

The Role of Food in Building Connections and Relationships

Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

This learning paper focuses on the role food plays in building connections and relationships. It starts by setting out the learning about when using food works best to build connections and relationships and the mechanisms by which it does this. It then goes on to consider the problems and pitfalls of using food, with some key messages to consider. It finishes by showcasing some examples of the different ways in which food is used to build relationships.

How food works in building connections and relationships

We found food acted as hook to help people engage. It also creates a more informal environment and helps create connections by providing a topic for conversation. We also found it can be used as practical tool to address isolation.

Food as a hook and a welcome

Food was identified as a hook to engage people - providing food helped to indicate that people would receive a warm welcome. It also helped draw people into the programmes. Instead of attending a class or session they could start with a piece of cake and a chat which is often less intimidating for someone emerging from social isolation. We also found people valued others having gone to the trouble of providing or making food for them and the “investment” that meant they had made in them.

‘Food is a hook in the sense that most people will be more likely to come along to something if they know they will receive a warm welcome and food can really help to create that kind of environment for people.’

‘It has been noted that some people may be nervous or reluctant to engage for a number of reasons, food can provide an effective incentive to encourage them to attend the event/session. When members do attend, they have the opportunity to meet new people, have fun and hopefully make new friends. Everyone loves lunch provided or a cup of tea and a slice of cake. There is strong evidence from feedback

collated from members that they feel strongly regarding the provision of food and refreshments as part of activities and events. They feel this is very important and a factor in their decision to attend. It is felt that sharing food breaks down barriers and helps people connect and feel included and welcome, it also provides a means of generating conversation.'

'Eating together is a welcoming social activity; it shows more 'effort' has been put into the event than simply meeting up - it gives the message 'all are welcome.'

'We believe it is most definitely a hook to attract people, particularly for men. It is also the only time our members may sit down and eat with somebody else, enjoy a nutritious home cooked meal, or actually be served a meal and enjoy it, which can be a rare occasion if you are for example a full time carer. Food is at the core of a lot of our groups and most definitely a significant factor in their success.'

'inviting people into the café for a Cuppa & a piece of cake was an easy way to start to engage with locals. We had struggled when just offering classes.'

Using food to create an informal atmosphere

Ageing Better programmes also identified how providing and eating food helped create a less formal atmosphere which then created an opportunity for people to connect with each other. Programmes also identified how people associated food with an informal event which in turn helped create that more informal environment at their sessions. A number of organised activities have also developed a slot afterwards where people can stay on for a drink or snack and a chat to help further develop connections.

'Food is always a great connector and we use it in meetings to make people feel valued, at ease and less formal which helps in building relationships.'

'People also associate food with informal events. We all need to eat and we all enjoy eating. A way to share things about ourselves in an informal way - a conversation starter.'

'Food generates discussion, helps people to feel more relaxed and provides an opportunity to develop lasting friendships. In addition, including food helps to create a supportive, inclusive and welcoming environment.'

Food as an "ice breaker" and as a way to connect

One of the key pieces of insight from Ageing Better is the role food plays as an ice breaker in social situations. Food gives people something to talk about that is both neutral and about which everyone can say something, whether it is good or bad. It allows people to focus on something that isn't about them and it can act as a buffer during the silences that naturally happen during conversations. People use food to create a safe and informal way to connect. 'Do you prefer cake or pie' questions can enable a safe discussion and to express difference without fear of offending others. Many of the participants of Ageing Better programmes may have low confidence and be nervous about being in a social situation and so the role food plays here can be important.

'It is a common ground so people who don't know each other very well can discuss the food as an opening talking point'

'it's a talking point about food likes and dislikes and what their favourite food is'

'very easy conversations can be had around the subject of food: food memories, different ingredients, recipe methods, food for celebrations'

'It acts as a buffer to help with silences between conversations, if people are

eating. So it takes the pressure off'

'Food is something we all have in common, we might differ in our likes and dislikes, portion sizes, allergies etc. but it is something that brings people together'

'it gives people something to talk about (even if, as the project leads have reported, they enjoy complaining about the food)'

Programmes also identified how talking about food was a way of connecting to people's memories and how again this can help as a starting point for conversations.

'food provides a connection and a starting point for conversation. Food is a subject that's relevant to everyone but can also be very personal through preferences and memories'

We also found food could help people connect to each other particularly in new places. The conversation allows people to find what they have in common and to have those informal conversations.

