although the meal operates by suggested donation, they raise enough money to regularly donate to a local food bank.

Growin’ Spaces runs a weekly meal which is well-loved and well-attended. Its menu often features produce from its community allotment site. It runs in a local Church Hall on a Thursday evening. Reflecting the make-up of Sneinton; the east, inner city area of Nottingham, Growin’ Spaces sees a diverse range of diners who come for a cheap, social meal after work and school. The small family team who run the initiative often host Christmas and celebration events in this well-used and well-known venue and the city council and local councillor occasionally run surgeries at the venue as a means of engaging with the local community.
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As formatively explained in the previous sections, the aim is to create an inclusive overall methodological approach such that a variety of respondents can describe and compare their own commensal participation with each other, and where data can be produced that provides a rich portrait of the lifeworld or foodscape of social eating initiative practices. The research will combine concurrent multi-methods conducted across these multiple field sites to study how participants themselves articulate their modes of participation in these initiatives in a manner that ‘should not overshadow the social and therapeutic value of mundane spaces’ (Cattell et al. 2008:558).

It is important to note here, that this approach requires further clarification given that the case-studies are not just engagements with the network but specifically with their ‘participants’, be those volunteers, managers, cooks or customers. In taking account of all of these individuals but then also including the contexts, resources and the stories and narrative elements of mealtime participants, the term participant is explicitly chosen to move beyond the individual eater and their identity to include the non-human actants of a social eating initiative mealtime. Moreover, this term acknowledges that these spaces appear to enable shifting phases of contribution and engagement beyond formal role division and therefore terminologies such as ‘staff’ or ‘customer’ may not always be applicable. The term participant then, is purposive and conveys the practice-oriented approach that seeks to foreground rather than hierarchise research subjects/objects.

And much like the questioning of the Right to Food (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford, 2015) and its reliance on an active citizen willing to claim and enact those rights, uncritical acceptance of a participatory ‘public’ can conceal the undergirding dynamics embedded in homogenising definitions. As Fraser notes, formative formulations of the public sphere were founded upon specific kinds of social relations, often those tied to ‘philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural [societies that were] anything but accessible to everyone’ (1993:114). The development of the term of ‘counterpublics’ (Fraser, 1993; Warner, 2021), was intended, therefore, to make space for marginalized views and disenfranchised participants. Despite varying agendas within the field of ‘publics’ and public and participant engagement a shared concern for recognizing diverse voices has emerged alongside an acknowledgement that ‘the
boundaries of a public are far more permeable and uneven than the general, or universal, public originally set out’ (Le Dantec and DiSalvo, 2013:243).

Le Dantec and DiSalvo contend that there is ‘no single public, but rather a multitude of publics’ (2013:243). In acknowledging this, I sought to select specific methods which centre the variance of participants and their lifeworlds within the research process. I selected engagement questions that are open, inductive and where emic perspectives are primarily centred. ‘The emic approach investigates how local people think […]. How they perceive and categorize the world, their rules for behavior, what has meaning for them, and how they imagine and explain things’ (Kottak, 2017: 47).

However, as becomes evident in the discussion on coding and analysis in the following chapters both emic and etic (insider and outsider-oriented) approaches are utilised in the next stages of the thesis. Practice theories emphasise the more tacit and taken for granted forms of behaviour that are often difficult to articulate, but this positioning has also been criticised for under-representing the participants themselves in favour of researcher-observation (Wills, Dickinson and Meah, 2016). Therefore, just as I have highlighted Nicolini’s ‘zooming in and out’ (2017) approach to encountering and accounting for social practices so, too, I utilise this empirical and analytical moving back and forth between considering ‘insider’ participant views, and the lens of the theory-informed researcher. To this end the question that operationalises the methods centre of the theme of value: ‘what is the value of the mealtime, to you?’.

This gets us in touch with the participant views and supports a ‘CBPR-informed’ approach of the methods (or community-based-participatory-research methods, which are explained fully in the following section). The ethnographic fieldnotes and observations and the dialogues that were created during meal-oriented methods as well as the coding process itself demanded that the researcher perspective was foregrounded and made evident. Intended to be open enough to encompass anticipated variations in responses, this question was also alert to the notion that the researcher was looking for expressions of practices in-situ. Moreover, CBPR and practice theories are intended to work together to create data that is alert to a range
of ‘participant’ views, whether verbalised, visualised or materially, spatially or temporally-presented via a range of human and nonhuman ‘participants’.

This specific question will be asked with prompts if necessary: ‘why do you eat here? ‘what do you like about this place?’, ‘why do you like visiting?’. These prompt questions are designed to be simple, open, inductive and centrally, to enable the participant to give as little or as much of a response as they wish to, in-situ and without disrupting the flow of their mealtime. I was looking to populate a portrait or snapshot to gain a sense of the practices that are valued within these spaces and places. The methods of applying this question will be specifically discussed in the next section.

To conclude this section, the overall methodological approach appropriate to fulfilling the first part of this chapters research sub-question (c) which underpinning theorisation is appropriate for examining the practices of social eating initiative commensality? is a qualitative, purposively sampled, in-situ, practice theories approach and in particular, a dynamics of social practices approach (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) which focuses on The Nottingham Social Eating Network.

In the next section, I respond to the second section of this chapter’s sub-question (c) what are appropriate methods for examining the practices of social eating initiative commensality? It is proposed that a community-based participatory research-inspired approach is a suitable mode, enacted through a suite of qualitative methods. These methods will create rich, insightful, practice-oriented data pertaining to the various actants, contexts and discourses of a social eating initiative mealtime and how value is constructed, ascribed, experienced and conveyed herein.

4.7 Mobilising the methods
In this section and before the chapter conclusion, a suite of qualitative methods is proposed to investigate and engage with the now identified Nottingham Social Eating Network and their participants
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To recap, each chapter has a research sub-question that drives its argumentation in service of the overall research question. The overall thesis question (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?** is therefore further addressed by responding to the third sub-question and in particular the second segment of this sub-question (c) **which philosophical underpinning, and which methods, are appropriate for examining the practices of social eating initiative commensality?**

One route into uncovering social value within communities is through enquiries into the types of commensality they construct. The ‘mingling, observing, and lingering’ (Cattell et al. 2008) around informal mealtimes is framed here as an entry-point to deeper understandings of how social value is expressed in non-formal ways. As per my initial positionality statement, I intend to capitalise on the networks and the ‘deep hanging out’ relationships (Geertz, 1998) I have developed over 10 years of engaging with social eating initiatives and stakeholders, operationalised through a number of methods.

This desire to articulate the value of social eating initiatives has thus far been underpinned by a conceptual focus on commensality as both being, and standing in for, much ‘more than food’. Moreover, a specific focus on the practices through which commensality is ‘carried’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) provides a potentially deeper articulation of social eating initiative commensality beyond a sole reliance on individual narratives. This developing argumentation also influences my choice of methodology via an empirical focus on qualitative, emic research and emic and etic analysis, as operationalised through participatory methods and open and inductive participant-questions. Inductive in this context means the data produced by these methods will be analysed in the following coding chapter through key terms, verbatim or literal coding. Organising these open codes into overall themes means that I am moving from the general to the more specific and building theory from the ‘bottom up’.

Of late, there has been ‘a renewed and reinvigorated exchange of ideas’ across sociology and participatory design, emerging from a shared interest in ‘community sensing’ (Le Dantec and DiSalvo, 2013); specifically attempting to engage and conceptualise the ways in which ‘public’ participants endeavour to enact
desired futures and prompt both local, regional and systemic change (Ehn, 2008; Björgvinsson et al., 2010; DiSalvo et al., 2012; Le Dantec and DiSalvo, 2013) and to uncover the value enacted within seemingly mundane activities such as eating.

Before we proceed, however, a rationale for the methods which were not chosen is also provided. I chose not to proceed with conventional interviewing of participants because I did not believe that the dynamic mealtime atmosphere would be well-captured if the data was taken out of context. I was mindful that interviewing out of service times might be onerous and time-consuming for participants when many were busy volunteers. In reality, also recruiting members of the public to be interviewed about their social eating initiative participation was also deemed to be impractical, requiring meeting strangers without the safety inherent in working in a public space. I also believed that it would be difficult to get potential participants to commit to meeting me ‘out of hours’ or that they would be reluctant to leave the dinner table when many of them could be assumed to be in need of a meal for sustenance. In considering the complex and challenging contexts under which many people live in the UK currently, I deemed the face to face, conventional interview format to be impractical and unethical.

Moreover, conventional interviews would de-situate participants thereby disinclining them from noticing or recalling the spatial, temporal and material facets of the mealtime, particularly as these arise spontaneously, around the dining table. One of the challenges around capturing practices as they flow and unfold is around re-inventing forms of attentiveness that are mobile and can respond precisely to admit the fleeting, the tacit, the mobile, chaotic and complex. A move away from the static nature of interviews requires researchers to work on the move in order to attend to the ‘newly coordinated’ nature of social reality which is partial, shifting, emergent and local. As Back notes: ‘(w)e have reached a moment where interviews have a limited usefulness as a means of understanding and investigating social life’ (Back, 2012:27), and as Harrisson also claims: ‘words both assist and obscure the sociologist’s understanding’ (Harrisson, 1947: 21).
Not being limited to what people say explicitly enables us to train a kind of attentiveness to tacit forms of coexistence: ‘If methods are not innocent then they are also political. They help make realities. But the question is: which realities? Which do we want to help make more real, and which less real?’ (Law and Urry, 2004: 404).

The challenge and opportunity that arises is the need to develop forms of attentiveness that can admit the fleeting, distributed, multiple, sensory, and emotional aspects of sociality. Therefore, the conventional interview format was discarded in favour of go-along or mobile interviews, for meal-centred focus groups in-situ and photographic and ethnographic fieldnotes which can produce, together, a rich, participant-centred dataset where the views, voices and perspectives of participants are grounded and where there is an explicit commitment to capturing those complex lifeworlds as they ‘form and deform’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) within community settings. The component elements of community-based-participatory research-informed sociology proposed here seeks to expand the sensory dimensions of sociological attentiveness, and to mobilise methods that move with the social world and to develop multiple vantage points from which empirical accounts are generated. The selection of these methods demonstrates how enlisting a wider range of the senses changes the quality of data and makes other kinds of critical imagination possible.

The community-based participatory research (CBPR) inspired approach broadly seeks to involve community members in the research process, producing forms of knowledge that are relevant, useful and/or driven and directed by community participants (Chung-Chun Chow and Crowe, 2005; Bradbury and Reason, 2006). As Gamble and Weil state: ‘they are also the means through which oppressed groups, which are often marginalized by government structures, can effect positive change in their communities’ (1995: 483). Although I cannot state with certainty that social eating participants are oppressed or identify as such, this approach is at least cognizant of and sensitive to the UK milieu in which there are significant experiences of hunger, both physical and social.
Through close attention to and involvement with users and their ideas, skills, habits, desires or plans, a range of entry points for explaining social practices emerges. Using public eating spaces to engage participants creates a focus for and rhythm to, dialogue. Sharing food with participants creates convivial conditions where emotions are stirred, reminiscences are recollected and where new relationships can begin to form (Dunbar, 2017a). Design approaches, which fall under the broader community-based participant research methodology, are primarily object and practice-oriented, where food and eating forms part of a researcher toolkit and offer creative ways of stimulating the production of answers to researchers’ questions (Marovelli, 2019; Hall and Holmes, 2020).

A CBPR-inspired approach seeks to capture and express subjective and group experiences in emic-ways that ‘make sense’ to the producers of those knowledges. These kinds of methodological techniques that reconstruct and articulate subjective experience as spoken, written or visualized narratives produced by participants themselves can as Goodson argues, serve as ‘a starting point for developing further understandings of the social construction of (group) subjectivity’ (Goodson, 2013: 30). These types of group or community participatory methods may contain the greatest potential for ‘full and equal partnership’ as they reposition the participant as both an expert and as an ‘ultimate insider’ (Goodson, 2013:149).

As Marovelli reflects, community food initiatives have capacity to ‘operate as provisional bridging mechanisms between people, communities, projects and services, providing the connective tissue in ways which are hard to measure through simple quantitative measures and, as a result, are rarely articulated’ (Marovelli,2019:190). Furthermore, ‘[c]onstructing simplistic binaries between ‘alternative’ and ‘conventional’ networks is no longer useful […] scholars are now using language that captures a sense of hybridity, relationality and diversity’ (Maye, 2013:387).

CBPR overall, is useful for ‘applied research that seeks to understand people’s engagements with objects, systems and services, better engage/ publics and other stakeholders, work towards social change and
identify and intervene in futures’ (Lupton, 2018:1). This CBPR-inspired approach then, encourages participants to ‘reconsider previous views on certain topics’, ‘challenge pre-conceived ideas’ and facilitate ‘new ways of looking at old problems’ (Doyle and Davies 2013:269). This approach will include the assessment of already-formed ideas and the investigation of propositions developed through a review of the literature, but it also attempts to ensure that participants are engaged in ways that place their perspectives in the centre of data production. There is increased focus on the varied data-utterances and articulations of participants rather than exclusively asking and verbally answering questions. In this sense CBPR-approaches also share a methodological commonality with practice theories.

However, I state at the outset of this chapter section that I am not undertaking a fully invested community-based participatory research approach, rather I am taking a CBPR-inspired approach. As stated earlier, CBPR and practice theories are intended to work together to create data that is alert to a range of participants, whether spoken, visualised or materially, spatially or temporally presented, and the differing views and perspectives that emerge from grouping all of these facets of the phenomenon under the title ‘participants’.

I acknowledge that conducting the research alongside participants in an ongoing in-depth process would potentially interrupt valuable eating and socializing time and move the creation of data insights away from the more immediate, spontaneous and convivial atmosphere I was seeking to capture and convey throughout this thesis. This positioning is cognizant of the ethical dimensions and the practical time constraints of the thesis. Fundamentally, the conventional thesis is an individually-driven piece of academic work which has developed from my involvement and interest in social eating initiatives. And whilst I have particular access to and relations with The Nottingham Social Eating Network, the research agenda, for example, has not been instigated by the participants themselves.

However, in keeping with the CBPR-inspired ethos of the methods members of the network are engaged in a more in-depth manner through two of the proposed methods and customers, volunteers and myself
are all engaged as ‘participants’, a term which, much like the flat ontology of practice theories, collapses participants in to one ‘field’ of theoretical, conceptual and empirical enquiry.

In keeping with a CBPR-inspired approach which typically utilises multi-modal methods to collect data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and through a specific focus on this broadened conception of participants as the empirical and conceptual point of entry and lens for analysis, the methods selected are: meal-centred focus groups (Trubek and Belliveau, 2009; Halkier, 2017; Hall and Holmes, 2020; Smith and Harvey, 2021), ‘go-along’ interviews (Carpiano, 2009; Evans and Jones, 2011; Garcia et al. 2012), Photovoice (Chilton et al., 2009; Valera et al., 2009; Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Pettinger et al., 2013; Flint et al., 2016; Soma et al., 2021) and the use of ethnographic-influenced fieldnotes (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012; Marovelli, 2019).

Together these methods are intended to create a rich and deep set of varied data that will facilitate a deeper understanding of how the practices of social eating initiatives are constructed and enable us to ascertain why and how social eating initiative commensality is valued by participants. At the end of the methods sections I provide a table showing the data collected by site and method. This will be formatively analysed in the next section when that data is coded.

4.7.1 Capturing commensality: Meal-centred focus groups

‘[t]here is an urgent need to ‘get creative’ with the way we tackle social and nutritional inequalities [...] the use of creative participatory approaches [can] engage ‘harder to reach’ communities in dialogues to improve their well-being and life skills [...] food can be a powerful catalyst for social inclusion’ (Pettinger et al., 2019: 1).

‘Food is quite literally, the stuff of the everyday. It punctuates daily rhythms, constitutes social relationships, and shapes economic and political systems. Whether by looking at its origins,
cultural relations, environmental and health impacts, or economic implications social researchers have long been fascinated by food’ (Hall and Holmes, 2020:84).

Eating is undoubtedly positioned as one of the most fundamental, socialised, imaginative and collectively invested biological functions (Masson, Bubendorff and Fraisse, 2018) and our eating behaviours are strongly influenced by social context (Higgs, 2015; Higgs et al., 2019; Higgs and Ruddock, 2020). Eschewing the regular types of at-a-distance research approach such as surveying, using public mealtimes as a research resource and eating together with participants as a method can create intimate, convivial and equalising ways of co-producing data. The shared mealtimes can construct a sense of ‘we-ness’ within the array of non-kinship related eaters (Douglas, 1972). It can create an intimate, conversational research environment through a novel power dynamic where the eater and researcher are collapsed through a ‘moment of commensality’ into social eating co-participants and where there is a conscious attempt to avoid being a ‘drive-by researcher’ (Carpiano, 2009). This method is uniquely suited to uncovering perspectives wherein value beyond consumption is enfolded into eating practices and for observing how these practices draw upon the wider social value of social inclusion or cohesion. As Trubek and Belliveau, assert:

‘cooking, eating and conversing in a social setting could be key ingredients in the education and socialization [...] of society [...] cooking and eating together is not only a didactic tool, but also instrumental in teaching us how to cooperate with and engage with our natural and human communities’ (2009).

And whilst there are what are termed ‘disciplinary’ techniques such as formal mealtime rules, expectations for behaviour, dress and embodiment (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015) these specific considerations are not centred here (however, it is of course acknowledged that delineating specific facets of commensality is more difficult ‘in practice’ given that the informal rules of mealtime such as etiquette and civility are often implicated in the uniting, as well as differentiating of, groups of meal-consumers (Trubek and Belliveau, 2009; Warde, 2014; Giacoman, 2016). Instead, and as already emphasised, there
is a focus within this research on the convivial facets of commensality (cf. Giacoman, 2016) which means I am instead alert to commensalities propensity to create social cohesion (Dunbar, 2017a, b).

‘Social eating initiatives have implications far beyond the mealtime. These initiatives are part of a broader ‘feed people first’ movement in which the intersections of corporate food donation, charitable redistribution and community food projects meet to guide the effective redirection of edible food surpluses to those citizens suffering from food insecurity, but also to those seeking friendship, company and experiences of caring, through the medium of commensality’ Smith and Harvey, 2021: 13).

Social eating initiatives are frequented by a broad range of people. The research method was thus intended to be maximally inclusive such that participants could move freely in and out of the research setting as they pleased and so group discussion could occur in a free-flowing format whilst people enjoyed food. These relaxed inclusion criteria enabled participants to eat as they would do normally in the space whilst maximising the sample size available for the study.

Using social eating spaces to engage participants, then, creates a focus for and rhythm to empirical dialoguing. Sharing food with participants creates convivial conditions where emotions are stirred, reminiscences are recollected and where new relationships can begin to form. The rhythmic dialoguing over dinner creates space for data to assemble and it creates an emotional and affective environment that is different from conventional interviewing. Eaters join in with conversations offering unscheduled comments and conversational topics change direction as the food itself prompts discussions and reactions. Eating food together is expected to create a conversational, participatory research environment; creating new ways for researchers and participants to relate to each other as co-producers of knowledge. Participants immersed in that commensal environment may develop connections with each other as well with researchers according to their priorities and interests rather than solely pre-determined research agendas.
Current empirical research on food insecurity, for example, has tended to employ approaches that are methodologically individualist, or which focus on verbalised, individual narratives through interviews, for example. Meal-centred focus groups take eating together to be a creative ‘material’ that can be both empirically encountered and at the analytical stage, be drawn upon as evidence of the materials, competences and meanings which go-into practices. However, examining social practices also requires creating the conditions for reflexivity around mundane actions and things such as the preparation or storage of foodstuffs or the turning on of appliances; making the familiar strange (Mannay, 2010; Linderson, 2010; Trubek, 2014) and illuminating facets of practices that are routinized, habituated and where materialities such as tools, resources or space and place may not have ordinarily been considered (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

The food and eating experiences of the so-called ‘harder-to-reach’ vary widely according to individual circumstances (Skinner, Pratley and Burnett, 2016). As per the literature review, current debates involving food and poverty tend to revolve around the rise of charitable food provision and management of food experiences under austerity (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015). Yet the ‘poor’ can and do have similar aspirations to much of the rest of society (Dowler, 1997) and ‘we know that food holds strong meaning and can reveal highly individualised perspectives in those who are doing the best they can in the face of multiple deprivations’ (Pettinger et al., 2019:2).

Whilst being cognizant of this sensitivity, a meal at a social eating initiative is, however, if not equalising, at least momentarily suspends or redirects our focus from inequalities towards shared experiences and commonalities. At a social eating mealtime, there is only one or two meal choices and a single pricing structure. Therefore, encompassing this materiality into the research design functions to drive the method; moving us step by step towards a ‘more than’ approach to examining the value of social eating initiatives beyond recourse to economically mediated values or pre-determined social class distinctions, for example.
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Here, all participants including the non-human ones are considered to be ‘co-creators of value’ (Baron et al., 2018). Without presumptive recourse to the stigmatising ‘leftover food for left behind people’ narrative (Riches and Gerlings, 2019) I can instead draw upon the conviviality of commensality and some of its specific features to shape and mobilise the meal-centred method.

Accordingly, a methodological focus on group commensal participation as well as the ethical-sensitivities of the approach, as already outlined, take The Nottingham Social Eating Network and their differing places, spaces, timings, observed customer demographics, organisational structures, and the social networks that they draw upon, as a varied and nested-within case-study. Research engagement which relies upon pre-existing, socially structured categorisations of participants are foregone in favour of a practice-oriented focus. Instead, eaters form part of a coalescence of materials, competences and meanings that are creating ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019).

Participants, here, may well be ‘below the level of consumption adequacy’ but they may not be. Or they may not be at that particular time- the shifting, dynamic lens of commensality undergirded through a practice theories approach and flavoured with a CBPR-informed style directs us to consider social eating commensality not just as an ‘event’ but as intersecting and interleaving through participants’ lifeworlds in varying forms and modes in order that its socially bonding function can be continually constructed, reproduced and transformed.

Specifically, meal-centred focus groups were organised as follows: attended each mealtime and ate a meal myself, queuing, choosing, paying and seating myself; sitting with people I knew and people that I did not. Armed with Post-it notes and large sheets of paper and after being introduced by the manager of each social eating mealtime, I set up the table with the ethics and information forms and invited eaters to come over and respond to the guiding research question, with prompts if necessary. The overall participant question was designed to be as open as possible: ‘why are social eating spaces valuable?’, ‘what is the
value of social eating, to you?’, ‘why do you eat here? ‘what do you like about this place?’, ‘why do you like visiting?’: I also talked around the topic, answering questions as needed and letting participants know that I was interested to know their thoughts, to understand their experiences and that this was not research that has a correct or preferred response. Those prompt questions were designed to be simple, open, inductive, and centrally, to enable the participant to give as little or as much of a response as they wished to, in-situ and without hugely disrupting the flow of their mealtime.

Past research and charitable-working experience have generated within me a fondness for Post-it notes. Post-it notes are small and colourful and participants do not feel intimidated by a large blank sheet of paper they may feel uncomfortable with filling in, nor are they reams of questions on a clipboard that give the impression of taking a good while to answer. Post-it notes can also be readily rearranged which brings us to the next stage of this meal-centred focus group method. There is a power differential between an academic and a non-academic with individuals often worrying about ‘getting it wrong’. Post-it notes can be taken back to tables and completed in discussion with fellow eaters or alone if something sensitive is to be jotted down. Although they are welcome to scribble on multiple notes fundamentally everyone gets the same Post-it note, building upon and iterating the theme of this method of not encountering eaters in a manner which is segregating.

However, the limitations of Post-it notes are their size and the space allowed for writing. This could shape the types of answers provided by directing participants to give brief answers. However, in many cases participants will write in either small type or used multiple Post-it notes. Moreover, in the desire to capture the dynamics of the social eating mealtime some practical operational decisions were made, and this method was deemed the most ‘approachable’ and easy to comply with. By utilising go-along interviews and photovoice as well as ethnographic notes, I attempted to create and facilitate the production of a rich data set wherein other aspects of these broader conversations and observations could also be mapped; elaborating upon Post-it note insights.
On the large sheet of paper, participants could place their notes alongside other eaters. Eventually, when there were enough notes I would return to the participants or engage with the ones currently at the table and ask them to arrange the notes into themes, if possible, and collectively decide on a theme title and write it on the paper. This stage of the method explicitly involved participants in the coding and organisation of the data they produced. In this instance moving from the inductive first order of data coding to the deliberative production of second order data code theme; from the general into the more specific and grouped, was a means of generating ‘qualitative rigour’ in inductive research (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013).

It was expected that each of the meal-centred focus groups would take two hours as I would attend the site prior to opening and confirm the research purpose and process with the mealtime manager, and set up a table and research space. I would also complete ethnographic fieldnotes and take photographs in-situ. Post-focus group I would also help to clear down the research space and provide feedback to the mealtime manager if requested. The method had the potential to create volumes of candid, engaging inductive insights which were ordered and sorted for recording within the storage software, NVivo, and then stored safely according to Coventry University’s ethical and data regulations.

In summary, and to paraphrase Levi-Strauss (1963) eating together-research is useful not just because it is good to eat, but because is it good to think; with the researcher ‘digesting their thoughts on the experience as a group’ (Hall and Holmes, 2020:87). In the next section ‘go-along’ interviews are proposed as an additional means of capturing contextual, temporal and spatial data, and in the following chapter the specificities of what insights these go-along interviews generated, are discussed.

4.7.2 Spatial considerations of social eating ‘in situ’: Go-along interviewing

‘The go-along method... is a form of in-depth qualitative interview method that, as the name implies, is conducted by researchers accompanying individual informants on outings in their
familiar environments [...] In this regard, the researcher is “walked through” people’s lived experiences of the neighborhood. Through asking questions and observing, the researcher is able to examine the informant’s experiences, interpretations, and practices within this environment [in order to] examine how physical, social, and mental dimensions of place and space interact within and across time for individuals’ (Carpiano, 2009:264).

In extending the suite of qualitative methods according to the practice theories and CBPR-inspired methodological approach the mobile or go-along interview is now appraised. Whilst conducting the meal-centred focus groups in-situ an opportunity also arises to take stock of the spatial dimensions of the research environment. As the vignette reflects, tables, chairs and their arrangements, the serving hatch, the rather run-down external appearance of the Church hall— all of these factors shape the kinds of competences and discourses that emerge at a social eating initiative mealtime. ‘Indeed, it seems intuitively sensible for researchers to ask interviewees to talk about the places that they are interested in while they are in that place’ (Evans and Jones, 2011:849).

So, too, the way that a kitchen is laid out, the idiosyncrasies of locks and security alarm, the ways that customers travel to and negotiate entrance into the hall— all of these things intersect within practices as facets of its construction (Goffman, [1959] 2002). Therefore, via the practice theories approach, I was alert to how contexts may be considered as actants or participants which shape the practices of social eating initiative commensality. This focus moves context, which may be implicit but is often overshadowed by a methodological focus on individuals and their rational thoughts and beliefs, towards the consideration of the social eating initiative foodscape wherein the locality, set up and means of movement within those spaces is made explicit.

As stated, in terms of general qualitative methodologies, researchers become cognisant of the activities through which participant groups practise their identities. Within semi-structured interviews or participant observation exercises, for example, these cultural practices become the object of further
questioning and scrutiny. However, it is important to supplement this cognisance with an explicit awareness of the ways in which these practices are tied into places. This ‘person plus place’ is what Anderson (2004) terms ‘co-ingredience’. Empirical focus can be given to the key routines, habits and practices through which people inscribe their knowledges into places and how these places also shape knowledges. Becoming literate in this way of researching is therefore a process well-accounted for within a practices theorization.

These place-encompassing practices in the words of James [1890] (quoted in Tulving, 2000: 56), are the key ‘contiguous associates’ that can serve as more than cues or clues to reminiscences, but importantly, as actors within that research environment. A method which can encompass and articulate the agency of these placed-practices can support the creation of knowledges about social practices in the round: ‘the knowledge produced is importantly different: atmospheres, emotions, reflections and beliefs can be accessed, as well as intellects, rationales and ideologies’ (Anderson, 2004:260).

As a result, ‘talking whilst walking’ is part of a wider post-modern project that seeks to ‘challenge externally’ generated knowledge’ (Anderson, 2004:260). Through introducing me to the layout of the space, its equipment and features, the mobile or go-along interview ‘interrogates the sense of place as respondents articulate their own subjectivity in real time’ (Finlay and Bowman, 2017:264). The ideas and emotions of participants are articulated differently; first-hand, as opposed to by recall (Evans and Jones, 2011).

Practically, this was accomplished by asking the mealtime managers to walk me through their set up, service and clear down. I recorded this interview, took photographs and afterwards, constructed reflective fieldnotes. As Finlay and Bowman note ‘guided by the notion that place matters, the mobile interview generates rich spatial observations and theories grounded in lived experience. Researchers can experience places that matter to participants in situ’ (2017:263).
Following the dynamism of Shove, Pantzar and Watson,’s model of social practices (2012) I was alerted to the construction of a ‘stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment’ (Kusenbach, 2003: 463). In this way, social eating practices are not seen as a static place or temporal event but as intersecting with place, space and time- all of which carry the practice of the social eating mealtime into and out of existence. The conceptual and theoretical model proposed in the thesis break these practices down into mobile units of elements which pre-form, form and de-form in and out of practice.

This go-along activity also directs us to look at and inside cupboards, fridges and freezers with participants and to ask questions about ‘what goes on and why’ in the social eating initiative, including features such as payment-taking, queueing, clearing tables, etc. Whilst the social eating initiative might be materialised in a community centre or church room or rooms, or parts of a room, how participants inhabit these spaces and when and how a space is given meaning and becomes a ‘place’ is of interest (Kusenbach, 2003).

Moreover, as explored in the previous section the dynamic between researcher and researched is altered as the mealtime manager takes the role of expert, guide, gatekeeper and introducer: ‘the go-along helps to reduce typical power dynamics that exist between the interviewer and interviewee’ (Carpiano, 2009:267).

Again, in buttressing the ethical approach directing this research, the go-along approach encourages collaborative participation that may be conducive to participant openness (Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009). Brown and Durrheim (2009) posited that in a go-along interview the environment itself might shape some of the discussion, taking some of the perceived focus, and pressure, off the participant and interview script while allowing a dynamic conversation. Ross, Renold, Holland, and Hillman similarly found that:

‘the interactions that took place on the move were dynamic, characterized by a more free-flowing dialogue, moving from topic to topic, returning to previous topics, allowing unstrained gaps and
pauses. The pressure to converse was removed somewhat from these research encounters’ (2009:619).

In summary, go-along interviews have been used in a variety of disciplines to articulate contextualised understanding in a mode distinct from traditional interview approaches. Go-along interviews are consistent with CBPR-informed research methods in which participants more actively guide an iterative data sharing process and which articulate the ways in which place, space and timings also co-constitute practices. This potential makes the go-along interview method valuable for adequately revealing and reflecting upon a social eating initiative mealtime and its context. Furthermore, it aligns the data collection with the commensal conceptual framework, and the practice theories analytical approach to develop the thesis argumentation towards evaluating a multidimensional, ‘more than food’ approach to understanding how participants ascribe and experience value within these settings.

4.7.3 Capturing reflexive aspects of social eating: Photovoice

Applying theories of practice empirically requires using methods that can reveal multi-faceted social phenomena, and visual methods offer a ‘way in’ to reveal such events. Examining social practices requires creating the conditions for reflexivity around mundane actions and things, such as the preparation or storage of foodstuffs or the turning on of appliances; making the familiar strange (Mannay, 2010; Linderson, 2010; Trubek, 2014). There are an increasing number of studies that draw on visual research methods to investigate domestic practices and consumption (Martens and Scott, 2004; Martens, 2012; Pink, 2013; Souto and Spasojevic, 2017) and visual means of producing data has also been used alongside ‘go-along’ interviewing (Meah and Watson, 2011; Meah and Jackson, 2017, Meah, 2014; Wills, Dickinson and Meah, 2016). This visual method can serve as both a visual recording device and a memory-prompt, which can aid writing up fieldnotes from memory, post-event.

Narrative based spoken or written techniques, in particular, may allow participants to talk or write about everyday habits including food provisioning, preparation and consumption, within the broader realms of
everyday life (Evans, 2012; Wills, 2012). However, as Pettinger notes, encouraging participants to take photographs to describe and document their experiences ‘provided powerful narratives, showing that for them, food holds meaning, elicits emotion and exerts power; and that the food environment can be a critical social place: food preparation can provide companionship and occupation’ (2017:557).

Power et al. (2014) claims, moreover, that when talking about the everyday, participants may find difficulty in providing a comprehensive narrative of their practices because they are either directed by the questioner to answer at that moment rather than seek answers within their own time. They may struggle to enunciate feelings and meanings as well as consider features of practices that do not present as forms of behaviour or thought, such as the role of non-human materials, for example. Moreover, food and eating, as sensory practices may also be particularly difficult for participants to convey verbally (Rowe et al., 2012). As Chilton et al. reflect ‘[p]hotography is a unique and very public way to engage others in common dialogue, as it requires no functional literacy and transcends written language’ (2009:76):

‘Photovoice is a participatory action research strategy that includes providing cameras to those participants who are usually the “subjects” of policies and programs (or the subjects of research studies) to ensure that they can provide their own frames of reference around issues most meaningful to them [...] The intention of photovoice methodology is to provide a way for people [...] who are usually treated as passive or voiceless — to express their individual voices through photographs and accompanying narratives’ (Chilton et al.,2009:75).

As Martens (2012) also contends, relying on talk about practices tends to reduce the meaning and significance of a practice to an individual and potentially misses out on the ways in which contexts direct practices. In this way, participants engaging in photovoice may reveal physical and spatial environments that create certain types of cooking such as work surfaces or drawer placements that may go unmentioned in the go-along interviews or which may happen in a timeframe when the researcher is not present, for example during the deliveries of the surplus food stocks.
As Soma et al., (2020) have shown, equipping participants with cameras elicits data that conveys their experiences beyond any textual or official description. For example, cross-referencing maps of local food banks, pantries and free meal services against participants experiences of them revealed that provisioning which was listed was often not the case in reality. For example, participants collected images of huge queues for services that had often run out before they reached the front of the line and places listed as open that in fact were closed due to volunteer shortages. Places where people foraged and found free food were also photographed, adding data to those maps; extending local knowledge of what free food resources were available.

