Why Eat Together? Key messages from existing research

Here's how we know that eating together is so positive…

Loneliness experienced by individuals and communities

- The negative impact that loneliness has on health and wellbeing is well established and has attracted recent policy attention, with the appointment of a Minister for Loneliness and development of a 'Loneliness Strategy' (ONS, 2018).

- The likelihood of experiencing loneliness is associated with where people live (ONS, 2018). For example, those who feel lower levels of trust or belonging to their local area report higher levels of loneliness, and those who never speak to neighbours are 43% more likely to feel lonely than those who do (ONS, 2018).

- Conversely, research found that initiatives which look to connect older people to their local communities can reduce feelings of fear and distrust, thus reducing feelings of loneliness (Bernard, 2013).

- In a study based in Glasgow, people who knew others in their local area were less likely to report feeling lonely (Kearns et al., 2015).

- Loneliness and a lack of social attachment has also been linked to housing tenure. For example, people who rent are more likely to experience loneliness (ONS, 2018); research carried out in Australia found that people in private and public rented housing were around three times more likely to experience loneliness on a daily basis, compared to their home owner counterparts (Hulse and Stone, 2007). Tenants also felt less attached to their local area, and perhaps as a result reported lower levels of neighbourhood trust and less of a shared sense of identity with their place of residence (Hulse & Stone, 2007). Other studies have identified social isolation as an issue for sheltered housing tenants (Erosh, 2018) and former homeless people in supported housing programmes (Tsai et al., 2012), due to a lack of social integration.

- In a representative sample of 1,500 adults, 38% said they would welcome more organised activity to bring neighbours together and just over a third (35%) would feel happier if they knew their neighbours better (Havas Sport, cited in Carr-West and Wilkes, 2013). This supports the main literature which refers to the important role of facilitating face to face contact in the local community to alleviating loneliness (Kantar Public, 2016).

The impact on health and wellbeing for people who eat alone

- Eating alone has been linked to negative health and well-being impacts. Studies in China and Japan have shown that lack of companionship during mealtimes is associated with depression in older adults (who are statistically more likely to eat alone (Dunbar, 2017).

- Survey data of 7,968 older people in China found that women who ate alone were more likely to experience depression than those who ate with others (Wang et al., 2016).

- Eating alone was also found to lead to higher rates of obesity and health problems with men who live alone (Kwon et al., 2018).

- A survey of 2,196 older people in Japan found that those who ate with others less than once a month were more likely to assess their health as poor (Takemi et al., 2017).

- Eating alone has also been found to have negative health effects on young people (Khoury et al., 2015; Jung and Sun Ja, 2010).

Benefits to health/mental health/loneliness of eating with others

- Research evidence shows that neighbourhood participation can contribute to improved mental health and quality of life (Allen, 2008).

- Being connected to neighbours also has benefits for wellbeing through providing a sense of "purpose, comradery, belonging and identity." (Kantar Public, 2016:12).

- Conversely, the disappearance of social spaces can contribute to people feeling 'disconnected' (Kantar Public, 2016).

- Eating with others has been viewed as offering a protective factor through enabling people to strengthen their bond with others, with 76% of those who responded to a survey identifying a shared meal as a good way to bring people closer together (Dunbar, 2017).

- Of a survey of 2,523 UK adults, 16% said they would attend a regular food based event to help them overcome feelings of loneliness (Kantar Public, 2016).

- Older people interviewed in Australia said that they ate meals with others as a way of maintaining social contacts, and reducing loneliness, feeling that an arranged shared meal gave them a purpose to meet (Pettigrew and Roberts, 2008).

- Of 68 shared meal projects across Brighton and Hove, all said that it reduced social isolation and depression and encouraged companionship and friendship, as well as contributing to good nutrition and health. Of the five projects based in sheltered housing, companionship was reported by all as a reason that people attended (Brighton & Hove Food Partnership. 2015).

- A survey of over 8,000 British adults found that connecting with others through social eating has one of the highest positive associations with wellbeing and conversely, eating meals alone was more strongly associated with unhappiness than any single factor other than having a mental illness.

- Someone who 'never' sits down to eat alone had a Living Well Index score 7.9 points higher than a person reporting that they 'always' ate their sit-down meals alone. (Oxford Economics, 2018).

- A systematic review of mealtimes in hospital and rehabilitation settings for older people found that offering communal eating spaces was important, as it encouraged a 'social environment', and that social interaction should be encouraged (Edwards et al., 2017).

- An evaluation of *Eating with Friends*, a social eating programme running in 37 sites across Tasmania, found that involvement led to a more positive outlook and allowed friendships to flourish, with socialising taking place outside the arranged meal times (Eating with Friends Project, 2014).

- Despite the positive impact social eating can have on wellbeing, 69% of people surveyed in the UK had never shared a meal with neighbours and over a third (37%) had never eaten with a community group (Dunbar, 2017).

Impact on groups and communities of eating together

- Evaluation of the Big Lunch, running in local areas across the UK, found that after attending, 82% of people felt closer to their neighbours, 88% met new neighbours and 81% believed it had a positive impact on their community (Carr-West and Wilkes, 2013).

- An evaluation of a project in Leeds where people who normally eat alone ate together at local community venues reported feeling more attached to their local community, alongside reduced social isolation and loneliness (Alden and Wigfield, 2018).

- Supporting shared eating can also encourage community cohesion through enabling people from different cultures and backgrounds to socialise. Research has found that eating with others can reduce people's perceptions of inequality, and diners tend to view those of different races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds as more equal than they would in other social scenarios (Julier, 2013).

- Consuming the same food can also lead to people feeling closer and more trusting of each other and can serve as a 'social lubricant' (Woolley and Fishbach, 2016) to help support people in developing closer bonds (Kerner et al., 2015; Woolley and Fishbach, 2016).

- An evaluation of the Ageing Better programme, funded by the Big Lottery Fund (2018), found that running social eating activities facilitated people from different cultures to connect with each other in their local community. A JRF study found that offering communal activities around food in a diverse community helped people to share and learn from each other (Collins and Wrigley, 2014).

Workforce: productivity and wellbeing of individual staff

- In a newspaper article which looked at the results of a BUPA study into productivity, 40% of workers said skipping lunch dampens their productivity. 52% claimed it puts them in a bad mood. (Davidson, 2015)

- Recent data from productivity app DeskTime, which tracked people's office habits, found that the employees with the highest productivity took 17-minute breaks for every 52 minutes of work -- and they did not spend that break time checking social media or replying to emails. (Davidson, 2015)

- "When overwhelmed with work, lunch with colleagues can seem like a luxury, but eating alone can have adverse effects. Research has found that people who eat most meals alone may express feelings of loneliness and social isolation and, what's more, eating in solitude is more strongly associated with unhappiness that any single factor other than having a mental illness." (Gordon, 2018)

- "The result of feeling socially connected, studies show, is greater psychological wellbeing, which translates into higher productivity and performance." (Seppalla and King, 2017)

Workforce: Team Building

- A significant and widely quoted piece of research from Cornell University looked into building higher-performing, more cohesive teams. The research focused on firefighters who prepare and eat meals together during their shifts. Researchers led by Kevin Kniffin, of Cornell University, say they've found a deceptively simple method: "Encourage teams to eat together." (Harvard Business Review, December 2015): "…our field research shows a significant positive association between commensality and work-group performance." (Kniffen et al, 2015) "Our findings establish a basis for research and practice that focuses on ways that firms can enhance team performance by leveraging the mundane and powerful activity of eating." (Kniffen et al, 2015)