

AGE BETTER
IN SHEFFIELD

**Melting Pot Lunches...
Mixing things up and
making things happen**



Over the past few months we've held four melting pot lunches (an idea inspired by Kaleidoscope), where we've brought together 6 – 10 people with an interest in a particular area which has the potential to link in with reducing loneliness and isolation.

The aim was to learn from each other, and to facilitate people meeting who might not otherwise come across each other, and potentially spark off new conversations and collaborations. Two themes were areas where we knew that we had a challenge in recruiting participants (men and people from BAME backgrounds), and two where we thought there might be potential for engaging with interests or areas of work to help reduce loneliness and isolation (food and Sheffield as The Outdoor City).

Melting Pot Lunch No.1 – The Outdoor City

The first meeting is taking place on Tuesday 6th March 2018 and will be led by The Outdoor City. You can read the blog below which is all about how keeping active helps to keep people well, and allows people to experience connections with others

"Hi, I'm Mike. I'm 58 years old. I live in Sheffield. I've lived here all my life. I don't know anywhere like I know Sheffield.

I live in a terraced house. Nowt special about it, same as all the others really, in a community on the east of the city. I'm not married, well not anymore anyway. I work part-time as a driver. Free time is spent watching TV or surfing the internet.

I've got type 2 diabetes, amongst other things, and so I find it hard to get out. In fact, recently I've found it hard to do anything. I just can't seem to motivate myself.

Even though I know Sheffield. I'm not sure Sheffield knows me. Most of the folk I grew up with have left the area. It's changed. I went to see my GP last week, for my Diabetes, she mentioned that physical activity might help to control my diabetes – as well as the drugs she's put me on. I hate taking them. I get it and understand that it can help me – I'm not daft – but I really don't know where to start. I've got no one to help me. I'm on my own. In fact, it would take a miracle for me to become more active..."

Mike is fairly typical of a lot of people in Sheffield and certainly of the people that we have interviewed as part of our research with the National Centre for Sport and Exercise Medicine and its Move More programme. The question is, if a miracle did happen, and Mike did become more active, what would have changed? What would be the first thing that he would notice? The first minute detail that would be different about his life? Here's a few thoughts on this;

Mike would wake up, turn on the radio and perhaps there'd be an article on the news about the positive impact that 'programme X' was having on people with diabetes in communities through walking. Mike wouldn't really think too much about it as he busied himself with getting ready. Mike would have breakfast and head outside to his van, he was working today. Only this morning he'd notice people like him walking and cycling past his house instead of the usual stream of heavy traffic. 'Weird thought Mike' but he enjoyed the cleaner air as a result. 'Good Morning' a passerby would say – how you doing? Not so bad, Mike would reply as he jumped in his van. It felt good to talk to someone, even someone Mike had never met.

Even though it was February and still quite dark outside the street were well lit, which made a real difference to the feel of his community. Mike was surprised what a difference this made as it was normally quite dark and unwelcoming. He felt safe. Mike's day went as normal. Dropping off parcels around the city. Well almost like normal, he was surprised at how many people he saw outside, lots of them walking and cycling around the city.

People like him, all shapes and sizes. He was also surprised by how many of them said hello. It felt like he belonged, like he was part of something, part of a community. He'd not felt like that for a long time and after all this was his City. He loved Sheffield. Mike got home, made a cup of tea and sat in his usual chair ready to watch the box. He could still see people outside his window moving around the streets. Mike had his words from his GP ringing in his ears and had a desire to join them – maybe a walk round the block isn't that difficult an ask after all Mike thought...

Melting Pot Lunch No.2 – The Links Between Food and Social Connection

Age Better in Sheffield has been dabbling with the links between social connection and food in various ways since its inception. In order to achieve their aims of making Sheffield a city we can all be proud to grow older in; there have been cook and eats, Father's Day pie and peas, Christmas Day dinners, Age Better Champions meeting up with their beneficiaries over coffee and cakes in cafes and Access Ambassadors eating wraps together at their monthly meetings.

Age Better in Sheffield also delivered an 8 month pilot of a project called Me'n'u that was its most serious endeavour into food and social isolation. Although the associations have not yet been examined to identify evidence of what works and what cultural and social factors we need to explore further. From delivering the Me'n'u pilot, I have identified some areas to explore. The aim is to inspire those to make friends through food!

Why is it good for wellbeing to eat together?

The benefits of having a healthy relationship between social connection and food should not be underestimated. For example in older people, those who ate regularly with another ate 2.3 more portions of vegetables than those who ate alone. Moreover, children who do not eat dinner with their parents at least twice a week also were 40 percent more likely to be overweight compared to those who do. They are also less likely to truant from school and do better in tests when children ate with their parents.

