



Food for thought: community connections through shared meals

**Time to Shine report
January 2020**



About Time to Shine

Run by Leeds Older People's Forum, Time to Shine aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness of the older population in Leeds.

Our vision is that older people need not experience loneliness and social isolation as an inevitable consequence of ageing but that our programme will offer opportunities for fulfilment by breaking down barriers and building strong communities.

Time to Shine is one of fourteen areas which form Ageing Better; an ambitious, large scale programme funded and developed by the National Lottery Community Fund. Ageing Better aims to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over by reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Introduction

Languages teach us that food is inextricably linked to friendships and relationships. English, Spanish, French and Italian words for "companion" all come from Latin words meaning "with whom one eats bread".

Sharing food is an important part of the Time to Shine programme as it's an everyday activity and a recognised way to bring people together. In 2015 delivery partners were invited to apply for funding with the theme of Dinner Dates for projects that could engage lonely or socially isolated older people in social activities which had a focus on food.

This theme was identified through consultation and also from evidence in the "Older People Eat Well" literature review (2014) ¹ which found that:

- Food and eating with others has wider social and cultural significance.
- Some of the main barriers to eating well are: the affordability and accessibility of food, limited food services, decreasing mobility, and lack of cooking skills.
- Malnutrition and under-nutrition are important risk factors for older people becoming vulnerable and their independence becoming compromised.

Most projects within the Dinner Dates theme lasted two years, but one was extended for a further two years to test whether the model could be replicated in other geographical locations in Leeds. In 2017 delivery partners were invited to apply for funding under different themes and many projects incorporated food-based activities into their overall project plan. Some short-term Time to Shine Small Funds projects also focused on food.

1 www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Older-people-eat-well.pdf



Evidence

Time to Shine has funded 100 projects (2015-2019). Delivery partners collect case studies, quotes, insight and learning from participants, volunteers and staff. Care Connect, the local evaluation team, conducted interviews and focus groups in food-based projects. All this evidence has informed this report.

All fourteen of the areas which form Ageing Better have a focus on research and learning. As a result, similar programmes around England have also gathered evidence from their projects on the ways in which food brings people together. Leeds, along with other Ageing Better areas, has shared insight with the National Lottery Community Fund to help create a report based on evidence from national findings: *The Role of Food in Building Connections and Relationships*.

Insight from a Time to Shine delivery partner

Many customers who come in to the cafe often start off sitting alone, but quickly respond to conversations and introductions where we sense this may be needed and appreciated. Staff and volunteers measure the success of this by the fact that customers regularly return or directly tell us.

One person who comes in several times a week to borrow our iPads and eat a meal said:

“I get very lonely at home and I just don’t want to cook for myself any more. My self-care is low. I don’t like going to the library because it’s not friendly like here. Here I can use your iPads and be in a place where I can chat and eat a proper meal at the same time. I won’t eat proper food again today. I’m not confident about going online and you help me”



A diverse range of Time to Shine interventions around food

Here are some of the ways that delivery partners used food to help older people to connect with others:

- **Choices (Feel Good Factor)** ran 'cook and eat' sessions in the communal areas of a sheltered housing scheme.
- **Shared Tables (Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours Scheme)** enabled older people who could travel independently to eat meals together in local restaurants at weekends.
- **Cook and Eat (Zest Health for Life)** ran 6-week cookery courses in a state-of-the-art teaching kitchen.
- **Raat di Roti (Touchstone Sikh Elders Service)** created opportunities for Punjabi-speaking older people and volunteers to share an evening meal at home.
- **Lychee Red Chinese Seniors (Health for All Leeds)** welcomed members of the Chinese community from across Leeds to share traditional meals and cultural activities.
- **Young at Arts (Yorkshire Dance)** worked with older people, a food-share project and a professional poet to create a 'Food for Thought' arts event.
- **Supper Club (New Wortley Community Centre)** provided a home-cooked two course evening meal and access to a range of facilities, activities and information.
- **Don't Call Me Old (Armley Helping Hands)** identified volunteers aged 50+ who were keen to set up and run a local foodbank.

Key Messages from Ageing Better programmes across England

It is clear that food is 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 thought and consideration.

Nationally, 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 together can help create an informal environment. This can help relax people and help them interact.
3. Food can be a particularly useful tool to engage men. It can be used in a variety of different ways, for example 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.

