

social



**PROJECT  
STORY**

# INTRODUCTION

Our Social Eating Project brought together eight partner organisations from across Greater Manchester, to deliver social eating activities, between July 2018 and March 2020. The project was managed by **TLC: Talk, Listen Change** and commissioned by **GMCVO** through the Ambition for Ageing Programme. Delivery partners were a mix of social housing providers, social enterprises, food specialists and voluntary sector providers. We wanted to test out different models and approaches to social eating, in order to learn what works and what doesn't, with a focus on those at higher risk of isolation.

The aim of all our social eating activities was to create environments where:

- Older people increase and improve their connections; and
- Older people become less socially isolated (or at risk of it)

We were curious about what made a successful social eating environment, that could engage a diverse range of people from local communities in Greater Manchester. For the purpose of this project, an older person was defined as someone over 50 years old and social isolation refers to an absence of, or limited, contacts. This is the story of our project, the approaches that partners used and what we learned.

## At a glance

- Our project partners used a diverse range of models and approaches to social eating and to food preparation
- There were different levels of financial investment across project partners, depending on the scale of activities, whether social eating was charged for or free and what other investment partners had secured to support activities
- Project partners describe social eating in different ways, depending on the audience
- As a test and learn project, there was a significant amount of learning across projects and activities
- The stories of social eating participants help to demonstrate impact and how social eating reduces social isolation

## Our approaches to Social Eating

Working across a range of localities in Greater Manchester, our projects all shared the same aims of reducing social isolation and increasing connectedness, but they used a variety of different approaches and models to deliver social eating. Projects were funded from July 2018 - March 2020.

# COMMISSIONING AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT



ambition  
for  
ageing

**Ambition for Ageing** is a Greater Manchester wide cross-sector partnership, led by GMCVO and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, aimed at creating more age friendly places by connecting communities and people through the creation of relationships, development of existing assets and putting older people at the heart of designing the places they live. The delivery of social eating activities and the production of this guide was funded through Greater Manchester's Ambition for Ageing programme.

GMCVO

**Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO)** is the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector support and development organisation covering the Greater Manchester city region. They work with and through the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector for the benefit of the people and communities of Greater Manchester.



Talk  
Listen  
Change

**TLC: Talk, Listen, Change's** mission is to support safe, healthy and happy relationships. TLC offers a range of services and projects across Greater Manchester including counselling and therapy, domestic abuse services and community work. They also work in collaboration with other organisations to pilot innovative ways of supporting individuals, couples, families and communities. TLC provided project management support and gathered learning from project partners, to create the Social Eating Guide.



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This project has been kindly funded by:  
Ambition for Ageing & The National Lottery Community Fund

# DELIVERY PARTNERS



## Heywood Middleton and Rochdale Circle

**About:** HMR Circle is a community interest company based in Heywood, Middlewood and Rochdale. At the heart of HMR Circle is a fundamental belief that everyone has the right to a flourishing, independent later life. A life in which people can do the stuff they want to do in the ways they want to do it. Circle is about learning new things and enjoying hobbies and interests with others in the community.

**Social eating approach:** HMR Circle have used various methods to engage participants and made good use of private sector assets within the community for example; offering Tea and Chatter sessions in the local Morrisons, Tea and Talk in a local café, Breakfast for Blokes at Wetherspoons and social eating events at residential venues. HMR Circle asked participants to purchase their own meals at pubs/cafes and also asked for a financial contribution where they delivered social eating in residential venues.

**Level of investment:** £10,500



## Rochdale Boroughwide Housing

**About:** Rochdale Boroughwide Housing is the UK's first tenant and employee co-owned mutual housing society, with over 13,000 homes throughout the local area. They work to make better places for their members, tenants and employees to live and work.

**Social eating approach:** Rochdale Boroughwide Housing's main focus was on delivering social eating projects for residents of their housing schemes. They delivered cook and taste sessions once a month; encouraging residents to come together and cook together, invited carers to take part in social eating and established the Grow a Bowl Full project (giving residents grow-boxes of veg to make their own meals). They also delivered a "Feeding the Forces" eight-week cooking project sharing cooking techniques with veterans and their families. Rochdale Boroughwide Housing used the funding to pay for a worker to develop and co-ordinate social eating projects, they then sourced additional funding to pay for delivery costs of activities.

**Level of investment:** £38,420

## Bolton at Home

### **Bolton at Home**

**About:** Bolton at Home is a charitable community benefit society that works to make people's lives better by providing quality housing, giving people opportunities to prosper and helping customers to maximise their income. To achieve this, they work in partnership with a variety of local charities, social enterprises and other agencies.