'A characteristic of our schemes where we know food was a critical factor..is where food has enabled informal conversation. Especially where people may naturally attend a place (e.g. a pub) but not feel confident to start a conversation or react positively to someone else starting a conversation. A pub lunch allows connection and conversation to be a secondary outcome of attendance at a pub'

'It creates a welcoming atmosphere which can put people at their ease and is a social 'leveller'. This enables people to open up to conversations - especially important when their isolation has damaged their confidence in social situations. It can become a topic of conversation - what people like and don't like and why - and when people find they have something in common, they are more likely to feel at ease and it increases the chances of their returning'

'There is some evidence that friendships can develop after multiple informal connections. If you become familiar with someone and you share some interests then after a number of interactions a threshold can be crossed and contact is maintained outside these settings. For this to occur it's not about creating a 'point' but a repeated exercise that allows people to suss each other out. The key to food being useful in connection is its ability to make a setting informal and comfortable. This makes conversation more natural and less intrusive'

Food activities can help projects engage with men, a traditionally hard to reach group in social isolation projects and in the 50+ age group.

'We have a higher proportion of men to women in this project, maybe this is because we offer a 'doing' activity where everyone has a role'

'It works best for men. It gives them something to focus on more than just pure interaction and possibly a subject to start a conversation with'

Food also acts as a foundation to start other conversations and to connect and open up to each other, as well as to workers or support staff.

'it can help people to open up as it takes the focus away from them and puts everyone on the same level'

'everyone has their own opinion about food, not everyone has their ideas of politics or mental health. So food provides a good foundation for people to start a conversation'

Using food as a practical tool for isolated people

Within Ageing Better the use of food has also provided practical tools to help people.

Offering opportunities to eat together can provide a focal point to help people connect.

'For those most at risk of isolation and loneliness, who often live alone, lunch or supper clubs can provide a warm, balanced meal of the type people are less likely to prepare just for themselves'

'Sharing a meal together helps to create a sense of shared activity, and stimulates feelings of friendship and togetherness'

'I think people want to connect with their neighbours but lack a reason, a comfortable environment or the confidence to do that. The food provided a focal point for people to meet'

The problems and pitfalls of using food to build connections and relationships

Through Ageing Better we found many positives of using food. But there are also pitfalls and challenges associated with using food.

The first of these relates to the practical challenges of working with socially isolated people who are over 50. Social anxiety linked to food is a real and tangible barrier that can reduce people's engagement.

'It is important to understand that loneliness has links with depression and anxiety. Food anxiety is not uncommon and some people just won't be comfortable eating in front of others. They also won't be comfortable in expressing this and it might take a significant level of trust to develop before someone can be open as to why food is a barrier to them'

Food is often wrapped up in identity. This means the choices of food on offer can be critical to helping people engage. Making the wrong choices can mean disengagement.

'food is an equaliser but also wrapped up in identity. We all feel hunger every day. But the access, choices and how we eat is often unexamined but is crucial to understanding how it can support connections with others'

'Food identity was a sticking point in the Me'n'u project (Age Better in Sheffield). Older people had a strong sense of identity with the food they ate. They wanted what we might think of as traditional food; fish and chips, meat and two veg and pie. Therefore we tried to accommodate peoples taste where possible. The older people who were more willing to try new foods or did not place their identity in traditional food seemed more resilient and less lonely'

'it oils the wheels but too much or 'wrong' food is not good. It needs thought'

'Apparently people from all backgrounds like a baked potato - it seems trivial but it's important to choose food that people are less likely to reject and hot food always seems better than a sandwich'

We also found that the setting is critical. For some people a meal in a pub may be more attractive but for other groups it may be equally disengaging. People need to be able to relate and engage with the setting where food is on offer. It is also important to be mindful that culturally inappropriate food or food that polarises may make people feel uncomfortable

'If the audience don't believe the setting is 'for people like me' then the food won't attract them'

It is important when considering the food on offer to think about the type of food

people want and are willing to engage with. This also means being sensitive to some of the less obvious reasons why people will not engage.

'be sensitive to but not a slave to culture and habits'

'Start where the participant is at - i.e. some people want simple and others want to be stretched'

'Keep the food fairly simple so you do not divide people over preferences'

'Be aware of obvious and non-obvious cultural factors (obvious - halal, kosher, veggie, Ramadan, not being able to stand whilst eating buffet food etc.) and non-obvious - some South Asian cultures interpret receiving food from others as a sign of charity and don't want friends or family to be aware of this charity as they may worry the person can't afford their own food'

There are also challenges associated with offering free or paid for meals. Paid for meals can act as a barrier but so too can offering free food. Please see the Greater Manchester Wetherspoons case study later where coffee was provided but people could then purchase their own choice of breakfast. There are also practical considerations when running group meals about how bills will be split and how that process will be managed.