Relying on methods such as interviews or diaries also inherently conceals the competences and often habituated aspects of a practice (Halkier and Jensen, 2011) and the intricacies that might exist between ‘carriers’ of practices (Goffman [1959], 2002). This visual perspective can help to draw out both the tacit and the discursive elements of a practice (Reckwitz, 2002) through an up-close examination of the ‘doings and sayings’ of social life (Schatzki, 1996). As Trubek’s videographies of people cooking their favourite dishes in their own kitchens demonstrated, what people say they do, and what they actually do, are often different ‘in practice’ (2014). Moreover, appraising competences within practices means drawing out those elements of practices such as mis en place (which translates as ‘everything in its place’) or kitchen skills which are often routinized and played up or down when participants are asked to reflect upon them. As Flint et al. reflect ‘[w]e do not claim that these processes are neat and orderly. Indeed, research processes - particularly those which are qualitative and small scale - are acknowledged by many to be ‘messy’, complex and challenging’ (2017:3). Moreover, it should be noted that whilst photovoice is a tool for ‘getting at’ practices, and especially the more mundane and less easy to articulate ones, photographs are still forms of representation. They are subject to certain sets of conventions (angles, framings, close-ups, composition), and therefore they do not provide the viewer with unmediated access to practices.
Adopting this methodological approach also reduces the tendency to foreground people or places or things ‘as each of these aspects, and others besides, are considered as constituent parts of an overall jigsaw puzzle’ (Wills, Dickinson and Meah, 2016:471). The intent here is also to look beyond the mealtime itself, and even the phases of cooking or serving, to see what elements, and in which order, make up the cooking or serving practice.

In practice this method was operationalised by asking participants who organise, run and manage social eating spaces to record their experiences and views through regular or even exceptional photograph-taking. These images will be coded and analysed as ‘texts’ that work together with the meal-centred focus groups Post-it note insights, the go-along transcripts and photographs and the fieldnotes to create a rich portrait of social eating initiative mealtimes that can be analysed via the dynamics of social practices model of commensality.

In the following table, the data that was collected at each site is shown. This will be formatively analysed in the following coding chapter.
Table 5. List of research activities, by venue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Eating Initiative</th>
<th>Number of observational hours spent at venue</th>
<th>Photos taken during fieldwork by researcher</th>
<th>Meal-centred focus groups Post-it notes</th>
<th>Go-along interview transcriptions</th>
<th>Photo voice photographs</th>
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<td>39</td>
<td>71 Coded in-situ</td>
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<td>44 Partially coded in-situ</td>
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<td>42 Coded in-situ</td>
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<td>Sycamore Dining</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>66 Coded in-situ</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Social eating groups engaged</td>
<td>69 hours of observation</td>
<td>268 photos</td>
<td>438 Post-it notes produced during 7 meal-centred focus groups, with 229 participants engaged</td>
<td>1 hour 11 minutes transcribed, with 3 interviewees engaged</td>
<td>7 groups engaged in photovoice with 116 photos submitted</td>
</tr>
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</table>
4.7.4 Adding colour and reflecting on the research with ethnographic fieldnotes

The unique contributions of the anthropological and sociological disciplines are their ability to provide insight into direct experiences, lived realities and ‘insider’ perspectives, particularly through the deployment of qualitative methods. Ethnography is the classic approach adopted by anthropologists wherein empirical focus is placed on reflexive mapping of the processes of both everyday and exceptional life, in as close relation to the subject as possible (Erickson, 1986; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The aim is to ‘get inside’ the way each group of people sees the world (Hammersley, 1995; Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995), to reject the traditional separation between the researcher and the research setting in what Geertz (1998) refers to as ‘deep hanging out’.

In asking the reader to ‘relive the experience through the writer’s [...] eyes’ (Denzin, 2000: 905; Johnson, 2019) to convey a ‘vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life (Erickson, 1986:149), the aim of ethnography and the ‘bring life to research [and] bring research to life (Ellis, 1998:4). Fieldnotes and vignettes are utilised here, not as the main methods but as adjuncts, promoting, focusing and contributing to the assembling of a rich portrait of a social eating mealtime, positioning myself as both eater and eating-researcher.

Recently, accounts such as Williams et al. (2016) and Garthwaite (2016) have articulated politics within food banks in the UK through an ethnographic approach illuminating how austerity policies are negotiated, subverted, contested and managed at group and individual levels. The social eating vignette offered in the literature review chapter also served to illuminate the practices, processes and sensorial effects of a mealtime by using fieldnotes and photographs to substantiate how the material, competences and meaning-elements of a practice theories informed analysis might begin to ‘take shape’.

The methods proposed are not just a means of data collection and description but are intended to also serve as a sociological practice for situating observed accounts within a broader social context. Envisioning the interrelationship between the observation and contextual reflection forms a starting
point for sociological analysis alongside the participants whose culture and worldview have now been explicitly foregrounded. For it is suggested that the conventional ‘core principle of ethnography – to get inside the heads of individuals and their subjective understandings – is insufficient [...] Rather, ethnography must reveal the links between these subjective understandings and their structural social origins’ (Rees and Gatenby, 2014:2).

One route to acknowledging this more reflexive and purposive form of ethnography is through the auto-ethnographical turn. The method of autoethnographic vignette-making (Crawford, 1996; (Denzin, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Humphreys, 2005; Reed-Danahay, 2021) can be described as a means of representing the subject/object of study within a qualitative framework; noting impressions, senses and feelings as well as materialities; enabling the reader to see the ‘multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:733) Ellis and Bochner defined the term auto-ethnography as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural (2000:733). Reed-Danahay’s conception of ‘autobiographical ethnography’ as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context is useful here, given the researchers positionality and the CBPR-informed approach. The vignettes, fieldnotes and photographs act as ‘both a method and a text [...] It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs’ (Reed_danahay, 1997:9).

In the following section, the chapter concludes with a summary of the theory, concepts, and methodological approach and methods that will be used to operationalise the research.

4.8 Conclusion
In this chapter, the rationale for a practice theories and specifically a dynamics of social practice theory approach has been presented. This responds to this chapters’ sub-question: **which philosophical underpinning, and which methods, are appropriate for examining the practices of social eating commensality?**
Occupying an ontological mid-space between structure and agency whilst being cognizant of both, a practice theories approach views the construction, reproduction and transformation of the social realm as occurring at the empirically encounterable level of practices. These practices are pre-formed, formed and de-formed as the elements of the social world—material, competences and meanings—assemble and dissemble (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). This focus on practices locates agency in individuals but and in places, spaces and timings as well as upon non-human agents such as surplus foodstuffs, in the co-shaping and carrying into being, of a practice.

This is an appropriate theorisation to undergird the study of social eating practices because this expression of commensality seems neither fully determined by austerity-riven policies nor completely accounted for via individualistic accounts of poverty consumption or of active citizenship. These conceptions rely on either structural or behavioural theorisations and furthermore, neither of these accounts takes into consideration how the trajectory of surplus foodstuffs may be constructing new forms of eating and eating together. Therefore, a theoretical approach which acknowledges non-human agents, as well as the effects of structure and agency without recourse to either, was favoured. Moreover, practice theories and the lens of commensality combine to provide accounts of social eating initiatives that are both situated in specific contexts and times and simultaneously undergirded by the ongoing and broader function of social cohesion.

After justifying the underlying theorisation upon which the thesis argumentation is built, the methodological sections considered the ethical and positional dimensions of the research. In light of the vignette and the findings from the literature review, an approach which stays close to the mealtime itself was favoured. A number of methods which privileged the views of participants without any assumption about their status or motivations and which enabled the convivial and conversational atmosphere to be conveyed, were chosen. The capacity for the participants to convey the material, competences and meanings of the social eating mealtime both before, during and after, were also privileged. These participant-shaped methods will be added to and enriched by theoretically-informed observations which are alert to the context, situation, materiality, and spatial and temporal ‘participants’ and how they may shape practices. Moreover, the participant-shaped methods also seek to capture habituated, reflexive and routinised facets of practices; seeking to capture the materials,
meanings and competences that fabricate social eating practices, across The Nottingham Social Eating Network.

Overall, the empirical research proceeded according to the processes of identifying practices of commensal social cohesion as visualised in the conceptual model:

![Conceptual Model Diagram]

**Figure 17. Empirically operationalised version of the ‘practices of social eating initiative commensality’ model.**

The following chapter is concerned with putting into practice the research design of the methodology, guided by the conceptual model. Accordingly, the fieldwork will be described, the approach to coding will be elaborated and the emergent data structure and initial findings will be presented.
Chapter 5. Data collection and coding: *Making sense of social eating mealtimes*

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect on the fieldwork stage of the research and formatively analyse the data through a coding process. I come to some initial findings about the practices which are ‘carrying’ commensality within social eating initiative mealtimes, which will be elaborated upon in the following chapter. This chapter conveys how a large, rich data set was collected, organised, coded and structured. The sub-question that drives the argumentation of this chapter is (d) **what are the practices of social eating commensality?**

The process of coding the data draws upon the concepts and approaches emphasised within the developing thesis: the appropriateness of using the lens of commensality to better understand the value that social eating initiative participants may be ascribing to mealtimes, the ‘more than food’ approach, and the focus upon social practices. These additional and alternative approaches direct us to capturing, coding and formatively analysing the data for signs of how commensal practices may be ‘carried’ through social eating initiatives. Not just through individuals and the consumption of a meal, but also through a consideration of the places, spaces, materials, timings and meanings that may be coalescing within and around the mealtime. Through this, I identify a connection between the relatively mundane and localised act of eating together and the processes of social production more broadly.

In the previous chapters I have made the case that the construction of variable, situated and localised forms of commensality may nonetheless be representative of, and contributing to, a broader UK social-scape wherein commensality both represents and materialises the broader production and reproduction of the social realm. Roe and Buser state that ‘to focus only on the inevitable and infinitesimal heterogeneity, embeddedness and hybridity of alternative re-localised food movements [is to] conceptually marginalize their activities because of their embeddedness and variety in place’ (2016:2). They make the argument that alternative local food initiatives should be seen as examples
of society in transition (Dobson, 2003) wherein ‘the local dimension offers research on low budget practices [the] possibilities to chart moments of agency’ (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015:169).

Accordingly, I have been building a successive argumentation to suggest that social eating initiative commensality may be about the accomplishment of much ‘more than food’, and that this ‘more than’ is potentially the role that commensality plays in the broader construction, reproduction, and transformation of social life in the UK.

The chapter on the research methodology of the thesis linked commensality and theories of practice in their sharing of a commitment to seeing the universal in the specific, the general in the local and the significant within the mundane. This specific and general approach requires a ‘zooming in and out’ (Nicolini, 2017) which the methodological chapter noted could be accomplished through a variety of CBPR-inspired methods and through a practices theorization. Therefore, this chapter begins to illuminate, through the coding analysis, the situated, local, specific social eating network practices that may be carrying the broader values of commensality in being.

In understanding what value may be experienced and detected within these mealtimes (and particularly beyond those attached to physical sustenance) I can respond to the overall research question: (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?** The data collected was formatively shaped into three practices through which commensality was demonstrated be being ‘carried’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). Perhaps not surprisingly, the first of these is **eating together** wherein references to food and eating formed the majority of Post-it note responses, conversational texts during the go-along interviews and submissions for the photovoice activities. Next came **helping out** and thirdly came **socialising**. This chapter then, is about describing how I move from the fieldwork towards identifying these three practices and how the data was ‘handled’ in order to draw out these formative findings.

Through close attention to these practices in the following analysis chapter, I will appraise how the commensal and ‘more than food’ conceptual approach enables us to begin to understand how social
eating initiative mealtimes are valued by participants. But for now, in this chapter, I show how a large, rich data set was collected, organised, coded, and structured.

5.2 ‘v busy. Social eating snowballing in-situ!’: My experience of the data collection process

Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

Figure 18. Photographs taken during ‘meal-centred focus group’ activities- showing data construction, dialoguing and participant-informed open coding.

After a research event at a very busy social eating space, I commented in my notebook ‘v busy. Social eating snowballing in-situ!’ At this event I had been somewhat overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of participants, around 70 of whom had chosen to grab a Post-it note and answer the empirical research question, seemingly all at once and when I didn’t have 70 consent forms. I improvised by asking groups who had come together, to sign one form, collectively. This was just one instance where the operationalising of the methods required in-situ workarounds, slight adjustment and where the methodological approach went from concept to reality. In this chapter section, I use ethnographic fieldnotes to ‘set the scene’ of the empirical stage of the research and give a context to the data that will then be presented alongside a coding structure diagram.

Recapping from the previous chapter, the question that operationalises the methods centre on the theme of value: ‘what is the value of this mealtime, to you?’ This specific question was asked, with prompts where necessary: ‘why do you eat here? ‘what do you like about this place?’, ‘why do you like visiting?’ These prompt questions were designed to be simple, open and inductive to enable the
Chapter 5. Data collection and coding

participant to give as little or as much of a response as they wish to, in-situ and without disrupting the flow of their mealtime. I was aiming to capture a snapshot and gain a sense of the practices that were valued within these spaces and places.

The social eating initiatives that allowed me access to their kitchens, dining rooms and diners, and where the meal-centred focus groups were staged were: Bestop Kitchen, Secret Kitchen, Carriages Café, Parkgate Community Café, Soul Food Café, Sharing Sherwood and Growin’ Spaces. Secret Kitchen, Carriages Café and Parkgate Community Café also engaged in go-along interviews. Bestop Kitchen, Secret Kitchen, Carriages Café, Parkgate Community Café, Pulp Friction and Sycamore Diner all contributed to the photovoice exercise.

It must also be noted that the limitations of each method also came to the fore when they were deployed in-situ. The meal-centred focus group and Go-along interview methods, although eliciting quantities of insightful data, were sometimes hard to administer. The start of service was usually busy and occasionally chaotic. This meant that I planned Go-along interviews prior to opening times but this still meant that interviews were rushed especially if there was last-minute cooking or issues with volunteers. Interviews also commonly stopped and started so that only the person who had given ethical clearance was recorded.

I also had to make hurried fieldnotes to accompany interviews and this rapid notetaking also extended to the meal-centred focus groups. I did expect these to be busy and despite multiple explanations, I still had to repeat instructions and go from table to table to ensure participants knew what to do. I also had to make notes when I had verbal discussions. I did not audio-record these because these were noisy settings, and it would have been difficult to screen out background noise and often people were speaking simultaneously. This meant I relied on often hurriedly written notes which I then had to go over post-event to reconstruct what I had heard in a clear sequence and where notes could be usefully coded. The meal-centred focus groups also elicited very occasionally what I felt to be personal data about mental health challenges, for example. I chose to remove these and keep them only for coding and analysis when I felt that those Post-it notes might be considered ethically dubious to display on the coding boards. The coding boards were chaotic, Post-it notes fell off and had to be re-
Chapter 5. Data collection and coding

stuck. At one venue there was no space to put up a board and I had to improvise by putting all the Post-it notes on a table and asking people if they could see any common themes. Venues were noisy, busy and I had to keep an eye on multiple tables to ensure I could answer questions. Without careful management people would drift away.

Getting people to sign ethics forms was sometimes problematic. People were happy to write on the Post-it notes but not always happy to then sign a form. People used the Post-it notes before looking at the forms, children came up and wrote on them, people wrote things then left and it wasn’t always clear who had written what. I also ran out of ethics forms on one occasion and had to ask whole tables to sign a single form. This was not an ideal situation and meal-centred focus groups in-situ can be reflected upon as a very fast-paced, somewhat ethically and methodologically messy approach. Moreover, it created a large volume of data ranging from single words to several Post-it notes in dense script. This took a long time to code and I was also challenged by having to decipher handwriting.

The Photovoice exercise yielded some insightful data, but I had to regularly go back to participants to ask them for more detailed process and venue-oriented pictures as at first I received a slew of staged, publicity-style photographs rather than those which captured the ‘nitty gritty’ of the spaces, materials and processes, for example. I also went in with participants during the Go-along interviews and prompted photograph-taking to try and ensure a wide array of views with enough detail were submitted.

Overall, the methods were appropriate and they generated enough data to enable a meaningful and credible analysis, however, without my unique positionality and experience of these settings, other researchers may have found these busy, hectic, haphazard and dynamic environments challenging to research in.
Chapter 5. Data collection and coding

Table 6. List of research activities, by venue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Eating Initiative</th>
<th>Number of observational hours spent at venue</th>
<th>Photos taken during fieldwork by researcher</th>
<th>Meal-centred focus groups Post-it notes</th>
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<td>66 Coded in-situ</td>
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9 Social eating groups engaged

- 69 hours of observation
- 268 photos
- 438 Post-it notes produced during 7 meal-centred focus groups, with 229 participants engaged
- 1 hour 11 minutes transcribed, with 3 interviewees engaged
- 7 groups engaged in photovoice with 116 photos submitted
To recap, the meal-centred focus groups were ‘recorded’ via ethnographic fieldnotes and photographs, by photographing and retaining the Post-it notes themselves, and through retaining and photographing the larger sheets of paper upon which the Post-it notes were organised and sometimes annotated. These photographs were securely stored on the University’s ‘OneDrive’ and on NVivo.

The most enjoyable aspects of this fieldwork were the sometimes slightly chaotic meal-centred focus groups. After being announced, sometimes very sweetly with an encouraging speech about my research, I was surprised to find how many participants were ready and able to engage. Given my ethical and positionality rationale I was minded to ‘linger, observe and mingle’ (Cattell et al., 2008) in the queue chatting with people before collecting my dinner and sitting at my ‘research table’. This gave me the chance to introduce myself and the research without just having to walk over to people’s tables and interrupt their dinner. This proved helpful as numerous people came over in stages, groups and floating back and forth between children, puddings, coffees and the research. As anticipated, the Post-it note approach was useful in enabling participants to jot down answers and arrange them on the large sheet I had stuck to the table. Notes built up rapidly in some spaces and more slowly in others.

As the sheets filled up with Post-it notes towards the end of service, I asked people to return to the sheets and some people who had not contributed to the data also joined in. I asked them if they could ‘see any themes or common issues?’ I asked them, if they could, to rearrange the Post-it notes into groups and to give each theme or group of notes a title. This worked well in most venues and there were some lively discussions, without controversy, and a number of thematic codes were produced. In one venue, there was no room for a sheet or a separate research table, so I had to abandon the coding effort in that instance. Alongside the 438 Post-it notes of data, participants across the meal-centred focus group activities grouped the notes into 43 themes, many recurring or overlapping, such as ‘Social, Socialising, Socialising and friendships’ and ‘Price, Affordable, Cheap, Money saving, Money/Affordable, Pay it forward’ and ‘Community building and support, Community engagement, Service and Community, Community space, Community concerns’. This in-situ organisation created three tentative groups of codes, which I organised into formative thematic titles. The process of assigning formative themes will be discussed in the coding section of this chapter.
I tried not to scrutinise answers in-situ, given the potential for people to disclose sensitive information or perceive that I may be judging the ‘correctness’ of their answers. Two participants stand out in my recollections for those reasons. One participant joined in the table discussion as people were re-arranging the Post-it notes and coming up with theme titles that would be used to support the structuring of the data. Upon leaving the venue however, this participant passed me their Post-it note without a word, which I later read. It detailed his impoverished situation which he was evidently unwilling to disclose in-situ. Another participant simply wrote on their Post-it note ‘stress pressure buoyant’. This somewhat oblique contribution made sense when they verbally disclosed that they had “off work, sick with depression for a year” and that a friend had “dragged them along” and although at the time they hadn’t thought much about it they noticed that prior to the next event “they were actually looking forward to something” and that it had been “years since I’d felt like that”.

Formal interviews may have missed this sensitive approach, which relies on the development of rapport and spontaneity in-situ. This is not to dismiss interviewing as a method in elucidating intimate responses, but rather to note that the meal-centred method mobilised the atmosphere of the mealtime and its ability ‘to accommodate and to welcome personal vulnerabilities’ wherein the...
mealtime ‘render[s] these spaces safe for sharing experiences’ (Marovelli, 2019: 198-199). What also became apparent as the Post-it notes began to pile up through successive events, was that the social eating staff, volunteers and associates were trusted gatekeepers who, by dint of introducing my research, legitimated it. As noted in the previous chapter the dynamic between researcher and researched is altered as the mealtime manager takes the role of expert, guide, gatekeeper and introducer: ‘the go-along helps to reduce typical power dynamics that exist between the interviewer and interviewee’ Carpiano, 2009:267). This legitimation appears not just to come from the role of the gatekeeper as a formal member of the social eating organisation; I felt this was entwined with the co-creation of safe, welcoming spaces where people felt ‘at home’. This impression was confirmed through the many Post-it notes and through closer attention to how spaces were laid out and arranged (discussion of which will form the substance of the findings chapter).

By eating with customers commensality also appeared to enact its social function of building group cohesion. I felt that this was likely allowing respondents to disclose information, unprompted, because of that feeling of personal and social connection. As stated in the methods section of the last chapter, the shared mealtimes can construct a sense of ‘we-ness’ within the array of non-kinship related eaters (Douglas, 1972). It can create an intimate, conversational research environment through a novel power dynamic where the eater and researcher are collapsed through a ‘moment of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019). This responsiveness confirmed the appropriateness of the method at an early stage and drove me to pursue the approach, even though at times the spaces were busy and service demanded I try and fit in around the heroic efforts of staff and volunteers to feed a hungry cohort of social eaters.

Occasionally, I experienced a feeling of awkwardness or apprehension, especially on entering a space I had not eaten in before. I reflected in my fieldnotes that this unfamiliarity and the crossing-the-threshold experience was worth revisiting in my analysis and I noted how much easier it was when there were greeters at spaces (sometimes introducing my presence by bellowing across the dining space) or where the dining room entrance had glass windows, signage or a clearly marked route to the eating space. One very enjoyable aspect of the research, apart from the food, was when people recognised me as a researcher and then introduced me to their table, taking on an impromptu role as active ‘explainer’ or guide to elders or new eaters.
Chapter 5. Data collection and coding

The most commonly noted overall themes across the meal-centred focus groups were the food, eating and eating together, the price and cost of the meal, the service itself and how it was set up and organised, and the social and inclusive aspects of the mealtime.

This first stage of the in-situ research saw 7 meal-centred focus groups conducted in different venues, with groups ranging in size from 8 to 70 people. In total around 230 people across the network took part in this activity, generating around 440 Post-it note responses ranging from single words to detailed descriptions, often written over several, stuck together Post-it notes. These sometimes came with verbal asides, which I endeavoured to capture in hastily scrawled fieldnotes. The outputs of these activities are shown below and the sites where coding was undertaken in-situ are noted.
### Table 7. List of research activity, by venue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Eating Initiative</th>
<th>Number of observational hours spent at venue</th>
<th>Photos taken during fieldwork by researcher</th>
<th>Meal-centred focus groups Post-it notes</th>
<th>Go-along interview transcriptions</th>
<th>Photo voice photographs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>71 Coded in-situ</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>51 minutes</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>28 minutes</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>44 Partially coded in-situ</td>
<td>52 minutes</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>42 Coded in-situ</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
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<td></td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>69 Coded-in-situ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>66 Coded in-situ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Social eating groups engaged</td>
<td>69 hours of observation</td>
<td>268 photos</td>
<td>438 Post-it notes produced during 7 meal-centred focus groups, with 229 participants engaged</td>
<td>1 hour 11 minutes transcribed, with 3 interviewees engaged</td>
<td>7 groups engaged in photovoice with 116 photos submitted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5. Data collection and coding

The facilitation of participant-produced coding, in situ, which is also part of the meal-centred focus group process, worked in some venues. However, other settings did not accommodate this as there was either not enough room to have a separate ‘research table’ or items were already on walls so a blank poster could not be attached. Sometimes participants did not want to engage beyond writing answers on a Post-it note, or staff wanted customers to remain seated so they could manage the dining room. For example, in the table above ‘partially coded in-situ’ refers to when I began to facilitate the open coding process but had to abandon this process over halfway through the session as the table was needed to seat new diners.

5.2.1 ‘Going along’ to social eating initiatives

The go-along interviews happened either before or after the meal-centred focus groups or occasionally as a stand-alone piece of fieldwork when, for example, food came already prepared off-site or on an occasion when service was so busy I deemed it inappropriate to try and take up the cooks’ time. Go-along interviews were conducted in three of the social eating initiatives. I recorded the dialogue and asked impromptu prompt questions to ascertain elaborated responses about specific aspects of the mealtime. Through these prompt questions, and with practices in mind, I sought out information that pertained to the material features of the mealtime, such as: keys and key holders, the idiosyncrasies of locks, heating systems, alarms and the spatial and temporal aspects of the mealtime, such as defrosting ingredients prior to the cooking times or the staging of opening and closing times.

The most commonly noted overall themes across the go-along interviews were: the preparation, cooking and serving of meals, the set up and organisation of the mealtime, the contributions and engagements around the mealtime, and the need for the service.

My main observations were that a vast amount of work goes into the set-up, service, clear down and management of a social eating mealtime, and that this is relatively routinized and therefore often unremarked upon until scrutinised. This go-along approach supported the meal-centred method by adding context, detail and insight beyond that provided by eating-participants. In total, around one hour of audio was recorded across the three sites. This was accompanied by photographs and
fieldnotes. The audio was recorded on my phone and transcribed, then the audio and transcripts were stored securely on the University ‘OneDrive’ and on NVivo (and the original audio was then deleted).

5.2.2 Pictures of practices: Visualising social eating initiatives

For the photovoice exercises, participants at 7 organisations were asked to complete a photo-diary over a few weeks, taking photographs of whatever content they thought captured their day-to-day activities. Particular attention was given to the set-up, service and clear-down of the meal and how the spaces were arranged, moved-through and used. This produced 116 images covering food deliveries, food sorting, storage, preparation, cooking and serving. Images of travel arrangements for elderly customers, of the set-up of the dining room, volunteers ‘showing off’ the meals they have prepared, and the kitchen facilities, queues, people washing up or moving tables and chairs were all

Figure 20. Photographs from ‘photovoice’ activities- showing food preparation, food storage, meal service and meal, itself.
5. Data collection and coding

Captured and sent in for analysis. These photographs were accompanied by brief emailed notes where participants explained and clarified the content.

The most commonly noted overall themes across the photovoice exercise were the mealtime and the eating-customers, volunteers, food preparation and cooking, the venue, kitchens, surplus deliveries, and the infrastructure such as freezers, storage, kitchens, tables and chairs.

Again, this method operated to support the verbal and textual data by visualising what may have been verbally mentioned, such as the arrangement of tables and chairs. It also served to sketch out the context and processes within the mealtime such as the way payment was taken, the thresholds and entrances of spaces, serving hatches and queues as well as the dinners being served. These images were emailed over, then stored securely alongside all the concomitant data on the University’s ‘OneDrive’ and on NVivo.

5.3 Identifying data themes through coding procedures

Coding of data refers to the process of transforming collected information or observations to a set of meaningful, cohesive categories. It is a process of summarizing and re-presenting data to provide a systematic account of the recorded or observed phenomenon. I consider coding then, to be a decision-making process (Elliott, 2018) and a stage of formative analysis. Grounded Theory for example considers the coding process in qualitative research (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Saldaña, 2014) as the ‘conceptual abstraction of data’ (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011:265). Indeed, I can confirm that during the meal-centred focus groups in particular, I was alert to which practices may be ‘carrying’ commensality and this shaped the use of ‘axial’ and ‘selective’ coding procedures, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Coding is also a means of articulating the focus of the study: ‘coding should always be for a purpose. It is never an end in itself’ (Richards, 2020:105). The organisation of the data into an analysable structure should also narrate how the research process moves through empirical work, to coding, and to generating formative findings which then lead on to the findings, knowledge development and on
Chapter 5. Data collection and coding

towards the contribution to the literature. My central empirical task after data production and collection was to code, structure and interpret that data in a way that remains close to the originating mealtime and research processes themselves whilst also being cognizant that I am aiming to find evidence of commensal practices and the elements that dynamically constitute them.

Once the complex set of data was collected and stored on NVivo, I undertook the coding process. Summarily, a large amount of data had been collected across four different but intersecting methods. During the meal-centred focus groups, some of the participants had grouped the Post-it notes into over 40 open codes in-situ, many of which overlapped. These open codes centred around three overall themes, which were: eating and food; the service itself and how it was organised; and the social facets of the mealtime. I consolidated all of the Post-it note data, the transcribed go-along interview dialogues, fieldnotes and photographs into one complete dataset then used these three, participant-identified and overarching themes as a scaffold upon which further coding was structured.

The rationale for consolidating all data, rather than coding each social eating initiative’s data separately is because I have claimed throughout the thesis thus far that *commensality* is positioned as the conceptual lens through which social eating initiative mealtimes are appropriately viewed. The lens of commensality, like theories of practice, has a common ontological and epistemological view of the social realm and this has methodological and coding implications. As stated in the previous chapter these synergies are a shared commitment to a social world that is co-constituted by an array of human and non-human ‘things’. This position that holds that the mundane and everyday is in fact, the socially significant and consequential, and that the particular and specific also reveal the general and universal. Therefore, this finds expression in the conjoining of the various data into one overall data set.

This approach relates to the research question, the sample selected and the methodological approach of the research. The overall research question concerns the value of social eating mealtimes to participants, not what is different or distinctive about each mealtime. The lens of commensality holds that, regardless of variation, commensality underpins these differential expressions of eating together practices. The sample selected is The Nottingham Social Eating Network and therefore, I am interested
in what shared values, carried through commensal practices, may detected across the network (instead of, for example, examining how differences in individual initiatives create differing types of practice or whether class, gender or ethnicity create differing types of commensal practice).

I do this because, as per the methodological approach, asking participants to identify and segregate themselves in terms of these structural divisions may move us away from the immediacy of commensal conviviality, in-situ. Without a potentially lengthy and interrupting preamble about which class or ethnic group each person identifies as, I would be operating upon a number of assumptions about the terms of reference which could undermine the veracity of the research. If I did seek to analyse the participants or the network in terms of class, for example, then I could also analyse in terms of race, age, gender, occupation, educational level, and justify why each or any one of these categories is appropriate one for understanding why participants value a social eating mealtime. This might create an over-focus on the variations of the diners themselves; moving us away from the findings of the literature review regarding the commonality of commensality. Moreover, it would also miss the significance of the non-human facets of the mealtime through excessive attention to individual human rationalisations about these social distinctions.

It is not the case that I do not think these features and facets of identity are unimportant, but they are not the focus of this research. Furthermore, a focus on class, for example, has an ethical dimension as this may remind people of their hardships, problems and limitations, potentially compounding stigma. Taking time out from a mealtime to answer a lengthy series of demographic questions may also be unethical; interrupting potentially valuable eating and respite time. Fundamentally, these types of commensal scholarship already exist (see for example, Warde, 2016) but insights into the value of social eating initiative commensality for participants is an under-developed empirical and conceptual space that this thesis seeks to contribute to.

My commitment to not examining the individuals or individual pieces as discrete data *per se* or sorting participants’ data by some prior agreement as to their class, employment status, age or gender for example, upholds my methodological interest in the assembled arrangements of social practices, in particular the social practices of a social eating initiative mealtime. This includes, but is not reduced
to, individuals. Therefore, I added all the data together to create an overview of the *commensal practices of the network*. This approach upholds the internal consistency of the thesis and means that I can look for findings and analyse them as overall practices, enabling me to respond to the overarching research question (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?**

The purpose is to sort all insights gained, whether through transcription, texts or photographs, into thematic categories with sufficiently detailed coding to capture the differences between, for example, meals being paid-for, paid-forward, free or affordable whilst also recognising that the methodological approach focused on identifying a practices-oriented overview of what the participants of social eating initiatives value. This overview means that I am going to rely on these overarching and thematic codes to discern practices, rather than each individual piece of data.

As stated in the methodology chapter, I have proposed a CBPR-inspired approach to empirical work and propose a grounded theory-inspired approach to coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1998) wherein the theoretical framework of the dynamics of social practices approach (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) guided the latter stages of the coding process. Therefore, codes were not solely developed by participants according to the verbatim data ‘texts’ but were also attributed according to a theoretically-informed formative analyses by the researcher. This was preferred in contrast to approaches which aim to discover underlying theory exclusively through systematic analysis of data (for example, see Glaser, 1978).

As much as I wished to include user-views and let the data guide the development of the coding, I am not claiming that all coding was undertaken by participants or that the verbatim or only literal coding of the data was sufficient to convey some more of the complex and practice-based insights necessary for a thesis-level analysis. In claiming that social eating initiatives may be of value to participants because they are composed of a range of participatory practices, I am using a practice theories-informed approach to selectively code the data once it has been initially sorted according to a Straussian structure (Strauss and Corbin 1994, 1998). The simple diagram below shows that process. The first part of the open coding was undertaken by participants in-situ, then I open coded the rest of the data, including adding theoretically-informed codes to the verbatim and descriptive ones, then
all codes were axially sorted into three main groups by relating codes to each other, and then these three groups of axially coded codes were given selective codes that described the type of practice they could be analysed as.

I will clarify what is meant by ‘open’, ‘axial’ and ‘selective’ coding, and ‘abductive reasoning’ in the following sections.

Figure 21. Coding process, drawing upon a Straussian-informed approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1998)

Alongside facilitating participants to code their own data in-situ, I also engaged in a second order of coding that sought to structure the data in a way that articulates more observed and theoretically-informed complexity, and which also links to the conceptual model and my analytical approach. Summarily, the coding process I undertook sought to link the CBPR-inspired approach to the research by enabling participants to engage in some formative, open coding. However, given my agenda to investigate social eating initiatives mealtimes at the level of practice, I went on to code the data according to both verbatim and theoretically informed ways.

5.3.1 Intensive analysis of the data through ‘open’ coding
The first stage of this coding process had already happened in-situ during the meal-centred focus groups wherein participants rearranged Post-it notes into groups and gave those groups theme or code titles. Open coding is defined as:
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‘[o]pen coding is the part of data analysis that focuses on the conceptualisation and categorisation of phenomena through an intensive analysis of the data. In this first step of open coding, the data are broken up into smaller parts that are deeply analysed. The aim of this analysis is to grasp the core idea of each part and to develop a code to describe it’ (Vollstedt and Rezat, 2019).

