



### Summary

More Than A Mealtime - Time Together used eating together as a way of making enjoyable connections for isolated older people to reduce isolation and improve well-being.

The project contained two strands:

1. Consideration of people confined to the home
2. Focus on times outside of office hours

In the first strand the project recruited and trained young people 18+ and studying in Leeds to act as volunteer befrienders to housebound older people, with some kind of shared meal acting as the focus for the visits. This was to harness the potential for inter-generational engagement that is mutually beneficial around food – skill sharing, knowledge and budgeting, as well as an

available volunteer force that had not been made use of to date despite excellent transport links between central Leeds, Headingley and Crossgates.

For the second strand the project wanted to make it easier for single older people to eat out in company in their local area by reserving shared tables at a variety of local venues and providing a sociable volunteer to facilitate the gathering. This supported the shy, recently bereaved or others lacking confidence due to health issues, in taking steps towards a more active social life which is known to be good for well-being. The project planned to offer these opportunities at the weekend and evening as that is when 'mainstream socialising' takes place and single people can feel especially isolated by contrast as other options are reduced at these times.

## Outputs

- 42 home visits
- 3 older people took part in one-to-one meals in their homes
- 3 new student volunteers
- 7 older volunteers
- 69 facilitated dinner dates
- 53 older people attended dinner dates
- 312 volunteer hours given

## Theory of Change

The original theory of change was for the project to have two parts. The housebound part of the project didn't take off but the shared tables part was more successful than anticipated and really struck a chord with people. One of the reasons it was successful as a model was that it encouraged friendships and networks to develop outside of a project / service delivery environment. This part of the model was given funding for an additional two years to test out if the model would work in different geographical areas.

## What difference did it make for older people?

- Older people reporting reduced social isolation
- 59 unfacilitated meals / events
- 58% of respondents were less isolated as evidenced through the UCLA scale
- 40% of respondents had increased their level of social participation
- 63% of respondents had increased wellbeing after having being involved with the project

## Learning

- Dinner dates for housebound older people was less successful; likewise the recruitment of student volunteers was less successful. However the shared tables project was very successful – so much so

that it was re-commissioned to roll out the learning to other areas.

- There was an incorrect assumption at the start of the project that students would like to volunteer. Students were hard to recruit, due to timetables and a reluctance to commit to specific hours and days, and the project failed to attract the anticipated high numbers of student volunteers.
- Importance of match between participant and volunteer (eg. shared interests, hobbies, or a love of good food) and a sense of reciprocity so that participants and volunteers both feel like they have something to offer.
- Shared tables grew each month, increased frequency to weekly, had to limit the number of participants to 16 (to help inclusion for newer people), but in return introduced double dates once a month on Saturdays and Sundays.
- Most participants had experienced bereavement. Some participants increased their confidence to become facilitators. In addition volunteers input into monthly meetings to plan the dinner dates.
- There were opportunities to have unfacilitated meals and some participants met for coffees / cinema in addition to dinner dates.
- Opinion was divided on whether to limit table numbers. Some hosts thought smaller table numbers promote intimacy, better inclusion in conversation and helped build confidence and deeper connections. Others thought limiting table numbers would put people off booking and that a smaller number of diners was less socially attractive. There were also practical considerations such as whether a venue could accommodate larger tables.
- The older people involved in this project had to be able to get themselves to the venue so it was more suitable for people with a higher level of independence.

- The project tended to work best for people whose isolation had come about through factors such as bereavement or retirement rather than ill health or a loss of mobility.
- It was a very successful model but not intended for people with higher support needs; so the limits to the scope of the project were understood from the outset.
- The model attracted men and provided an environment where men felt comfortable.

## Legacy

- The shared tables model was recommissioned and its learning rolled out to other areas
- One placement decided to carry on and fund the meals themselves. The volunteer will continue to be a volunteer with Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours Scheme and be supported in the usual way as a befriender.
- Held table host training to gain feedback on the role of the host and the pros and cons of limiting table numbers. They also gave out meal invites to all those that had hosted tables over the two year project: 13 in total; eight original hosts and five participants who became table hosts.
- Held an end of project shared table celebration for table hosts to say thank you for their commitment and support to the project and to recruit volunteers for the new Shared Tables project.
- Current volunteer hosts were asked to continue hosting. 10 out of 12 wanted to continue and to take part in the shared tables with other older peoples networks / groups to help promote the project within other areas of Leeds and enable other groups to pilot their own 'shared tables.'
- There was also interest from other Ageing Better areas so we could potentially test the model in different geographical areas.

## Sustainable Partnerships

- Local eateries and related businesses.
- 20 Christmas meals were donated to Cross Gates GNS by a local Travellers Rest as a result of the project.
- Promoted an Age Friendly approach to business as participants and staff gave feedback on what made a business age friendly or welcoming to older people.

*"It's nice to see or recognise people when I'm out and about in the community. I knew people by name or in passing but now I feel I have much deeper connections as a result of spending time with small groups on the shared tables."*



## Case Study

A Time to Shine project has meant finding something beyond friendship for two of its participants, Anita and Ken.

More than a Mealtime, delivered by Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours, brings people together over one of the most important things in life – food.

Those who might ordinarily have been eating on their own can now meet up in a local pub or restaurant and share a meal, conversation, and friendship. Participants gather for a meal together at The Travellers Rest in Cross Gates.

After losing her husband, Anita felt lonely and isolated. She described how simple tasks like changing a light bulb became overwhelming, as she adjusted to the new routine of her life.

She wouldn't go out for a meal by herself, partly because coming back to an empty house was just a reminder of what she'd lost.

She joined More than a Mealtime to try to meet some new people and start to socialise again, and possibly find common ground with other people in a similar situation.

What she found changed her life completely, as she was able to connect with others who understood what she had been through.

"Life has a meaning now. There is more to life than just waking up and going about routine things. I've made new friends and developed friendships that I already had."

And she met Ken, another Shared Tables member. Their friendship unexpectedly blossomed into a romance, and the two couldn't be happier.

Anita said that if she gave advice to anyone else who might be hesitant to get involved she would say: "Do it. Don't give it a second thought, just do it. It's a brilliant scheme."



**Time to Shine is managed by Leeds Older People's Forum (LOPF) and funded by Big Lottery Fund's Ageing Better programme to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst people over 50.**