Key Messages from the Time to Shine programme in Leeds

Our overall findings in Leeds broadly match the national learning outlined overleaf. Here are some specific key messages from Time to Shine delivery partners:

- Keep food-related activities **simple, low-key and stress-free**.
- Share **light refreshments** during an activity so that people can take a break to chat in an informal setting.
- Be sensitive to **issues around food** as people could be experiencing food poverty or have an eating disorder.
- Single people or bereaved people in particular may benefit from **gentle encouragement or support** to help them reconnect socially with others over food.
- People may prefer to **meet locally in smaller groups** rather than meet centrally in larger groups.
- Consider **accessibility and physical requirements**: people may need to sit whilst eating buffet-style food or need step-free access to the venue.
- **Sharing traditional meals** between people of different cultures is a good way to bring communities together.
- Consider **cultural and religious factors** including provision of halal, kosher or vegetarian food as appropriate. Some factors are less obvious, for example a person perceiving that accepting food at home is shameful because it is similar to accepting charity.
- Allow enough time for people to get comfortable, **talk, laugh and reminisce** whilst enjoying a meal or light refreshments so that connecting over food helps to build relationships and create friendships.
- Look for **innovative and creative** ways to bring food into a wider range of activities.



Outcomes

Food is a shared interest and a common topic of conversation which can help to break the ice for people who are newly acquainted.

Time to Shine programme activities relating to food generally fall into one of the following strands:

- eating together socially
- an incentive to get involved in a different activity
- a practical, hands-on activity involving food

Outcomes under all strands are generally positive. Sharing a meal with others may have particular importance for older people who live alone or who are single or bereaved. The Life, Loss, Learning and Legacy project at Lippy People brings older bereaved men together to share their stories. The worker notes that *“regardless of the meals they choose, enjoying a free, nourishing lunch with a group is incredibly important to the participants... [it] creates space for conversation and friendships between older men and provides a break from difficult conversations”*.

Feedback from the Late Breakfast Club project at Zest Health for Life is that *“Our combination of providing hot and cold snacks, refreshments and fruit being available while having an engaging staff and volunteer team has meant that attendees are happy to participate in activities with each other in a safe fun space and talk freely on a range of topics, sometimes of difficult subject matter, during sessions.”*

In terms of outcomes for individuals, a participant in Raat di Roti *“has expressed that she has become a happier person because she feels she has a good connection with the Raat di Roti volunteer. She expressed joyful emotions [and] said “[the volunteer] is a good cook, provides lovely food and I enjoy eating with her. I always look forward to her visits because the volunteer has a wonderful personality and makes me happy. After dinner she stays and we play games”*

Further evidence of the outcomes is that the Shared Tables model has been successfully replicated in three localities in Leeds. Shared Tables in Cross Gates and District continues to flourish after Time to Shine funding ended. Likewise, Lychee Red Chinese Seniors continue to meet regularly without funding from Time to Shine.



Case study: Cook and Eat classes (Zest Health for Life)

As a worker I learnt that it is harder to engage isolated older people than I thought it would be. I now know that people need a first point of contact with me before they attend to make them less nervous. When participants did attend they quickly relaxed and most of them attended all weeks. I learnt that this project is really important in our community for people to feel less isolated and make friends. Every person who attended said they thoroughly enjoyed it. I found that a lot of people who did attend were then confident enough to try other things on offer at the Old Fire Station.

I asked participants what they thought about the cooking classes. The comments state that most of the participants have made new friends. They also say they have learnt new skills and wish that the course was more than 6 weeks long. They all enjoyed sitting and eating together and some of them said it was the only time they ate with anyone else.

As a result of meeting on the cookery course, some participants have:

- arranged to go to church together
- become friends during the course, swapped telephone numbers and said they were going to arrange to attend the Ministry of Food cooking course together
- started volunteering at the Old Fire Station
- attended a sewing group together
- joined a gardening group
- asked if they could volunteer at the sessions if we get funding for it to continue

“I’ve learned new skills and I’m eating much more healthily than I was before. I feel much better about myself and I’m much more sociable than I used to be. The group I was in was fantastic. It was a good mix and all very sociable. I’d love to do more courses with this group if any came up.”



Recommendations and references

Time to Shine recommends that:

- Funding applications include a budget for shared meals or light refreshments as a way to bring people together.
- Commissioners or grant-giving organisations recognise the importance of sharing food in order to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness.
- Projects look for innovative and creative ways to bring food into a wider range of activities.

Creative resources:

- Community connections through shared meals: film
- Time to Shine: film
- Raat de Roti volunteer experiences: film
- Young at Arts poem about Home: poem by Peter Spafford and Pete

Learning resources:

- Food for Thought at Young at Arts: reflections on the project by Christian Watson
- The role of food in building connections and relationships: report by The National Lottery Community Fund
- Age-friendly communities, older people eating out together: Shared Tables case study by the Centre for Ageing Better
- Setting up a Shared Tables project in your local area: toolkit
- Lychee Red Chinese Seniors: end of project summary report
- Raat di Roti: end of project summary report

Academic resources:

- Time to Shine, time to share at Lychee Red Chinese Seniors: case study
- More Than a Mealtime: sharing and enjoying food together: case study
- Shared Tables 2019: case study

Find these reports and other resources on the Leeds Older People's Forum website
www.opforum.org.uk/resources

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