'if eating somewhere that requires people to pay for their own meal, don't underestimate the amount of stress and worry people can feel about working out the bill and how much to pay or how to split the bill so think about this in advance'

Key messages about using food to build connections and relationships

It is clear that food can be one of the tools that can be used to help build connections and relationships but it will not suit or engage everyone. Using food, as with any tool needs some thought and consideration. Our key learning is:

1. Food gives people something to talk about. This can be likes, dislikes and memories. For socially isolated people who are 50+ this can be an easy topic to begin connecting over.
2. Eating food can help create an informal environment. This can help relax people and help them interact - having a meal together gives people something to talk about.
3. Food can be a particularly useful tool to engage men. It can be used in a variety of different ways e.g. as a hook to attend and also as an activity, such as learning to cook. The key appears to be providing an activity for them to engage with so creating an environment where they are more likely to engage further.
4. Food can be closely connected to people's identity. This can be a positive but it can also exclude people if they feel something is not for them.
5. Including food in your programme can also be expensive and careful consideration should be made to the budget to ensure a good quality of food can be provided.

How food is used in Ageing Better to build connections and relationships

Food has played a role at every stage of Ageing Better. Across many programmes and projects food was built into their delivery from day one. In some cases this meant ensuring the tender process built refreshments into all budgets. Others identified the

potential of food during their coproduction work. Ageing Better projects also found their use of food and the value they placed on it grew as they saw the potential for using food 'to transform relationships'.

During Co-Production

During co-production work food was used to reach out to older people and their families to help understand what they wanted from the programme. The food provided a way of generating a buzz and the environment which allowed them to ask questions that unpicked some of the local issues.

Age Better in Sheffield ran a coproduction event where they hired a stall in The Moor Market. Over a busy lunch time they cooked food in front of people. This was a display to engage those passing the stall. It created a buzz and an energy. People came to eat the food and then engaged with members of the team about the project. They also used food to start conversations with people. They used cakes to pose questions to people, for example, they would stick a flag in a cake which asked 'if you were king or queen for the day, what would you do to support people to feel more connected in their community'. This acted as a great discussion point and helped conversation to flow.

To reach out and connect to people

Food is also used in Ageing Better as a way of helping people make the first step in connecting with a project or programme. The offer of food and refreshments helps connect to groups and people they might otherwise struggle to engage.

Ageing Better Camden held Fish and Chip suppers. They found these were an effective way of attracting the older white working class residents into the programme as the food was a culturally appropriate treat.

Leicester Ageing Together ran a Pop Up Café at Thurncourt. They used the offer of refreshments to attract people to a Community Centre in a 'rather forgotten' part of the city. Many then went on to attend regularly, get involved with a variety of activities, bring in their own food and started to volunteer with running the café. As part of this they held a Pakistani Street Food session. Many people at the café had never eaten Indian/Pakistani food (although they lived in Leicester). They were wary of the dishes but willing to give them a try because they were well labelled, didn't contain too much chilli and were being freshly made in front of them. 'The conversations that took place were the most uplifting, they were breaking down barriers and the result was the café members wanted to make a reciprocal visit to PYCA (Pakistan Youth and Community Association) to showcase an afternoon tea'.

At Brightlife (Cheshire), they used food to reach out and connect to communities they were struggling to engage with. 'When going into a new community we were finding it quite difficult to encourage people to engage. Rather than just put flyers through doors we included a homemade biscuit with a personal message asking people to contact us. This proved really successful as people were keen to find out more.'

To reduce social isolation

Food is also used in Ageing Better as a tool to help reduce social isolation. There are several projects that use the opportunity to meet and eat as a way of encouraging social interaction and helping to reduce social isolation.

At Time to Shine (Leeds) they operate Shared Tables. This provides the opportunity for a group of single people to share a meal together in a local pub or restaurant

with a range of different times, cuisines and prices for people to choose from. Each table is facilitated by an older 'volunteer table host' who takes responsibility for welcoming people, ordering, ensuring everyone is involved and sorting the bill out at the end. These volunteers are often participants who have been encouraged to 'step up' as they have been involved in lots of meals. The project attracts a high proportion of people who have been bereaved and they find benefit from the informal peer support as 6 people sit and chat around a table. It attracts people who used to go out for meals but who have lost the person or people they used to go with. There is no pressure on a participant, they can just sign up. It also reduces the chance of rejection when asking an acquaintance out for a meal as well as the concerns about how much it will cost and who will pay.