This happened via group discussion and with little assistance from the researcher. For example, the following Post-it notes show the Post-it notes arranged under the code ‘quality of food’, ‘cooking and eating’, ‘the price is right’ and ‘social and meeting people’. The participants created around 40 open codes. Some codes were so similar as to be collapsed into one code such as ‘price’, ‘cost’, ‘price of meal’. This refining of the open codes is discussed in the following sections.

Figure 22. Photographs from ‘photovoice’ and ethnographic fieldwork activities.
Open coding was also undertaken by the researcher post-event. This proceeded by word, by line, or by segment, with the purpose of developing verbatim or literal codes that stayed as close to the original ‘text’ as possible. This next set of pictures were coded in a verbatim or literal manner by the researcher as ‘washing up’, ‘kitchen’ and ‘equipment’ and the next one ‘volunteers’ and ‘preparing food’. The third one was coded ‘serving food’ ‘plates’, and ‘equipment’.

Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

Figure 23. Photographs from ‘photovoice’ and ethnographic fieldwork activities- showing washing up, food preparation and moving equipment.

For example, the following excerpt from a transcription was coded as ‘set up’, ‘times’, ‘FareShare’, and ‘delivery’:

“Well, the cafe normally starts for me on a Tuesday, when the FareShare delivery which comes anytime between 1 o’clock and 4 o’clock” (Go-along interview, Carriages café).
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The following transcript section was coded as ‘kitchen’, ‘equipment’, ‘oven’, ‘food’:

“So, there’s a fully equipped kitchen in here and there’s a partially equipped kitchen in the front of the house with another oven which we use to hold the big pans of food and keep them warm, and we use bain-marie and a soup kettle to hold the soups with and I use them to hold the roast potatoes when they’re done and the vegetables as well” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café)

Accordingly, during the open coding stage, all the consolidated data was coded verbatim, or as literally as possible, either according to the exact words on the Post-it or a basic, thematic approximation of that text if it was more than a few words. This process identified, named, described and categorised phenomena; alongside the in-situ participant group coding it created the first order of ‘open coding’.

In summary, there were around 90 open codes from the meal-centred focus group activities, the go-along interview transcriptions, the photographs and the fieldnotes. (The data which pertains to each of these codes are listed in the appendices section). An additional 43 open codes were produced by the participants, taking the total number of open codes to around 130.
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Transcriptions used to identify, name and describe phenomena found in all texts.

**Researcher- open coded**

Eating together, Meal, Eating, Affordability, Low-cost, Free food

Choice, Fresh, Health and safety, Use by dates, Accessibility, Measuring, Home cooked, Education, Food quality, Healthy, Nutritional, Balanced meal, Health condition, Three-course, Family meal, Packaging, Supermarkets, Environmental, Food bank, Allotments, Take-aways, Restaurants, Junk, Surplus, Donations, New foods, Food collection, Supply, Menu

Service and organisation, Service to the community, Community, Welcoming, Not for profit, Signposting, Community spirit, Well Organised, Funding, Giving back, Worthwhile cause, Service supporter, Weekly attendance, Cooks, For the homeless, No-pay initiatives, Washing up, Greeters, Referred, Queue, With not for, Free items, Leadership, Costs, Service, Training, Travel

Inclusive, Company, Different people getting together, Friendships, Families, Communicating, Non-judgmental, Enjoyment, Being cared for, Made with love, Health, Old friends, Elders and aging, Struggle, Neighbours

Atmosphere, Food service, Service, Safe, warm, comfortable place, A hub, Sit together, Getting out of the house, Neighbourhood, Queue, Clean, Transport, Something to look forward to, After work

**Participant- open coded**

Food, Food poverty, Cooking and eating, Good food, Convenient, Mealtime, Food waste

Price, Affordable, Cheap, Money saving, Money/Affordable, Pay it forward

Space, Local, Nearby, Good environment

Getting involved, Service and Community, Community space, Community concerns

Community building and support, Community engagement, Church and Community, Network, Networking, Connecting people, Sharing information, Volunteers

Social and Wellbeing, Community, Social, Socialising, Socialising and friendships, Meeting new people, Good company, Interaction, Cooperation, Emotional needs, Help and support, Ethical, Spiritual action

*Figure 24. Diagrams of codes produced during open coding processes- using transcriptions and participant codes created in-situ.*

These open, literal codes were not always sufficiently precise to convey the theory-informed observations of the data, so these were elaborated upon through a secondary coding of that data which was informed by conceptual terms, academic parlance and practice theories.
For example, the following data was coded under *míš en place* because it refers to, or describes the set-up, organisation and planning of meal:

“Yes, we do we have the menu and then we have what things that need to be done, and then what times things need to be on, so we don't forget, which is easy” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Café).

“I aim to be here if I can for two, print the menu, pin it on the wall, on the fridge, and it's just a matter of cycling through making sure we get everything done on time” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

“Then I assess what we've got; look at the use-by and best-before dates and think what the menu is going to be then I go home and type that up and put it on Facebook and that’s usually the Tuesday done and dusted for me. And I'll take stuff out of the freezer that I need for the Wednesday put that in defrost in the fridge” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Café).

“Well, actually we have to start Thursday and so if there is joints of beef or pork however that needs to be cooked on the Thursday. There has to be prep for vegetables, potatoes, what's on the menu. That takes about 2/3 hours on a Thursday” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Café).
The ‘food as a prop or tool’ code refers to when participants refer to using food beyond its instrumental use; as a vehicle or method of doing something else, such as engaging people:

“So, it’s not just about maintaining or engaging community it’s more active than that; breaking barriers over food” (Fieldnote discussions, Bestop Kitchen).

‘Food is a prop’

‘Food is the unifying factor’ (Post-it note texts, various social eating initiatives).

The academically informed coding of this data created around 65 codes which takes the total number of codes to approximately 200.

**Additional academically informed codes**

- Food insecurity, Food sovereignty, Mis en place, Abundance, Food as a prop or tool, Visual, Advertising, Visual aspects of food, Logos, Temporal, Time, Schedule
- Spatial, Materials and resources, Set up space, Storage, Accessible, Kitchen, Tables and chairs, Hall, Entering space, Moving between spaces, Map, Network, Space and place, Location
- Contributary, Wider community, Civic duty, Networks and partners, Alternative provision, Need for service, Demographic, Attendance, Beneficiary, Eligibility, Non-means tested, Financial vulnerability, Reason for setting up, Innovative, Formality, Advertising, Reputation, Advertising

*Figure 25. Diagram of theoretically informed codes.*
It is important to restate here that during the open coding stage I also began to think through my observations and impressions of the mealtime and relate these to my review of the literature. I observed that, alongside the more evident feature of food and eating, the social element of the meal seemed significant, as did the experiences of care, community and friendship. Given the number of open codes, I also had to make a decision about how to organise them to create a manageable set of codes in a manner that related to the argumentation of the thesis thus far. Therefore, in the next coding stage, I began to link the codes together to create some overall thematic categories.

5.3.2 Connecting the data together through ‘axial’ coding
Axial coding is the process of relating codes to each other via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking. Axial coding is needed to investigate the relationships between concepts and categories that have been developed in the open coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). To simplify this process, rather than look for any and all kind of relations, grounded theorists emphasize causal relationships and fit things into a basic frame of generic relationships (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1998). According to Vollstedt and Rezat ’[a]fter having broken up the data in the process of open coding, they are joined together in a new way in the process of axial coding as links are worked out between a category and its subcategories’ (2019, open coding section). During axial coding the emerging relationships between the open codes are identified as a means of reducing down the number of open codes by organising them into more manageable yet related axial codes. Axial coding was also undertaken according to the concepts such as ‘food ladders’ (Blake, 2019b) or ‘spaces of encounter’ (Marovelli, 2019) which have shaped the argumentation of the thesis towards a ‘more than food’ approach and which were used again, as a scaffold upon which the axial or related and grouped codes were structured. In summary, I organised the array of open codes into related ‘axial’ code sets.

When the meal-centred focus group participants arranged the Post-it notes into themes, they were engaging in open coding. When I collected these sheets and consolidated all of their codes according to their relatedness, I was axially coding them. For example, all the following open codes produced by participants were axially coded together because they relate to food and eating together, either materially, or in terms of competences or meanings:
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| Inclusive, Company, Different people getting together, Friendships, Families, Communicating, Non-judgemental, Enjoyment, Being cared for, Made with love, Health, Old friends, Elders and aging, Struggle, Neighbours |
| Atmosphere, Food service, Service, Safe, warm, comfortable place, A hub, Sit together, Getting out of the house, Neighbourhood, Queue, Clean, Transport, Something to look forward to, After work |
| Contributary, Participatory, Intentional practice, Having a role, Feeling valued, Bonding over food, Presence, Familiarity, Familiar space, Relationship and status, Intergenerational, Emotions, Temporal aspects of wellbeing, Self-help, Learning and skills, Space to play, Entertainment and music, Exclusion, Lack of skills, Social eating model, Routines, Regularity |

These next codes were axially related together because they share either verbatim or academically informed references to socialising:

The following diagram is more complex than the Straussian-informed coding process one provided earlier in this section, but it follows the same process, and is intended to illustrate the development of the coding process- from the data collection, to open coding (by both participant and researcher), to axially relating these codes together into three distinct groups.
5.3.3 Refining the data through ‘selective’ coding

The next stage of organising and structuring the data used selective coding wherein the axial codes were further and systematically sorted: ‘The essential idea is to develop a single storyline around which all everything else is draped […] Selective coding is about finding the driver that impels the story forward’ (Borgatti, 2005: Selective coding, para. 2). By going from specific instances of data to generalised theories about what the data represents, an inductive approach was utilised. This grounded-theory approach much like the addition of academically informed codes to the verbatim and literal ones, was a process of refining and clarifying a large, complex set of data from its ‘raw’ empirical form towards a theoretically informed set of grouped codes that can be analysed. ’The goal
of selective coding is to integrate the different categories that have been developed, elaborated, and mutually related during axial coding into one cohesive theory’ (Vollstedt and Rezat, 2021:89).

In this case, that cohesive theory was the theory of commensality, and specifically the mealtimes practices of social eating initiatives. The next and final stage of this data organisation process is the selective or abductive coding of these three axially-coded groups through a dynamics of practices theory lens (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). This particular version of practice theorisation has been proffered within the thesis as a means of convincingly accounting for how the differing elements of any given social realm coalesce, form and reform into dynamic practices. Abductive reasoning is a form of logical inference that begins with an observation and then moves to find the most simple or likely conclusions: ‘an interpretation of the situation (a conclusion) that best explains what has been seen’ (McGregor, 2014). Abductive reasoning yields a plausible conclusion but does not claim to verify it. This is an appropriate approach in qualitative analysis where there are complex and intersecting phenomena being observed, wherein a correlation rather than causal findings can be developed.

Therefore, and abductively, I can confidently state that the three overall social practices that can be discerned within social eating initiative mealtimes are eating together, helping out and socialising.
Each of these three overarching, selective codes (eating together, helping out and socialising) then, have these larger and more complex datasets nested underneath them and it is this data that I will analyse in the following chapter in order to substantiate a series of commensal analyses.

This further coding of the three axially coded sets of codes with a selective code also confirms the appropriateness of the conceptual commensal, ‘more than food’ and practice theories-informed approach; I see within these codes material resources such as surplus food, tables and chairs, queues and kitchens and the temporal and spatial aspects of the mealtime such as entering the space, the...
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layout of the dining room, the time of the meal or its regularity or frequency. I also see competences such as eating, measuring and washing up in evidence across the network. I can also detect the meanings entwined within these practices such as feeling cared for, feeling valued, food acting as a tool or prop and there being choice or good quality foods available. This implies that this conceptual approach, and the methods selected to investigate the conceptual model, are also appropriate.

5.4 Conclusion: Initial results

In this chapter I have discussed the fieldwork stage of the research, reflecting on this empirical work using auto-ethnographic fieldnote reflections to convey the experiences of being a researcher-eater and to describe how the planned methods were enacted ‘in practice’. This chapter has provided a description of how I moved from the fieldwork stage towards producing some initial results and I have articulated how the large, complicated data set was progressively organised, structured and presented in order to clarify how I arrived at these initial results.

Following the empirical processes of concurrent, multi-method data collection and some open coding undertaken by participants in-situ, I added to these open codes by verbatim word coding to identify, name, and describe phenomena within transcriptions and texts. I also used theoretically informed coding to further refine and clarify the data set. This gave me a large set of codes, which needed to be organised and distinguished into some initial results. I undertook this process through axial coding which established relationships between the multitudes of open codes to forming overall categories or groupings. Then, I undertook selective coding according to the conceptual model and a practice theory-informed framework which is alert to the practices that are valued by participants. This selective coding was a process of abductive, or ‘best guess’ reasoning, which produced some initial findings.

I have been building an argument within the thesis suggesting that social eating initiative mealtimes may be about the accomplishment of much ‘more than food’. This ‘more than’ is the role that commensality may appear to play in the broader construction, reproduction and transformation of social life in the UK. The previous chapter proposed that this potential valuing may be discerned through attention to the commensal practices of social eating initiatives from the perspectives of
participants. The sub-question that drove the argumentation of this chapter is (d) what are the practices of social eating commensality? Accordingly, I have engaged in a process of identifying three distinctive initial results. The three practices I have discerned across The Nottingham Social Eating Network are: eating together, helping out and socialising. These initial findings reflect how practices can be conceived of as a dynamic mixing of elements; materials, competences and resources, confirming the appropriateness of employing a commensal conceptual model and a practice theories analysis.

Therefore, in this chapter I have moved progressively towards partly responding to the overall research question (1) what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants? by identifying three empirical practices of social eating initiative mealtimes which will now be discussed in the next chapter according to their commensal and conceptual value. In the next key findings chapter, I will examine these practices in detail, looking at how they are ‘carried’ through social eating initiative commensality as proto-practices, practices and ex-practices (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).
Chapter 6. Key Findings: *Eating together, helping out and socialising practices and the emergent ‘more than food’ value of social eating initiative mealtimes*

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I enter the final stages of the argumentation of the thesis to continue to partly answer the overall research question: (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?**

To return to the conceptual model below, I can track the progress of the argumentation to the ‘commensal social practices analysis’ stage of the project. This analysis will involve integrating more fully, an analysis of social eating initiative mealttime practices with the concepts which emerged from the literature review, which are outlined on the right of the diagram under a ‘more than food’ conceptualisation.

![Figure 28. 'Practices of social eating initiative commensality' model showing 'more than food' concepts and formative findings.](image-url)
Chapter 6. Key Findings

The specific research sub-question that drives this chapter is (e) how do these practices contribute to a ‘more than food’ approach? Therefore, through a clear exposition of the construction and constitution of how value is ascribed to the three key social eating initiative mealtime practices, I substantiate the claim emerging within the thesis that social eating initiatives might be appropriately understood not just as a form of charitable food aid, or as solely the relatively passive consumption of food waste, but as about much ‘more than food’. The three key findings then, are analysed as an expression of commensality, with all of the import that commensality entails:

‘Commensality is a term that has been used by social scientists to address the practices that lead people to share a meal at a common table. Recently, food scholars have focused beyond the actual act of sharing a meal to specifically study the networks of relationships that come together to make this sharing of a meal possible’ (Abarca, 2021:664).

The sub-question that drove the argumentation of the previous chapter was (d) what are the practices of social eating commensality? In the data collection and coding chapter I discussed the fieldwork stage of the research, reflecting on being a researcher-eater. I described how the planned methods were enacted ‘in practice’ and I drew upon the ‘practices of social eating initiative commensality’ model and its practice theories analysis to distinguish three distinctive, dynamic and correlated practices that are emerging across the mealtimes of The Nottingham Social Eating Network. These initial findings pertain to eating together, helping out and socialising.

These social eating initiative mealtime practices are presented as being ‘carried’ (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) or themselves enacted through the assembly and intersection of a number of other practices such as those involved in the preparation, serving and consumption of surplus foodstuffs or through participation in, paying-for and washing up after, mealtimes, for example. Practices sit within practices, and commensality is constructed not just through the eating of a meal at the same table but as Abarca notes, through ‘the networks of relationships’ (2021:664) that a social eating mealtime involves, and therein through relations, forms of participations and agency that also include non-humans. In this chapter then, I appraise how social eating initiative commensality is both described, observed and presented within the social eating network. I also appraise how it is carried over from other practices through a focus on the competencies of the family mealtime, or via the discourses of
convenience food consumption practices. I then appraise how resources or materialities, such as the layout of dining rooms, construct certain types of mealtime practice, for example.

Therefore, social eating initiatives do not just ‘appear’ within the social realm; they are embedded in other pre-existing social flows - material, discursive and performative; borrowing-over from other areas of UK social life to assemble into novel forms of social eating commensality. This account gives us the ‘dynamic’ aspect of commensal practices and sensitises us to the links between the findings of the literature review and the vignette - that new practice elements are combining to produce new assembled practices, which in turn can be understood and analysed as new forms of commensality.

In the methodology chapter the ontological links between the anthropological concept of commensality and theories of practice were outlined. In this chapter, the suitability of adopting a practice-theories informed approach to revealing the commensality of social eating initiative mealtimes is further analysed. This widened, practice-informed commensal approach illustrates ‘the social practices of doing things together around food’ (Davies et al., 2017), which include but also move beyond commensality or ‘eating at the same table’ (Fischler, 1980). As Davies et al. note, ‘sharing then is not just what people do, it is a co-ordinated entity… and a performance - a process of doing’ (Davies et al., 2017: 137). By this reckoning, social eating initiative commensality is also an entity that is perpetuated and reshaped by the dynamic mix of elements that come into and move out of expression within the carrier-wave of practices.

According to the ‘zooming in and out’ approach (Nicolini, 2017) wherein empirical and conceptual focus shifts between the differing scales and strata of practices in order to show how they are organised and correlated, so too in the previous coding chapter I focused on organising the extensive and rich dataset into a set of distinctive and interrelated findings.

In this discussion chapter I will utilise this ‘zooming in and out’ (Nicolini, 2009, 2017) to construct a mid-level analysis of the network practices in-situ. I will do this by knitting together the micro-practices of individuals, in reference to the challenges and influences of the ‘off-site’ social context of the UK currently, and by drawing together conceptual threads from the literature positioning and review to articulate a ‘more than food’ conclusion. Now I ‘zoom’ back into the specificities of network mealtimes to illuminate and substantiate the ‘more than food’ approach through careful appraisal of the go-
along interview narratives, Post-it note insights, photos and the vignettes generated during the fieldwork process.

It is important to note here that the contribution to the literature, the overall objective of this thesis, is intended to be that of *commensal scholarship advancement*, not practice theory progression. Whilst the empirical unit of the analysis is the practice and how it is constituted through its different elements, a dynamics of practice theory-informed analysis is intended to *extend the commensal literature*. The focus of the thesis and where the argumentation is leading concerns the examination of the value of social eating initiative commensality. This phenomenon has not been empirically well mapped thus far and the values that participants ascribe to social eating initiatives are certainly not well-understood, nor has a conceptualisation of commensality and social eating been much advanced. Therefore, an expanded conception of commensality, as constituted through social eating initiative mealtime practices and via the proposition of a ‘more than food’ approach, is the overarching aim of the thesis.

Three elaborated commensal analyses will be developed and then displayed as social eating collages to convey, through codes, texts and images, the rich, dynamic intersection of elements and practices (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012), which coalesce as social eating initiative commensality. This analysis and synthesis will therefore construct the response to the chapter’s sub-question (e) *how do these practices contribute to a ‘more than food’ approach?*

### 6.2 Reflecting on the ‘dynamics’ of mealtime practices

‘[We] must be attentive to food’s material, metaphorical, allegorical, and symbolic social influence processes that make commensality possible’ (Abarca, 2021:666-667).

Although appraisal of the empirical data in this chapter is oriented towards a commensal analysis, prior to these commensally oriented analyses I briefly return to restate some of the features of engaging in a practice theories-informed commensal analysis. Previously, in the methodology chapter the rationale for a practice theories and specifically a dynamics of social practice theory approach (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) has been presented. Occupying an ontological mid-space between structure and agency whilst being cognizant of both, a practice theories approach views the
construction, reproduction and transformation of the social realm as occurring at the empirically encounterable level of practices (Schatzki, 2016).

This approach was presented as an appropriate theorisation to undergird the study of social eating initiative mealtime practices because this expression of commensality seems neither fully determined by austerity-riven policies nor completely accounted for via individualistic accounts of poverty consumption or of in/active citizenship. Cloke, May and Williams reflect upon the alternative and additional forms of care that food aid organisations offer, it follows that:

‘in order to reassess the politics of possibility emerging in these ambiguous and contested responses to social need it will be necessary to deconstruct [...] the binary that too often characterises dominant ways of thinking about such spaces of care’ (2017:719).

As Delormier, Frohlich, and Potvin also note:

‘t]he most important limitation of studying eating strictly as a behaviour under the control of an individual, is that it exaggerates the extent to which rational choice drives what people choose to eat and underestimates the extent to which eating is embedded in the flow of day-to-day life[...] Eating does involve isolated choice, but it is choice conditioned by the context in which it occurs.’ (2009:217).

Furthermore, neither overly structural nor overly behavioural accounts take into consideration how the materiality of surplus foodstuffs, or the time and regularity of social eating mealtimes, for example, are also implicated in the constitution of new forms of eating and eating together. Thinking-through social eating initiative commensality to ascertain its value to participants then, is appropriately achieved through a practice theories-informed approach which collapses this binary to favour a focus on the ontological and empirical mid-space of practices. In this richer and more extensive conception of what constitutes a mealtime, practices are understood as being pre-formed, formed and de-formed as various elements of the social world; material, competencies and meanings, assemble and dissemble (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). This focus on the dynamics of practices, therefore, locates agency as dispersed across overarching social structures, in individuals but also in
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places, spaces and timings and non-human actants, which all come together in various ways in the co-shaping and co-carrying into being of any given practices. As Gherardi and Perrotta note:

‘objects and their material world can be construed as materialised knowledge and matter which interrogate humans and interact with them [...] Consequently, a key question becomes the following: how are all the elements – material and semiotic – which make up a practice assembled, held together, and interrelated? How does the object of the practice emerge and become stabilised?’ (Gherardi and Perrotta, 2014:137).

As per the methodology chapter, when I reflected upon what particular scale and which specific ‘part’ of a practice I would be focussing upon, so too in this chapter I restate which type of practice I am analysing. In the discussion of the theorisation of practices I learned that, whilst practices are viewed as the empirically encounterable feature of society, the level, scale, or stage of those practices can be differently perspectivised. As Schatzki states, ‘social life is much more than small social phenomena alone [...] Practices and arrangements connect not just to one another. They also link with others of their ilk: practices with practices and arrangements with arrangements’ (2016:5).

In the methodology chapter, I provided a rationale for focusing on the mid-level of practices and for looking at how those various practices hang together as a mealtime, rather than conducting very detailed micro-analyses of each practice in each distinct social eating initiative. Analytically, I am focusing on a network of social eating initiatives and the overall mealtime practices that can be discerned therein. More precisely, I am focusing on the mealtime itself and the preparation, cooking, serving, and clearing down of that mealtime as it is practised across The Nottingham Social Eating Network to better understand the value of these practices to their participants.

When the data was coded, almost 200 codes were created, and these code ‘containers’ give reference to almost 30,000 words’ worth of transcription, texts and image descriptions. Through axial coding these 200 codes were sorted into three groups. These three groups were selectively coded as eating together, helping out and socialising. Each of these three overall, selective codes therefore, has this larger and more complex dataset nested underneath each of them. Each of these selectively coded practices are now ready for an analysis which draws upon various concepts that have been foregrounded during the thesis; through a ‘more than food’ conceptualisation.
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As per the following diagram and starting with the first of these three selective codes: eating together - I begin by looking at the setup and delivery of the mealtime, as per the ‘more than food’ approach, as constructing ‘spaces of encounter’ and ‘moment of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) and where the use of surplus can be analysed as a ‘food ladder’ (Blake, 2019b) practice. Furthermore, meals can be examined as a form of ‘home cooking in public places’ and as a way of reconsidering the responsibilization tropes I encountered in the literature positioning and review, for example.

The helping out sections of codes will be examined through the concepts of ‘alimentary contribution’ (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015) and the socialising codes will be analysed through the concepts of ‘lingering, observing and mingling’ (Cattell et al., 2008) and ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). The analysis of this rich and now clearly organised data set will demonstrate the utility of employing the ‘more than food’ conceptualisation as a means of understanding the values entangled in the carrying of social eating initiative mealtime practices into being. As Marovelli reflects, ‘[t]he analysis of the meal ritual revealed a complex and hybrid type of commensality, in which elements of public and private, exceptional and everyday commensality converge’ (2019:200). It is these convergences that are now substantiated in the following chapter sections through the analysis of eating together, helping out and socialising as they are practised across social eating mealtimes.
Within each of these interlinking and intersecting discussions, I utilise the Post-it note, go-along and fieldwork observation notes and quotes, and the photographs taken, to give voice to how these practices within practices are carried through a social eating mealtime. After the more ‘zoomed in’ discussions around how these mealtime practices are assembled across the network, at the end of the chapter I take a more ‘zoomed out’ view to discuss how these practices ‘hang together and are interconnected in more or less strong and enduring ways’ (Lamers, van der Dium and Spaargaren, 2017: 57) in order that some overall conclusions about what participants value about these mealtimes can be affirmed.
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At the end of each section within this final chapter, these images and codings and texts are presented as a collage alongside a chapter conclusion.

6.3 Data analysis of the mealtime practices of The Nottingham Social Eating Network

‘Studies of food and eating from a social science perspective have often focused on meals. The reason is that meals and practices that have evolved around their preparation and eating are a telling story about the importance of eating habits to culture and modern societies’ (Makela, 2009:37).

Figure 30. Photographs of social eating mealtimes from ethnographic fieldwork.

In the UK, the types of commensal participation, contribution and togetherness emerging within social eating spaces are shown, within this chapter, to be evermore necessary. In this context, industrial levels of food wastage coincide with record levels of food insecurity. Experiences of exclusion for those that cannot afford to engage in the reciprocity of commensality are amplified. There is also an attendant rise in charitable food ‘waste’ redistribution as a means of attempting to ameliorate the worst effects of this dispiriting milieu. In addition to this, the rise in fast and convenience food consumption amongst those who are time, motivation, education as well as resource poor, produce a social context which undermines opportunities to engage in commensality for growing numbers of...
people. Given this specific social context engaging in commensality may become of increased value for those experiencing differing forms of alimentary exclusion: ‘even though the discussion on the commensality of meals is often related to family meals, a ‘family meal’ is only one type of shared meal. Eating together creates a feeling of community and solidarity among people who do not share family ties’ (Makela, 2009:43-44).

Let us remind ourselves exactly how social eating initiatives are described before going on to analyse these stories: ‘Generally, these social eating projects [...] cook and provide nutritious meals in a community venue for a suggested donation of, for example, £2.50 per three course meal for adults; children eat for free. The meal is generally offered once a week in venues such as children’s centres, community centres and churches’ (Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021). These initiatives operate as non-profit organisations. The meal is a low cost, paid-for offer with discretionary free meals available, rather than a free meal via charitable referral. They have limited opening hours and reclaim spaces which otherwise serve different functions at other times in the day, such as church halls. The provisioning is typically overseen by a skeleton staff, with support from a broad ensemble of volunteers managing how food is served, participants are greeted, spaces are organised, entertainment provided, and dishes cleaned. They are ‘community-based initiatives that provide an integrated model for recovering and using surplus food’ and which are ‘localising food and providing spaces of interaction that can address food insecurity, support health, well-being and social capital’ (Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021: Abstract, para. 2).

Moreover, social eating initiatives are a novel emergence, an assemblage of domestic, exceptional and food charity and surplus consumption practices through which a particular view of the current UK milieu, and the commensality that is emerging within it, can be articulated. As Giacoman claims:

‘commensality can be perceived as a practice that fulfils the role of strengthening cohesion among the members of a group, both in serving as an interactive space and in symbolising a sense of belonging and respect for shared norms [...] The study of commensality is relevant because its analysis allows us to explore the way in which solidarity mechanisms operate in society with respect to uniting its members, imposing rules, and creating identity’ (2016:460).
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Recent research affirms this notion with Dunbar stating that:

‘family meals are widespread and commonplace in all cultures and inviting friends or visitors to dine remains a regular social activity in most societies – with communal eating with guests being widely regarded as both the height of hospitality and an important way of getting to know people. Even in times when fast food dominates everyday culture, sitting down to eat with family and friends continues to be seen as important and desirable’ (2017b:199).

According to these generalised descriptions, there is much ‘more than food’ occurring through these spaces, and the fieldwork has indeed revealed the rich details of these practices. Beyond the instrumental provisioning of a low-cost meal (although affordable meals are also shown to be of import), and by utilising a commensal approach, I can now begin to discern the value of social eating initiatives to their participants. Given the inter alia-ness of commensality and how it is always-already both a proxy for, and a practice of, social life and enfolded within other often mundane aspects of daily life, its conceptualisation forms the foundation upon which to develop new scholarly insights beyond the ‘leftover food for left behind people’ (Riches and Gerlings, 2019) narrative. It is the capacity for both continuity and transformation, or at least constant modification and affordance, that makes commensality such an interesting and useful framework within which to analyse the emergence of these novel social eating initiatives: ‘the practice of commensality remains open for fresh interpretations’ (Koponen and Mustonen, 2020: 4).

Therefore, throughout the thesis thus far I have been drawing upon the theorisation of commensality to represent and differentially account for some related, but not always conceptually conjoined, features of the current UK social realm. I have used it as a lens to reframe why participants may value a social eating mealtime experience beyond the satiating of physical sustenance, and why the meeting of that need for ‘more than food’ has taken the shape that it has. It is not just that commensality is significant per se, it is also that social eating commensality is particularly significant to participants within the current UK milieu. When Dunbar states that ‘those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support’ (Dunbar, 2017b:198), I can
identify a line of enquiry that moves beyond an overreliance upon opposing conceptions of the powerless yet responsibilized, or the citizen consumer, to the in-common practices of commensality. It is from this location and through the data utterances of cook, customer, volunteer and academic researcher-participants that the specificities and nuances of social eating commensality is analysed.

This foray or a ‘zooming into’ (Nicolini, 2009, 2017) the data will show us that the ‘how’ of a social eating initiative mealtime can be evidenced and connected to other flows of social practices. It is through the conceptualisation of commensality, the elaboration of a ‘more than food’ approach and encompassing the practice-oriented enfolding of things as well as people, that the ‘why’ of social eating initiative mealtimes can be articulated.

Moreover, the forthcoming analysis within this section reveals how this feeling of community and solidarity exists because elements of social eating commensality are indeed drawn from or carried over from, domestic commensality, rendering beyond-kinship mealtimes familiar; a meal cooked by community for community. As Valentine states, ‘consumption practices and identity formation in the home can shape or be shaped by consumption practices and identity formation in other spaces’ (1999:495)

This analysis forms the response to the research sub-question: (e) **how do these practices contribute to a ‘more than food’ approach?** This thesis analysis will demonstrate that much ‘more than food’ is being achieved and accomplished through social eating initiative mealtime practices. Through attention to the spaces, places, contexts, materialities, competencies and meanings that are emerging and intersecting into and out of social eating practices, I evidence and demonstrate the appropriateness of this enriched, ‘more than food’ commensal lens. This lens clarifies and contributes the answer to the overall research question: (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?** In this chapter, the thesis evidences and analyses these mealtime practices to show incrementally, successively and significantly, their value. In the following chapter, the deeper import and contribution of these analyses to commensal scholarship will be claimed.
6.3.1 Creating ‘spaces of encounter’

When participants make statements that a social eating initiative can be understood as: “a safe welcoming space and place with food at the heart” and “the idea of being welcoming and safe is absolutely critical. It’s a non-judgmental, accessible to everybody place to come, in the heart of the community” (Bestop Café), they are describing practices which enfold from the assemblages of kinship and familial commensality. Whilst Valentine notes that ‘the home is usually studied in isolation, as divorced from the locality and dis-connected from socio-spatial relations at other scales’ (1999:495) it is possible through paying close attention to the articulations of social eating participants, to trace the links between the home and these quasi-domestic, public mealtimes.

Indeed, I detect elements and proto practices of domestic commensality, domestic provisioning, of parenting, caring and meal timing management and mis en place. Food familiarity, food quality and meal quantity are also frequently mentioned as are the discursive affects such as feeling cared for and welcomed and sharing family time. These spaces are described as being ‘home from home’ where

8. Quotation marks (‘) are used with texts that come from Post-it note insights from the meal-centred focus groups. E.g., ‘I love the food’

Speech marks and text in italic (“) denote quotes from the go-along interview transcriptions, and occasionally fieldnote quotes. The longer go-along interview transcription excerpts are also accredited to the relevant social eating space. E.g., “I fear the possibility of something going wrong - food poisoning, safeguarding, health and safety!”
‘good food’ and ‘fabulous, healthy meals’ are served. The meals are appraised as being ‘well cooked and presented nicely’ and customers arrive ‘knowing what the food is’ and with the confidence that ‘that the food will be good’. It is not only the ‘home cooked’ and ‘homemade’ facets of the meal on offer but also the layout of tables and chairs, the expectation of seeing people that are known, the weekly regularity of the event or its siting within the locale and being ‘only down the road’ which all facilitate and bring into practice a mealtime. These practices are structured by the carrying over of the elements and the proto practices of domestic commensality.

As Warde et al. note, domestic meal provisioning realised through ‘coordinated co-presence and spatio-temporal delimitation [...] involves an identified site and more or less precise specification of the time at which the event will begin and end. It requires social coordination and spatial propinquity’ (2021:384). This propinquity also extends then, not just to the spaces and timings of a meal but the assemblage of materials, competences and meanings that pre-exist and are held within shared norms around domestic commensality.

In this section, then, I follow the schedule of the mealtime itself - reflecting on the practices that are occurring prior to, during and after the meal service. I will focus on how surplus food use within these practices can be considered as a ‘food ladder’ (Blake, 2019b) which is enabling alimentary participation. At the end of this section, I will reflect upon how the responsibilization tropes which surround the consumption of ready meals and ‘fast’ foods are being subverted by the social eating dinner, and why that is significant for participants. Finally, I will consider how all of these practices can be understood as those which restructure commensality.