One study on chimpanzees who ate together had produced more oxytocin, the hormone responsible for feelings of happiness, belonging and trusting others. Food sharing has been found in humans too, even amongst unrelated individuals, increases oxytocin levels. Physiologically, oxytocin acts in the brain by reducing anxiety and fear, enhancing social memory and activating neural reward circuits. It increases cooperative behaviour, reduces aversion, promotes trust and generosity.

It is unquestionably therapeutic to eat with someone; as an excuse to talk and to reflect on the day. Often, talks over dinner open up into deeper discussions and by using food as a vehicle to spend time together – discussions can happen regularly. Eating with someone is a small act and requires very little organisation beyond the usual food prep but can make a huge difference to our wellbeing. In the end, the word 'companion' (Lat: com [=with], panis [=bread]) may be more literal than previously thought.

Food and Identity

Throughout my time running the Me'n'u pilot, I found there to be a strong link between food and identity. We express our identities through our culture, language, heritage, clothes, jobs, interests and likes and dislikes. This is the same for the food we eat and who we choose to eat with. An examination of loneliness would suggest that it is the feeling that our true selves are not accepted or our identities are not acknowledged in our social circles. Consequently meaning that, if we eat alone, we lack opportunity to share our identity with others. One way to ameliorate this might be through food. I believe, when we recognise the isolated person's identity through food, we will be able to crack into the link between social connection and food.

But how can we do this?

One factor to consider is that residents across the city saw themselves as belonging to small villages. I found especially across Sheffield, tribal behaviour to be a fundamental part of participant's lives and will dictate much of their decisions as a consequence. This is essential to their identity and the parameters of their community. I found it difficult trying to get volunteers to agree to travel outside their area to share a meal with a lonely older person. They prioritised someone in their own community over the subjective feeling of loneliness. This demonstrates that tribal behaviour is strong in the city. It could be used to our advantage if we focused on small behaviour changes within small areas.

The food people ate is a huge expression of identity. Older people had a strong sense of identity with the food they ate. They wanted what we might think of as traditional food; fish and chips, meat and two veg and pie. The older people who were more willing to try new foods or did not place their identity in traditional food seemed more resilient and less lonely.

That is not to say that everyone is the same, despite liking the same food. When engaging with older people, I made the mistake of seeing food, loneliness and poverty as connected. This caused some older people to feel alienated and confused as they were not suffering from poverty but loneliness. Despite many people in poverty feeling lonely, there is no silver bullet for administering interventions.

How do we, as foodies, use this knowledge to the betterment of Sheffield? Do we simply acknowledge the tribal nature of Sheffield and use these silos to create stronger identities? Or do we try to challenge these identities in the hope of bringing people together? Should we work around the isolated person's relationship towards food as this is part of their identity or actively try to instil behaviour changes to improve one's wellbeing?

How are we going to make change stick?

An older gentleman I came to know called David became very eloquent about his experiences with loneliness over the time I was carrying out the pilot. David's wife died at the beginning of last year and turned his world upside down. He was in an inconsolable state for months whilst being passed from bereavement counselling to charities and group therapy. Whilst having counselling, he realised that he was lonely and was able to reflect on what he could do to ameliorate this. He now attends two/three lunch clubs a week. He also went on to talk about how times when there was no organised activity; he felt very lonely. This was the case in mornings, evenings, weekends and holidays. The lunch clubs he went to were an opportunity to meet with friends and give purpose to his day. He acquired cooking skills and ate more healthy meals than if he were alone. Although he knows that this is not the only solution, he acknowledged to me that this kept him going.

In this example it is clear that sharing food was not the only thing to improve his wellbeing. But working in unison; the interventions, his social network, the community organisations and his reflections were able to improve his wellbeing. The takeaway message is that we need to be able to work together to ensure that the links between social connection and food are really unearthed, captured and employed to better the wellbeing of the people of Sheffield.

Another message is that we need to empower people to share meals with others without intervention or if they need it, to empower them to reach out to the network of options listed above to improve their wellbeing. David having counselling enabled him to identify what his needs were and how to attend to them. We need to demonstrate the impact of making small changes – that they can instil in their own lives.

David was encouraged to invest in their social networks. As food is steeped in ritual and dependency – sharing food could be the perfect vehicle to bring people together. Maybe by promoting these links we can enact real change that will have a lasting legacy for that person.

Melting Pot Lunch No.3 – Where are the men?