**Social eating approach:** Bolton at Home worked closely with local community organisations, social enterprises and CICs, and community centres and sheltered housing to deliver eight social eating activities across four wards in Bolton borough. The work has been led by their community development team and builds strongly on their local knowledge, and relationships in the area. Activities range from eat and meet at a local community allotment through to lunchtime social eating and activities at community centres and working together with a community café. They also collaborated with local community groups to offer social eating activities specifically for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and female asylum seekers and refugees. Bolton at Home chose to provide 12 months of funding to each social eating activity.

**Level of investment:** £39,500



### **FoodSync**

**About:** FoodSync works with the food system and delivers projects for the commercial sector, local authorities, housing associations, and the community, voluntary and social enterprise sector. They use Food Systems Thinking for the benefit of society by synchronising the way we produce and consume food bringing about economic, health and environmental gains.

FoodSync have provided advice and expertise around nutrition and malnutrition to our Social Eating project. Working closely with Bolton at Home, they delivered malnutrition training to social eating staff and created a sustainable social eating model for the future. They also provided specialist knowledge and guidance for the Social Eating Guide.

**Level of investment:** £8,500



## Southway Housing Trust

**About:** Southway Housing Trust is a social housing provider based in South Manchester. They provide services and activities to support our residents to live independent and fulfilled lives. Southway carry out leading work and research to create 'age friendly' homes and communities for South Manchester and beyond.

**Social eating approach:** Southway wanted to test out an asset-based community development approach to social eating, using venues and groups within communities and neighbourhoods. They worked in partnership with a range of organisations: creating a grow and eat project at a local fire station, delivering intergenerational work with schools, utilising university halls of residence for one off social eating events, creating "Munch at the Museum" to explore history and culture of food with tasting and interactive sessions, developing social eating at a local bowling club and working with sheltered housing schemes. Southway chose to invest some funds in capacity building local groups to enable them to incorporate social eating activities alongside their existing activities. Salaries for staff who worked on the project were funded separately.

**Level of investment:** £20,500



## Cracking Good Food

**About:** Cracking Good Food promote cooking skills in local communities by delivering cooking courses and training, as part of a wider campaign for affordable, sustainable and healthier food for all whilst addressing food poverty, the dangers of commercially driven nutrient empty processed food and the consequent damage to the environment. The income from Cracking Good Food's Cookery Schools and bespoke programmes helps support their core running costs, enabling them to work in the community, which now accounts for 85% of their work.

**Social eating approach:** Cracking Good Food worked together with Southway to offer cook and eat sessions in two distinct localities in the city; Didsbury and Harpurhey. Their aim was to enthuse people about food and create a pool of volunteers to lead activities in the longer term.

**Level of investment:** £24,500



## Groundwork

**About:** Groundwork is a federation of charities working locally and nationally to transform lives in the UK's most disadvantaged communities. Groundwork in Greater Manchester aims to create stronger, healthier communities, responsible businesses and greater prospects for local people.

**Social eating approach:** Groundwork asset mapped their local area and have been working in partnership with established projects; adding value to their provision. Examples include: United Reformed Church, who were establishing a new community café, East Ward Growing Together community allotment project, Ramsbottom Community - a partnership with Great Places Housing Association, Persona Care and Support, and the Attic Project (a local charity offering community courses for people experiencing isolation through poor mental health.) Groundwork took a broad approach, in order to reach people who are socially isolated.

**Level of investment:** £53,893

*“We found that private residents were more at risk of social isolation than social housing residents. This was because most social landlord responsibilities include activities for older people within older persons housing schemes and people outside the schemes are either not comfortable going along or not part of the scheme so excluded”.*

# TALKING ABOUT SOCIAL EATING

Our project partners talked about and described social eating in different ways, depending on the audience.

## **When making the case for social eating to partners, funders or commissioners:**

“It’s an amazing way of bringing people together, reducing isolation, creating friendships and a support network that has a knock-on effect on the health and wellbeing of participants”

“Food is the conduit to hook people in – it’s a great way of bringing people together”

“Social eating is a way of investing in communities to reduce social isolation and create healthy lifestyles”

“Social eating is place making using food-centric approaches. It’s about not leaving anyone behind and supporting adults who are vulnerable to isolation. It’s community bridging through food”

“It’s a gathering of people, have a natter, eat with company, make new friends, try something new, find something in common”

## **When describing social eating to encourage older people to come along:**

“Come down, it’s a nice, warm, friendly environment. Good set of people and there’s nice food. I’ll come and pick you up and get you there”

“It’s an opportunity to meet new people, catch up with old friends and learn new recipes whilst eating some great food”

“Coming together through food”

“Do you live alone? There’s a session going on with a free hearty lunch. You can socialise and meet other people”

“Coming together to have a chat and eat something”

“Home cooked food, really friendly people. It’s about strengthening the community”

“We’re a group of mostly African women, we cook tasty food, it’s welcoming and friendly”.