In the following vignette, I reflect on my experiences of entering a social eating space one evening, just before dinner was due to be served.

“It’s so busy and bustling. I think the feeling is anticipatory. Almost manic but not quite. Everyone is ready to eat, ready for the dinners to start coming out. There is a buzz. It’s like when kids are hungry, and they start getting a bit agitated but on a larger and more polite scale! And everything has to come together. People are here on time, but dinner seems to be
running late. People are queuing and dumping coats and bags around the seats, and I can hear
a screech when a woman is dragging a highchair to the table with a baby on her hip. The urn
is on, and the buffet table is stacked with bread and butter, cereal bars, fruit, juices and
yoghurts. Plates are rattling, and in the kitchen, steam is coming out of the oven as the cook
is checking the food. Someone is walking back towards the door which has hinged open letting
the cold air into the hall after someone has yelled “shut that door!”

Before the meal has even been served these fieldwork observation notes provide an insight into just
how much ‘action’ precedes the consumption of a social eating meal. The hall has been readied with
heating and lighting turned on before customers arrive. Tables have been positioned and set up, chairs
arranged and a side table with cutlery has been arranged, items have been plugged in, switched on,
and heated up. In this kitchen as well as many others, I observed an array of skills, the designation of
roles and the following of procedures occurring as the cooks work towards service time.

As a staff member at one site recalled, “Well, actually we have to start Thursday and so if there is joints
of beef or pork however that needs to be cooked on the Thursday. There has to be prep for vegetables,
potatoes, what’s on the menu. That takes about 2/3 hours on a Thursday. And then we set up in the
main hall and set the kitchen and the chairs and tables in the hall out on Thursday night. So, on Friday
morning when we come in here, we can just start to cook so eight o’clock comes in this morning. Putting
the cookers on. We’ve got casseroles today, so we started cooking the veg and putting those in the
cook pots. And then we have staff come from about a quarter past eight to about quarter past nine at
the most, and all the staff here can help cooking. Some of them are in the main hall, putting out the
drinks, cakes and some of the other things ready, some of the cooking in here, some of them are
preparing, putting stuff out” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Cafe).

From these instances of reflection and description it is already evident that within a social eating
initiative mealtime there are myriad materials, meanings and competences come together to carry
that mealtime into production and that many of these elements and proto practices exist in
formations of other practices.
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Looking at the following images, they show cooks busy in well-organised kitchens and other kitchen staff and volunteers preparing the food to be carried out, passing into the dining room space with the meal and the side tables being laid, cutlery and plates made ready and food heaters plugged in. I become cognizant again of how much of the preparation of the meal requires know-how about an array of things and draws upon a repertoire of skills and embodied knowledges. The competences, most evidently performed by the cooks, require skills that are carried over from a range of experiences and trainings.

Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.
So too, the pictures of the storage cupboard with labelled goods show that practices of material organisation can involve roles which draw upon skills in planning, risk assessment, food hygiene compliancy and temporal scheduling and sorting. These practices also draw upon commensal preparation competences, which pre-exist in the commercial and institutional food sectors, as well as upon their associations with safety, regimentation and administration. These competences in practice all require and draw upon other elements and forms of proto practices being carried over into those new settings and situations in order that these tasks are proficiently undertaken. Indeed, the formalised competencies necessary to enact a public mealtime are conveyed by the organisers and cooks:

“staff need training - food hygiene, safeguarding, etc” because “[we have] to accommodate different food intolerances, dietary requirements e.g., need for halal etc” because “I fear the possibility of something going wrong - food poisoning, safeguarding, health and safety!” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Café).

This results in spatio-temporal practices such as organising the dining space into staff and customer zones: “for health and safety reasons our staff they serve all the meals and we use hot plates and cook
pots so keep the food at the right temperature and if somebody needs something, they always ask the staff and they will try to do that, because we've never had an accident in four years, and we don't want that to happen” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Café). And as one cook reflecting on the way that the opening times, entry to the eating space and the way that equipment was staged, shows that these practices also shift and are modified according to both planned activities and the more haphazard way that people act in practice:

“It used to be a bit chaotic with the coffee by the front door, so we moved it to the back so it's easier to control the dining room space. It's much better” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

Although the customer participants do not mention any type of concerns over the provenance, safety or cleanliness of the venue or food offers, this is nonetheless raised as a concern by one staff member: “the food offer needs to turn around very quickly and lots of issues around provenance and compliancy which causes delays and difficulties”(Go-along interview, Carriages Café). The actant materiality of surplus food and how it shapes practices within social eating initiatives will be discussed in a following section, but this quote emphasises that multi-layered and complex practices which are embedded into the production and purchasing of meals are regulated, regularised and formalised by a range of intersecting hygiene, temperature regulation, cleaning procedures and serving formalities. These are being carried over from the food industry, from previous and in-situ training and from experiences both domestic, institutional and professional.

As Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) confirm these materials, skills, roles and the significance and value of helping out, therefore, do not appear ‘fresh’ each time a social eating mealtime is enacted, instead they draw upon elements and proto practices that already exist within other areas of social life. As one of the cook-participants reflects:

“I don’t write plans out; I have an ability to work out the cooking times ahead in my head. We aim to have everything we can, ready for half past five when the doors open. Veggies are always the last to go on as they cook quickly” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).
Thus, embedded within this statement is a complex array of habits, know-how, knowledges, and the spatio-temporal considerations that give rise to the skills of *mis en place* so necessary for the competencies of mealtime preparation to be realised. When the cook participant states that:

“I aim to be here if I can for two, print the menu, pin it on the wall, on the fridge, and it’s just a matter of cycling through making sure we get everything done on time” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café), within the term ‘just a matter of’ in a relatively unreflexive manner there is actually a complex array of practices which are being drawn upon.

These complex mixtures of practices within practices are termed ‘integrative practices’ (Schatzki, 1996:98) wherein ‘each performance presupposes competence in at least several others’ (Warde *et al.*, 2016:41) and which Warde also describes as being:

‘sometimes coordinated by formal organisations [...] They then attempt to regulate performances- prescribe rules, prohibit or discourage particular forms of behaviour, teach acceptable conduct [...] While not all integrative practices are so constituted or steered, Exactly what is ‘out there’ is critical to explaining how (some practices) are coordinated as shared, collective modus operandi’ (2016:45-46).

Moreover, these seemingly humdrum recollections of the laborious practices inlaid into meal preparations, point to a naturalisation and normalisation of practices whereby practices around food preparation come to have some internal coherence, consistency and ‘integrity due to its ‘organisation’; it exists ‘for itself’[…] in a historically generated collective accomplishment […] [via] individual performers, who hold or weave the elements of the nexus together, to exemplify its organisation’ (Warde, 2016:42).
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Underpinning this seeming mundanity and the rendering of complex food preparation practices into something everyday and unexceptional and often overlooked (DeVault, 1994; Valentine, 1999) are also forms of bespoke mealt ime modification, of spontaneity and of ad-hoc elements. This personalisation and customisation are also discernible features of social acting mealtime preparations, suggesting that new and novel formations of practices also emerge alongside those that are habituated and regularised. These impromptu practices such as when people spontaneously take up voluntary activities such as helping out in some way as mealtime preparations escalate, of showing people to the queue or conferring what is on that day’s menu also rely upon and are shaped by pre-existing practices such as those of the domestic sphere where there is an expectation to get involved or share alimentary information.

Noticing these elements of social eating practices and how they are carried over and appropriated gives us insights into ‘the multiplicities of times and spaces within individual homes, and how these multiple times and spaces may weave into and interact with each other’, which in turn enables us ‘to gain a clearer understanding of how the ‘temporal and spatial micropolitics of everyday domestic life’ (Valentine, 1999:521) are being constituted and reconstituted into new and novel practices that create the affects and value of ‘home’.

As one customer-participant said when I asked, “I noticed you went off and did something when I came in, what are you doing?” and they replied, “That’s right, the cook had a car full of food and trays of trifle, and a big steaming pot of stew, so we helped her carry stuff in for a bit” (Go-along interview, Secret Kitchen). Without prompting, a temporary practice of voluntarism was enacted. This may have been broadly individually motivated but the informality of the social eating event, the familiarity of the space, the expectation of a sequence of events that are leading up to the meal, the social norms around helping people carry cumbersome items and the way the building was set up with a shared and visible entrance way all coalesced to form a hybrid nexus of practices upon which performances of intentional and spontaneous support are launched.

The following photographs capture the moving of tables as eater-participants rearrange the dining room to accommodate their friends and family (see also, Marovelli, 2019). Feeling able to arrange the
space to suit, without asking permission, intentionally acting to meet your own needs and rationally deciding to enact some activity within a space are all expressions of agency. In some formative senses, the fact that tables and chairs can be moved and that spaces have enough room for furniture to be rearranged also points to the agential and contextually sensitive nature of practice approaches wherein materialities shape the possibilities of what can come to be within those practices, but more fundamentally these expressions of casual agency also rest upon a nexus of other practices, particularly those that are borrowed over from the domestic sphere.

Figure 33. Photographs of participants moving tables and chairs together, from ethnographic fieldwork activities.

These are domestic and kinship-related actions; ‘making yourself at home’ as one participant notes. These spaces feel like ‘home from home’ because they are ‘local’, ‘nearby’, ‘10 minutes away’, ‘our local community centre’ and where ‘I already use [the] centre’; elements which combine to create an atmosphere and context where competencies conventionally enacted in the home find new expression within the social eating dining room.

Temporality, too, has an affect with the ‘weekly’ frequency of the event, which over time engenders a ‘familiarity’ with customer-participants stating that ‘I have been coming since it started’. Some
participants already make connections between what Warde et al. call the ‘coordinated co-presence and spatio-temporal delimitation’ (2020:384) of shared mealtimes. A regular and frequent mealtime that lasts a prescribed length of time creates a focused and intensified form of practice that also resonates into the future by dint of both the scheduling of a fixed event that shapes future plans, but also discursively via the meanings of anticipation that come from having ‘something to look forward to’.

As participants noted on the Post-it notes, social eating is a ‘regular provision- not a one-off’ and it happens in the ‘same time and space- community rhythm of a mealtime’. Some participants consciously connected these elements of a practice, noting the ‘Place- accessible, hospitable (sic) building and at the same time every week’ and confirmed that this nexus of practices created affects: the “regularity of it: certain, certain time- comforting and reassuring, gives people something to look forward to” (Fieldnotes, customer from Bestop Kitchen). Taken together, then, ‘the shared meal is able to determine, at least for its duration, “a sense of ‘we-ness’ in difference” thanks to its order, ritual and hospitality’ (Marovelli, 2019:193). ‘Spaces of encounter’, then, are constructed through the practices of a social eating mealtime wherein the set-up, staging, rhythm, arrangements and delivery of eating-together services are explicitly and habitually deployed to facilitate communal ways of thinking, acting and feeling. (Marovelli, 2019:200).

6.3.2 Dinner is served!: The practices of social eating mealtimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moments of Commensality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local, Nearby, Accessible, Entertainment and music, Sit together, Made with love, Good environment, Atmosphere, Safe, warm and comfortable place, A hub, Familiar space, Familiarity, Getting out of the house, Space to play, Routines, Attendance, Weekly attendance, After work, Schedule, Bonding over food, Time, Regularity, Something to look forward to, Temporal aspects of wellbeing, Visual aspects of food, Food as a prop or tool</td>
</tr>
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*Figure 34. Text box of Moments of Commensality codes.*
I now look to the mealtime itself and analyse how its facilitation and delivery is creating value for participants, before I look specifically how the surplus foods that fabricate the meals are creating practices of inclusion, pleasure, and participation. I present another vignette, this time jotted down after entering a space and sitting down where the meal service was already underway.

‘The somewhat grey and nondescript outside of the building is such a contrast to the bright, food-smell-saturated, full-of-people inside. The dinner here is already underway and there is a sort of focus, a food-focus, where lots of people are eating at the same time. It’s not as noisy as the other spaces I’ve visited, and I wonder if this is because everyone is already eating?

The well-organised dining room has steaming hotpots of food at one side and here customers get table service, with staff and volunteers who ask them for their food choices and bring the food over. The tables sit 4 people each and they are arranged more like a restaurant rather than being put together in a longer row. People seem to love being served at the table! I return to the doorway as the chap taking payment has returned to his chair. I pay £3 for a three-course meal, and I can help myself to tea and coffee at the side table. I notice that cakes are already sliced ready to be taken and I’ve noticed in other venues that some foods, where the public can readily access them, come pre-cut or pre-served. I’m assuming this is intended to make sure people don’t help themselves to too much stuff, especially if it’s part of the already paid for meal. The idea of ‘freebies’ sometimes causes a scrum. (Remember that one event where I saw staff intervening when one lady tried to take a huge catering block of cheese away?!). Not here though, this space seems to run on a buzz of quiet efficiency, and everyone is very ‘well behaved’.

In this space, as elsewhere across the network, the spatial organisation of the mealtime is shaped by the way that the venue is set up and administered, which in turn affects the type of commensality that emerges within that space. Here, a hybrid family mealtime/eating ‘out’ atmosphere is created not only by the greeter and money-taker at the desk by the entrance but also via the table set up, and especially via the table service. As the cook-participant states:
“And when people come in, they pay at the desk just to the left. We have two greeters so if there’s anybody that’s new, they’re looked after. And we always have people serving to the table” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

For, as Giacoman notes: ‘like all interactions commensality entails a staging in a concrete space, where the different actors involved play a part and follow a script that directs their practices and conversations’ (2016:461).

As Marovelli’s account of food sharing initiatives recalls, there is a ritualised ordering of a mealtime, including the ways that spaces, places and material resources and infrastructures within those spaces shape and amplify those orders: ‘material and spatial aspects constitute features to be manoeuvred

Figure 35. Photographs from ‘photovoice’ activities- showing dinner service, transportation to venues, greeters, ‘till’ and arrangement of cutlery and plates.
in order to obtain a convivial atmosphere and the spatial arrangements of the kitchen and the table play a poignant role in this process’ (2019:4).

This ordering mitigates and minimises the ‘inherent risk at the heart of the ideal notion of public space’ (Cattell et al., 2008:545) wherein open access sites entail the mixing of people which in turn may amplify differences, throw into relief the non-kinship ties of eaters and which may emphasise what Giacoman (2016) terms the ‘ambiguous value’ of commensality wherein it can also offer an occasion for differentiating and excluding social groups (Grignon, 2001). As Young reflects when thinking through the values attributed to public and ‘associational’ spaces, ‘by definition a public space is a place accessible to anyone [...] in entering the public one always risks encountering those who are different, those who identify with different groups and have different opinions on life’ (1995:268).

In order that conviviality emerges from commensality, social eating spaces employ a number of strategies both reflexive and explicit, to create practices of harmonious commensality and to embed the normative functions of meal sharing in producing group cohesion. So too, customers regulate and constrain behaviours, as noted in the quiet, food-focused eating style previously described and the policing of foodstuffs as occurred in the allusion to the reactions of a customer taking food without permission. ‘The manner in which goods and services are delivered manifestly affects how they are received or consumed [...] the domestic mode of provision is important, but market, communal and state models all play a part’ (Warde, 2016:14). The spatial set up such as the payment desk, the materiality and discursive elements of a paid-for meal, the set-up of tables, the zoning of the space according to the activities that are occurring there, all support the fabrication of permissible practices and discourage those deemed improper.

Moreover, when “public spaces can be treated as ‘locales’ or as settings in which ‘social relations, communities of place and a sense of place are constituted”’ (Cattell et al., 2008:546-547) the social eating groups themselves operate as ‘translation mechanisms’ (Williams et al., 2016). They are co-constructing hybridised services that mix domestic informality with more formal, institutional and exceptional commensality via set-up and servicing practices which encompass elements of familiarity, expectation, welcome and accessibility alongside the assurances of safety, compliance and public
social order. As with the careful and compliant preparation of foodstuffs, the network is operating to enfold certain values into those spaces, places and social groupings. As participants note, the network offers: ‘A space, a support network, or place where people from the same community can meet when they would not otherwise be engaged’ which ‘allows different genres of the community to meet in similar/familiar environment’ and acts as a ‘safe place for communities to meet’.

These spaces act as inclusive places where that ordering of conviviality via commensality also operates to bring both the focus onto the shared element of the mealtime - and to suspend, albeit locally, temporarily and partially, some of the intersectional differences that are amplified by the tropes of responsibilization (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017) such as experiences of disability, ill health, poverty and challenges in travelling to, and accessing, services. As one customer describes “this is a place that brings people together so it can be an anchor for many who may be socially isolated”, whilst another says that these mealtimes “get you out in a community where there are very few places to meet” (Fieldnotes, customers from Bestop Kitchen and Soul Food Café).

The layering up and amplification of inclusive practices will also be further discussed in the surplus as a ‘food ladder’ section (Blake, 2019b) through a focus on how the materialities of the social eating meal specifically construct practices of alimentary participation. For as one customer conveys:

“Well, for many of our folk, it’s getting out of the four walls. What I mean by that is that by getting away from that you aren’t confined by the pressures of mounting bills and stuff like that. It’s a meal you can have, it becomes cheaper to eat at the social eating space than it is at home” (Customer, Growin’ Spaces).

As shown in the previous photographs some members of the network organise travel to and from the dinner to ensure that customers can access the service; drawing upon a repertoire of relational and scheduling practices which stretch out from the venue spatially and temporally to ensure participation. As one participant noted:
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“I have trouble cooking due to illness and it makes it easier to come here for a cheap meal and great company” (Fieldnotes, customer at Parkgate Community Cafe).

This is an example of how social eating initiatives are conscientiously constructing, and are themselves caught amidst, assemblages of commensal production. Participants conveyed how social eating spaces enabled them to ‘all come together to support disabled neighbours’ in places that had ‘disabled friendly access and [were] nearby’. Additionally, participants referred to situations where support workers used these mealtimes to anchor other activities: ‘the community nurse brings people up’ (Fieldnotes and Post-it notes from Bestop Kitchen). As Marovelli also asserts, ‘initiatives that are not targeting exclusively people in need but are open to anyone manage to provide a different sociality during the meal’ (2019:8).

These mealtimes are anchored via practices of access, availability and safety and also by practices of conformity, expectation and authority which criss-cross from other domains of social life to coalesce around the shared table in a ‘moment of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019). As a customer stated during a go-along interview:

“I find the thing about it socially though, is the fact that we are sat at a table together and we are talking. We encourage people to put the phone down and actually engage with each other. That is a social eating initiative because everybody could sit with the TV dinner but the importance of the talking to one another and sitting at a table is a social eating initiative, for me” (Fieldnotes, from Growin’ Spaces customer).

Indeed, in the Post-it note sessions multiple utterances around these issues demonstrated that more than being ‘community anchors’ and ‘safe spaces’ this network also facilitated the inclusion of those multiply excluded by the material cuts to services enacted via austerity and the discursive shunning (Garthwaite, 2011) that often accompanies those deemed responsible for their own disadvantageous predicaments:
“It’s an opportunity to engage over food; because food brings people together; it’s a leveller”, because “it’s not just talking, you’ve got the food. It brings people together over the problems. It’s something else to talk about not just problems you can talk about the food” (Fieldnotes, from Growin’ Spaces customer).

In one go-along interview, a staff member articulated the links between the meal they were offering and the cohesive properties of commensality:

“Where food is at, there is the community. Food and eating together is the unifying, bonding glue that keeps people together and how it encourages people to come back time and time again” (Bestop Kitchen).

Contrary to the careful coordination practices that are enacted through table service, but not contrary to the overall dynamics of inclusionary practices, some staff assembled a convivial atmosphere by revoking these orderings and relying upon the normative powers of their dining service to shape behaviours without intentional interventions: “We don’t have greeters, we open the door, and everybody just piles in” (Go-along interview, Secret Kitchen).

Therefore, the layout of spaces, the ordering of the service, facilitating access into the spaces for marginal groups, the competences of serving at the table or cutting up portions of food, pre-service, or even the practice of letting customers just ‘pile in’, are all examples of practices that control and mediate public spaces so that conviviality and commensality can emerge for the benefit of participants. Again, Marovelli reflects that ‘the spatial and material aspects of commensality proved to be organised to facilitate a collaborative and familiar atmosphere, which reduces anxieties around the quality of the meal and fosters a sense of togetherness for the duration of the meal’ (2019:9).
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However, just as cook-participants conveyed anxieties about managing the safety of foodstuffs, so too, I see concerns and practices of mitigation employed within the network to manage and retain control over these spaces:

“It can be quite overwhelming - as soon as the doors open people have a coffee, take their coat off and feed them straight away. You find that most people are really keen to have a coffee. It used to be a bit chaotic with the coffee by the front door, so we moved it to the back so it’s easier to control the dining room space. It’s much better” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

Here, the entrance into the space was modified, with the coffee being moved into another section of the space to discourage overcrowding at the doorway. The photos below show the narrow venue lobby, the clear space at the entrance of the space and the now-reattuated coffee machine.

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Figure 36. Photographs from ‘photovoice’ activities- showing dining room, serving space and threshold.

“It gives us a little bit more control, so we get them seated which means they stay in one place, and then we come and ask them what they want, and we give them a copy of the menu that you see hanging up there, and we put on the table and then we serve each table” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).
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The need to shape and maintain the flow of the social eating mealtime and to ensure harmonious commensality entails practices that draw upon both the intentional material regulation of spaces but also upon the habituated competences of queuing, exchanging payment for meals, being seated or served, and polite consumption from a shared resource whose distribution may not be being overseen by staff. These practices of politeness and sociality are both drawn from domestic and exceptional commensality and shaped in-situ by the agential properties of tables, chairs, serving hatches and payment buckets that serve as material prompts that regulate those practices.

Thus, insights into the practices which extend prior to, within, and beyond the meal itself, and which entangle and encompass a number of distinctive yet interlinked elements and proto practices drawn from various areas of social life, are revealed. These are carried into and are necessary for, the establishment, and upholding of social eating commensality. ‘In this way, it is possible to think about how food practices (symbolic and material) can locate people within particular emplotted stories or narratives of identity not of their own making; and how people can also employ food as a way of constructing stories about themselves within the wider multiple plots of family, work, institutions, nation and so on’ (Valentine, 1999:496).

This emplotting of food practices that shape the mealtime but also allow new narratives to be forged is particularly apt when thinking through the use of surplus foodstuffs within social eating initiatives.

6.3.3 Learning to participate

‘Food can produce both borders and commensalities’ (Wise, 2011:106).

Although united through their practising of social eating commensality, members of The Nottingham Social Eating Network also articulated the ways that conflict arises and is managed within their spaces. Strangers meeting over food, according to anthropologists, requires many explicit and implicit rules to be shared and complied with in order for conviviality to emerge through commensality (Douglas, 1972). As Giacoman notes commensality itself is also the processes of social exclusion and the reinforcement of difference. Indeed, potential conflicts, flashpoints and reinforcement of stigma are both explicitly and implicitly surfaced in the fieldwork. Organisers, volunteers and customers
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themselves convey how the spaces, timings, roles and division of labours and material resources form and deform to create and mitigate tensions. Data collected also evidences where specific accommodations within practices have to be carefully managed to ensure the value of commensality, or social inclusion and cohesion, is upheld. Eating with strangers at social eating initiatives is also interpolated with managing people with differences in opinion, approach and culture. As Amin (2010) notes, the upholding of mealtime conviviality requires managing ‘the many local separations, dispersed geographies of attachment and qualified proximities between strangers that characterise modern urban living’ (Amin, 2010:10).

Whilst everyday commensality is regarded as a private and domestic affair, and exceptional or ‘eating out’ commensality is undergirded by strong rules of propriety and manners (Julier, 2013; Warde, 2016), social eating is a hybrid practice of commensality. As such elements of both types of commensal practice can be detected as well as elements of homelessness or food bank provisioning (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). In order to uphold cohesion, multiple and entwined facets of practices get carried over from pre-existing practices whilst novel elements, such as the offering of excess produce or ‘surplus-surpluses’, also create new directions of practice such as those deployed in moderating tendencies of people to ‘grab stuff’.

Managing dining room tensions means that groups rely on both their individual sensibilities but also on how these are expressed as collective sets of manners and expectations of customer behaviour. However, when differing people eat in public for differing reasons, a common culture cannot be relied upon to guide decorum. Examination of the differing tactics that groups utilise to maintain conviviality showsthat there are multiple ways (beyond a reliance on behavioural norms) through which practices are shaped. In this way, behaviours are not just matters of individuated manners or even shared norms and values, but also require conscious management. As Douglas suggests a mealtime is the creation of order within the broader disorder of everyday life (1972). It creates ‘a sense of ‘we-ness’ in difference’ (Wise, 2011:102) because of its order and ritual.

Internalised yet simultaneously dispersed-across-the-group behaviours such as turn-taking and queuing also evidence how a practice-lens brings into view the multiple forms of habituated and
reflexive manners which assure social cohesion. Reliance upon these ‘good’ behaviours within social eating mealtimes articulates the normative power of previously experienced and integrated commensality. As Warde and Martens note, ‘cultural templates’ (2000) direct how mealtimes are conducted wherein multiple prior experiences build conscious knowledge and etiquette, social expectations which arise in different settings, and learned behaviours that transmit and reproduce existing socio-cultural orders all coalesce at mealtimes; surfacing oftentimes as unconscious habits and as preferred ways of setting up spaces, and the expectation of meals to be served at certain times, for example. These conscious accommodations within practices are also accompanied by a number of normative dimensions, many of which are enfolded over from domestic, institutional and exceptional commensality, such as not taking more than your share, waiting in a queue in an orderly way, taking your plate to be washed or not allowing very noisy children or phone calls to interrupt other’s dining experiences. As Warde (2016) notes:

‘One element of manners is proper bodily hexis. Children are still told to sit up straight and not slouch, to pull the chair into the table and to refrain from leaving elbows sticking out. Such instructions [...] are not just a matter of manners but also associated with the material nature of the furniture, tools and utensils related to eating’ (Warde, 2016, 73).

These often-unspoken aspects of mealtime practices demonstrate how practices are not just enfolded into individuals as part of their ‘habitus’ or their ‘practical consciousness’, or their embodied and embedded norms around rules of conduct (Bourdieu, 1990); mealtime conflict management is also held within and across groupings as structuring tendencies.

These unspoken aspects of mealtime practices are also bolstered by the set-up of spaces, which is sometimes changed to shape behaviours more consciously. As one staff member notes, ‘you have to deal with the ‘hungry energy’ of lots of people wanting food as the same time. What do you do? Well, we have greeters who show people to the tables and get them seated, we announce when dinner is ready and we ask people to come up table by table with children going first. That way people know what to expect and you know, it’d be rude to just push in if there were kids waiting” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Cafe).
Another volunteer, when explaining why they had a coffee station at the entrance of the space, described their tactics for managing a rush of people at the beginning of the service time, “people were milling around outside before. This gets them in the door, a coffee or whatever, then they can settle and have drink. It was a bit of a jostle outside and that put off some of our elderly customers as they thought some of the homeless people were a bit hectic” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

As Smith (2021) notes, feeding what can be considered vulnerable populations such as those experiencing homelessness, can be fraught with flashpoints which emerge from the seemingly innate behaviours of queuing and turn-taking, but which actually need to be carefully managed:

‘[Q]ueuing for food in public places can create a potentially threatening environment. Jostling for queue position was a recognised conflict trigger. Fear of missing out on food was exacerbated by long queues. Fights erupt because of queue jumping [...] Newcomers were a
source of friction, fuelling the perception that regulars might miss out on food.’ (Smith, 2021:13).

Whilst evidently not an explicit service for those experiencing homelessness, the social eating organisers did however draw upon their repertoires of other practices in food banks and homeless shelters, for example, in order to foresee potential sites of conflict. As one volunteer explained “you have to minimise the scrum! It’s not nice to have everyone grabbing at stuff or pushing. The free bits of the table sometimes cause a bit of a rush ‘cause people want first pick. So, we put it out bit by bit and we save some of the table stuff for customers we know need it more or who need special stuff, like we do at the food bank. We manage it a bit in a discreet way” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Café). One participant also recalled how at a previous (now defunct) social eating initiative, they had managed the influx of homeless customers by staging two mealtimes “one during the day when the unhoused folk could come in for a bit of respite and a free meal and one in the evening where we advertised it as a family-friendly meal aka no intoxication, or what have you, and we found that worked well and made the service much more manageable” (Fieldnotes, Picnic Basket Café).

Whilst the inclusion of marginalised groups such as the homeless or the disabled are enacted in ways which seek to suspend everyday stigma and isolation, albeit in temporary and localised ways, the potential for discord does have to be anticipated and managed by organisers: ‘we want to include everyone and make sure everyone feels welcome but you have to be honest here. Not everyone will get along, some people take more than they should and don’t consider others. Some people get pissed off if the meal they wanted is gone and they have to eat something else. Some people who are new sometimes complain about the lack of choice’ (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

However, some groups do not attempt to manage customers and consciously allow the crowd of eaters to regulate themselves, relying on the implicit and embedded norms and values around mealtime behaviour: “god no, I don’t have time to be getting anyone seated or what have you. Everyone just forms a massive queue. I think regulars know that there is enough food and they know
people who they chat to in the queue. Obviously if someone is old or has a baby or what have you, people let them go first but otherwise it just sorts itself out” (Go-along interview, Secret Kitchen).

It was also noted in one space that a sign asking people to only take enough for themselves was placed above the free food table and another sign also appeared in one space reminding people to wash their hands carefully after people complained that unhygienic customers were ‘rifling through the food’ in ways that other customers found disturbing. Herein groups had to find polite ways of shaping behaviours: “we used a sign, clearly marked, so we don’t want to be picking on any one person or embarrassing them but at the same time, we can’t have people just touching all the bread and cheese or whatever and having dirty hands. We can’t make them wash but we can remind them and hope they get the hint! “(Fieldnotes, Growin’ Spaces). The normative dimension (Giacoman, 2016; Higgs, 2015) of the mealtime is demonstrated to act as an inherent system of scrutiny (Warde, 2014) wherein infringements (such as the lady taking the cheese) were met with immediate censure from the crowd of diners but which also required groups to draw upon also more structured ways of managing potential conflicts (such as members using signs to direct appropriate behaviours).

Therefore, The Nottingham Social Eating Network and its customers draw upon repertoires of behaviour that are prompted by the practices of domestic and exceptional meal provisioning and which are also shaped the repertoires of practices which cross over from institutional and food charity services. For example, it was regularly observed that extra foodstuffs, often located on side tables where customers could help themselves, were taken in small amounts by many customers. Although the novelty of being able to take free food may have contributed to behaviours wherein people would ‘grab stuff’ (such as the lady attempting to take a wheel of cheese home), children were chided for taking multiple yoghurts or chocolate mousses and people also waited until the end when they were sure things were not going to be taken before helping themselves to produce that would have otherwise been thrown away. Normative behaviours coexist with spontaneous and transgressive behaviours and these in turn, are shaped and managed by the broader flows of mealtime practices.

Indeed, the view that emerges from fieldwork articulates how commensal inclusion relies upon implicit and embedded disciplinary practices and expectations for behaviours which form part of the
materialities, competences and meanings of practices (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). These disciplinary facets of social eating initiatives are subsumed into the ways in which spaces are organised, with queues, with serving hatches, or even with table service (which is designed to politely discourage people from ‘wandering around’... [and for] keeping control of the dining room” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Cafe). Groups employed different strategies to overcome challenges of social opprobrium, and to minimize and avoid the potential for exclusionary and conflicting aspects of commensality wherein groups within groups could form that replicate the already existing hierarchies and divisions which exist within the social realm. The value of creating convivial and commensal spaces threads through the practices that both the network and customers themselves deploy. The intention is that ‘these different spaces [...] situations of hospitality, sharing plate and so forth - are resources where capacities and affective dispositions positive towards difference can be slowly built up’ (Wise, 2011: 107) and where, in the face of complex issues, these initiatives, if not granting a solution to conflicts, ‘do act to ameliorate the negative aspects of contemporary life’ (Marovelli, 2019:11).

6.3.4 Surplus is a ‘food ladder’

![Figure 38. Text box of Surplus as a Food Ladder codes.](image)

‘While few have focused on what users feel about receiving surplus food specifically, the practice of redistributing such food may exacerbate feelings of exclusion and worthlessness’ (Caraher and Furey, 2017:13).
"They should stop calling it waste. That devalues what we do. The food is perfectly good. It’s just surplus. That doesn’t help as people think it’s just a load of old crap." (Go-along interview, Carriages Cafe).

At first glance, and with an offer of weekly or monthly cheap, no or low-choice meals and particularly through their use of surplus foodstuffs, social eating initiatives can be readily subsumed within the food aid critiques as yet another manifestation of food aid, unwittingly ameliorating the worst aspects of food insecurity (through feeding people surplus under the ethos of it solving both food waste and hunger) (Caraher and Furey, 2017). Indeed, the literature positioning and review chapter identified that much scholarship on UK food banking and charitable food projects has been directed to articulating and critiquing the structural drivers and narratives which appear to underpin and account for the rise and proliferation of surplus food aid (Garthwaite and Bambra, 2017; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Caplan, 2017, 2020; Caraher and Furey, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019).

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Figure 39. Photographs from ethnographic fieldwork activities- showing surplus collection.

As Cloke, May and Williams admit ‘some academic discourse has been vehement’ with surplus food aid being ‘interpreted as being inextricably implicated in the aggressive neoliberalization of welfare, the shrinkage of the welfare state and the subjectification of the undeserving poor’ (2017:719).
notion of ‘leftover food for left behind people’ (Riches and Gerlings, 2019) is a particularly potent perception which problematically conjoins surplus, declaimed as a waste material, to those consuming it, rendering them passive recipients of a not-fit-for-consumption waste stream.

This conception also reduces surplus to a somewhat inert mass-substance that gets picked up and used to pacify those in need whilst contracting out corporate detritus under the guise of charity. Moreover, the categorisation of surplus as a form of homogenous waste (rather than encompassing its edibility) has also ensured it has been relatively under-investigated beyond attempts to reduce ‘it’ within the overall food stream. Whilst much research exists on food waste (Evans, Campbell and Murcott, 2012; Facchini et al., 2018; Baron et al., 2018) and consumer food waste behaviours (Evans, 2011, 2012; Midgley, 2014; Gollnhofer, 2017) which have been an increasingly well-examined topic within academia (Avram et al., 2021), little has been done to interrogate surpluses designation as a form of waste per se, or to examine it for its ‘more than food’ properties.