Bristol Ageing Better run Bristol Meets the World. This is a programme of activities that allows for cultural exchange through food, shared meals and food related workshops and talks. 'The Bristol Meets the World Project has been amazed to see how the sessions have brought people out of their shells' being able to talk to one another and engaging with the volunteer tutors. They have been able to share their own stories and learn about the cultures of other countries using food as a bridge for that engagement. Through the project they have encouraged some people who are 50 + to attend food hygiene courses so they were able to lead their own sessions at different locations. To build up their confidence an example session plan was provided to demonstrate how to organise their class and manage their time. They took away personal benefits from teaching the classes as well as contributing to the community.

At Brightlife (Cheshire) they run Share Club Days. The days run from 10am to 3pm and provide a two course roast dinner. This was decided following feedback from potential members who said that they would either not bother making themselves a home cooked roast lunch or that they couldn't afford to buy a joint. They always cook a roast joint, fresh roast potatoes, mashed potatoes, four fresh veg, gravy and sauces. The meal is cooked by Community Compass staff and allows plenty of time for interaction. If there are any leftovers these are portioned up for people to take home. Dessert is chosen by the members the session before and there is usually a choice on the day. This again all encourages chat. The Share Club also includes an element in the community where volunteers when cooking for their families take a portion to their neighbour (all volunteers receive food hygiene training and are DBS checked). They have also teamed up with Fairshare so they receive end of shelf life products (but still consumable) from Tesco, Asda and Waitrose. The goods are either used in the sessions or are delivered to members who are unable to get out. This has been really helpful in encouraging people to engage. Their aim is that trust will gradually build and the person may start having a volunteer visit or attend one of the Clubs. It is a helpful tool and provides an 'excuse' to knock on someone's door.

To reach and engage specific groups

Ageing Better projects are also using food as a way of reaching specific groups including people from a shared ethnic background. Food is also a way they can reach out to men. This includes offering opportunities to learn to cook, as well as opportunities to eat with others.

North London Cares (Ageing Better Camden) ran a weekly men's cooking club at a community centre. Due to the size of the kitchen this is a small group and attendees have built up a strong bond with some older men who attend weekly. The preparation and cooking element allows more socially isolated attendees to join as they have a practical task which means they don't have to make conversation but

can work alongside each other. But the shared eating creates a social aspect also. This group is always full and provides an excellent ongoing opportunity for men to build relationships and learn a new skill.

Ambition for Ageing (Greater Manchester) run projects that reach out to men. This includes:

- Breakfast for Blokes is set in a Wetherspoons pub. The organisation pays for the coffee (unlimited refills), whilst men attending can purchase the breakfast they want. The key to the activity is it creates an informal setting for conversation and they bring in other organisations to make short presentations to market local activities.*
- Men's cooking classes for men with poor mental health. Circle brought together a group of men with poor mental health living alone in tower blocks from a diverse range of ethnicities. Classes went well when they were looking at basic skills but a key piece of learning was that attendees did not appreciate attempts to share diverse food from each other's communities. Simple dishes like beans on toast or baked potatoes were incredibly popular.*
- Monthly lunch club at The Blue Bell Pub. They found they were struggling to engage men within their project, they asked around and found a number of men would go to the Bluebell pub but then just drink alone. Working with the landlord they set up an affordable lunch club that gave people an excuse to talk to each other. The brewery is now looking to roll out the concept to other clubs.*

Men in Sheds (Age Friendly Island, Isle of Wight) used Blokes, Biscuit and Banter groups to recruit people to the sheds. They also run a monthly "bacon butties" to help recruit more members. These are free for any man to access and they don't need to be a shed member to participate. They also run a summer BBQ, which began as a social activity. Different men had different roles within the preparation and serving - some cooked, some made up salads, some washed up or were the drink sorters. Whatever they did, they were engaged and had a role in addition to enjoying the food and the company. It also gives a sense of normal. 'When I put on a 'come along and find out about the sheds' event for a new area, I always provide a hot drink, biscuits and cake, because it provides the men with an excuse to come along 'just to have a cuppa' when in fact they are interested in the sheds. Men find it hard to admit they are lonely, it is easier to admit they need a cuppa.'