One of the key aims at the start of Age Better in Sheffield was to have a focus upon men, largely because the initial research found high levels of loneliness amongst men, particularly those aged between 50 and 64. A recent study looking at the national picture by Independent Age [i] has confirmed this on a national basis, extending what is known on this area and reporting previous research findings[iii]. Data that the Age Better in Sheffield (ABiS) programme collects on a regular basis shows that the engagement of men in the programme stands at a low 30 per cent. In the next three years and indeed beyond, ABiS will seek to significantly improve that involvement, yet we are often left asking 'where are the men? The Independent Age study suggested that the number of older men aged 65+ living alone is projected to rise by 65 per cent between now and 2030, from an estimated 911,000 to 1.5 million. The ELSA[iiii] data cited in the Independent Age study, demonstrates a spike in the incidence of loneliness among the 50-64 age groups. So, more men are feeling lonelier and are increasingly becoming more isolated. Indeed, the whole phenomenon has been termed 'the silent epidemic' by some media outlets.

It is very clear that research focussing upon older men is limited in range, yet various studies, reported in the Independent Age findings show that:

·Older men are more socially isolated than older women.

- Older men have significantly less contact with their children, family and friends than older women.
- The number of older men outliving their partners is expected to grow.
- Men are less likely to seek help themselves, for example from their GP. They fear the stigmatisation of being seen to be weak, of being unmanly, and not being self-reliant.

These findings replicate those found in the studies of the late 1990s and earlier. Additionally, for men, the main drivers for greater isolation and loneliness tend to be structural. That is poor general health, specifically poor mental health, low income and unemployment. Yet there are also key social factors involved as the Independent Age findings reveal. For example, the impact of the death of a spouse is greater upon men because of the nature of their friendship networks. The study by Kate Davidson and colleagues found that women tend to play a pivotal role in the establishment and maintenance of wide social networks and these fail upon her death. Older men have less contact with friends than women. Nearly 1 in 5 men (19%) had less than monthly contact with their friends compared to only 12 per cent of women. Further, older men are more dependent on their partners (often women) for these friendships, and as has been noted, women tend to make stronger friendship groups.

Older men without partners were more socially isolated and lonely than older women without partners, three-quarters (76%) said they were lonely compared to 71 per cent of women.

These findings replicate those found in the studies of the late 1990s and earlier. Additionally, for men, the main drivers for greater isolation and loneliness tend to be structural. That is poor general health, specifically poor mental health, low income and unemployment. Yet there are also key social factors involved as the Independent Age findings reveal. For example, the impact of the death of a spouse is greater upon men because of the nature of their friendship networks. The study by Kate Davidson and colleagues found that women tend to play a pivotal role in the establishment and maintenance of wide social networks and these fail upon her death. Older men have less contact with friends than women. Nearly 1 in 5 men (19%) had less than monthly contact with their friends compared to only 12 per cent of women. Further, older men are more dependent on their partners (often women) for these friendships, and as has been noted, women tend to make stronger friendship groups. Older men without partners were more socially isolated and lonely than older women without partners, three-quarters (76%) said they were lonely compared to 71 per cent of women.

What are the implications of such evidence for Sheffield? My recent chapter (with Alan Walker) in 'State of Sheffield 2017'^{liv} documents how well (or poorly) Sheffield's population is ageing. Although similar to the most major cities, Sheffield is below the England average on a number of key indicators including life expectancy at birth and at 65, disability free life expectancy after 65, and health related quality of life for those over 65.

All these factors conspire to lead to a potential for loneliness. We conclude that a more structural approach is required for better health and well-being based upon an approach recommended by the WHO called 'active ageing'; and across the life span. Such an approach is at the heart of all the 'Age Better in Sheffield' interventions and projects. Yet a key question remains. How should we, and can we engage better with men and find these 'hidden' lonely and isolated older men?

Among the methods that have been used to get men involved, a few dominate the literature and practise in this area. These include Men's' Sheds and Walking Football.

What is common to both is that they do not label themselves as exclusive to older men or, and in particular, are targeted for those that are 'lonely'. To do so would, reflecting the research literature, only reinforce the feelings of helplessness or their need for support. Indeed, the evidence is that men may prefer services which are built around their particular interests and workplace or former workplace, or experiences such as football, rugby and other male dominated sport. They also tend to prefer 'doing' or 'action' orientated interventions.

In conclusion, based upon the research evidence we know, the 'Age Better in Sheffield' commissioning process needs to be clear that any project should be developed by the potential users. We know we need to market this better to men and appeal to men of different ages and different interests.