On closer examination these social eating initiatives, which do indeed utilise surplus food to construct a no or low-choice menu, also however display a number of coexisting features that distinguish them from food banking specifically, and from food aid more generally. They can be distinguished most obviously through their provision of a paid-for meal. There is a cooked meal rather than a food parcel, they are open-access and without means testing or referral criteria, and they are not deemed an emergency provision service. But the usage of surplus and the problematisation of low or no choice meals compared with a valorised model of consumer choice continues to conjoin the consumption of surpluses with food charity (Caraher and Furey, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

I have instead chosen to take a generative approach throughout the thesis that seeks new empirical insights. In the methodology chapter, I gave reference to Nicolini’s approach around inductive research approaches being ‘more articulate and capable of perceiving differences (and thus meaning)’ (2012: 216). Such an undertaking is ‘generative, not eliminativist: its goal is to increase our capacity to make connections among phenomena, not to eradicate interesting features in the name of generalisation’ (Nicolini, 2012: 216). Collins supports this view: ‘sociological concepts can be made fully empirical only by grounding them in a sample of the typical micro-events that make them up’
Chapter 6. Key Findings

(1981:988). Moreover, Heuts and Mol also state that ‘crafting a rich theoretical repertoire [...] does not work by laying out solid abstracting generalisations, but rather by adding together ever shifting cases and learning from their specificities’ (2013:127).

Therefore, through a focus on both participant perspectives and the practices of surplus consumption, a more complex and hopeful narrative emerges that challenges the overreliance on socio-economic and structural critiques of surplus food usage as ignoring, missing or concealing these complex practices of affordance. These considerations also buttress and complement the ‘more than food’ conceptualisation proffered by this thesis as a means of making sense of how and why participants value social eating initiative mealtimes. When this approach is taken, social eating initiatives can be more accurately described:

‘Social eating initiatives use redistributed surplus foods, volunteer networks, maximally inclusive pricing and have a limited menu choice, but the meals are not free, and the organisations do not operate through referral systems. Closer examination reveals that social eating initiatives support a hybrid form of commensality wherein the varying practices of domestic, charitable and ‘eating out’ commensality intersect. Attendants at these spaces are transforming practices of commensality, rather than just being passive beneficiaries of surplus food aid’ (Smith and Harvey, 2021:2).

This more empirically informed description locates the use of food surpluses amidst a range of other practices which conjoin to create a more positive affect, and one that dislocates it from the reductionist and empirically undeveloped surplus food waste tropes and places it within a commensal framework where its ‘more than food’ qualities can be foregrounded.

A portrait emerges as to what is being done, beyond these deficit-based and reductionist readings, to and with surplus foods. The response from social eating initiatives is that, overwhelmingly, it is being eaten, enjoyed and valued. It is drawing upon, enabling and determining new forms of commensal practices. Celebratory and exceptional commensal practices such as eating ‘out’ and the notion of feasting and plenty circulate discursively within social eating practices; the image below shows some
celebratory mealtimes where anniversaries and impromptu music performances created practices of exceptional commensality.

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Figure 40. Photographs from ethnographic fieldwork activities- showing anniversary and celebratory activities.

This approach locates the social eating mealtime within a shifting array of other social practices which are significant, important, pleasurable and valuable to participants, such as the family dinner or the eating ‘out’ meal, or amidst sustainable consumption tropes. Fundamentally, it prefigures surplus as an agent which affects, shapes and fabricates certain types of commensality, creating effects beyond its nutritional use-value.

Looping back to the concepts introduced in the literature positioning and review chapter, I return to take these up again within the ‘more than food’ approach. Notably, Blake’s work on ‘food ladders’ (2019a) and the elaboration of an additional and alternative conception of the value of surplus food (2019, 2019a, b, 2020) sees it positioned within the specific and shifting contexts of usage and affordance. This approach confirms the three practices of social eating initiative commensality that have been identified: eating together, helping out and socialising are all enabled through surplus food use in varying ways. In this, the eating together section, empirical data confirms that the ‘ladder’ of surplus foods is materialising and mobilising opportunities to engage in mealtime reciprocity, sharing, abundance and second helpings, demanding new competences and skills, and fabricating new
identities that escape the depiction of surplus as being the foodstuff of ‘left behind people’. As one cook conveyed

“We try and make sure it goes out looking nice, that it’s presented on the plate. Not just dumped on there […] we want people to feel good about eating it and that there is some care that’s gone into it […] Like you get when you eat out” (Go-along interview, Carriages café).

Figure 41. Photographs from ethnographic fieldwork activities- showing quality of meals served at social eating initiatives.
Blake’s concept of ‘food ladders’ (2019a) articulates how food resources are not static but can be used selectively, during different phases of social life, for differing reasons, catching, capacity building and community change. A food ladders approach sees food utilised at differing stages of both crisis and cohesion, and as material that feeds, brings together and mobilises individuals and communities. It locates agency both within food as a material resource, as a performative and agential resource. This sets in motion specific types of subjectivity and practices and also operates as a symbolic resource that can be utilised to build social resilience and capacity both within individuals and groups. Surplus food can be enmeshed within a range of practices from ‘emergency support […] to activities that expand food literacy […] expose people to new food items […] that diversify the foodscape to meet all local food needs […] and [enable] positive relationships with food’ (Blake, 2019b:9).

As one go-along interview conveyed when showing us around their stock cupboard:

“We couldn’t afford to buy this much food at the wholesaler, or whatever. So, this gets us lots of good quality food really, well, relatively cheaply. God, the stuff that would have been chucked. Criminal, really. So, I always shout about surplus. “It’s not waste, it’s not what people probably think it is” (Go-along interview, Secret Kitchen).

As with the previous sections of this analysis chapter, I will utilise the ‘zooming in and out’ (Nicolini, 2009, 2017) to construct a mid-level analysis of the network practices in-situ by engaging with the micro-practices of individuals, by drawing together conceptual threads from the literature positioning and review, and through mentions of off-site context to articulate a ‘more than food’ conclusion. Below is a selection of Post-it note comments and a couple of go-along interview quotes which were coded under ‘food’, ‘food quality’, ‘price’ and ‘surplus’. Far from the negative positioning of surplus as a waste stream, as ‘leftover food’, here participants attach positive views to the meals and foodstuffs that they are provided with.

‘A great wholesome meal that’s really cheap.’
Chapter 6. Key Findings

‘Fabulous, healthy meal.’
‘Food and meals are brilliant.’
‘Food and people are nice.’
‘Food well cooked and presented nicely.’
‘Great food at a great price.’

Great food, Great value and love <3 That it’s coming from a worthwhile cause.

“Great that they cook at last minute and make fresh food.”


‘Stops you eating quick junk food.’
‘The food is great.’
‘The food is great and can’t always afford to cook for myself.’
‘The food is great, and you can get whatever you want.’
‘The food is great for an affordable price.’

“The food is great quality and I get a feeling of abundance as its such good value” (Fieldnotes, customer at Secret Kitchen).

‘The meal is normally very nice and tasty.’

I can understand how surplus becomes reframed within social eating initiatives through an attention to the practices they get caught up within and shape. The lens of commensal and ‘more than food’ practices here places surplus amidst other assemblages of social eating and connects this materiality to the broader context of food insecurity, food waste and food aid, but also to convenience foods, ready meals, home cooking and eating out. This lens enables us to escape reduction of surplus to its sole use-value of as a form of physical sustenance. Instead, I understand it as creating practices of alimentary inclusion and participation, novel formations of healthy and homemade ‘ready meals’ in ways that act contra to the destructuring tendencies identified in the current UK foodscape.

Thus far, I have looked at how the dining spaces across the network are set up and managed and how spaces and places shape commensal practices. Here I see how the materiality of the meal itself, and the surplus it is fashioned from, are ascribed value. Surplus can be understood here as an actant whose affordability, perishability and variability creates specific materials effects, demands new
competences and affords new meanings (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012; Midgley, 2014). These pertain to both the nutritional properties and the types of alimentary practices they fabricate. The materiality of surplus food also affords the possibility for new practices of culinary skill and identity to emerge.

Many of the Post-it note insights concerned food and its quality. The food on offer across the network was described multiply as ‘fresh’, ‘quality’, ‘healthy’, ‘homemade’, ‘a balanced meal’, ‘a wholesome meal’. Far from the negative associations of fast, junk and convenience food (Jackson and Viehoff, 2016; Meah and Jackson, 2017) as being unhealthy and by implication, demonstrating a perceived lack of caring competence (Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 019) surplus enables and indeed demands fresh, from-scratch cooking within social eating spaces. Delivered weekly, fortnightly or monthly, the fresh and short-dated items require ‘quick processing’. As one cook conveys:

“I have to think, ‘what shall I make out of that?’ and how I can use that food and those ingredients to make a meal” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

The inherent perishability of surplus food drives storage and cooking practices. As one volunteer showing me around the storage and freezer areas stated:

“we have to follow food hygiene standards. We have to be compliant, take the temperature of the food when we get it, store it correctly and do all that paperwork. It’s no different [to restaurants] we have to use it all by the dates” (Go-along interview, Parkgate Community Café).

Surplus temporally sequences the ‘mealtime’ offer across the network through its use-by dated-ness and the fact that it arrives in one delivery that has to be checked, stored, frozen or cooked and processed ‘in one go’. It shapes skills and competences and draws upon the skills of planning, sequencing and mis en place that are required to maintain safety and edibility. Herein surplus can be
envisaged as an actant that shapes commensal practices not only through its perishability but through the types of inclusive alimentary participation it enables.

The price of the meal was again, multiply mentioned across the empirical stage of the thesis. In one of my vignettes I remark on the quality and the price of the food. Getting a cheap, freshly made meal is unsurprisingly viewed as a boon by customers regardless of whether they can afford to eat out or not. As one customer happily stated: “two quid for a three-course meal! Of course, I’m happy with that!” Being able to regularly access a cheap meal also enables some customers to manage their domestic budgets more readily by allowing them to take home ‘short-dated items for free or by donation’ and through the availability of ‘take-aways’ that can be eaten during their own domestic mealtimes. Moreover, the paid-for offer attaches the social eating meal to assemblages of exceptional and eating ‘out’ commensality where payment interacts with expectations of alimentary standards, with customers remarking on the “food, well cooked and presented nicely”.

Again, I observe the elements and proto-practices from domestic commensality such as feeling able to help yourself to food-extras: “You felt nourished by the food. It was a buffet-style thing, you get a lot of choice. So, people can help themselves” (Fieldnotes, customer at Growin’ Spaces). The idea that low or no-choice meals were inherently problematic were also disputed by customers who felt freed up from having to ‘think about what to cook’ or to have to “decide what to eat when there’s too much choice, especially with the kids” (Fieldnotes, customer at Secret Kitchen). As several customers also noted, the lack of choice was countered by the freshness of the food: “in a pub or whatever, they just heat it up. But here, you know it’s fresh ‘cause they have to stop it going off!”(Fieldnotes, customer at Growin’ Spaces).

Moreover, surplus food decoupled from the commercial requirement to sell uniform portions of food profitably, engenders expressions of abundance, generosity and resource stewardship, for example:

“what we tend to do is give out seconds of meals; some people want take-away because they can’t eat a lot in one go, but other people stay and have three or four platefuls of food, and I’m quite happy for
them to have more than one serving because I don’t want food to go to waste” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

But for those on low incomes the offer enabled by surplus, of a fresh, homemade meal and especially one that can be eaten out with others, was hugely valued: “it’s different to a café you get more for your money, you feel it’s made with love” (Fieldnotes, customer at Secret Kitchen). Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreich when discussing alimentary exclusion and poverty consumption, describe how Individuals employ coping strategies that include ‘surfing the ups and downs’ (2015: 493) wherein they attempt to maintain control, agency and choice by eating as they wish for the beginning of the month but eating cheap quality and lower cost meals as income dwindles towards their next payment date. As one participant noted: “I come here because its value for money. I’m on ESA and can’t afford a decent meal” (Fieldnotes, customer at Parkgate Community Café). However, as well as these strategies, which of course also include ‘abandoning quantity’ and ‘abandoning quality’ of foodstuffs (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreich, 2015: 493), they also concede that ‘special occasions such as birthdays become a particularly difficult endeavour under tight financial restrictions’ (2015:493). Here, the value of social eating commensality is emphasised as participants convey both challenges in eating well and eating together: “I am unemployed, no income, so am having to budget carefully” but also how social eating services are supporting them amidst these challenges: “sometimes I take food back home and that helps my budget” (Fieldnotes, customer at Parkgate Community Café).

Moreover, staff were very cognizant of the need for “cheap food at a time when lots of people are in poverty” (Fieldnotes, customer at Soul Food Café). The issue of food insecurity then, is carried over into social eating spaces in the ways that it shapes pricing structures, the offer of ‘seconds’, the stationing of buffet tables with ‘extras’ that people can take for free and the attention to providing a ‘good quality’, ‘nutritious meal’ for many who may “really need some good food, a hot meal”. In contrast to ‘having to constantly watch your budget’, social eating mealtimes are set up to engender practices of abundance, fulfilment and choice:

9. ESA stands for ‘Employment Support Allowance’, a UK means-tested welfare benefit available to those who’s capacity to work is effected by a health condition or disability.
“The food is great, and you can get whatever you want”. As one participant noted: “I feel comfortable enough to eat. It makes it possible to have a special family meal on a tight budget” (Fieldnotes, customer at Secret Kitchen).

Or, as one customer stated:

“You get a main course first and is that is a good helping of that, and then you go back for dessert and also a table with some surplus foods on it; extras like chocolate bars, for example, they can use to add or supplement your meal” (Fieldnotes, customer at Growin’ Spaces).

Moreover, surplus foods, and food in general, marshalled within community spaces can create safe and inclusive spaces for experimentation and interaction with food (Pettinger et al., 2017; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Blake, 2019,b,c, 2020). Luca et al. (2021) also consider: ‘social eating initiatives and their focus on group eating, or commensality, food sharing and mealtime inclusion, participation and contribution can be viewed as expressions of a food well-being-oriented approach, which seeks to prioritise food as a means of developing and sustaining both physical and social capital’ (Block et al., 2011). As one diner and volunteer notes:

“We have people that have never eat at the table, we have people they don’t try vegetables; everybody has an off day. But it’s about trying something new; exposure to something new” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

Surplus within this context acts as a foodway back into social life. For example, in its requirements to be received, sorted, stored, cooked and served, it becomes a tool of engagement, of agency, of alimentary education (Pettinger and Whitelaw, 2012; Pettinger et al., 2017; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021) and a symbol of plenty and of commensal reciprocity. As one participant setting the table ready for service stated: “I hate it when people say its waste! It’s not waste, its surplus, surplus to being sold, but that doesn’t make it waste to us.”
Surplus acts as a food ladder to move people beyond the everyday budgetary constraints by enabling them to engage in the types of ‘eating out’ practices they are usually excluded from, albeit in localised and temporary ways. Despite the impermanence of those practices, they are nonetheless valued. These practices of culinary participation and relative abundance are underpinned and ‘emplotted’ into participants lifeworlds, not necessarily shifting the whole register of food insecurity for that individual or community but still disrupting the totalising and demeaning identification of them as ‘left behind people’.

6.3.5 Home cooking in public places.

Figure 42. Text box of Home cooking in public places codes.

‘Cheap meal ready cooked for me’, ‘no cooking and no dishes’, “And also, importantly, it’s a place away from the pressures of home. Where they don’t have to cook and think about what they are eating” (Fieldnotes, from Bestop Kitchen).

As with the alternative conceptualisation of convenience foods proffered by Meah and Jackson (2017) surplus food resources are conceived of as being interpolated within the temporal and spatial ordering of social life in ways that a narrower focus on behaviour or structure misses. This view reveals how agency and subjectivity are enmeshed with and are brought into being through complicated material and competence-arrangements that are not fixed but mobile and contingent. Surplus then also enables novel valuings to emerge within these settings.
The prevalence of cheap, mass-produced, individually portioned, fast-food and snacks offers in contemporary UK foodscape have been described as restructuring, and in some cases replacing, the freshly cooked and shared family mealtime (Twine, 2015). This disruption is further compounded by the rising cost of healthy foods in the UK, which increased more rapidly than the cost of unhealthy foods (Wiggins et al., 2015). Snacking, too, which may be used by the food insecure, as well as lone eaters, in lieu of full meals, is configured in the destructuration of commensality with small-scale, individually portioned and mobile mealtimes positioned in temporal and spatial competition with conventional meals such as breakfast or lunch (Grogan, Bell and Conner, 1997; Weijzen, de Graaf and Dijksterhuis, 2009; Orbell and Verplanken, 2010; Twine, 2015).

Fischler discusses gastro-anomie and suggests that ‘modern individuals are left without clear socio-cultural cues as to what their choice should be, as to when, how, and how much they should eat. Food selection and intake are now increasingly a matter of individual, not social, decisions’ (1980:948). The lack of choice and the sharing of one type of meal across customers who are ostensibly sharing and eating from the same ‘pot’ means that social eating mealtimes can also be conceived of as challenging this malaise.

‘Convenience food’ is an expansive category encompassing a diverse range of goods (Jackson and Viehoff, 2016). Derided as among the least sustainable and most unhealthy of dietary choices the use of convenience food is frequently ‘tinged with moral disapprobation’ (Warde 1999: 518). Both proximity to affordable, fresh ingredients or local oversaturation of fast food and processed food outlets impact the capacity to both eat well and the ease with which people can readily assemble meals and fabricate shared mealtimes. Underpinning and intensifying the rise in experiences of these forms of gastro-anomie (Fischler, 1980) more broadly is the UK neoliberal economy, where busy work and leisure schedules also impact upon the time reserved for family mealtimes.

However, within social eating mealtimes, instead of the problematic conjoining of ready and convenience foods to a lack of time, education, or care (Warde 1999; Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019) these ‘convenient’ meals can instead be understood as ‘healthy ready meals’ or ‘good fast foods’. This is because they are cooked fresh, are available at mealtimes, according to more recognisably domestic standards of preparation but are available readily within these spaces for an
affordable price. It is apparent that many participants come not solely because of food poverty or loneliness but because of convenience. As one group stated: ‘We don’t want to cook and eat on our own!’ Other participants readily identified the break from domestic and paid labour as a draw: “to get away from cooking at home” because “I’m always tired by Thursday as I work full-time, so not having to cook dinner is brilliant”.

The mealtime offer here enables a hybridised experience wherein customers can maintain the feelings of caring associated with domestic providing and consuming home-cooked meals without expending the usually required effort:

“I really like coming here as it’s down the road - only come to bring my daughter to play with her friends and so I don’t have to cook!” because “it’s the convenience of not having to cook but still being able to eat and see others” (Fieldnotes, customers at Growin’ Spaces and Secret Kitchen).

As one participant also gladly conveyed: ‘No washing up’. Social eating initiative surplus-made meals call into being new forms of subjectivity and agency that escape the conformist tropes of the individuated, responsibilized, politicised, neo-liberal consumer. They emphasise the value of convenient mealtime participation, without the perceived diminishment of meal quality and, by association, personal standards. They are valued because they don’t stigmatise people who, for whatever reason, struggle to cook ‘from scratch’.

As Bowen, Brenton and Elliott surmise ‘most people have an idea of what family meals should look like. Maybe they pull it off on a regular basis, maybe they don’t, but they hold in mind a similar ideal of what it means for a family to sit down and eat together’ (2019:18). For those struggling most to fabricate a healthy, shared mealtime, and who are unfairly subjectivised as caring less (Meah and Jackson, 2017; Bowen, Brenton and Elliott, 2019) this ideal is significant and the accomplishment of that ideal, even in partial, temporary and unconventional ways, is of value. In the final analysis of the three practices which concerns socialising, I will return to this issue and elaborate upon the notion that commensality stands in for care and the significance of receiving care through homemade meals in public places.
6.3.5 Social eating practices are ‘restructuring’ commensality
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Figure 43. Collage of ethnographic and ‘photovoice’ photographs, codes and verbatim texts designed to illustrate the ‘restructuration of commensality’ practices of social eating initiatives, created by David Jones (a local community worker) and Marsha Smith.
Visualised here in the first of the three collages, social eating initiative mealtimes, as upheld across The Nottingham Social Eating Network, are sites of commensal restructuration. Through the enacting of practices that are low-cost, contra-food waste, alt-fast and junk food, inclusive, pleasurable, participatory, somewhat reflexive and sometimes creative, this network and its participants, human and non-human, are carrying into being a deep seated and significant set of commensal practices in both novel and necessary ways. They are valued because they enable multiple, shifting, temporally and locally specific opportunities to congregate and socialise, often amidst situations of need, hunger, loneliness, exclusion and stigma:

“When the three of us come along sometimes it felt like the only time we had a family meal all week, as we’re often too busy to eat together” (Fieldnotes from customer at Parkgate Community Café).

Social eating mealtimes then, are composed of practices which are being incorporated into a number of different and coexistent ‘foodways’ (Coveney, 2013) to engender social connection, contact and conviviality - all facets of social life which are affected by the current context. Indeed, Gollnhofer claims that ‘value does not exist apart from our cultural and economic sphere. It is created through a combination of material resources, work and energy. Discarding safe food items implies ignoring or depreciating any other value that has been built into the object’ (2017:633). Restructuring commensality is upheld through the regular, frequent and familiar family-style mealtime, mixed with the temporary freedom from domestic chores. Surplus food is consumed, not as a waste stream but through homemade meals served in public places: ‘reconstructing the biographies of food objects allows consumers to see the inherent value in them’ (Gollnhofer 2017:638).

The Nottingham Social Eating Network also tap into the long-standing and pervasive powers of social cohesion and the associated mechanisms inculcated in the production, reproduction and even the railing-against, the current UK social-scape. Restructuring commensality connects the individual to the group and the group to the society. Social eating together is valued because participants are engaging in social and civic life; evidence that the social realm is always-already being constructed and reconstructed at the everyday level of shared mealtime practices.
Chapter 6. Key Findings

These conceptualisations see social eating initiative commensality not as a simplistic instrumental intervention to bring about responsibilization or behaviour-change which conceal or manage-away the crisis in welfare provision, instead they are envisaged as part of the complex social assemblages of food and eating that link in and out towards the broader social realm.

Whilst food bank users’ experiences of food precarity are conceived of as homogenous, repeating, and temporary need-meeting, food ladders and the fabrication of ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) provide for a more nuanced, complex, shifting conception of the value of social eating initiatives to participants. Food ladder and social, eating together practices are not solely driven by austerity-shaped structural impositions but through multiple, modified, mutable food practices, which can be empirically evidenced in ways that emerge from, and are important to, those communities.

As Marovelli states: ‘food sharing’s collective spaces and the affective qualities that they evoke are particularly vital in urban contexts at times of austerity, as these initiatives operate as a bridge connecting people, communities, projects and services. This interconnectedness can help to address complex societal challenges such as food poverty and social isolation and it can also initiate a much-needed reflection on the causes of urban inequalities’ (2019:11). As Blake asserts, developing ‘place-specific levels of support [...] enable(s) the recognition and enhancement of locally-based assets to create transformations in communities Blake, (2019a).

It is evident that using surplus food to do ‘more than’ feed people has the ‘potential to engage individuals in personal-level and community-level change through reflection, empowerment and connectedness’ (Pettinger et al. 2019:2). When one participants pragmatically states: “well, why shouldn’t we be eating it?” and commensality is presented as ‘perhaps the single most important thing we can do – both for our own health and wellbeing and for that of the wider community’ (Dunbar, 2017a), when Caraher and Furey (2017) state that ‘proposing the use of surplus food as a response to food insecurity is problematic because it serves to distract political and popular opinion away from the food waste issue’ (2017:15) , a powerful counter narrative to this framing can be articulated by disclosing social eating together as restructuring commensality.
Social eating mealtimes then, are materialising and set amidst a broader range of social practices, which include, but are not limited to, sustenance, socialising and social production. The carrying over, hybridisation, affordance and upholding of commensality have all been shown to come under the auspices of the network’s practices. Herein, articulating the values ascribed to social eating mealtimes discloses the value of those participating in their consumption. As Evans posits: ‘this is where movements can be so powerful and disruptive, not just telling new stories, but in creating ‘congregational spaces’ where these stories can be incubated and lived out’ (2017:12).

This claim is further strengthened when I consider in the following section, the practices of helping out or alimentary contribution, and continue to elaborate upon the ‘more than food’ approach to understanding the value of social eating initiatives.

### 6.4 Social eating as practices of ‘alimentary contribution’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alimentary Contribution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Service and Organisation, Service, Service supporter, Service to the community, Contributary, Civic duty, Volunteers, Cooks, Help and support, With not for, Need for service, Giving back, Worthwhile cause, Community, Wider community, Community concerns, Community space and network, Church and Community, Community building and support, Community engagement, Networking, Sharing, Networks and partners, Alternative provision, Signposting, For the homeless, Referred, Social eating model, Leadership, Well Organised, Reason for setting up, Formality, Innovative, Reputation, Demographic, Information, Education, Training</td>
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*Figure 44. Text box of Alimentary Contribution codes.*

As has been discussed throughout the thesis, the way groups of people eat cannot be separated from broader debates about satiating hunger in the UK. Identifying the connections between eating together, social isolation and poverty direct us to consider how retrenchment of the welfare state, neoliberal economic policies and the dominance of the paying-consumer as the primary agent of society distorts understandings of who and what is deserving or of value (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Smith and Harvey, 2021). The era of austerity has also been identified as one of the factors increasing social isolation, especially of vulnerable populations (Briggs and Foord, 2017). Social
isolation and loneliness are viewed as contributing to poorer general health and exacerbating food poverty (Hauver and Shealey-Griffiths, 2017). Therefore, alimentary exclusion, the destructuration of the mealtime and the emergence of a culture of loneliness are enmeshed with practices of commensality. The value of being able to eat with others, to food share and to participate in mealtimes is then, of particular significance. A selection of participant insights below, gives a sense of the importance of contributing to the network:

‘I have been a supporter of the Community Café since it first started.’
‘I usually pay extra to support those who can’t afford it. I encourage friends to attend, too.’
“So, even if they aren’t able to pay, participation and involvement is just as important” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).
‘Sense of giving something back, giving time and learning new skills’
‘Back to basics, people getting involved’
“Participation- every person has the opportunity to bring skills experience and talents, to be shared locally” (Fieldnotes, interview Bestop Kitchen).
‘no financial reward, so has the feel-good factor on a very practical level.’
‘Non transactional model- everyone participates at some level and gets something out of it.’
“Even if just as a consumer, you feel you are giving back, doing your civic duty.” (Fieldnotes, volunteer at Carriages Café).

Conceptualisations of food insecurity might also consider the ability to participate in customary activities associated with food as impacting upon individuals’ senses and experiences of food security (Healy, 2019). Healy argues that to get a ‘true sense of the prevalence of food poverty […] those who experience social exclusion vis-a-vis food also need to be included in official estimates’ (2019:2). I am reminded that Healy notes that ‘qualitative research has shown that low-income households could not afford to socialize regularly with food […] either through eating out or entertaining friends at home with food’ (2019:5).

This context directs us to consider how social eating may be realising opportunities to contribute to and participate in mealtimes, for those who can afford food, those who struggle to, those who are isolated, and those who want to contribute towards helping those that are struggling.
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Opportunities to help out either directly or indirectly were recurrently mentioned, directing the development of increasingly specific codes such as ‘worthwhile cause’, ‘civic opportunity’ and ‘service to the community’. As data analysis progressed, the compound practice (Warde 2016) of alimentary contribution could be discerned: “everyone participates at some level and gets something out of it” (Fieldnotes, Bestop Kitchen)

Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher discuss ‘hunger for social inclusion’ which refers to ‘the possibility of experiencing the social function of food, by eating outside the home, and/or together with others, [and] is something from which poor people are significantly excluded’ (2015: 488 and 485). Thus, even if the social aspects of eating are not necessary for nutritional wellbeing, ‘the possibility to eat with others, offering hospitality [...] appear to be regarded as an essential and significant part of people’s lives at every age’ (2015:485). One participant noted, “I like coming here with my daughter because she sees people sharing and helping each other. That’s a good environment for her to see” (Fieldnotes, customer at Growin’ Spaces). The staging and set up of the overall social eating space itself are framed as contributing to the wellbeing of participants in ways that may not be readily apparent without seeking out the views of participants, in-situ.

It is this complex picture that creates the staging for alimentary contribution practices within social eating spaces. As has been discussed in the previous section pertaining to surplus food being practised as a ‘food ladder’, the materiality of low-cost mealtimes is also framing alternative and additional forms of contribution and hospitality that also extend beyond the meal. Thus, going beyond simple material inadequacies and mere sufficiency of eating, alimentary exclusion provides an extended conception of food insecurity as existing beyond the meal itself, extending within the spheres of sociality to include shopping, preparing food and getting together for hospitality. Alimentary contribution can, similarly, capture the array of elements and practices which help to sustain an ethos of informality, inclusion, hospitality and togetherness.

This extended conception also includes the normative facets of social eating wherein domestic and institutionalised practices of commensal contribution cross over into these public eating spaces. The photographs below show how scraping down plates, stacking plates for washing, loading up a trolley
and manning the washing up basin all rely on previous practices of domesticity, or are reminiscent of school mealtimes and canteen practices.

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Figure 45. Ethnographic photographs- showing participants getting involved in mealtime clearing up.

The non-financially oriented service provision of social eating constructs practices of contribution wherein customers can not only achieve performances of generosity but are framed as agents who have useful ‘skills’, ‘experience’ and ‘talents’ that find expression through the multiple entry points of voluntary activity that a community food initiative requires. The practices of helping out around the mealtime - whether using surplus rather than allowing it to enter landfill, collecting and sorting the food, serving, washing up or clearing down the space - might be understood as forms of alimentary contribution.

The concept of alimentary contribution extends from the idea of social eating initiatives enabling commensal or alimentary inclusion or participation, to a more active conception wherein participants are encouraged, enabled, choose or feel empowered or inspired to contribute. These contributions can be as obvious as ‘supporting those who couldn’t afford to eat in these environments by paying monies forward’ and as subtle as the service itself being framed as a contributor: "as I work full time in social care it’s nice to feel I’m getting something back" (Fieldnotes, customer at Secret Kitchen). It encompasses the practices of contribution that are non-transactional but deeply valuable to
participants and which include the desires to engage in sustainable forms of food consumption compared to the intensification of consumption often associated with poverty consumers (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015). Sustained through the domestic and civic spheres of life, translated into a public setting, alimentary contribution here is framed as performatively upholding the ethos and the symbolic value of broader social contribution: “even if just as a consumer, you feel you are giving back, doing your civic duty” (Fieldnotes, volunteer at Carriages Café.)

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Figure 46. Ethnographic fieldnote photographs- showing dinner service where participants are spontaneously helping out, and short-dated surplus foods which are free to take.

The photographs above show the excess, surplus-surpluses that are made available at a buffet-style side table. These free, short-dated items are placed to encourage participants to reduce potential food wastage and construct, through their inherent perishability, practices of consumption that can be interpreted as ‘helpful’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘environmentally-friendly’. Also, in the image below I see impromptu alimentary contribution as people help set up cutlery, put out plates and carry large, hot pans in an instance when service was running behind schedule. The homemade meal, its informality, and the cooking skills of people who are often proficient, but not professional, construct scenarios where alimentary contribution and assistance is required in order to ensure that ‘dinner is served!’
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The photographs below show examples of alimentary contribution practices as volunteers wait near the counter at one space for plates that they will then serve to customers. The person at the door collects payments in the following photograph. These are the more obvious ways that participants can enact competencies which are recognizably ‘helpful’ and contributory. These roles and subjectivities across the network are required in order for the meal service to be enacted; attracting those who are able to commit to ongoing and scheduled acts of voluntarism.

Moreover, the contribution of paid-for meal to others is a common practice across the network and payments are paid ‘forward’ without any expectation of reciprocity. They are instead framed as contributing to the givers’ sense of wellbeing: “the idea of overpaying to help the less fortunate appeals”.

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Figure 47. Photographs from ‘photovoice’ activities- showing volunteers ready for a meal service and the greeter at the impromptu ‘till’, taking money.

Alimentary contribution is an ongoing developmental process for many participants of social eating initiatives. Typically, people move from more passive consumers of food in their early experiences of these initiatives to later actively shaping the planning and preparation of mealtimes, organising the physical and social arrangements of the spaces and fostering an inclusive, helpful environment for other people to participate: “I moved to (here) in August knowing no residents- so a good meeting point. The idea of overpaying to help the less fortunate appeals”. 
A similar phenomenon has been recognised in the sociological literature on foodbanks where recipient-donor roles are switched as people become ‘active citizens’ volunteering to support others in need (Garthwaite, 2017). However, in social eating initiatives this type of agency is a widespread hallmark of participation. Something as seemingly mundane as customers moving tables and chairs to eat with another table shows how domestic practices of agency around spatial organisation can be reconstituted within public social eating initiatives, creating environments that are constructed as intimate, customisable and participative. As social eating participants become more embedded through repeat attendance, this temporal rhythming helps to engender a sense of belonging.

As I can recall from the literature and positioning review, within the neo-liberal trope of UK austerity the unit of social agency is prefigured as the individual, independent, rational, employed consumer whose main value, worth, and identity is determined through their capacity to purchase goods and services (Clarke, 2007; Dujarier, 2015). This concept of the prime social unit becomes a framework through which the food-insecure are refracted. In this way, food insecurity tropes are being ‘responsibilized’ (Rose, 1996; Pyysääinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017; Morris, 2020) or discursively situated as being both created and sustained at the level of the individual. The food-insecure are always already positioned as being both unable to manifest their own food security and simultaneously responded to with services which render them passive recipients of food aid. This is further compounded through experiences of food aid receipt where they must perform their impoverishment (Williams et al. 2016), further enmeshing the production of neoliberal welfare subjectivities.

