



Raat di Roti: meals shared with Punjabi elders

Time to Shine end of project report
2017



Summary

Raat di Roti means 'Evening Meal' in Punjabi. Volunteers invited an older person to share their evening meal. Through the ritual of sharing a nutritious evening meal, Sikh and other Punjabi Elders mixed with younger families and together they developed a stronger sense of community and reduced social isolation.

Once a fortnight volunteers shared the Raat di Roti in either the volunteer or elder's home. The project connected Punjabi-speaking families with Punjabi-speaking isolated older people and fostered cross-generational relationships in the local community.

Raat di Roti in Numbers

Of the people who completed an evaluation form

- 100% reported that they had reduced their sense of loneliness
- 71% reported an increase in social contacts in their neighbourhood
- 80% reported an improvement in their sense of wellbeing
- 63% reported being less socially isolated
- 28 volunteers were involved in the project
- volunteers contributed 1,250 hours
- 40 frail elderly Punjabi people participated in the project
- 697 dinners took place - a mixture of shared dinners at events and home visits



What happened during the project, what did they change?

Raat di Roti encountered a number of barriers fairly early into the project:

- A reluctance from younger people to volunteer – the idea of inviting a stranger into their own home felt like an intrusion.
- Older people were also reluctant to engage with the original model.
- The idea of accepting a meal in a stranger's house was perceived as 'charity' and they were concerned about how it would be perceived by family and friends.
- The original model intended for the older person to leave their house and go to the house of the volunteer. For that to have worked the project should have started in springtime for older people, who were already reluctant to leave their home, to be able to come out when evenings were warmer and lighter.

Raat di Roti was flexible and addressed these barriers by adapting its model:

- Older people were quite happy for volunteers to visit them in their own homes to cook and eat a meal together.
- The frequency of dinners was increased on request to weekly as opposed to fortnightly.
- The project was extended to the wider South Asian community to include Hindu and Muslim people.
- Meals could be in the daytime or at the weekend, as opposed to just weekday evenings as originally proposed.
- Meals out at cafes and restaurants were also included.
- Some beneficiaries wanted the project worker to be involved in dinners, providing some hand holding and continuity.



Learning

A longer set up time was needed, especially as starting a project in the winter when older people felt less inclined to venture out was a barrier.

There was an unexpected stigma attached to eating a meal in a stranger's home.

Even with the changes, some older people still felt uncomfortable with the idea of a volunteer coming to their home.

The availability of Cha da Cup, another service that involved a shared meal at Touchstone's premises, was more acceptable to the participants.

The administration and coordination required was considerably more than was anticipated and budgeted for.

The unexpected stigma of kindness?

Raat di Roti was a Touchstone Sikh Elders project that brought together Punjabi-speaking families and isolated older people to foster cross-generational relationships.

Once a fortnight volunteers shared an evening meal, or raat di roti, in their home or in an elder's home. It was hoped that the ritual of eating together would foster a sense of community but that wasn't always the case.

A number of elderly people opted out of Raat di Roti due to the stigma attached to being fed by someone else. In 2016 nine older people opted out of the project for that very reason. "We do not want to go to a volunteer's house to eat food. We have food in our own house. The volunteer can eat our food with us."

Some elders said they felt uncomfortable participating in the project because their neighbours and friends may see it as a form of charity as they were in receipt of free food. One such beneficiary said: "I like the connection but I fear the neighbours and friends might think I am getting charity. I would much rather come to a group and eat with others and that way we are all in the same situation."

This was the case whether the elders ate at the volunteer's house or at their own home. Similar misconceptions led some participants to opt out of the project even though they were quite happy to participate in other group activities where lunch was provided.

A participant said: "My sister-in-law is visiting from India, and whilst she is here with us, we do not want the volunteer to bring food. She can still come but eat our food."

He continued: "I don't want my relatives to think I'm getting charity. They will mock and indicate I've not earned enough for my own food. They will not understand that eating together is something special."

Many Punjabi-speaking older people who fear this stigma have still said they want to eat with the Raat di Roti project worker. They said it was important to maintain this connection as it will help them to come back to Raat di Roti at some future date and reconnect with the volunteers once they've overcome the stigma attached.

Learning what doesn't work so well, and why, is just as important as learning what does. Time to Shine uses this crucial information to improve its projects, inform future third-sector work and help shape government policy.

Legacy

- The Touchstone Sikh Elders project was able to successfully test out assumptions about family dynamics in South Asian communities across Leeds.
- Touchstone took this learning into the wider organisation to inform future work.
- The project highlighted the importance of food as a tool to bring people together.
- Valuable learning that Time to Shine will use to improve and inform its projects.
- Touchstone also explored whether the Raat di Roti model could be incorporated into their SES scheme.





Case study

A couple aged in their 60s had previously described themselves as being socially active and not at all isolated or lonely. However the failing health of one partner resulted in them feeling socially isolated and lonely. Mrs S had become the carer for her husband and as a result found it very difficult to get out and socialise. Mr S's ill health also meant that he was confined to the house. They were matched with volunteers from the same culture and faith who spoke Punjabi.

Mrs S said: "I'm independent and enjoy cooking and therefore I shall host a meal to share with my volunteers. If I enjoy cooking so much it doesn't matter who provides a meal as long as we enjoy the company."

They found a happy medium where they prepared a meal together.

She said: "We cook something together and it does not have to be much."

Mrs S felt the friendship with the volunteers had a positive impact on her wellbeing and looked forward to their social dates together.

She said: "Because I cannot get out as much, having RDR volunteers coming to socialise with me is very important. My heart is uplifted and I feel less trapped."

Her husband also enjoyed the company when well enough to participate and the volunteers felt the match worked well for them too.

Resources

To find out more about Touchstone go to <https://touchstonesupport.org.uk/>

To find out more about Time to Shine's work with diverse communities you can read the report Connecting with Culture. An insight from Time to Shine 2018

Further learning from Time To Shine

Raat di Roti – volunteer experiences (short video)

Find these reports and other resources on the Leeds Older People's Forum website

www.opforum.org.uk/resources



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