Finally, all Age Better activities need to include a concerted 'follow up' process, to encourage those involved to keep being involved. Follow-up contact with attendees who do not return can be beneficial in that it gives them the feeling they are missed and valued. Even if an attendee only misses one meeting due to other obligations, a follow-up call can help strengthen their connection to the service. Integral to any project, mechanisms and processes should be in place to start to look to preventative strategies and projects that seek to reinforce friendship networks earlier in men's lives. More too should be done to similarly engage and support those men caring for a partner who may be severely or terminally ill. We know Age Better in Sheffield has a huge part to play in this: but a whole-city approach is needed.



What did we learn?

Variety is the spice of life

All the sessions were really positive and gave us interesting insights. The sessions which were most rewarding and interesting were those with attendees from the broadest range of backgrounds. Sometimes it was hard to get this breadth though. We know everyone is busy and it can be really difficult to take two hours out of a day 'just' to talk and share experiences and ideas, but we found the 'challenge' areas particularly hard to engage people with, perhaps because our networks aren't as strong, and in the case of men because we engaged with organisations that already focused on men, but didn't get much interest from those that aren't engaging as effectively with them – there's still work to do.

That sounds familiar... some common themes and ideas.

Several broad themes and some very specific ideas that have worked came across in all the groups when we talked about how to deliver services which engage effectively with people to reduce loneliness and isolation. The themes that came up weren't a huge surprise, but the extent to which they dominated conversation, and the universality, was perhaps more so. The themes were:

Trust and Inclusivity

Trust and making people feel welcome was key, particularly for engaging with BME communities. Local organisations which are already embedded within communities have the potential to reach people more quickly because they may already have trust as well as networks within communities. Making people feel welcome is more about the approach of individuals and giving time and attention; taking the time to acknowledge someone who is new at the start and then to speak to them before they leave and find out how the session went for them, perhaps following up with a phone call if someone doesn't return.

People are our greatest strength

It was great to hear that participants were recognised as being key to reaching more people. Encouraging participants to bring a friend, either to the first session so they are not coming alone, or to bring along someone who they thought might enjoy it or benefit (or hopefully both) once they were already coming regularly was often successful in increasing attendance. This was the same for our melting pot lunch sessions themselves – the willingness of attendees to share their experiences and enthusiasm to connect was what made them work so well.

Sustainability needs to be planned in from the beginning

The importance of planning sustainability into projects from the very start came through several times, with one project having found that they struggled to move participants on to allow more people to benefit because they hadn't created that expectation with the design of their project. Other projects found that clear messaging or timeframes from the outset of a project, and empowering participants to take on responsibility for continuing relatively low demand and low risk activities (such as walking groups) could be successful.

Two specific ideas that have worked well to help people to build stronger relationships and have deeper connections also came across in several lunches:

From organised activity to informal socialising

Several organisations encouraged and instigated people taking part in activities and groups to meet informally outside of the groups, organising meals or trips to the pub and even trips abroad. This really gave people the opportunity to develop friendships and richer relationships that could continue outside of the formal meetings, and once one social event had been organised by the service provider, these then sometimes happened spontaneously.

Walking leads to talking

We were surprised by how often walking was mentioned. We expected it to come up in our Outdoor City melting pot lunch, but it cropped up in the men's and BME lunches as well as something which appealed to a wide range of people and which could be focused around different interests (for example Sheffield United have led history walks, as well as partnering with Step Out Sheffield and Drink Wise Age Well to set up a walking group). Attendees found that as well as being affordable and accessible for many, the act of walking allowed people to feel comfortable having deeper conversations than they might do in a more formal setting and even to be more open to ideas for making positive changes to their lives.

So what next?

We've used learning from the lunches to input into our commissioning process, and we're thinking about what the next step for Age Better is around facilitating learning and collaboration.

There's enthusiasm to collaborate more

Attendees were really positive about further events to share learning and encourage collaboration. People frequently talked about the value of meeting and talking with others working to reduce loneliness and isolation and wanting to increase collaboration, but recognised that the funding environment and pressures of work often made it challenging to do this.

But there needs to be a purpose and facilitation. Where an individual from a lunch has tried to instigate ongoing meet ups with a general purpose, these haven't really come to fruition so far. Given how stretched everyone is, it makes sense that when time is of the essence, ongoing meetings need to give real value or have a clear outcome. That outcome might still be about learning something, or it might be about trying to solve a specific problem or collaborate on a particular piece of work, but specific times and purposes are likely to be important.

Finally, we'd like to say a big thank you to Kaleidoscope who were generous enough to share their melting pot lunch concept with us.

Age Better in Sheffield

152 Rockingham Street

Sheffield

S1 4EB

www.agebettersheff.co.uk