# KEY LEARNINGS

Our project was a test and learn project and we came together regularly as a group to share learning and reflections from different social eating activities.

## People's experiences of ageing

- Older people who are socially isolated can lose their sense of value and self-worth. As someone becomes isolated, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to share knowledge, skills and experience with others. This can mean that people feel that they are too old to try something new or they “don't want to be a bother”. Our experience has been that even if activities are available for older people, it can take quite a lot of encouragement before someone feels confident to come along. Initial invitations and the welcome to the group need to be followed up and repeated over time.
- Older people don't necessarily see themselves as “old” – even if they fit the criteria for a social eating project. They may see the activity as only for “really old” people. People may feel that they are taking someone else's place, who needs it more than them or that it is “charity”. Language which is associated with being “old” can therefore be a barrier to engaging people – for example the term “luncheon club”. We found that the needs of “younger older people” and “older older people” can be very different.
- The sense of being known and cared about is important for older people. All our projects have highlighted the importance of building relationships and remembering details about people's lives. People appreciate the time and space to talk about personal or health issues but it may take time for trust to build up. Even if people have contact with their families, they can still be spending a large amount of time alone each week and people still need the social support of people they consider peers and confidants.
- Older people connect more with activities that emphasise community and social connections, rather than focussing on isolation or people needing to “learn” about cooking or eating well.
- Older people with caring responsibilities for partners can feel isolated and pressured and social eating hosts found that taking care with seating plans and bridging connections between carers and other members of the group was helpful.

## Engaging marginalised, diverse and socially isolated older people

- Our project aimed to involve the most socially isolated older people and this can mean that there is a slow build, particularly when starting up new activities from scratch. Partners found it helpful to involve older people from existing networks at an early stage, to act as ‘early adopters’ or champions and help to build momentum as they reached out to those who were most isolated.
- Some people can feel self-conscious eating in front of others or may not want to eat a meal. Offering the option of just coming along for a chat and a drink takes the pressure off and means that people don’t miss out on the social aspect, even if they are not eating.
- There was significant learning for partners around the naming and marketing of social eating activities to older people and understanding how certain language could be considered patronising or stigmatising. Southway and Cracking Good Food found that older people didn’t respond to publicity encouraging them to “learn to cook” or offering “cooking lessons”. This wasn’t an effective hook to get people along to sessions and a common response from older people was “I already know how to cook”. Instead, talking about “cook and eat” or “cook and taste” and focussing on the social aspect, proved more successful.
- Huddle Up found that older people in the local Asian community were less likely to attend if the emphasis was on getting a “free meal”, as this was seen as being in receipt of charity. In the community they are based in, Huddle Up found that focussing on the social aspect works better. Groundwork received feedback from older people about the marketing of their Lunch and Learn sessions; people said they did not want to lunch and learn at this stage in their life and thought to suggest this was more of an insult than inviting. The project was re-designed with older people and branded as “Come dine with me”.
- Several partners used door-knocking, conversations on the doorstep and distributing flyers as a way to reach isolated residents, within a certain vicinity of the venue. Bolton Solidarity Community Association (BCSA) found that through conversations with key community members, they were able to identify those within the local area who were most isolated.

- Southway and Cracking Good Food tested out running cook and eat sessions in two very different communities (Didsbury and Harpurhey). A key learning has been that offering social eating in areas that experience high levels of poverty does not, in itself, guarantee attendance and engagement with social eating activities. The absence of existing relationships with residents and community groups in the area made it challenging to build up trust and encourage engagement. Finding a suitable venue also proved difficult. When setting up from scratch in an area, significant time and resource needs to be invested in building relationships and finding the mechanisms to direct market to people – either through door-knocking or linking with community groups that are effective at reaching local people. Consideration needs to be given as to whether people feel safe travelling to the venue. Other partners within our project also found that having social eating activities in areas with other community assets and activities, resulted in people meeting up independently more, outside of the social eating group.
- There was learning for partners around the cost per head, with the cost being higher in those projects targeted at BAME communities (around £5 per head, as opposed to £1.50 per head in other communities), due to meals being more consistently meat-based and a greater desire to put on big spread, when bringing people together to eat socially.
- A more targeted approach is needed, in order to ensure activities feel welcoming and accessible for people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT). Out of 177 event feedback forms completed, only one person identified as lesbian and 9 ticked “prefer not to say”. This would indicate that generic social eating activities are not successful at engaging people from the LGBT community, or that people do not feel confident sharing this information on feedback forms. We would recommend partnering with organisations that have good reach into the LGBT community, ensuring that the voices of LGBT participants are heard during co-design and co-production work at the start of projects and considering the creation of a targeted offer.

