

Learning Snapshot: The Role of Food in Building Connections & Relationships

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

We collect information and insights from across 14 partnerships and use this learning to support service deliverers, funders and policy makers working to reduce social isolation in people aged over 50.

This learning snapshot details key findings and recommendations relevant to best practice in the Role of Food in Building Connections and Relationships.

You can use it as a summary of the [full learning report](#), to share practical tools with colleagues and in teams, or include in your own presentations and briefings.

<p>1. Why does food play a crucial role? Food provides a universal hook that helps people (particularly men) engage and is an easy topic of conversation for those who have lost confidence in social situations.</p> <p>Food is a practical and attractive incentive for isolated people who rarely eat in company. Being served food makes people feel valued. Eating together is a welcoming and informal social activity that makes people feel connected and included.</p> <p>Sharing food can also be used to break down cultural barriers or bring people from the same ethnic background together.</p>	<p>2. What are the challenges? We all feel hunger every day but access, choice, how, when and where we eat are all factors that can create barriers if not taken into consideration. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social anxiety linked to food can reduce people’s engagement • Some people prefer traditional (known) foods, others enjoy experiencing new dishes. These personal preferences should be catered for so everyone feels comfortable, relaxed and included. • Setting, cost and culture are also key factors; free food may alienate some whilst cost will be a barrier for many.
<p>4. So what can we do with this learning? Food is a ‘hook’ that helps bring people out of their shells (and homes).</p> <p>It is particularly effective when engaging men who find it harder to admit they are lonely. Men prefer to attend an event where they can do a practical task or learn a new skill. The offer of a “cuppa” and biscuits gives them an opportunity (and excuse) to socialise as well.</p> <p>Consideration should be made when setting project budgets to ensure the offer, quality and variety of the food can be maintained.</p>	<p>3. How can we improve engagement? People tend to associate food with an informal event, it generates discussion and puts people at ease. Several areas developed a slot after an organised activity where people could stay on for a drink, snack and chat and develop connections in a more relaxed setting.</p> <p>Food can be a subjective topic so being sensitive to personal budgets, habits and dietary requirements is also important.</p> <p>Consultation and co-production from the outset of a project are key to success.</p>