However, the beneficial kinds of contribution that emerge within social eating spaces are also contrasted with the problematic impacts of being a hybridised public space in which the high ratio of volunteers, the precarity of funding and the challenges in availability of estate across the network produce a number of competing and contrary types of contribution. These may be competencies of sacrifice or duty, which often invisibilised and concealed amidst the tropes of altruism that are often required when ‘clients’ narratives invoke powerful emotional responses to social need’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:718).
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As one participant reflected when thinking through their set up and longer-term capacity: “we’re all volunteers with jobs/families’ other commitments, so can’t dedicate much more time” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café). This means that the regularity and stability of services and the responsibility this creates for participants ensures that many spaces across the network were “overly reliant on key anchor individuals” to maintain the integrity of services. As Cloke, May and Williams also reflect, the complicated assemblages of ‘helping out’ and ‘caring’ are not just individually motivated acts, but rather they sit amidst:

‘complex amalgam of self-aware morality plus a desire (often described in moral, ethical, political or religious terms) to ‘do something about something’, plus a less tangible performative capacity to express ethics of caritas, agape or generosity being advanced as a more accurate reflection of why and how people respond to perceived and experienced need’ (2017:716).

However, community commensality is exposed to precarious support from the public and private sectors, with further uncertainty emerging as the initiatives are often unable to gain long-term guaranteed access to spaces for social eating. As one participant reflects on the challenges of securing a venue: “We are precariously accommodated - we could really do with a proper venue, proper space for equipment and where we are free to work rather than occupy other people’s spaces where they have their own rules and regulations” and “we have very little outdoor space - no locked facilities outdoors for i.e., community.”

As Marovelli reflects, these initiatives all see ‘their local communities in flux, experiencing precariousness and uncertainties in their everyday urban lives’ (2019:11). Social eating projects, whilst sustained in part by customer remuneration, remain subject to the precarity associated with the broader charitable food sector within austerity. Funding and finances also arose as a significant issue of concern for the network who reflected that “many groups are financially precarious” and recognised that a “lack of funding /uncertainty of ongoing funding” meant that they were “always chasing funding” (Fieldnotes, volunteer at Sharing Sherwood).
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The timings and connecting of schedules across a variety of actors - places, activities, volunteers, delivery of foodstuffs - all create complicated organisational assemblages that often rely on competences of selflessness, negotiation, overwork and compromise: “we now struggle: for time looking for a broad spectrum of sponsors, not knowing how many to cater for, funding for equipment, storage space for ingredients and equipment, meaning that we have to collect and drive equipment and ingredients to the kitchen. FUEL! needed to pass on any surplus food we have that may go to waste” (Fieldnotes from discussion with Square Meal, prior to official fieldwork stage).

However, these concerns are not fixed; they vary, and are dependent upon the interchanging elements of those assemblages where stresses and strains phase in and out of being practiced. The pressures of voluntarism were also then countered by the sociality of the network, its ad-hoc, informal, invitational and grassroots nature means that times of precarity and anxiety are often best dealt with by the very services they support: “the staff have a good camaraderie” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café) and ‘our voluntary team are v. strong, social connections ++’.

Across the Nottingham Social Eating Network empirical contact with social eating initiative participants reveals the ‘progressive possibilities arising in and through spaces of food banking and wider welfare and care’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:704). These possibilities include the prospect of eating well with others in ways that do not depend upon economically mediated access to a market of goods and services. The types of participation, exchange and transactions that occur in and around a mealtime are demonstrated here to be enacted through and shaped by a range of elements and arrangements of practices. These contributions, both mundane and unprompted or spontaneous, highlight how a dynamic conception of social eating initiative mealtimes enables us to bring into focus the multitude of intersecting contributary practices that, along with the meal itself, also form part of social eating initiative commensality. One participant, when asked about the value of social eating, described their service as creating an “environment where people are willing to offer what they can do (esp. food wise) and not worry about what they can’t” (Fieldnotes from one-off visit to Snacks & Ladders social eating event).
This social dynamic reframes the serving and eating of surplus foods not as something that is simply done to people as a consequence of top down or structuralist food insecurity pressures. Instead, it is done by and with people as a consequence of their own agency, repurposing surpluses by creating new spaces for their own enjoyment while also helping other people: “Lucky we are here to eat this. Not only the meal, together, but otherwise it’d be tipped. What a waste!” (Fieldnotes, customer at Secret Kitchen). Social eating initiative commensality then, is envisaged through the insights of participants, as being about much ‘more than food’. The thesis collection of data here documents what can be described as a ‘plugging away with other people […] it is about doing something-about-something’ (Miles, 2012: 162) and where the opportunity to help out, no matter how mundane, partial or temporary may still be conceived of as generating ‘potential glimmers of alternative political-economic possibilities incubate as rivals to neo-liberal capitalism’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:716).
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Figure 48. Collage of ethnographic and ‘photovoice’ photographs, codes and verbatim texts- designed to illustrate ‘helping out as alimentary contribution’ practices at social eating initiatives, created by David Jones and Marsha Smith.
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6.4.1 ‘Mingling, observing and lingering’ in social eating spaces

*Mingling, Observing and Linger*ing
Eating together, Communicating, Meeting new people, Different people getting together, Intergenerational, Families, Elders and aging, Old friends, Greeters, Getting involved, Connecting people, Company, Good company, Presence, Neighbours, Social, Socialising, Socialising and friendships, Social and wellbeing

*Figure 49. Text box of Mingling, Observing and Linger*ing codes.

‘Theories and empirical work about collective action [and] social movement studies have retained a perhaps inevitable bias towards adversarial social movement mobilization and highly visible social conflict, meaning analysis of the everyday has been tentative and contingent’ (Yates, 2015b:237).

In this final section, I consider the mealtime practices of socialising as manifesting performances of caring, inclusion and pleasure. As with the two previous practices-informed discussions on restructuring commensality and alimentary contribution, caring within social eating spaces intersects and intertwines with other practices. These mealtime practices are not constructed in isolation, nor do they occur as wholly distinct events or activities, but rather socialising is conceived of as an entangled and enmeshed set of practices. These practices are mobilised through the use of surplus food that enables access to eating ‘out’ spaces and encourages alimentary reciprocity, or through the safe and careful construction of welcoming spaces where people feel nourished by convenient and low-cost meals; herein practices sit within practices.

Socialising in this chapter section is positioned through discussion of the data as a form of beyond-kinship caring wherein the isolating and alienating tendencies of the current milieu are suspended and pleasure and conviviality are centred. Social eating initiative practices offer multiple opportunities to meet new people, socialise, sustain and strengthen existing relationship, to volunteer and to give and receive care. Moreover, the way that these public spaces constitute experiences near to but beyond
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the familiarity of home environment, where spaces of respite, safety and refuge are fabricated, are all inculcated in practices which can be conceived of as performances of care.

The significance of socialising practices is also examined as evidence not just of practices that can be dismissed as ‘short-term pragmatism’ or as a ‘sticking plaster’ that is pacifying participants at a time where ‘radical structural change’ is necessary (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017), but as part of a ‘diverse repertoire of protest’ (Yates, 2015a) that is accomplishing much ‘more than food’.

Therefore, in this section, I draw upon two conceptualisations that have circulated within the thesis thus far pertaining to the creation of culinary ‘hang out’ spaces where ‘more than food’ is being circulated and where the ‘glimmers’ of more progressive ways of structuring and servicing the multi-layered and multi-scaled challenges of the current UK social scape may be being formed. This ‘hopeful’ (Ferguson, 2011) approach contrasts with the instrumental provisioning of much food aid, the ‘pay to play’ ethos of marketized commercial food services, and the benefactor and beneficiary dynamic of much of the surplus redistribution sector (Midgley, 2014).

In the photographs below, part of my auto-ethnographic fieldwork data, are three examples of how social eating initiatives may be conceived as enabling practices of ‘mingling, observing and lingering’ (Cattell et al., 2008) that are of value to participants. Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

Figure 50. Photographs from ethnographic fieldwork- showing mealtime celebrations with music, birthday parties and ‘food evening’ social eating events.
‘Mingling, observing and lingering’ is used to describe the attachments people have to informal public spaces and how these often mundane, hidden and unspectacular spaces have significance to their users and their senses of wellbeing. Cattell et al. describe how ‘ordinary spaces are a significant resource for both individuals and communities’; stating that the beneficial features of these spaces are ‘not reducible to natural or aesthetic criteria’ but rather they can be understood as places that can provide relief from daily routines, sustain a sense of community and create opportunities for ‘bonding ties or making bridges’. Importantly, these places and spaces can ‘raise people’s spirits’ (Cattell et al., 2008:544).

The first of the pictures above gives voice to the spontaneous, informal and pleasurable ethos of The Nottingham Social Eating Network. In this image, a local band sought permission to provide musical entertainment via an acoustic medley of Pink Floyd hits (which was warmly received). In the next photograph a child’s birthday party is hosted at his local social eating space with well-wishers looking on and where a rousing, whole-hall rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’ was shared. The last picture is of an International Food Evening event hosted at a space where customers spilled out into the courtyard to carry on conversations over food. Each of these pictured scenes, pleasant in and of themselves, give substance however, to the notion that these spaces are about much ‘more than food’. The temporal features of repetition and regularity engage competencies of agency, permissiveness and ownership which ‘possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time’ (Cattell et al., 2008:544). Participants feel comfortable and able enough to utilise these services in service of their own interests, celebrations and hobbies in ways that are also embedded in performances of caring, sharing and contribution. Social eating encourages solidarity and a ‘home from home’ atmosphere wherein ‘every person has the opportunity to bring skills experience and talents, to be shared locally’.

The hosting of the birthday party shows that forms of hybridised enmeshing of commensality are being enabled. Elements of domestic, kinship, community and exceptional or celebratory commensality can all be detected in novel assemblages as temporary acts of caring and community spirit. The locale and proximity of social eating initiatives to those that frequent them are also entangled in their accessibility and familiarity which, in turn, is engendering practices of safety, respite, inclusion and welcome. These ‘sites of association’ (Cattell et al., 2008) might be envisaged as ‘therapeutic landscapes’ (Cattell et al., 2008:546) wherein the sometimes dingy and rundown facades
of these spaces are actually experienced by participants as ‘in walking distance’ places which promote wellbeing.

‘Place that brings people together so it can be an anchor for many who may be socially isolated’

“Space to bring community together, a hub where other agencies can come in” (Fieldnotes, Bestop Kitchen).

‘A place for community to come together and meet.’

“The community use our place as a safe haven, the community love the centre the food and the experiences they receive from homemade soup to full roast dinners.” (Go-along interview capturing customer comment at Parkgate Community Café).

‘Very valuable- space to get people together in the community’

Moreover, this locality and accessibility and the weekly, fortnightly or monthly pattern of social eating gives voice to the needs of participants ‘for constancy in the social or physical environment’ (Go-along interview, Carriages Café). Some of the network members have been running regular social eating events for around a decade, embedding and ingraining commensal practices into those spaces and forming a rhythm and cadence of caring where the salience of wellbeing becomes possible due to the ‘the continuity of casual encounters over time’ (Cattell et al., 2008:553).

‘I enjoy every visit and as part of a routine to keep me busy through the week’.

“It is great to mix with other members of the local community, some of which have become friends over the past few months.” (Go-along interview capturing customer comment, Carriages Café)

“It’s part of my weekly routine, I’m really disappointed when it’s not on.” (Fieldnotes, customer at Parkgate Community Café).

‘It’s nice to socialise and meet up with people in our village who we only see from time to time’.

‘It motivates me to get up in the morning as I have something to look forward to’.

“And we know this is important because people come an hour and forty-five minutes before food is served, so that’s how we know!” (Fieldnotes from Bestop Kitchen).
The practices of socialising within, through and beyond these spaces constructs what is termed ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, in Dupois and Thorns, 1998) wherein spaces become the basis for feelings of ease and belonging. This ‘home from home’ atmosphere also extends the kinship relations of intimacy, caring and bonding out into these public spaces. These competencies and meanings bridge over from domestic and other areas of social life, carried by practices that seem mundane, such as engaging in friendly ‘small talk’ by ‘chatting in the queue’ or receiving a smile when holding a door open for someone. However, these interactions evidence what Cattell et al. describe as ‘the importance of being able to enter and remain in a place without a specific purpose’ (2008:554). The competencies enacted by ‘hanging out’, which ‘might not happen in a more organised setting’ are enabled by the assemblages of practices that constitute a social eating mealtime and which are discursively experienced as ‘comfortable spaces to linger’ (Cattell et al., 2008:554). The conceptualisation of public spaces as staging experiences of ‘mingling’, observing and lingering articulate the myriad of caring practices that spark and sustain valued relationships.

Both fleeting and frequent encounters were valued for their capacity to enable and amplify the competencies of friendship and companionship. The capacity to create, sustain and enjoy friendships formed a substantial facet of the participant-created data set. There are multiple codes created to convey not just friendship per se, but its iterations: ‘meeting new people, ‘different people getting together’, ‘intergenerational’, ‘old friends’, ‘company’, ‘good company’, ‘socialising and friendships’. These codes all make references to the rich practices through which social eating commensality and its function of social cohesion is realised (Giacoman, 2016; Marovelli, 2019; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Smith and Harvey, 2021).

“It’s about community. It is outside your own family because you might not have a family but there’s a wider community, and you might take your immediate family there too, and making friends, outside the family [...] as well as your family, the wider neighbours and community.” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).

‘For the companionship- everyone is so very friendly.’

As Cattell et al. reflect:
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‘often quite mundane places attain symbolic significance for people through social relations that take place there. But public spaces are more than just containers of public activity, they possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time, spaces can contribute to meeting needs for security, identity, and a sense of place’ (2008:556).

However, just as any talk of any singular ‘public’ space is problematic (Cattell et al., 2008) for it carries within it many assumptions, and often discriminations about who that public may be, looking across the relatively diverse network of The Nottingham Social Eating Network, I seek to convey that there are different manifestations of social eating and the publics they create and call upon, whilst simultaneously identifying some common, consistent, and sustained features; those of commensalism.

The lens of commensality as well as the identification of habituated and commonplace practices situates the discussion of public spaces and social eating within a theoretical framework that sees the general in the specific. These approaches are useful here for showing how commonalities emerge and connect with broader social mores and customs. According to these publics themselves, these complexities are always being negotiated and reconstructed. As one customer charmingly stated:

“I like to come to meals to socialise and meet various kinds of people and listen to people views, we all got different opinions. That’s way God made us. That way.” (Fieldnotes, customer captured on go-along interview at Parkgate Community Café).

This sameness in difference and the shifting ‘ethics of care’ that are required to manage these ambivalences is a part of the engine of commensality wherein there is room for peculiarities whilst the function of social cohesion runs onward:

“Let’s keep in sight the bigger picture- we actually need to eat together, and we need that company” (Go-along interview, Carriages Café).
Or, as one participant reflected:

“It might be to strengthen existing community or broadening community. I think it’s one step more. You might have a nice community, but they can do more to create integration.” (Fieldnote discussions with customers at Growin’ Spaces).

6.5 ‘In the meantime’, social eating practices are ‘performances of care’

![Figure 51. Text box for In the Meantime codes.]

“A safe and welcoming place with food at its heart” (Fieldnotes, from Bestop Kitchen) is how one participant described a social eating initiative. Commensality within these spaces enables a whole range of ‘performances of care’ (Murcott 1982a Van Esterik 1995; Meah and Jackson 2017) as evidenced by the related-codes under which participant-produced data is nested. Socialising at social eating mealtimes is envisaged here, not just as a form of social bonding and social cohesion. It evidently fulfils those functions, for as Dunbar notes:

‘communal eating, whether in feasts or everyday meals with family or friends, is a human universal [...] eating with others provides both social and individual benefits [...] those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others,
are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support’ (Dunbar, 2017b:198).

As the collage below and the codes that are placed there illustrate, social eating initiative practices concern the habituated forms of caring that I recognise from embodied and encultured and communal circles of commensality (Van Esterik, 2015). Also envisioned are codes which disclose a hybrid amalgam of domestic, community and exceptional commensality that expresses through codes such as ‘non-judgemental’ and ‘feeling valued’, that social cohesion is emerging through social eating practices amongst groups that share not only the perennial need to bond but also for those who may desire new forms of inclusive, participatory, intentional and cultivatory commensality.
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Figure 52. Collage of ethnographic and ‘photovoice’ photographs, codes and verbatim texts - designed to illustrate ‘socialising and performances of care’ practices at social eating initiatives, created by David Jones and Marsha Smith.
Beyond a formative conception of social bonding, social eating practices of sociality also serve to refute and offer respite from, stigma, exclusion and loneliness. They are envisaged by participants as more than just nice places to be (although of course they are also described as such)..Herein, alternative strategies against the tropes of responsibilization are employed, and the framing of convenience foods as signalling a lack of caring, for example, are subverted and resisted. This reframing draws upon the concept of ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) to articulate the ‘progressive possibilities’ of social eating practices in creating commonalities between diverse publics and to convey how everyday mealtimes can be the sites of alterative social productions. In the meantime, and mean times, we can see that alternative and additional means of transaction are emerging within these spaces.

The concept of ‘in the meantime’ encompasses the political, ethical and theoretical possibilities of seeing the ‘in-commonness, and the development of communicative publics in which ethical conversation provokes new practice-based normativities’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:707). It articulates the range and scope of commensal practices to create ‘meaningful encounters between people of different social positions and, as a consequence, some political and ethical re-evaluation of what constitutes the common good, and how it might be cared for’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:709). As one participant states:

“it’s not just about maintaining or engaging community, it’s more active than that; breaking barriers over food!” (Fieldnotes, discussion with Bestop Kitchen).

This conceptualisation also provides a grounding for the complex and nuanced perspectives required to unpick and uphold the tensions inherent in hybridised and shifting practices which, due to some inherent features, might otherwise be misidentified as, and subsumed under the critical scholarship on food aid. This conceptualisation and its admission that there are ‘hopeful lines of flight for resisting the processes and powers’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:708) that food aid is enmeshed within, does not however, entail the relinquishing of a critical stance. ‘In the meantime’ admits the ‘meanness’ of the current milieu but also offers a more nuanced reading of the current scholarship on food
insecurity and food aid which, in seeking to critique the neoliberal retrenchment of welfare in the UK, often misses or minimises the significance of alternative, additional and ‘more than food’ practices.

When a hegemonic, interpretative framework is privileged in understanding and valuing the strategies individuals are deploying in order to eat, eat well and eat together, rather than one which ‘transcends analytical binaries of incorporation and resistance’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) we miss the everyday practices of commensality which are occurring not because of austerity, but in spite of it (Smith and Harvey, 2021).

The empirical work of the thesis has sought through the enrolment of participant-perspectives and through the lens of practices, to illuminate the hitherto invisibilized, or at least less well-advanced, conceptions of social eating initiatives as being sites of everyday and ‘quiet’ resistance (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013). As Pottinger notes, scholarship on protest and social change has tended to ‘overlook the everyday embodied repetitions and practices of care that make modest, yet purposeful, contributions to progressive social and environmental goals’ (2017:215). In this way, notions of activism are rendered somewhat inflexibly around the conditions of conscious behaviours, political affiliation and/or active citizenship which are ‘incompatible with everyday life [and which] places the activist ideal beyond the reach of even those who are deeply committed’ (Pottinger, 2017:216).

Performances of care within social eating spaces can now be understood as expressions of inclusion, acceptance, pleasure, optimism and sociality. They can be seen as creating beneficial outcomes that do not relate directly or indirectly to market transactions but are neither expressions of overt politicism nor active protest. These practices represent ‘exuberant, appealing and socially inclusive, but also unforced’ (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013:148) ways of navigating and pushing back against the overwhelming hardships of austerity.

Smith and Jehlicka identify how food self-provisioning is often motivated not by an explicit political or environmental stance, but rather by an individual’s desire to feed themselves, often in healthy and delicious ways. So too, the communal feasting using surplus foodstuffs might also be understood as a
nonconfrontational, and even inadvertent, way of ‘doing something about something’ or ‘plugging away’ at neoliberalism (Miles in Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:717). Quiet practices then, come in different guises and the lens of commensality frames social eating not just as a performance of necessary care amidst ‘mean times’ but as a powerful but often overlooked engine of the social where new forms of solidarity and purpose may be being forged in unconventional ways. Under cover of the shared mealtimes and through the mechanism of social cohesion ‘parallel and overlapping narratives about families, networks, competencies and relations with nature are emerging’ (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013; Pottinger, 2017).

Moreover, a focus on the ‘culinary strategies’ (Meah and Jackson, 2017) that are deployed within performances of care and commensality point to how open access, low-cost, local and invitational social eating spaces form assemblages of processes where sufficient familiarity, competencies and shared narratives give rise to practices which:

‘allow different types of social groupings to coalesce and derive group solidarity, share skills and understandings […] requiring a conceptual vocabulary which does not reify collectives and movements, but is sensitive to the various overlapping forms of connections on the basis of shared ideas and practices’ (Yates, 2015b:238-239).

Or as one participant reflected, spaces which are “both friendly and invitational, and an accompanying environment where people are willing to offer what they can do (esp. food wise) and not worry about what they can’t” (Fieldnotes from one-off visit to Snacks & Ladders social eating event).

The following data excerpts convey in varying ways, the inclusivity, in-common- ing, welcome, and safety that participants experience as valuable, and which point to the existence of forms of subjectivity, materiality and discourses that are ‘not governed by the cold and impersonal arrangements of markets’ (Warde et al., 2020:395).
‘At a social eating space everybody gets treated equally, everybody gets a meal, everybody gets to eat together.’

“Breaking barriers over food? It’s a leveller. It brings together all types of people together: class religion or age, to discuss over food in a way that’s non combative. It’s a nice atmosphere where we can discuss things over food.” (Fieldnotes, discussion with customers at Growin’ Spaces).

“Currently of ‘No Fixed Abode’ (not for the 1st time) and need venues like this, obviously”

‘A source of nourishment but, a connection point for people, some of similar situations and some of contrasting situations’

‘Very valuable in local communities when, especially when, it is open to non-locals like myself’.

“For me, it is that safe, welcoming space. That’s our context. It’s that safe welcoming space where people can come. Food’s part of it. That just brings people together. It’s warm, its comfortable, they get a good welcome with people to chat to.” (Fieldnotes, discussion with Bestop Kitchen).

“I’m trying to think of other spaces I’ve eaten at- they don’t accommodate as many people, the heating is on, it’s warm and welcoming place. You felt nourished by the food. It was a buffet-style thing, you get a lot of choice. So, people can help themselves.” (Go-along interview, volunteer at Secret Kitchen).

“It encourages the bonding, I guess. For some people it encourages them to relax and put their guard down over a meal.” (Fieldnotes, customer at Bestop Kitchen).

‘I feel it difficult to talk sometimes but there is never any pressure here’

‘It gives me the opportunity to chat over food in a non-threatening environment. It’s the best!!!’

6.6 Conclusion
This analysis within this chapter has responded to the research sub-question: (e) how do these practices contribute to a ‘more than food’ approach? because I have carefully and thoughtfully demonstrated how these practices are both about, and are valued as being about, much ‘more than food’. Each of these sets of interlinking practices bring forth experiences of care, contribution, participation and pleasure. The concepts of ‘food ladders’ and ‘in the meantime’ for example, connect these practices to a converging corpus which seeks to both empirically and conceptually convey the proposition that eating in groups, in mundane spaces, utilising surplus foodstuffs is adding up to something more important and significant than instrumental feeding of ‘leftover food for left behind people’.
Social eating practices and the value that participants ascribe to them ‘transcends analytical binaries of incorporation and resistance’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) and instead reveals the low-cost, no and low-choice consumption of surplus foods in public places as transformative sites of mutual aid, with just as much capacity to develop new social structures as to respond to existing systemic pressures.

I have thought about social eating practices and how they enable performances of care ‘in the meantime’ but also as an alternative and additional means of expressing values that ‘speak back to the neoliberal subjectification of poverty’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:719). I have also considered how these practices constitute ‘small scale achievement’ and set the context for, other forms of mobilisation ‘through common understandings and compatible types of performances of these social practices’ (Yates, 2015b:238) which are ‘less often united by any clear or continuous collective identity’ (Yates, 2015b:238) but rather, in this case, a series of concerns, needs, desires and motivations. As has been articulated throughout the thesis, seeking the perspectives of participants across The Nottingham Social Eating Network has uncovered a diversity of approaches, motivations, values, anxieties and reflections. However, the lens of commensality brings focus to these differences by centring on the practices of eating together and how this forms a commonality amongst ‘some of similar situations and some of contrasting situations’ (Post-it note excerpt, Parkgate Community Café).

This commonality of commensality ‘brings people together’ without recourse to overt political proselytising or even necessarily through any conscious efforting. Yates describes ‘how the testing, expression and prefiguration of political meaning takes place in the course of everyday life, not just in periods of low movement activity or ‘abeyance’ (2015b: 238). When Cloke, May and Williams enquire, ‘where, for example, might the hundreds of thousands of people in the UK currently reliant on food aid turn for food in the meantime whilst longer-term solutions to the problems of food poverty are sought?’ (2017: 707) one response is that some of them have turned, or re-turned, to one of the most potent, persistent and pervasive of human activities, that of commensality.
As part of an ‘ambivalent and contradictory dynamics of care and welfare in the meantimes’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:703) social eating mealtime practices offer us an insight into how The Nottingham Social Eating Network and its participants are constructing a ‘progressive and hopeful space’ with ‘emerging ethics of hospitality’ where participants can ‘generously be in-common with others’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:721).

Performing care as an everyday act of resilience, if not resistance, might be as much as many people and communities experiencing hardships are currently capable of. Systemic change is still required but:

‘these seemingly mundane event spaces of care and welfare can serve as potentially virtuous areas of common life, in which social response to the phenomenology of need can lead eventually to political and ethical ruptures in the art of the possible within capitalist realisms’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:720).

Not surprisingly, and as has been articulated by a practice-informed approach, the everyday dynamism of commensality draws upon shared, habituated and deeply ingrained practices alongside evidence of the types of personalisation and modification that keep social eating feeling ‘freshly cooked’. However necessary the explicit critique of neoliberalism is; with rising levels of hunger, and alienation from and the degradation of, a collective social life, it remains the case that the ‘diffuse goals and targets, and unconventional styles of protest, make moments of political contestation, and the very definition of social movements and their boundaries – difficult to identify and sustain empirically’ (Yates, 2015b:237). But as one customer explained when talking through his Post-it note which simply read ‘stress, pressure, buoyant’, he recalled feeling extremely depressed and reluctantly coming out to eat at a local social eating space with a friend. He had been near-housebound with mental ill-health for some time. The following week however, he noticed that he was ‘looking forward to something’ and that he couldn’t remember how long it had been since he’d felt the pleasure of anticipation. Therefore, it is necessary to turn to commensality as a lens with which to examine this social scape for signs of additional and alternative strategizing and collective mettle, not least because of the significance of the shared mealtime to those feeling isolated, anxious and depressed.
Chapter 6. Key Findings

My research has identified key findings which have implications for the literature on commensality. I will discuss these implications of these findings and propose the scholarly contribution of the thesis, in the following chapter.
Chapter 7. Discussion and Contribution: 

Reconceptualising the challenges in eating and eating together in the UK

7.1 Introduction

‘The practice of commensality remains open for fresh interpretations’ (Koponen and Mustonen, 2020: 4).

The contribution of the thesis is the empirical and conceptual advancement of commensal scholarship. In this thesis, I have produced and interpreted new empirical materials and I have applied a novel conceptual lens to the phenomenon of study in order to better understand the value of social eating initiatives to their participants. In doing this, I have also elaborated a ‘more than food’ approach in order to advance the concept of commensality.

The final sub-question of the thesis will now be responded to: (f) how does the ‘more than food’ approach inform understandings of commensality. In the thesis thus far, I have demonstrated my ability to review the relevant literatures and structure the argumentation of the thesis accordingly. I have identified a conceptual and theoretical approach and planned and conducted a clearly thought out, ethical and positionally-reflective piece of empirical work. In the analytical chapters of the thesis, I have refined and organised data to derive some clear findings. I have applied the commensal conceptual approach and verified its appropriateness, and I have advanced an original and critical ‘more than food’ approach to the concept of commensality through a discussion of these findings.

In this section of the thesis I will further demonstrate how this originality and criticality pertains to advancing commensal scholarship. By breaking down and evidencing how these research qualities are evidenced within the thesis, the contribution of a thoughtful and incremental contribution to commensal thought can be claimed.

A contribution of this thesis is the dialogic and dialectical approach to reviewing the literatures and the subsequent positioning of the thesis argumentation; through conversing with already accepted scholarship, and through examining the veracity and ongoing usefulness of these knowledges. The
Chapter 7. Discussion and Contribution

thesis has not just been concerned with breaking new empirical ground, finding and responding to the existing literatures, proposing new perspectives and explanations, but also to uncovering their differing views about the constitution, reproduction and transformation of the deeper social realm. The thesis has moved from the ‘who/what’, or the clear and precise description of the phenomena of interest, to the ‘how’, or the processes through which this social eating mealtimes are constructed, to the ‘why’, or uncovering the deeper function of social eating initiatives. This penultimate section pertains to the ‘so, what’ of the thesis, or to my consideration of how the social realm itself is produced, reproduced and, crucially, how it changes (and within which social eating initiatives are emerging).

This thesis has engaged with a complex social and conceptual problem, namely that currently there is a challenging milieu in the UK wherein rising numbers of individuals are experiencing a form of ‘gastro-anomie’ or a disconnect from the structuring qualities of eating together (Fischler, 2011). Whether that is due to ‘alimentary exclusion’ due to food insecurity (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015), the deestructuration of the shared mealtime, the rise of snacking, fast and ready meals foodstuffs, or likely a complex and shifting amalgam of these interpolated issues, eating and eating together is a challenge for many people, contemporarily. Amidst these challenges, ‘social eating’ activities and initiatives are emerging within the UK which are not well-mapped or understood by scholars, and which would, due to some similar features, likely be identified, and accounted for, as an expression of food aid pertaining to ‘poverty consumers’ suffering from food insecurity (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015).

7.2 Advancing the current food insecurity literature, ‘in the meantime’
Accompanying this mischaracterisation (or at least oversimplification) available conceptual interpretations, aligning social eating initiatives with food aid services, overarchingly rely on either structural or socio-economic interpretations to account for the value of these initiatives. These accounts which critique behavioural and individualising tropes as responsibilising, show how individuals are negatively impacted upon by top down, distant yet powerful socio-material and discursive mechanisms such as welfare retrenchment (Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Garthwaite, Collins and Bambra, 2015; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016; Caplan, 2017, 2020). These approaches also frame community food initiatives that utilise surplus food as interlinked with governmental, neoliberal policies; highlighting the role of these groups in legitimating the displacement of community commensality with charitable feeding (Dowler and Caraher, 2003).
These groups are positioned as downstepping mechanisms wherein the enactment and upholding of the damaging policies and discourses of austerity are often uncritically and inadvertently enabled (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Caraher and Furey, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019; Riches and Gerlings, 2019). As Caraher and Furey note: ‘[i]n redeploying surplus food, we are effectively detracting from two significant food system failings while depoliticising hunger and allowing governments not to address the gap between income and food costs’ (2019:1).

I have been careful to state that the harm caused by austerity in the UK should not be ignored, denied, or minimised. Much credible and robust scholarship supports these claims (Garthwaite, 2011; Dowler and O’Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Middleton et al., 2018) and reference to this corpus of research forms an important facet of the literature reviewing and positioning work within the thesis. However, statements like those made by Caraher and Furey (2019) raise a number of conceptual issues that this thesis seeks to address, dialogically through engaging with the substance of these literatures, and dialectically by engaging with the structural and conceptual implications of these literatures, in understanding the phenomenon of social eating initiatives and their value to participants.

For these surplus meal services, the effect of them upon the individuals who receive these meals and the broader social scape within which these individuals and groups are situated, are conceived of as being structured in a certain, dualistic way. Taken together this approach proffers a hierarchical view of the social realm. Agency and the capacity for social change are located at the structural level (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012), and this social change is downstepped at the level of community food groups using surplus to feed people. And it is viewed as lacking at the lower and more individuated tiers of this realm (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Caraher and Dowler, 2016; Caraher and Furey, 2019).

In this conceptualisation, change comes from above in a unidirectional, linear and causative manner. Thus, any capacity for positive change within an individual’s foodscape must emerge, primarily, at the governmental echelons of the social realm to be downstepped, translated and experienced at an individual level. In these approaches, policy must change, welfare must be restored, income must be raised, and the structural drivers of food insecurity must be exposed in the UK if individuals are to escape the negative effects of this milieu. These claims are often made without acknowledging
empirical examples of where these requests might already be happening (albeit in partial, shifting and temporary forms), and where these novel empirical expressions escape conceptual recourse to the plea for structural transformation.

Again, I have been careful not to refute this positioning *per se*, for all of these called-for changes would indeed manifestly improve the tragedy of food insecurity that austerity has imposed upon record numbers of individuals in the UK. However, over a decade has passed since the imposition of these austerity policies. If the broader social structure does not alter and if the responsibilising rationale of government does not change, then despite being a view which is plausible, credible and widely held within academic scholarship, questions must be raised about which alternative and additional conceptualisations are available to academics to make sense of the current milieu, beyond socio-economic critiques of charitable surplus food aid distribution.

Whilst it is being argued that the conjoining of food surpluses and food insecurity ‘should NOT’ be happening, the empirical reality suggests elsewise. Food banking alone according to the Trussell Trust, has risen by 128% since 2017 (Trussell Trust, 2021). Social eating initiatives have expanded within The Nottingham Social Eating Network itself, with 3 new groups emerging since the completion of thesis fieldwork (The Nottingham Social Eating Network, 2020), and The National Food Service now has 10 branches (The National Food Service, 2021).

Aside from being empirically refuted, little conceptual room is left to manoeuvre in the assertion that these things should not be occurring; creating a rigid intellectual position that can only be stated and restated whilst a decade of austerity drags onwards. Alerting the public to the tragedies and iniquities of living under austerity in the UK has appeared to create a position amongst some scholarship that is ‘self-fulfilling, overly formulaic and potentially uncritical’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:706). This positioning whilst rightly concerned with exposing the problems inherent in simply distributing food surpluses to the food insecure, sets itself up dialogically and dialectically, as entrenched, as intellectually incurious, and as intractable in the face of both empirical developments beyond food banking such as social eating, for example. This corpus of scholarship relies upon a continuing conceptual impasse where ‘no possible good’ can be seen in the efforts of communities to sustain
themselves (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) (using food surpluses) and where, therefore, conceptual momentum has faltered.