For further information see our Social Eating Guide and our Technical Handbook, which includes a section about Diversity and Inclusion.

## Other learnings

- Advising people about healthy eating and nutrition is difficult if there is no pre-existing relationship between the person offering the advice and the person receiving it. Advice can be perceived as patronising or the advice dismissed. Befriending Refugees and Asylum Seekers (BRASS) in Bolton found that they were only able to introduce “healthy cooking” sessions after the project had been running for a number of months and positive relationships had been established. Cracking Good Food found that people were open to trying new things, as part of the cook and eat sessions, but note that this needs to happen gradually (for example gradual introduction of new textures) and with the involvement of the group in decisions about what they want to cook. It was also possible to introduce a greater number of vegetarian and vegan options over time, as relationships were built and established food cultures shifted.
- HMR Circle charged for some of their social eating activities and found that getting the right price point, can be difficult. The price point also varies considerably, depending on the target audience.
- Giving people the option to take left over food away at the end of the session was found to be helpful and well received by participants across a number of different projects.
- Reminiscence activities are very useful for getting people talking and building social connections. Cooking more traditional meals or “old favourites” can also be a prompt for reminiscence.

# OUR FUTURE PLANS

Because our project funding was short term, we were careful to think about sustainability from the start of the process.

## Bolton at Home



### **Bolton at Home:**

*“We have successfully secured funding to support all our social eating activities on an ongoing basis. Bolton at Home and FoodSync are exploring a more joined up approach to food purchasing and equipment across a number of social eating projects in order to reduce costs. Ideas include: having accounts with key suppliers to support with the purchase of equipment, every coordinator having a larder box of essentials, providing a storage garage for bulk purchase items, in order to reduce food costs. The project is also considering running on a pay as you feel basis, to make it more financially sustainable in the longer term and to reduce the stigma around receiving “free” food, which is an issue in some communities”.*

### **Groundwork:**

*“All of our social eating projects and events have been free and our customers tell us this was an added attraction for them to come along. Many explained they worry about having to pay to become a member of something and worry about the ongoing costs of things. However, as all our projects are customer led, some of the groups are now exploring future group outings which they are in control of and are happy to meet their own costs as part of the planning. Also the groups are now actively taking ownership and bringing contributions to the gathering, which minimises future costs associated with the social eating projects and builds in long term sustainability.”*



## Southway Housing Trust

*“Southway absorbed the salary costs for the project. The model was about creating sustainable activities that can be continued in the longer term – using assets that are in neighbourhoods and communities. This means that many of the activities can be sustained at a low cost. We have successfully built capacity within local groups and recruited volunteers who can help to make the activities sustainable.”*



## Rochdale Boroughwide Housing:

*“All the cook and taste sessions are running better than I thought they would, with numbers each session picking up, so much so that when I arrive a few of them have their own utensils ready as it’s what they are used to. They have all commented about how nice it is to be sat round the table whilst chopping and peeling making different foods to try, but most of all enjoying the company. They like the idea of cooking and eating together, and each group wants to continue with the sessions once this project comes to an end. To make this possible, we have a put a charge of £2-2.50 per session, this will help to build funds up, so it will cover the costs for the future cook and taste sessions. It has also led the project to steer in a new direction. Participants have an interest in growing their own produce to keep cost to a minimum, so in July we will roll out the Grow a Bowlful project to 16 schemes. This will involve each scheme growing their own soup and salad ingredients. We have also been working on a recipe book that will encourage participants to continue to cook for themselves and one another, to keep the social side of the project running.”*

# FURTHER INFORMATION

## Project Partners' websites

TLC: Talk Listen Change  
[www.talklistenchange.org.uk](http://www.talklistenchange.org.uk)

Groundwork  
[www.groundwork.org.uk/hubs/greatermanchester](http://www.groundwork.org.uk/hubs/greatermanchester)

HMR Circle  
[www.hmrcircle.org.uk](http://www.hmrcircle.org.uk)

FoodSync  
[www.foodsync.co.uk](http://www.foodsync.co.uk)

Southway Housing Trust  
[www.southwayhousing.co.uk](http://www.southwayhousing.co.uk)

Rochdale Boroughwide Housing  
[www.rbh.org.uk](http://www.rbh.org.uk)

Cracking Good Food  
[www.crackinggoodfood.org](http://www.crackinggoodfood.org)

Bolton at Home  
[www.boltonathome.org.uk](http://www.boltonathome.org.uk)

## Funder Websites

The National Lottery Community Fund  
[www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk](http://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk)

Ambition for Ageing (a GMCVO led project)  
[www.ambitionforageing.org.uk](http://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk)

GMCVO  
[www.gmcvo.org.uk](http://www.gmcvo.org.uk)