If scholars state that ‘the redistribution of surplus food is NOT the solution to food poverty’ (Caraher and Furey, 2019) one response is that indeed, it may not be the ‘solution’ but that it may, however, be a piece of a complex assemblage of shifting, partial, temporary and messy community food sector practices where food insecurity is being addressed ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). When there is an acceptance of the conceptual dead-end reached and a curiosity about what may be happening beyond the distribution of waste food to poor people (Riches and Gerlings, 2019) a mid-level, community-oriented space has instead been opened up where new empirical insights have unfolded and new conceptualisations have thus become necessary. As Cloke, May and Williams reflect: ‘we need to appreciate how spaces of charitable care can transcend short-term pragmatism and offer spaces for ethical talk and performance that connect to wider transformative politics and praxis’ (2017:705).

Moreover, the underlying metrics of socio-economic critiques pertain predominantly to income. Whilst this measure is of course vital, in this thesis other additional and alternative values such as those identified in the practices of social eating mealtimes have also been also emphasised; extending and enriching this corpus. As Cloke, May and Williams reflect, these arguments will likely ‘oscillate in myriad ways […]. It follows that in order to reassess the politics of possibility emerging in these ambiguous and contested responses to social need it will be necessary to deconstruct the ‘revolutionary’ versus ‘reformist’ binary that too often characterizes dominant ways of thinking about such spaces of care’ (2017:719).

This is one incremental contribution of the thesis: identifying an empirical and conceptual space as a means of appraising the specificities of the beyond food banking practices of social eating initiatives. Building upon concepts such as ‘in the meantime’ offers a conceptual means of tracing the tensions of ambivalence, affordance, locality, situatedness and partiality that mark out the practices of social eating initiatives. This complexification is proposed as a necessary maturation of the corpus of community food, food insecurity and surplus food use scholarship. Dialectically, it also shapes the
thesis by revealing the need for further research into the mid-spaces of community food services, and for overcoming the limitations of an overly dualistic view of the social realm.

Instead, this approach favours further enquiry, empirical curiosity, and intellectual nuance as necessary for exploration of social eating initiatives in the meantime. For as Cloke, May and Williams state, this more nuanced and sensitive approach can:

‘generate new forms of openness towards, and inspiration from, seemingly mundane performances of care, welfare and justice that appear as short-term “sticking-plaster” responses to austerity but may incorporate deeper-seated possibilities for the learning of alternative ethical and political postures and practices’ (2020:5).

The attention to this conceptual and methodological mid-space and how it has produced a key contribution of the thesis, will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

7.2.1 Contributing to the commensal literature

‘This kind of food sharing and this kind of commensality are based on conditions of both deprivation [...] as well as community involvement’ (Alexander, 2021: 238).

In the previous chapter I responded to the research sub-question (e); demonstrating how social eating initiative mealtime practices concern and create effects and values that involve much ‘more than food’. Now in this chapter I respond to the final sub-question (f) **how does the ‘more than food’ approach inform understandings of commensality?**

This thesis has persuasively argued that there are a number of related yet distinct facets of the UK milieu which are converging to affect the emergence, modification and vivification of contemporary group eating practices. The types of commensal participation, contribution and togetherness identified as emerging within social eating spaces are also framed as evermore necessary. Currently, industrial levels of food wastage coincide with record levels of food insecurity (Lalor, 2014; Caplan,
2017, 2020). Experiences of exclusion for those that cannot afford to engage in the reciprocity of commensality are amplified (Pfeiffer, Ritter and Oestreicher, 2015; Healy, 2019; Marovelli, 2019). Moreover, the rise in fast and convenience food consumption amongst those who are time, motivation, education, as well as resource poor are also intersecting to produce a social context where opportunities to engage in commensality are undermined (Fischler, 1980; Twine, 2015; Jackson and Viehoff, 2016; Meah and Jackson, 2017).

This challenging context is predominantly conceptualised through structural, socio-economic critiques, particularly around the intersections of austerity tropes and the dispersal of surplus and charitable food aid (Lalor, 2014; Caplan, 2017, 2020; Healy, 2019; Caraher and Furey, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019). However, it has been identified that new conceptual models and approaches are required so that we can better understand and account for the more complex patterning of these intersecting issues, and in particular the value that social eating initiative participants ascribe to the commensal practices they construct.

One example of this, and the focus of the empirical work of the thesis, is The Nottingham Social Eating Network being examined as an expression of where these challenges and responses are being constructed, reproduced and transformed at the level of practices. However, social eating initiative commensality, specifically, is framed within the thesis as an empirical and conceptual lacuna. As Davies et al. have stated: ‘the patterning and complexity of contemporary food sharing especially that occurring beyond the home and in urban, industrialised settings has received limited attention to date’ (2017:137). For, whilst commensal scholarship is extensive, social eating initiative commensality is not yet much elaborated: ‘spaces for non-familial intergenerational commensality require further research in the public and private spheres in terms of what occurs there’ (Biggs and Haapala, 2021: 10).

Moreover, the literature review and positioning chapter revealed that empirical examinations of beyond-kinship, surplus-eating practices are largely absent within current scholarship on modern, Western, urban commensality (cf. Davies et al., 2017; Marovelli, 2019; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Smith and Harvey, 2021; Alexander, 2021). As a cross-cultural phenomenon in both past and present societies, Jonsson et al. also suggest that commensality ‘deserves further research’ (2021:1). This includes commensality as a research topic in itself, but also its positioning as an entry point to ‘unveil different dimensions of social relations between people, as well as interactions between humans and material objects’ (Jonsson et al., 2021:1). Moreover, Scander, Yngve and Lennernäs Wiklund state that
ongoing commensal research should be encouraged as they call for the clarification and updating of ‘solid definitions of commensality and other search terms of eating together’ (2021:19). Examination of social eating initiative mealtimes, then, responds to these requests for both empirical and conceptual commensal advancement.

Indeed, in the UK, commensality is undergoing a transformation as a range of new initiatives emerge dedicated to creating new, shared eating practices:

‘Social eating initiatives’ which utilise surplus foodstuffs have been described as a ‘response to rising food insecurity, a growing resistance to food waste and as a form of surplus food aid redistribution. But as yet there is limited empirical research examining how the potent and pervasive forces of commensality intersect with, and shape, this emerging phenomenon’ (Smith and Harvey, 2021: 1).

And as Alexander also reflects:

’[i]n the diverse and often literally messy interactions featuring people from wildly different backgrounds gathering to obtain, cook, and/or eat [...] there exists both food sharing activities as well as a new kind of commensality, both fuelled by food waste’ (2021: 238).

What the lens of commensality brings into clearer focus is that, as well as the newness, modification and affordances of social eating initiatives, these mealtimes also draw upon commensality to sustain and continue a deep-seated set of social-bonding practices. Even in austere times and despite a social system where mealtime destructureation and the resultant gastro-anomie, threatens it (Fischler, 1980), The Nottingham Social Eating Network exists as an example of how these complex challenges are being negotiated. For, despite the claim that ‘[f]ood selection and intake are now increasingly a matter of individual, not social, decisions’ (Fischler, 1980:948), the results of the thesis actually disclose commensality as remaining a vital, significant, and valuable part of individuals' and communities' everyday practices.

The analysis chapters of this thesis have confirmed the findings of the literature review and positioning chapters; namely that commensality even in a context of this destructureation, is inevitable. It is always-
already being both destructured and restructured because of its innate value to both individuals, groups and the social realm, itself (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015). Herein, social eating initiatives are disclosed not as a ‘replacement or erosion of community commensality with charitable commensality, but as a complex and enduring form of social life that is enjoyed and multiply valued by its participants’ (Smith and Harvey, 2021: 10). This claim has been evidenced and analysed in the previous chapter through close attention to the mealtime practices of The Nottingham Social Eating Network. Beyond the application of this lens to better understand the emergence and value of UK social eating initiative commensality, this thesis also advances scholarship by evidencing, extending and enriching the concept of commensality itself.

However, the limitations of this approach must also be stated. Whilst a convincing case has been made for the restructuration of the mealtime, Giacoman (2016), from whose model of commensality the thesis’s conceptual model was advanced, inculcates commensality itself in the processes of social exclusion and the reinforcement of difference. The limitation of empirical focus on to The Nottingham Social Eating Network and in particular those participants who choose to engage in social eating, represent a relatively minor section of the populace and no consideration has been given within the thesis to all of those individuals and groups who are not participants. Closer attention to the barriers, challenges and turn-offs to social eating would form a useful addition to this emergent ‘more than food’ approach.

Indeed, Giacoman (2016) cautions against simply accepting a homogenous interpretation that any moment of commensality is necessarily fomenting social cohesion or indeed occurring between peers, or that commensality can be explicitly positioned as a proxy for care. Instead, Giacoman (2016), emphasises the need to scrutinise and delineate commensality in its complexity and specificity. Consideration of this nuanced approach to the role and function of commensality has formed the work of this thesis, but it is acknowledged that there is much empirical and conceptual opportunity within this ‘more than food’ approach to extend and expand upon who, what, where, when commensality is (and is not) being constructed, modified and accomplished.

However, for now and within this thesis, social eating initiatives are demonstrated to have implications far beyond the mealtime. These initiatives are part of a broader ‘feed people first’ (Baron et al., 2018) movement in which the intersections of corporate food donation, charitable redistribution and
community food projects meet to guide the effective redirection of edible food surpluses to those citizens suffering from food insecurity, but also to those seeking friendship, company and experiences of caring, through the medium of commensality.

An incremental contribution of the thesis which contributes towards this commensal advancement is then, not only the identification of an empirical and conceptual lacuna, but the novel integrating of a number of related, but not usually conjoined, conceptualisations. Alongside ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017), several concepts such as ‘food ladders’ (Blake, 2019b) enable the practices of social eating initiative commensality to be appropriately and critically articulated and the value ascribed to these practices to be more clearly expressed. Taking these concepts, fitting them together to advance a ‘more than food’ approach is a key contribution of the thesis to commensal scholarship.

The findings are confirmed by other scholars such as Marovelli who identifies the ‘connective tissue’ of commensality being enacted in similar community food initiatives in cities such as London (Marovelli, 2019:190). Recent works by Warde et al. (2020), Abarca (2021), Alexander (2021), Luca et al. (2021) and Smith and Harvey (2021) also contribute towards the fresh application of the lens of commensality in understanding the partial, messy yet hopeful emanations of community and social activism that are happening quietly, in mundane and everyday spaces and places, in between the cracks of neoliberal governance:

‘In practical terms, then, it could be that mundane everyday spaces of welfare and care, which appear to address short-term needs rather than deeper structural reformulation, can serve as here-and-now spaces of alternative ethical virtues which prefigure larger scale ideals’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2020: 8).

Moreover, projects in the UK such as FoodHall Project, Food Works, Open Kitchens in Sheffield, The Falmouth Food Coop, the Meals Collective in Glasgow, the Cambridge Community Kitchen, FoodCycle and The National Food Service continue to proliferate, evidencing the praxis of the ‘more than food’ approach.
7.2.2 Confirming the ‘food ladders’ approach

One of these ‘more than food’ concepts, is the ‘food ladders’ approach to encountering and understanding surplus foodstuffs, developed by Blake (2019a). The dialogic and dialectic limitations of an overly structural, socio-economic approach to thinking through the work done in community settings has also been identified in the framing of materiality and role of surplus. The way that surplus is conceived of within much critique can currently be understood as an oversimplification resulting in a subsequent mischaracterisation. There is an overreliance on an inference of surplus as food waste which always-already frames its usage, negatively. This framing hinders further enquiry under a ‘should NOT’ mantra where the possibility of surplus being used socially, creatively, to build bonds or even as being pleasurable to consume, has been missed. This has resulted in a relatively undeveloped empirical field which has, in turn, stifled conceptual development (cf. Midgley, 2014; Gollnhofer, 2017; Baron et al., 2018; Blake, 2019b,c, 2020; Alexander, 2021; Smith and Harvey, 2021).

However, in Blake’s concept of ‘food ladders’ (2019b) surplus food is not defined solely according to its materiality, but rather its multiple, shifting and situated uses are foregrounded. Surplus here is conceptualised not according to what it is, but by what it does, by its affordances and effects, and through its entanglement with people, places, spaces and activities:

‘Food Ladders activates food and its related practices progressively to reduce local vulnerability to food insecurity and its knock-on effects. Specifically, Food Ladders advocates for mobilising the more than nutrient, calorie, and commercial aspects of food, such as its capacity to bring people together to foster shared understanding and collaboration’ (Blake, 2019b:1).

Through empirical endeavours I have confirmed the appropriateness of Blake’s approach; namely that these surplus meals can be understood beyond the servicing of poverty consumption. Careful, curious and participant-shaped enquiry demonstrated that these meals are sources of enjoyment, caring, contribution and participation, or as Alexander notes:
Chapter 7. Discussion and Contribution

‘it is neither strictly a charity nor is it entirely a restaurant. What its corps of staff and volunteers seem to have discovered, though, are creative measures of recirculating and redistributing food waste to people who can find renewed joy in it’ (Alexander, 2021: 240).

What the thesis research has uncovered is that social eating initiatives offer and enable much more than surplus food services. This ‘more than food’ capacity rests upon not just the dispersal of low-cost meals made from surpluses (although this value is also articulated) but upon the intersecting practices which are constructed through the assemblages of venues, volunteering opportunities, meal timings and organisational networking, for example. This more empirically informed description has located the use of food surpluses amidst a range of other practices which are conjoining to create a more positive affect, and one that distinguishes it from the reductionist and empirically undeveloped surplus food waste tropes. The incorporation of the ‘food ladders’ concept within a ‘more than food’ approach situates it within a commensal framework where its alternative and additional qualities are now foregrounded.

Therefore, through a focus on both participant perspectives and the practices of surplus consumption, a more complex and hopeful narrative has emerged. The concept of ‘food ladders’ buttresses and complements the ‘more than food’ conceptualisation as a means of making sense of how and why participants value social eating initiative mealtimes. As Jackson and Viehoff note when considering convenience foods, there is an ongoing requirement to ‘characterize the place of this complex and contested food category within the structure of the contemporary food market and within the context of consumers’ everyday social practices’ (2016:9).

In this positioning new research thinking also arises about the situatedness, temporality, alternate and ambiguous uses of surplus food consumption which seek to pivot thinking away from charitable food aid uses to incorporate its additional, social, uses. Blake who in viewing surplus food within a food ladders framework also challenges the notion that ‘convenience’ and ‘care’, or in this case ‘surplus’ and ‘care’, are mutually exclusive or dichotomous categories. Just as Blake’s concept has been used within the thesis to surface the complexities inherent in naming and valuing surplus foods beyond a designation as waste, so too the valuing of the activities that surplus foods are mobilising are viewed as more complex than the passive receipt of stigmatising food aid (Blake, 2019b, 2019ac, 2020).
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This line of empirical divergence has enabled us to account for social eating initiative surplus-usage as reflecting both the qualities and values that pertain to the discourses of income and food insecurity, but also those that escape these readings. It directs us to look more closely at what is happening within these spaces and services and to scrutinise them for signs of the ‘new and small ways that await, and may be connected to, larger scale anti-capitalist changes’ that can open up scholarly space to hear the voices and practices that ‘potentially speak back to neoliberal subjectification’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:719).

7.2.3 The contribution of the ‘more than food’ concept

The thesis has demonstrated that current homogenising approach to community food groups that use surplus foods results in a misidentification and mischaracterisation. These socio-economic critiques continue to uphold income as the dominant arbiter of value within society, they charge these organisations with being austerity translation mechanisms, and they categorise surplus as food waste (Caraher and Furey, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019; Riches and Gerlings, 2019). This approach locates social change as unfolding from the higher-level social tiers of welfare policies, neoliberal governance or corporate food waste management, or as being downstepped by the mid-level charitable food aid sector.

Moreover, the reasoning and argumentation of the thesis proposes that the socio-economic scholarship which insists that these types of practices ‘should NOT’ be happening, is actually missing an opportunity to extend knowledge. This scholarship obscures and censors an opportunity to valorise the re-emergence and novel configuration of what is regarded within sociological and anthropological literatures, as one of the ‘single most important’ activities that humans undertake (Dunbar, 2017a); that of commensality in structuring the social realm.

Whilst absolutely recognising the value of what has ‘gone before’ this thesis has proposed a line of intellectual divergence in the form of an alternative ‘more than food’ conceptual lens. Rather than construct a solely oppositional critique, I have instead created a countervailing approach which commits to the accurate and nuanced depiction of these community spaces and initiatives, the surpluses they utilise, and which also promotes an alternative interpretation of the organisation and structure of the social realm to those relied upon within socio-economic critiques. For as Heuts and
Chapter 7. Discussion and Contribution

Mol also state, ‘crafting a rich theoretical repertoire [...] does not work by laying out solid abstracting generalisations, but rather by adding together ever shifting cases and learning from their specificities’ (Heuts and Mol, 2013:127). Indeed, ‘[s]ociological concepts can be made fully empirical only by grounding them in a sample of the typical micro-events that make them up’ (Collins, 1981:988). This thesis demonstrates some of these ever-shifting specificities but it also connects them to an enduring and potent realm of social activity, and it accomplishes this through the development of an enriched and elaborated ‘more than food’ commensal approach.

Instead, the practice-theories informed and ‘more than food’ commensal approach proposes a different lens of analysis in order to make sense of ‘the emergent organisational forms, diverse forces and unreliable agents’ (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015: 173) that characterise social eating initiative commensality. This lens brings into view ‘a more transductive approach that not only leaves behind the dualist either/or of possibilities or constraints, but also attempts to remain focused on concrete contexts and actual practices’ (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015:174).

For, as Davies et al. note, ‘sharing then is not just what people do, it is a co-ordinated entity [...] and a performance - a process of doing’ (Davies et al., 2017: 137). By this reckoning, social eating initiative commensality has also been disclosed as an entity that is being perpetuated and reshaped by the dynamic mix of elements that come into and move out of expression within the carrier-waves of practices. An elaborated, practice-informed commensal approach has illustrated ‘the social practices of doing things together around food’ (Davies et al., 2017), which includes but also extends commensality as occurring solely through ‘eating at the same table’ (Fischler, 1980). Taken together, these disciplinarily disparate yet related ‘more than food’ concepts share a thematic emphasis and a commitment to the empirical exploration of mundane, everyday and niche practices. It is through this closer attention that the potent, pervasive and persistent phenomenon of commensality is also brought into view.

This potent ‘engine’ of the social wherein the macro can be seen within the micro and vice-versa, positions commensality as a ‘total social fact’ (Mauss [1923] cited in Valeri, 2013). This perspective accounts for how these varying facets of the social realm are always-already interacting in a ‘supervenient’ or mutually affective, networked mode (Schatki, 1988; Spaargaren, Lamers and
Weenink, 2016). This assessment of commensality as having a tridimensional character; sociological, historical, and physio-psychological (Valeri, 2013: 266) means that the complex and multidimensional modes of social eating practices are disclosed as interacting and as mutually affective.

Through its designation as both supervenient and socially significant and as emergent and novel, social eating initiatives are positioned as contributing to the broader production and reproduction of social life rather than being simply a negative end result of upstream drivers. Commensality always-already ‘works both ways’ and is positioned as something that, whilst being mundane and everyday, is also and simultaneously, incredibly significant (Kerner, Chou and Warmind, 2015; Dunbar, 2017b). Abarca, continuing the confirmation of the role and status of commensality within the wider social realm, states that ‘knowing what someone eats, tells us who they are’ but that this individual ‘culinary subjectivity’, is always-already a ‘product of and produces networks of relationships’ and further, that these ‘food-centred networks become the catalyst of personal, familial and community social changes that take place at the micro levels of everyday life’ Abarca, (2021: 664-665). Within this thesis, this already-valorised conceptualisation is given further credence, extended through a practices-informed approach, and vivified through fresh application to The Nottingham Social Eating Network and their ‘more than food’ mealtimes practices.

7.3 Conclusion

This thesis has contributed to the commensal literature by advancing a ‘more than food’ conceptualisation. This encompasses and articulates the broader set of values enmeshed within these novel UK eating initiatives and has provided a conceptual lens with which to better account for the active mid-space between passive surplus food aid receipt and structural transformation of this current UK milieu. To conclude, the impact and potential of these initiatives cannot be measured solely by the number of meals they serve; we must continue to ‘consider the unmeasurable variables and more complex connections’ which make these initiatives valuable (Marovelli, 2019: 11). Through revealing how ‘influential, symbolic, powerful and transformative’ (Coveney, 2013: 5) the sharing of meals can be, this thesis has provided conceptual substance towards prising open a space ‘within a seemingly immutable and austere capitalist fabric’ to give voice to the ‘art-of-the-possible’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2020:17).
Chapter 7. Discussion and Contribution

In the following thesis conclusion chapter, some implications of the thesis contribution, and the pruning open of this empirical and conceptual space, are appraised.
Chapter 8. Thesis Conclusion: *Social transformation ‘in the meantime’?*

8.1 Introduction

I have now reached the final chapter of the thesis where I recap the research problem, research questions, the research design and the overall findings and contribution to knowledge. Then I consider the implications and limitations of, this contribution for organisations, communities and individuals by reporting on an output of the thesis, before presenting some concluding remarks.

Within the UK currently, record numbers of individuals are experiencing food insecurity associated with poverty. This impoverishment also concerns the social aspects of being unable or being limited in capacity to engage in the reciprocity, pleasure and social bonding of commensality. Time pressures and differences in scheduling, motivational and culinary capital issues also add to this socialscape. Concurrently, food aid charity, particularly services which utilise surplus foods, have proliferated. Moreover, rising numbers of individuals also report being excluded from commensality due to social isolation, including those that can afford to eat well but may still struggle to eat with others. Taken together, this creates a context wherein engaging in commensality has become ever more complex and challenging. This context is made sense of through a number of scholarly devices - primarily through socio-economic structural critiques which locate the source of these issues within a neoliberal social framework wherein the retrenchment of welfare, the corporate greenwashing of food waste distribution and the rise of fast and ready meals simultaneously conjoin to affect and entrench these commensal challenges.

The thesis argumentation articulates the notion that the value of eating is not just about the access to, and availability and affordability of food, it also involves the capacity to engage in reciprocity and social bonding through *eating together* (Healy, 2019; Blake, 2019b,c, 2020; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Abarca, 2021; Smith and Harvey, 2021). Far from being mundane, commensality is positioned within the thesis as a potent, pervasive and persistent part of social life and worthy of careful attention, especially in times where it may be threatened or where novel forms of its practicing are emerging.
The thesis has also proposed that group eating or commensality has been a distinctive but largely unexplored dimension of community food initiatives within this current social context. The thesis has therefore focused on examining the value of social eating initiative commensality, and specifically, the value that participants ascribe to social eating initiatives. In responding to this overall question I have enquired into some key issues that mar the current UK socialscape and how these issues intersect, and are conceptualised. This has led to the selection of the lens of commensality as a suitable and appropriate frame for understanding the emergence of social eating initiatives within this particular context. Additionally, the lens of commensality has also enabled a more empirically grounded and conceptually refined articulation of the value of social eating initiatives.

Methodologically, a more complex, nuanced and user-shaped perspective has been utilised which has encompassed not only the social eating mealtime itself but the range of coordinated resources, activities, behaviours and discourses that coalesce within a social eating initiative mealtime. In order to concretize the dimensions of commensality I have adopted and adapted a situated methodology that approaches social life as being accomplished locally in ordinary, everyday ‘micro-social’ acts (Knorr-Cetina, 1988). This ‘more than food’ approach recognises deep relationality, human and non-human interdependencies, the needs of others and hands-on mutuality as the basis for commensality. At this social eating initiative-level, commensality is accomplished locally and enacted in-situ; it is suffused with ‘recurrent interactions, emotional commitments, a sense of cohesion, and affective sentiments that are practically accomplished in (the) everyday acts’ (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021:138) of care, pleasure and participation.

Social eating has therefore been disclosed as being constructed through this range of intersecting elements and practices and clearly theorised through a practice theories-informed approach. The phenomenon of study has been well-investigated by deploying a range of commensally oriented methods which created a rich and complex dataset about the mealtime practices of The Nottingham Social Eating Network.

Three key findings emerged from the analysis of this data which disclose social eating initiatives as being constructed through the practices of eating together, helping out and socialising. These practices
were situated within a ‘more than food’ conceptualisation which draws upon a suite of other concepts to articulate how social eating initiatives are of value to their participants because they are about much more than the instrumental consumption of surplus foodstuffs. The thesis has elaborated and substantiated this ‘more than food’ approach to advance the commensal scholarship.

Returning to the overall research question: (1) **what is the value of social eating initiatives to their participants?** I can now state that the overall research question which has structured and animated the thesis argumentation has been addressed. Social eating initiatives are about much more than food alone. Social eating initiatives are formed through, and carry into being, a multitude of practices that are valued because they enact and enable the social bonding and social cohesion of commensality. They are valued because of their capacity to provide physical, emotional, community and social sustenance. Social eating initiative practices are now understood as sites of agency, pleasure and social production that, whilst every day and mundane, also plug participants back into a vital social realm. This social realm escapes and resists, albeit in partial, shifting and messy ways, the broader, neoliberal framing of value as being primarily held within a market of economically mediated goods and service where individuals are responsible for their own capacity to engage in this arena. Instead, access and contribution to, and benefit from, social eating practices and the commensality they create do not depend wholly on economic exchange but on a range of additional and alternative valuing. Participants at these spaces are constructing, reproducing and transforming practices of commensality. This commensal valuing is of particular import because it is being threatened and undermined within the current milieu.

The process of proposing and responding to a series of research sub-questions in order to successively construct an answer to the overall research question has resulted in the empirical mapping of new social eating practices and the development of new knowledge about commensality. In the following sections, the implications and limitations of this knowledge-development are appraised before the thesis is drawn to a close.
8.2 The implications of the ‘more than food’ value of social eating initiatives

The implications of a better understanding of the ‘more than food’ values that are carried into practice through social eating initiative mealtimes are now presented. Whilst a contribution to knowledge is the intended output of a thesis, consideration of how the findings and contribution may be leveraged beyond academia is a useful and appropriate ending discussion of this thesis given the studied phenomenon’s evident ‘real life’ application.

The literature review chapter section within this thesis titled ‘awaiting the Right to Food’ proffered a review of the current literatures which found that whilst appropriate and credible, this scholarship was however, simultaneously reliant upon the framing of UK individuals as needing to become active and politicised citizens. Moreover, it was particular grounded on a conception of exactly what this ‘right’ might entail (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012). This ‘right’ not only concerns the provisioning of the instrumental aspects of accessibility, affordability, availability and appropriateness of foodstuffs, it also relies on some kind of threshold of practical implementation which, once met, would evidence the claiming of this ‘right’. However morally apt this claim to rights is, much work would need to be undertaken to construct and conjoin the physical as well as the relational infrastructure necessary to implement any right, remedy or realisation of food security.

Even a formative manifestation of this right must contend with food surplus stewardship, consider the pragmatic draws of fast and ready meals, and ground the access, availability, affordability and appropriateness of foodstuffs with clear understandings of the effects of loneliness and social isolation on any rights-based service uptake. Moreover, any efforts must also be cognizant of the varying intersections of these multi-level and multi-scalar obstacles and commit any service to also repair the social fabric of the UK in order to counter the current milieu.

These complex factors, taken together, create a complex task which may fail in being realised if it relies on governmental and corporate policy shifts alone. A narrow focus on the claiming and granting of rights also obscures some of the ‘quiet’ (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013; Pottinger, 2017) ways in which social eating initiative commensality-as-resistance is manifesting in temporary, partial, shifting, messy, yet important ways. For example, The Nottingham Social Eating Network is actually creating alternative food security practices that might usefully come under the broader strategic purview of this called-for
‘right’. If scholars are not looking for these ‘quiet’ signs then not only is this an academic missed opportunity, but the potential for credibly platforming the activities of social eating initiatives may also go unrealised (Pottinger, 2017).

As Cloke, May and Williams also state ‘there is an overwhelming responsibility to draw attention to the narratives of users’ such as those that voice their experiences of ‘hospitality and generously being in-common with others’ and where ‘ethos talk promotes new forms of practice-based normativities’ (2017:721). This thesis charts how social eating initiatives are going ‘in search of different understandings of the role of social action in the austere conditions of the here and now’ (Cloke, May and Williams, 2020:7). As Marovelli also notes, it is ‘essential to attend to the cracks opening up within neoliberal governance and the innovations of grassroots action that emerges through them’ (2019:3).

The thesis has demonstrated how attention to ‘the local dimension offers research on low budget practices possibilities to chart moments of agency’ (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015:169). The practices of ‘doing something about something’ are therefore positioned in the thesis as vital forms of ‘plugging away’ at this knotty, complex and shifting milieu (Miles in Cloke, May and Williams, 2017:717).

Whilst ‘novel interventions in the foodscapes of one locale are easily dismissed as interesting but rather inconsequential niche experiments in the face of systems dominated by multinational neoliberal organisations, the work of this thesis has been to position incidences of commensality as expressions of micro-expressions of acts of resistance wherein people from diverse backgrounds are sharing resources, stories, responsibilities and burdens. These localised efforts to repurpose edible but unsold food nonetheless connect and reproduce the deeper mores of the social realm through commensal practices that remap social relations (Alexander, 2021).

The thesis has demonstrated how the lens of commensality frames social eating practices not just as a performance of necessary care amidst ‘mean times’, but as a powerful and overlooked engine of the social where new forms of agency, solidarity, abundance and purpose are being forged in unconventional ways (Yates, 2015a, 2015b; Alexander, 2021); and where strategies that counter food wastage and the problems associated with time poverty and unhealthy convenience foods, for example, are being manifested in unconventional, conjoined and situated ways. This is occurring in Nottingham not least through a city-wide, local meal offer which is regularised, affordable, accessible.
and appropriate, but also through a network of meal services that recognise and respond to the deeper need for social sustenance and convivial participation alongside physical nourishment. As stated in the previous chapter, The Nottingham Social Eating Network is one example of an array of organisations and networks which are dedicated to creating new, shared eating practices.

Fundamentally, the ‘more than food’ approach explores, recognises and appreciates the communitarian, relational and moral considerations as well as interpersonal connectedness and interdependencies that underpin commensal practices. The thesis has demonstrated how participants across The Nottingham Social Eating Network cultivate and sustain a diverse array of practices of care arising from a concern with the well-being of a range of human and non-human others, including families, local communities and neighbourhoods. The ‘more than food’ approach in emphasising the fundamental and structuring role of commensality in the contingent food goods and services market recognises that ‘mutuality, solidarity and affectivity are powerful drivers of action on a par with or even exceeding market-driven self-centredness’ (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021:135).

Prefiguring individuals as ‘more than’ consumers and especially as ‘more than’ passive recipients of food aid, relies upon a conception of the individual amidst the dynamic social realm wherein care for the other is continually performed in small, shifting, everyday and entangled practices. This figuration is always-already part of a constructive and alternative ‘hands-on empirical response’ to the tensions between individualization and precarity (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021:137). The ‘units’ of the social realm, then, within this thesis are revealed to be practices individuals are entangled within, which are mobilised by and oriented through care, affect and relation. By implication they are also positioned as being capable of resisting (to varying degrees) any singular labelling of them as being ‘left behind people’. Indeed, an implication of this thesis is that practical examples of how to resist, work between, hold together and enjoy (and not just endure) the current context can be well-revealed when the value of social eating initiatives to their participants is examined. Herein, participants are positioned as having much to teach not just scholars but local, regional and national organisations about non-economic exchange, group dynamics and the prioritising of pleasure, socialising and caring.

Therefore, when Cloke, May and Williams enquire, ‘where, for example, might the hundreds of thousands of people in the UK currently reliant on food aid turn for food in the meantime whilst longer-
term solutions to the problems of food poverty are sought?’ (2017: 707), a key implication of the thesis is that some of them have already turned or re-turned to one of the most potent, persistent and pervasive of human activities: that of commensality. For if a right to food can only be granted through upstream policy change, then another decade might yet pass whilst this demand, shouted upwards, goes unanswered. Another implication of this thesis, then, is that there is much already happening within these social mid-spaces where hybridised forms of eating-together practices are being established across networks of organisations whilst the necessary calls for welfare income reinstatement are being made. The commonality of commensality ‘brings people together’ without recourse to overt political proselytising, some threshold of temporal or material enactment, or even necessarily through any conscious activism. For as Yates describes: ‘the testing, expression and prefiguration of political meaning takes place in the course of everyday life, not just in periods of low movement activity or “abeyance”’ (2015b: 238).

The thesis argumentation has also developed beyond this concept of ‘awaiting’, and I have considered what other food-securing activities exist in the UK foodscape that might enable us to break the practical and conceptual impasse; the ‘theoretical cul-de-sacs’ which are ‘congested by negative critiques and adversarial evaluations’ (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021).

A key implication of the thesis is that commensality, however and wherever is it advanced, is practiced as a deep seated and socially significant expression of value beyond-economics; and its protection, scaling and foregrounding may be usefully encouraged as a means of grounding any attempts to address the challenges of the current UK milieu. Crucially the ‘more than food’ approaches centre the notion that ‘people derive a sense of well-being from diverse sources’ (Cattell et al., 2008:557) and that closer attention to these diverse commensal valuings may throw up useful footholds for individuals, communities, local authorities as well as governmental policymakers. If an incremental sea-change against the seemingly totalising manoeuvres of neoliberalism and austerity is to be found, it might now be looked for within social eating networks.

The thesis evidences the different ways that a more holistic form of food security is being partially, differentially, and temporarily achieved. It articulates the building up and building back of communities; of the repurposing and revaluing of edible materials discarded by the capitalist food system; the revivification of local social space; and the meeting of hearts and minds over shared
practices that is necessary if these temporary and partial accomplishments are to be mobilised in service of the bigger vision that many scholars call upon (yet fail to adequately identify or conceptualise, when it does show signs of emergence). The protection, facilitation and scaling of social eating initiatives might then, be a pragmatic and achievable strategic aim that can begin simultaneously and incrementally working towards addressing the serious challenges of current UK society identified within the thesis. Indeed, the ongoing significance of food and company, and the appropriateness and applicability of the ‘more than food’ approach, has been clearly illustrated in the regional response to the recent pandemic.

8.3 Shaping a regional food security agenda: One outcome of a ‘more than food’ approach

During the initial UK lockdown period, the numbers of people unable to access sufficient and suitable food increased dramatically. This was mirrored by an uptick in those reporting feeling lonely and socially isolated (Power et al., 2020). Throughout this period, alongside a host of other community food initiatives in the East Midlands, The Nottingham Social Eating Network mobilised to provide safe, effective, and personalised forms of ‘social’ eating support. Whilst face to face social eating mealtimes were evidently disrupted by the lockdowns, even as this period of crisis recedes, the social meal services of the network remain vital as significant numbers of people remain vulnerable and shielding or are suffering from continued food insecurity and social isolation. During the pandemic the network transformed their face-to-face services into social meal delivery services. In doing so, they not only demonstrated their capacity to support large numbers of people with safe, healthy and personalised food support, they also formed a ‘connective tissue’ (Marovelli, 2019) between broader issues around food security and people in communities who were in need of both food and social support.

Therefore, social eating initiatives are not just feeding people: they also form part of the ‘social infrastructure’ that made the work between local authorities, statutory bodies, charities and corporate stakeholders, possible (Klinenberg, 2018a). Social infrastructures are about more than material resources such as transportation or venues, they are also constructed through the interlinking of these assets with forms of social relating, caring and association (Smith, 2020; Luca, Smith and Hibbert, 2021; Ranta and Mulrooney, 2021). The advancing of a ‘more than food’ and commensal approach has implications then, in understanding not just the deployment of material resources held within discrete
organisations and via specific job roles, but how these interact, are shaped by, and rely upon forms of relating and shared values.

Adopting the lens of commensality through a practice theory-informed approach has extended our understandings of community food groups who utilise surplus and revealed a range of practices that creates a social eating mealtime. This elaborates not only this richer conception of these ‘more than food’ social infrastructures but also a range of entry points for developing policies on these challenges. The ‘more than food’ approach has emphasised the role of participants in bringing into focus otherwise hidden viewpoints and perspectives around social eating initiatives. This has implications for the designing of services which now might better be focused towards achieving outcomes and outputs which look beyond the current focus on instrumental feeding, budget-management and education, alone, to promote pleasure, participation, sharing and sociality.

Indeed, there is now regional strategic focus on food projects that engage in social connection-building and community cohesion. This means that funding and support is being made available in the East Midlands region to embed and expand social eating activities. For example, in the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Food Insecurity Network (FIN) plan, social eating groups are acknowledged in their capacity not only to support localised responses to food insecurity but also to facilitate the safe return of people into public spaces, post-pandemic. Moreover, meal services are now positioned in these strategies as a means of drawing in and engaging a range of diverse audiences. They are also positioned as supporting emergent and interlinked efforts around carbon reduction, sustainable consumption, mental wellbeing and social cohesion. The FIN agenda is being supported by £800k of ‘Contain’ Central Government funding via Nottinghamshire County Council. And whilst the Nottingham focus prompts questions about the broader applicability of the ‘more than food’ approach (and this funding is a relatively small amount) the promotion of social eating is now positioned as a key strategic aim of current and upcoming regional public health strategies.

This outcome was achieved initially by voluntary work undertaken wherein I linked The Nottingham Social Eating Network, FareShare Midlands, and Local Authority, charity and community contacts to a regional public health steering group. This led, eventually, to being asked to present my thesis findings
in service of shaping a regional post-pandemic public health strategy. This presentation pitched the idea that their intersecting behaviour-change plans might be better ‘joined up’ and realised if they considered how to increase opportunities to both eat, eat well and eat together through supporting the better distribution and usage of surplus foodstuffs; by facilitating alimentary contribution in various guises; and through acknowledging the draw of pleasure and socialising around food in engaging and sustaining links with various diverse eater-audiences across the County. This framing convinced local public health leaders to steer investment towards supporting both a material increase in the distribution and use of surplus foods, but also on adopting a ‘more than food’ shaped discursive approach. This funding aims to encompass the instrumental and immediate concerns of food insecurity alongside the more strategic work of re-branding community food services around the value propositions of eating together, pleasure, socialising, inclusion and participation.

Moreover, selected findings, presented in ways that are useful and appropriate, have been disseminated to The Nottingham Social Eating Network to be used as content for funding bids. Various members of the Nottingham network are now regularly invited to shape local food service funding agendas, and groups have also been featured in national reports such as the recent ‘From street feeding to social eating: Taking a ‘more than food’ approach’ (Smith, 2021).

This has resulted in an increased support for open-access services (rather than solely means-tested ones) that are ‘badged’ around participation, contribution and exchange and the funding of a suite of community-based services that attend to the differing stages and axis of food security, such as social eating projects and surplus food clubs. This agenda was underpinned by a view that social eating could be both the central aim of community projects as well as being a useful addition to a range of non-food-based services such as outreach, benefits advice and family holiday service provisioning.

This broadened and ‘more than food’ approach has shifted the regional public health narrative beyond the deficit-based interventions which seek, mainly, to educate individuals, and which therefore (adventently or inadvertently) responsibilize them (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Gray, 2009; Whiting, Kendall and Wills, 2012). Accordingly, local public health policy now directs workers to consider the social group as a unit of engagement to which services can be targeted. The building-up of social groups, often via established ‘anchor’ organisations is now favoured with time allocated towards
getting groups together alongside designing group-focused interventions. The adopting of a ‘more than food’ approach has also centred food and access and availability of food and meals as key drivers of public health that should be considered as happening not just within the home, but as also being enfolded more explicitly into community activities. Even where food is not the main focus, commensality is now being positioned as a means of drawing in and retaining participants, and as adding value these pre-existing services. The Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire Councils are both committed to becoming Sustainable Food Places (part of a national initiative\(^{10}\)) and have written commitments to extending and strengthening social eating in their regions into local food and public health policies.

A further implication of the ‘more than food’ approach is fundamentally, that commensality creates the conditions for and drive to, link multiple areas of social life together under a pragmatic activity. The use of surplus foods (sometimes augmented by locally grown foods), the shared use of venues, kitchens, energy and water resources is now seen regionally, to enable local authorities to meet multiple, intersecting policy remits as well as emphasise those which pertain to centring community voices and offering good value for public money. The clear articulation of the value of the social economy during the pandemic now finds its expression in policies that conjoin food security, carbon-neutrality, community cohesion, public health and place and space-based services, together.

This adoption of a ‘more than food’ approach acknowledges not only the complex interlinking of material and social infrastructures necessary for individuals and communities to be sustained and nourished, but it also contains the seeds of a crucial admission, that skills around household budgeting, dietary management, for example, can be held within and circulated through communities. There is also a fundamental implication here that wanting to be fed, cared for, welcomed and included is not an individual failing, but rather it sits within a complex array of practices which taken together are fabricating new types of convivial, connected and convenient surplus meal services, which in turn are responding to some of the most significant issues in contemporary UK society.

\(^{10}\) [https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org](https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org)
8.4 More than, but not enough: The limitations of these implications and directions for future research

Whilst these groups are now being acknowledged as a key component of regional food security and community cohesion, recent QR-funded CBiS research\(^ {11} \) has revealed the precarity of the regional social eating networks. Their reliance on key staff and volunteers, issues around accessing suitable venues and equipment, the demands of producing meals from supermarket surpluses, funding drop-offs, and the scale of work now needed to safely transition customers back into public spaces, were all emphasised. As Marovelli reflects, these initiatives all see ‘their local communities in flux, experiencing precariousness and uncertainties in their everyday urban lives’ (2019: 11). Indeed, whilst a number of new social eating initiatives have joined The Nottingham Social Eating Network, Growin’ Spaces and Carriages social eating events have now closed down due to various obstacles in funding, staffing and venue-use. Moreover, whilst the thesis has presented a stance that social eating initiative commensality holds potential to challenge, resist and rework social, environmental and economic relations, the particular power of small, ‘quiet’ and everyday acts of commensality ‘remain fragile, partial and ephemeral’ (Pottinger, 2017: 221).

These initiatives are located within the midst of competing regional and organisational funding and political and discursive assemblages that have their own momentum, timings, materialities and messaging that may not align with those of the network. There is then much potential for ‘disengagement and withdrawal from areas of debate where felt, empirical knowledge is lacking’ (Pottinger, 2017:221) and where attention to the complex ‘soft’ social values of the network may be overlooked in favour of more tangible and ‘objective’ metrics, such as the number of meals served. For example, whilst the ‘Contain’ funding lasts for 1 year, and social eating has been embedded into regional strategic public health plans over the mid-term, the longer-term outcomes and impacts of these strategies has not yet been realised or evidenced. There is a favouring within regional local government on quantitative metrics by the Contain funders which does not acknowledge the value of the these social benefits.

\(^ {11} \)‘Policy Measures Needed to Better Support Frontline Community-Based Organisations in the Fight Against Hunger in the West Midlands’, CBiS QR-Funded research, Coventry University.
Moreover, whilst each of the three practices of commensality described in this thesis draw attention to the prosocial benefits that accrue through this form of local network organisation, it must be acknowledged that The Nottingham Social Network and attendant and similar projects across the UK are currently reaching relatively small numbers of the public and therefore their current impact should not be overstated. Finally, the thesis has acknowledged the role and significant power of neoliberal ideology in shaping governmental agendas around food security, food wastage, social cohesion and community activism. This context undoubtedly hinders and blunts efforts towards systemic change in the UK. The work currently necessary to bring to national attention any regional benefits from adopting a ‘more than food’ approach will be both significant, likely significantly underfunded, and certainly undertaken by a voluntary and precarious community food sector. This context and admission necessarily proposes limits to any straightforward or ready adoption of the ‘more than food’ approach.

Therefore, much work could be undertaken to better understand the specificities of social eating initiative demographics, including the groups and organisations that set them up. Insights into the multiple and intersecting barriers to participation, and the role of proximity, gender, ethnicity, age or familial set-up, for example, in social eating initiative participation would form a useful elaboration to the ‘more than food’ approach. Moreover, applying the ‘more than food’ concept to more complex assemblages of organisations, food flows and the value propositions of the array of actors within this sector would be beneficial, as would knowledge about corporate responsibility and governmental agendas on surplus food consumption beyond the distribution to conventional food aid groups, for example. Future research in the area of social eating commensality and a ‘more than food’ approach must be multi-disciplinary, consider an array of diverse and contexts and scales, and fundamentally, they must involve and be shaped by invested communities and community groups, and any findings must be made accessible and available to these groups. Post-thesis, I will continue to be partly employed by FareShare Midlands and the Central England Coop via a research project which is seeking to understand the routes by which increasing volumes of surplus, and specifically ‘surplus-surpluses’, can be utilised, and how any diversification of surplus-services would align with the agenda's social eating initiatives, other surplus user-groups and an array of other stakeholders such as schools academies and public health bodies. The development of larger-scale multi-portion surplus ‘ready meal’ services, the partial processing of surplus prior to delivery and individually portioned surplus ‘ready meals’ are all currently being considered, as are new partnerships with corporates and food
producers. There is much empirical development within the regional surplus ‘scene’ that may be usefully understood through the lens of a ‘more than food’ approach.

With this already-underway project, one opportunity which may be usefully developed would be a ‘more than food’ symposium which would draw together practitioners and scholars from a number of disciplinary strands such as food activism, history, food and eating psychology, public architecture and design, food production and distribution, public health and social marketing in service of identifying the shared values and applications of a ‘more than food’ approach. The focus of the event would be the re-imagining of the feasibility of the revivification of surplus-serviced public canteens in the UK. It is envisaged that this process, which would take the ontological view of human sociality, sharing, mutuality and creativity as the basis for social action, could be delivered as a hybrid conference and visioning process where participants could share, imagine and plan for a practical manifestation of a ‘more than food’ future.

8.5 Conclusion

To conclude, I have been building a successive argumentation that suggests that social eating initiative commensality concerns the accomplishment and valuing of much ‘more than food’ and that this ‘more than’ concerns the role that commensality plays in the broader construction, reproduction and transformation of social life in the UK. As Abarca notes: ‘social transformation [is] born out of food practices, knowledge, and memories that while particular to […] specific individuals are not uncommon in the everyday culinary practice of many more’ (2021:667).

The thesis, in mapping the material, discursive and performative realms of The Nottingham Social Eating Network, has shifted the empirical and conceptual focus from deficit, passivity, waste and disempowerment to focus instead on the multidimensional ‘moments of commensality’ (Marovelli, 2019) which include these everyday culinary practices and their potentiality in shaping and transforming the social realm. The thesis has explored this potentiality to demonstrate how social eating mealtimes are to be understood as sites of agency, nuance, sociality, conviviality, pleasure, participation and productiveness at both an individual, local and social level (Marovelli, 2019; Luca et al., 2020; Smith and Harvey, 2021).
Moreover, what the thesis also accomplishes is a clear exposition of why the socio-economic surplus food-aid scholarship which insists that these types of practices ‘should NOT’ be happening, actually misses an opportunity to extend knowledge due to its own internal conceptual contradictions. Whilst it is necessary to pay attention to the context in which meal sharing takes place, the overarching reliance on socio-economic, structural critiques has produced an empirical and conceptual narrowing that is not nuanced enough to get into the ‘cracks opening within neoliberal governance’ (Marovelli, 2019:3). It has been identified within the thesis that the current scholarship on food insecurity and food wastage whilst demanding change, actually misses or avoids and cannot also conceptually account for, the transformations of social eating commensality as they are occurring at the level of community. These approaches discount these practices as pleasant but inconsequential and ineffective at best, and at worst as ameliorating and actually entrenching the conjoining of austerity measures and corporate food waste disposal (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Caplan, 2017, 2020; Caraher and Furey, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Riches and Gerlings, 2019).

Moreover, they are underpinned by a theorisation, whether explicitly stated or implied, which reproduces the hierarchies of socio-economic power whilst simultaneously criticising how these impinge upon individuals’ capacities to eat, to eat well, and to eat together. Fundamentally, these approaches are empirically underdeveloped and logically inconsistent when applied to understanding the value of social eating initiatives in the UK. Instead, this thesis (whilst situating the phenomenon of study within this empirical and conceptual setting and agreeing with some of the facets of these approaches) has nonetheless sought evidence about how The Nottingham Social Eating Network and its array of human and nonhuman participants can be understood through their voices, views and vistas. Herein, they are evidenced as vividly conveying how these mealtimes are valued beyond these socio-economic models, measures and metrics and the ‘cold and impersonal arrangements of markets’ (Warde et al., 2020:395).

In order to think beyond the current UK structural food aid critiques without sole recourse to either poverty consumer and responsibilization tropes, and beyond a demand for a State-sanctioned and citizenship-dependent Right to Food, the ‘more than food’ and commensal approach has been valorised. By starting from the premise that caring, pleasure and social relating are an ontological basis of life, and that extending these values to ‘the other’ forms the basis for social action, the ethics of the ‘more than food’ approach conceives of commensality as a dynamic and existential element of social
life which always-already escapes and resists both self-interested individuation and neoliberal marketisation. The thesis has taken social eating initiatives out of a socio-economic and structural critique and refracted them through the prism of commensality; plugging these practices back into the social realm and showing the linkages and relations by which participants attempts to stay connected, to society and each other, and where the group consumption of surplus-created meals ‘can be understood as a form of both subsistence and resistance’ (Alexander, 2021: 224).

The values of culinary contribution, alimentary participation and commensal caring that emerge through social eating initiative mealtime practices show how this form of commensality is ‘viewed through a lens of kindness rather than cynicism’ (Warde et al., 2020:395). Rather, participation in these practices does not depend solely on instrumental provisioning or eligibility criteria but rather more on mutuality and the sentiments of generosity and kindness which make for enduring social relationships. This appending of the value of social eating initiative commensality contributes a continued exploration of the ways in which food - in all its forms, including ‘waste’ - rather than being marginalised, can instead be seen as producing and collapsing the broader orders of the social realm.

For these valuing are not simply ‘a fulfilment of environmental obligations, an attempt to achieve “resilience”, or a response to limits, but the daily practice of a satisfying life’ (Smith and Jehlicka, 2013). In this way, social eating initiatives may be conceived as emerging not because of austerity, but in spite of the broader milieu; valued because they create opportunities to engage in the deep-set social need for commensal participation which is threatened by the neo-liberal tropes of individuation and marketisation, and particularly by the social restructurings of austerity.

This ‘more than food’ commensal lens has two critical benefits: firstly as a dialogical tool it better describes and engages with the array of literatures pertaining to eating together activities in its beyond-nutrition purview; and secondly, and more fundamentally, for the purposes of advancing commensal scholarship, it dialectically emphasises how and why commensality, as a structuring feature of the social realm, provides a logically consistent explanation accounting for both the problems of the current UK milieu, and the partial response to them, in the form of social eating practices. The thesis findings and analysis contribute to collapsing this duality in favour of revealing how alternative and additional conceptions of hierarchy, value, agency and resistance require additional and alternative conceptions of commensality.
Chapter 8. Thesis Conclusion

This thesis has therefore shifted the ontological focus from impassive socio-economic hierarchies towards the necessary encompassing and emphasising of noisy, messy and active networks of everyday commensal knowledge (Kuijer and Watson, 2017; Mallers and Strengers, 2018). This thesis articulates why merely identifying and conceptualising the harsh conditions that too many people in the UK suffer under is insufficient; practical suggestions for how to transform these conditions must also be elaborated that do not depend wholly upon socio-economic transformation, which is recognised as antithetical to commensality in deep and profound ways. In emphasising the fundamental and structuring role of commensality in the current socialscape, this thesis affirmatively articulates how and why convivial, commensal, daily living-with practices always-already shape, and from moment to moment also exceed, the fracturing and estranging tendencies of market-driven tropes.

For, if community food groups are perceived of having the power to downstep austerity, then they also have the capacity to refute, resist and subvert those policies, even if in localised, situated, temporary and partial ways. As Carolan reflects, practicing more hopeful, inclusive, pleasurable and participatory food futures requires ‘the sense of adding to the world rather than subtracting from it’ and the creation of conditions that ‘invite collaboration, co-experimentation and a coming-together’ which can alter, shift, and create the taste-testing of a social realm where much needed ‘critical optimism’ can be fed and nurtured (2015:150).

Therefore, whilst being threatened by neoliberal governance in the UK, attention to the value of the deep seated and socially structuring practice of commensality might actually be our more hopeful, ‘best bet’ of both resisting gastro-anomie and of contributing to a recentring of the value of a shared social life, over that of an individuated life of material consumption. Commensality is hugely potent, persistent and pervasive, and its value cannot be monetised; it is a currency beyond the reach of the market. Social eating initiative commensal practices can be viewed as existing ‘both inside and outside of capitalism’ (Tsing, 2015: 63), not as more palatably rebranded food aid, but as ‘palaces for the people’ (Klinenberg, 2018a) and as examples of the local nexuses necessary for both normative values to be reinforced, and for new and necessary forms of social infrastructure to be materialised. Across The Nottingham Social Eating Network, its participants are engaging in ‘adventurous food futures’
through the age-old practices of mealtime sharing. These mealtimes are ‘not about the making the world a better place as much as making a place for better worlds’ (Carolan, 2015: 150).
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Bibliography


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382–397.


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Young, I.M., (2014). ‘City Life and Difference’ in *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, Routledge:
London, 247-252.
## Appendix 2. Elaborated description table of The Nottingham Social Eating Network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Eating Initiative</th>
<th>Description from ethnographic field notes</th>
<th>Number of observational hours spent at venue</th>
<th>Photos taken during fieldwork by researcher</th>
<th>Meal-centred focus groups</th>
<th>Post-it notes</th>
<th>Go-along interview transcriptions</th>
<th>Photo voice photographs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Free Kitchens, Nottingham, secret kitchen (based in a newly conceived community kitchen)</td>
<td>A weekly social eating event and a monthly family meal. It offers table service and table setup is not larger, common-room arrangements. The group is also developing a community garden and is partnering with a local community kitchen to compost local food waste. Meals are produced in collaboration with local growers. The kitchen is located in a high-traffic area of the city, and is shaped within the city’s council’s vision for a service area of multiple developments. Meals are served on the side. The kitchen is designed to provide a warm, convivial atmosphere. It is a popular place to eat. The kitchen is clean and well-ventilated. It is a well-lit, spacious, and airy space. Customers are encouraged to help themselves to the table. Meals are served in bulk, and there is a large display case for the presentation of dishes.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Nook, Nottingham, community kitchen (based in a newly conceived community kitchen)</td>
<td>A weekly social eating event and a monthly family meal. It offers table service and table setup is not larger, common-room arrangements. The group is also developing a community garden and is partnering with a local community kitchen to compost local food waste. Meals are produced in collaboration with local growers. The kitchen is located in a high-traffic area of the city, and is shaped within the city’s council’s vision for a service area of multiple developments. Meals are served on the side. The kitchen is designed to provide a warm, convivial atmosphere. It is a popular place to eat. The kitchen is clean and well-ventilated. It is a well-lit, spacious, and airy space. Customers are encouraged to help themselves to the table. Meals are served in bulk, and there is a large display case for the presentation of dishes.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>51 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Based in a newly conceived community kitchen, Nottingham, community kitchen</td>
<td>A weekly social eating event and a monthly family meal. It offers table service and table setup is not larger, common-room arrangements. The group is also developing a community garden and is partnering with a local community kitchen to compost local food waste. Meals are produced in collaboration with local growers. The kitchen is located in a high-traffic area of the city, and is shaped within the city’s council’s vision for a service area of multiple developments. Meals are served on the side. The kitchen is designed to provide a warm, convivial atmosphere. It is a popular place to eat. The kitchen is clean and well-ventilated. It is a well-lit, spacious, and airy space. Customers are encouraged to help themselves to the table. Meals are served in bulk, and there is a large display case for the presentation of dishes.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>28 minutes</td>
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### Appendix

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>85 Coded-in-stu</td>
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9 Social eating groups engaged

| 60 hours of observation | 268 photos | 438 Post-it notes produced during 7 meal-centred focus groups, with 229 participants engaged | 1 hour 11 minutes transcribed, with 3 interviewees engaged | 7 groups engaged in photovoice with 116 photos submitted |

List of names and contacts of other community food stakeholder organisations and groups contacted during research period

Meeting with Dip in (a Nottingham allotment 'grow and eat' group)
A one-off visit to a social eating group called Snacks & Ladders who ran a monthly meal sharing dinner (which was not made from surpluses, currently defunct)
Meeting with a community development worker from FareShare East Midlands (now FareShare Midlands, a national surplus redistribution charity)
Meeting with a representative from Big lunch (a national organisation linked to the Eden Project who organise annual, national, community lunch events)
Meetings with neighbourhood development officers from Nottingham City Council who had been working with some of the groups to link up local community food provision
Visit and subsequent meetings Neighbourhood Kitchen (an Oxford-based contact who established a social eating café there (now defunct))
Phone call with Fad/Woore (a surplus-selling community pantry shop in Workop)
Various meetings with Nottingham Trent University architecture and the built environment staff who had engaged with The Nottingham Social Eating Network
Meetings with Nottingham Good Food Partnership (a local food and growing group representation organisation who are seeking to support the transition of Nottingham into a Sustainable Food City)
Appendix

Appendix 3. Sample of data held on NVivo

Samples of photographs from the data collection period, as indicative examples of fieldwork:
Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

Sample screenshots of NVivo data set, as indicative examples of ‘raw’ data, transcribed texts, codes and their structure:
Appendix

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Reference 1 - 0.62% Coverage
I encourage friends to attend, too.

Reference 2 - 1.24% Coverage
It's a good way to socialise with others as well as getting a good meal.

Reference 3 - 0.63% Coverage
Great opportunity to mix with others.

Reference 4 - 1.72% Coverage
I do this because I believe it gives the homeless an opportunity to mix with other home possessors.
Appendix 3. Sample screenshots of data, sorted by three, overall codes (stored as a Word document).
Appendix

Restructuring of Commensality data by code

Abundance
Pleasure, healthy meal.
abundance
enjoy, really good food. Sausages always do a fantastic spread.
abundance
The food is great quality and I get a feeling of abundance as its such good value.
new for a show/course meal? Occasionally I'm happy with that!

Create a listing service on Council website?
Is there anything specific about social eating in it that get people to come in?
Most of it is word of mouth, be visible in the street. We have put notices up on some social media.
Hand made campaign across City.

Regular and up to date information on places to eat. Both social media and leaflets.

I think what we need to get is a list of the best and bestest places and think what the menu is going to be then I come home and buy them up and put a description and then I subscribe the list in the meal.

We define social eating as a safe welcoming space and place with food at the heart, so the idea of being runny and simple is absolutely critical. It's a non-judgmental, accessible to everybody place to come. In the heart of the community.

I'm a user of this particular place and one day I was walking over and saw the table sizes and I was happy and thought oh it's perfect and that's how I heard about it and now I tell everyone about it sometimes to my sometimes it's a sign outside.

abundance
availability
And Ogilvies, depending on the funding, we have different people coming in. We have the elites; people who have allotments coming in, people coming from word of mouth, people coming with special needs; people with mental health issues community garden links up with them.

Food waste, allotments, access from cafes, etc.
Links into local growing networks.

MUSICAL MEAL
A brochure meal
affordable, back-to-the-roots meal
awareness of the meaning of eating delicious meals
Pose a meal and a safe place for communities to meet.
next event, friends take the weight off eating with kids (eat your veggies, etc.)

Appendix, Restructuring of Commensality data by code

to offer a home-cooked nutritious meal free of charge to people from all walks of life.

 sunday over food
A softly-well cooked meal or place with food at the heart.
street vendor over food
food is social glue (symbolic and functional)
food is the unifying factor.

N.O. part of it. That just brings people together.
It's a way to socialize with others as well as getting a good meal.

It's an opportunity to engage over food, because food brings people together, it's a familiar opportunity to engage over food and food brings people together.

Slightly more, we come to three meals a week and travel around to see all of them.
Mike, another user
We don't want to cost and eat on our own.

So, it's not just about maintaining or engaging community it's more about than that; breaking barriers over food.

The other reason is because it's a course to enable need made for me. I enjoy the food and the company.

We come to dinner because we enjoy the food and the company.

We encourage people to put something good but not more so we have to come in with some food and taking to each other amongst everybody. We have people that I have never met at the table, we have people they don't try vegetables, everybody has an off day, but it's about just trying new things, appears to something new.

Food out of site is the community. Food and eating together is the unifying, bonding glue. Food is the unifying bonding glue that keeps people together and how it encourages people to come back time and time again.

coffee
Food buffalo as a lot of choice out with coffee at the table makes people feel involved.

how to accommodate different food intolerances, dietary requirements etc., food for staff etc.

I'm trying to make as much as possible so they don't accommodate as many people, the hosting is on, it's warm and welcoming. You get approached by the table, it's a buffet place, everyone can help themselves.

Suitable for vegetarians.

food is good and you can get whatever you want.

we have sausages, jacket, childrens and adults and a chilli beef as well. We also have a choice of four meals. We have one meal, one cost. And then we also have a choice of four puddings: we offer chips, chocolate puddings to both children or adults, and we also have a few restaurant and toast and in case somebody doesn't like the main pudding.

Yes, I think to do that every week because in whatever they send us, we think to spread our love, we may have to do some meals if we don't have enough. It will try to do three options and that gives opportunities for umpteen if they don't like chocolate for example.

Appendix. Restructuring of Commensality data by code

Your get a main course for instance that's a good feeling of it, and then you go back for dessert and also a salad with some topup foods on it; actually like chocolate bars, for example, they can use to add or supplement your meal.

Plates
Affordable and very clean. Very clean.

Compliance
We waiting up
I don't exist a good way to get fed.

A lot of people can't be bothered cooking.

Cheap meal ready cooked for me.

or others to convenience factors - the convenience of not having to cook and eating with others, eating with others, eating together, I think that's the bonus, that's the added - not the missing thing.

My waiting room - removed the pressure of cooking but for others it's the convenience of not having to cook but still being able to talk and see others.

Saw that they cook last minute and make fresh food.

I have trouble eating due to illness and it makes easier to come here for a cheap meal and great company.

I really like coming here to get dinner and it's bring my daughter to play with kikis friends and we don't have to cook.

I'm always tried by Thursday at work full time, so having to eat dinner is brilliant.

It does, but again, we've discovered our content. It isn't the affordability. They can be bothered cooking, it's not the cost. They are the generation that gets pension credits, they are actually more efficient and like to social housing and they get that support and that finance.

He cooking
He cooking and me cleaning.

Proposal meal that you eat there.

Serve from cooking.

For Single, special meal.
We don't want to cool and eat on our own.

Total pre cooking quick job food.

The main reason is sometimes I take food back home and that helps my budget.

The other reason is because it's a bit of a course homework meal made for me.

To get away from cooking at home.

Try nice home-cooked food made by other people.

We don't want to cool and eat on our own!
Appendix

Appendix. Alimentary contribution data by code

Genevieve, Appendix. Alimentary contribution data by code

[...]

I've been using genevieve, Appendix. Alimentary contribution data by code

[...]

I've been using genevieve, Appendix. Alimentary contribution data by code

[...]

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[...]
Appendix

Appendix. Performance of Care data by code

Performance of Care

Access

How to accommodate different food intolerances, dietary requirements e.g. need for halal etc.

Improves access to fluid

In times of low

Access for all ages and size

All come together to support disabled neighbours

by making it cheap, affordable and accessible

All allow people to participate differently (performances)

Collecting food, cross, keep and - collecting from multiple sites

Such as to park, access, sharing, time consuming

disabled access

disabled friendly access and needy

All come together to support disabled neighbours

Even access for disabled

Fed with support groups

It is only down the road

It’s usually a venue and get big is easy for a venues or restaurants. My friends come from Uncunan, Babahille and Nottingham so it’s a midway meeting point as well.

Let the kids play in larger, indoor spaces.

Open and inclusive

No. They have a table inside the kitchen because the kitchen is hidden away in the back and it’s not really accessible so, they have several tables laid out and the doors laid up on them and you can walk along the front of these tables and be served.

People come here because they feel welcome. A non-judgemental place. Home from home.

Plants accessible, acceptable to doing it at the same time every week. Open to everyone regardless of circumstances or situation.

The place it’s got to be an accessible building, open at the same time every week.

To provide a safe environment for people to make new friends

Very valuable in local communities when, especially when, it is open to non-members like staff.

we used to serve from here because it’s too difficult because we have to walk through the corridor into the rest of the customer part of the café, so now we get them to serve behind the counter.

Atmosphere

Sitting together at large tables at the same time.

It’s all I agree. I find the thing about socially through, is the fact that we have set at a table together and we are talking. We encourage people to put their phones down and actually engage with each other. That is a social eating intake because
Appendix

Appendix. Performances of Care data by code

everybody could sit with the TV dinner but the importance of the tucking and sitting at a table is a social eating collective, for me.
A safe and welcoming space is physically or where food at the heart.
Big tables, decorations, setting the space to facilitate conversation.
Breaking barriers was food. It’s a barrier. It brings together groups of people together - class, religion or age, to discuss food and it’s a way that’s not confrontational. It’s a safe atmosphere where we can discuss food matters.

Customer can participate in serving place, or for example, washing up, cleaning up, etc.

different environment
friendly atmosphere
friendly greeting, warm atmosphere, friendly place
good coffee and tea will create good language

great world music
I put the classical music on and was just flow with it. But it’s not actually the type of music the people want, people just want some that music because it’s a fake. It’s a social manner. Some social eating space play music. It’s about creating an atmosphere for people to eat the food together.

It’s a very nice place to come to and everyone makes you feel welcome.

It’s an opportunity to engage over food, because food brings people together. It’s a family.

Love the atmosphere that staff and volunteers create
Nice food, nice environment
People come because they feel welcome. A non-judgemental place, home from home.

People not PCC’s social interaction not phones or IT social spaces

places/space
Social time, I’m one my own.

Gives me out of the house
The atmosphere, human, meeting up with friends, informal space, all ages is fantastic and I value it greatly.

To be social
Friendly atmosphere
To support the local community, who couldn’t afford extra eat in these environments by paying meals forward.

We come to dinner because we enjoy the food and the company
We define social eating as a safe welcoming place and place with food at the heart, so the idea of being welcoming and food is absolutely critical. It’s a non-judgemental, accessible to everybody place to come, in the heart of the community.

Welcoming atmosphere
Yeah, absolutely agree with you and I’m talking from experience of my own Initiation, the people should be talking to each other and eating at the table, but some people like music.

Appendix. Performances of Care data by code

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Appendix. Performances of Care data by code

and we know this is important because people come so hour and four five minutes before food is served, so that’s how we know.
I don’t get out much - good to get out.
It’s a lovely experience. Commonwealth eating is a nice way to spend your time.
It part of my weekly rations, I’m really disappointed when it’s out as it’s the only time we get to see most of them.
or just to spend time together and enjoy time together, without any judgement.

Our concern is clear; the people are socially isolated and we know this because people arrive early. An hour or 20 earlier than the lunch time. They turn up 30 to 40 minutes before service.

Our structure was a stable. We ran it the first week as we had to serve people at the table. That was a mistake, but it worked.

Regular provision not a case-off.

Negativity of it certain, certain time - comforting and reassuring, giving people something to look forward to.

Single men - we come to three meals per week and town enough to eat at these!

Putting together at large table at the same time.

Something to look forward to every week isn’t breaks the week up

There should be more of these get togethers.

To try new experience

volunteering at the end of the meal time
We work with different local groups for adults combating isolation and encouraging socialising which runs alongside the Frogmore Community Kitchen every Friday in the smaller hall.

Where food at the is the community, read and eating together is the serving, bonding. Much is the serving bonding glue that helps people together and how it encourages people to come back time and time again.

serving

Well, agree.

I find the thing about socially through is the fact that we are sat at a table together and we are talking. We encourage people to put the phone down and actually engage with each other. That is a social eating initiative. Because socially could eat with the TV dinner but the importance of the eating to come together and sitting at a table is a social eating initiative, for me.

A place for community to come together and now.

As we are where bodies gather at the current time (transition) at the end of the day, this is a creating a space where people can interact, make friends, have company and create community.

Breaking barriers ever had? It’s a table. It brings together all types of people together - class, religion or age, to discuss as we find it a way that’s not confrontational. It’s a safe atmosphere where we can discuss things outside food.

Bringing different people together - so important to this political moment.

Bringing people who may be isolated together and giving them a sense of belonging.

Community bonding